

# CHALLENGES TO THE GEORGIA'S HEALTH SYSTEM ON THE MUNICIPAL LEVEL AMIDST COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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## INTERNATIONAL OUTLOOK

The spread of infectious disease (COVID 19) caused by the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) has posed a significant challenge globally, including in Georgia. The pandemic created a number of problems on national and international levels and mitigating its impact became the top priority for every government.<sup>1</sup> Novel coronavirus origin was identified in Wuhan, Hubei province of China, in December of 2019 and under globalization, it spread rapidly throughout the world. The coronavirus is characterized by airborne transmission, meaning that the infection can be transmitted through sneeze, cough, verbal interaction, or close contact with the infected person. On January 13, for the first time outside of China, the COVID-19 case was confirmed in Thailand. By February 21, 47 cases were already confirmed in nine European countries. Out of 38 cases, 21 were linked to two clusters in Germany and France, while 14 people actually got the infection in China.<sup>2</sup> On January 30, 2020 due to the virus's rapid spread, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a public health emergency, and on March 11 – the pandemic. Notably, the COVID-19 is highly contagious, and its clinical manifestation is quite irregular – from asymptomatic to fatal.

Earlier outbreaks of coronavirus were less scalable. The first case of SARS coronavirus was also identified in China back in November of 2001. In 2003, the SARS epidemic spread to 29 countries (mostly in Asia, but reached Canada too), infected more than eight thousand people, out of which 774 died.<sup>3</sup> The Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) was first identified in the fall of 2012 in Saudi Arabia and gradually proliferated in other countries. By the end of 2019, 2494 laboratory-confirmed cases and 858 deaths were reported, with most fatalities (780 out of 858) in Saudi Arabia.<sup>4</sup>

Specialists assess that previous outbreaks were contained through strict quarantine measures and the total cleansing of southeast China's wet markets. Novel coronavirus is quite contagious and spreads rapidly. That's why its worldwide outbreak was more sweeping and fast-moving. As of October 22, WHO reported 41 104 946 confirmed COVID-19 cases and 1 128 325 deaths.<sup>5</sup> Data demonstrates that the coronavirus pandemic is the major global health crisis of our time. However, the COVID-19 is more than a health crisis. Considering the scale of its proliferation, it can have a deep

- 1 Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/nov-el-coronavirus-2019>
- 2 Spiteri, G., Fielding, J., Diercke, M., Campese, C. First cases of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) in the WHO European Region, 24 January to 21 February 2020. Euro surveillance: bulletin European sur les maladies transmissibles = European communicable disease bulletin, 25(9), 2000178. <https://www.who.int/ith/diseases/sars/en/>
- 3 <https://www.who.int/emergencies/mers-cov/en/>
- 4 <https://www.who.int/emergencies/mers-cov/en/>
- 5 WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard [https://covid19.who.int/?gclid=CjwKCA-jwrKr8BRB\\_EiwA7eFapm\\_P2yv8VXPtyU5mtdjjFsjelOi-Pa64PryDiTCW\\_VW17IVpnL\\_Tuxo-Cz9AQA\\_vD\\_BwE](https://covid19.who.int/?gclid=CjwKCA-jwrKr8BRB_EiwA7eFapm_P2yv8VXPtyU5mtdjjFsjelOi-Pa64PryDiTCW_VW17IVpnL_Tuxo-Cz9AQA_vD_BwE)

and longstanding aftereffect in the form of either social, economic, or political crisis. More specifically, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimates that the world economic growth in 2020 will fall to -3 percent, which is a more severe downturn compared to the 2009 global financial crisis (-1,73 percent).<sup>6</sup> In June 2020, the World Bank projected world gross domestic product to fall by 5.2 percent, the biggest decline in the last 150 years. Besides, income per capita will significantly drop in the countries of the developing economy and the number of people living in poverty will rise considerably. The UN estimates that the current crisis will drag 130 million people into extreme poverty.<sup>7</sup>

Obviously, countries undertake different measures to curb the spread of the virus, such as testing and treating infected patients, tracking contacts, restricting mobility, putting a ban on assemblies in public spaces, canceling sports and cultural events and shifting to distance learning. Restrictive measures didn't appear sufficient to contain the virus and it spread all over the world, regardless of the current condition and preparedness of a country's healthcare system. The nonexistence of either vaccine or etiotropic medicine exacerbates the crisis. Despite the significant progress in medical science, the COVID\_19 vaccine or treatment medicine isn't yet invented. Presumably, "coronavirus might become deadlier virus than HIV, malaria, tuberculosis or hepatitis used to be".<sup>8</sup> Until the etiotropic medical treatment protocol is introduced, wearing a face mask is considered the most effective protective mechanism, followed by frequent hand wash and physical distancing. Considerably, vaccination will take much time until it reaches at least 70-80 percent of the world population and so-called herd immunity is achieved. "The herd immunity is attained by protecting people from the virus and not by exposing them to it. Never in the history of public health has herd immunity been used as a strategy for responding to an outbreak, let alone a pandemic. It's controversial either scientifically or ethically", stated Tedros Adhanom, the World Health Organization Director-General on October 12, 2020.

Since the declaration of the pandemic, many countries had to switch into crisis mode and reshuffle the priorities to provide public health, freedom of mobility, protect personal information, private property and ensure economic welfare. Unfortunately, many countries imposed coronavirus-related restrictive measures belatedly. For instance, along with hundreds of confirmed cases, massive sports events, public gatherings and demonstrations were still allowed in Spain. Actually, in the initial phase of the pandemic, countries chose different approaches: some of them, such as Denmark, Finland, Norway, South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Vietnam and New Zealand closed the

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6 COVID 19 Influence on Georgian Economy. Economic Outlook and Indicators, PMCG, Publication #116 / 24.04.2020

7 Urushadze Andria, The Lessons of Pandemic for Georgia's Social Protection Mechanisms, EPRC, The Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation, 2020

8 <https://publika.ge/covid-19-iqneba-ufro-mkveli-vidre-aris-shidsi-tuberkulozi-malaria-da-hepatiti-gamyrelidze/>

borders and/or pursued massive testing and tracking strategy, while some countries, such as Brazil, Mexico, Netherlands, Peru, Spain, Sweden, the US, and Great Britain closed their borders later or closed them partially and opened them earlier, refusing to impose quarantine. Notably, the Swedish approach is unique not only in Europe but worldwide. When France and Italy had already imposed severe restrictive measures, under the Swedish government's approach, schools, shops, sports halls and restaurants remained open and people lived normal lives. Comparing and assessing the COVID-19 handling strategies would be premature but looking at the cumulative death rate per capita, the US is followed by Sweden, according to the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC). This Scandinavian country falls fourteenth globally in terms of deaths per 100,000 population (excluding Andorra and San Marino), with Italy, UK, Spain, Belgium the only European countries ranking above it.<sup>9</sup>

Absolutely contrasting events developed in China, where the government immediately imposed radical restrictive measures – declared the emergency and quarantined the whole population of Hubei province. Sixty million inhabitants of the province were restricted the freedom of movement and violators were subject to solid fines. The government halted the economic activity throughout the country and stopped the factories, enterprises, shops, banks, and other services. Statistics showed that China's productivity dropped below the 2008 crisis level.

Some approaches against the pandemic have definitely proved to be successful though not sufficient – the COVID-19 remains the world's primary challenge. The invention of contagious infectious diseases vaccines is the top achievement of medical science and has created some preconceived notion that the prevention of the pandemic was possible. However, the latest millennium has proved that the era of viral diseases is not actually over and novel viruses (COVID-19, Ebola, Zika and others) pose a significant challenge to the 21<sup>st</sup>-century world. Therefore, coordinating global efforts to consolidate and amplify measures against such infectious diseases, which does not only impact developing or emerging countries, is paramount. Tackling highly contagious viral diseases, including the COVID-19, is the top issue of the world agenda.

Obviously, speaking about the pandemic in the past tense is still early. It has already managed to affect the health and welfare conditions of millions of people. Every country has its story of COVID-19, but the pandemic has definitely unveiled the advantages and disadvantages of the existing healthcare systems in each country.

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9 <https://www.euronews.com/2020/10/19/has-sweden-s-coronavirus-strategy-helped-it-avoid-pandemic-fatigue>

## CORONAVIRUS OUTBREAK AND THE GEORGIAN GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE MEASURES

On February 27, 2020, the coronavirus's first case (COVID-19) was reported in Georgia. In response to the rapid spread of the epidemic, the Government of Georgia undertook some preparatory measures to control the emergency situation and prevent the internal spread of the COVID-19. On January 28, 2020 the Government of Georgia issued its first decree (N164) on the Approval of Measures to Prevent the Possible Spread of the Novel Coronavirus in Georgia and the Emergency Response Plan for Cases of Novel Coronavirus Disease. The national cross-sectoral committee was also established. The government adopted the Emergency Situation Response Plan prescribing detailed roles and responsibilities for each ministry and state agency for each stage of the crisis. On March 21, 2020 joining the world effort against the spread of the global pandemic, the Parliament of Georgia declared the emergency in the entire country. The authorities introduced a number of sweeping measures geared towards the gradual closure of educational institutions, public gathering locations, including sports halls, museums, theaters, shopping malls, bars, and restaurants. Harsh limitations were imposed on public transportation, as well as on-air and railway transfers. Borders with neighboring countries – Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia – closed.<sup>10</sup>

After three weeks of the first confirmed coronavirus case, the big epidemiological picture in the country clearly indicated that the timely and progressive containment measures were put in place, including the screening of travelers coming to Georgia from countries with a high prevalence of the viral infection, COVID-19 testing, contact tracing, the introduction of quarantine and self-isolation rules, decision on suspending international flights, closure of educational institutions, appeal to the employed to switch to online work, restriction of mass gatherings, partial restriction on public transportation, development of surveillance measures, inter alia elaboration and adoption of new protocols, engagement in active communication with the public and so on.<sup>11</sup> According to the epidemiological situation, strict quarantine measures were imposed and the following municipalities were gradually closed: Marneuli, Bolsini, Lentekhi, some administrative units of Kobuleti municipality, village Khidiskuri in Khashuri municipality, Rustavi, Tetrtskaro and later in August – Mestia.

According to the government report on the COVID-19 response, the containment of the virus was the first stage of the approach, followed by the second stage of reduced transmission and the third stage of crisis management and gradual lift of the restrictions and reopening.<sup>12</sup> Georgia underwent these three stages in spring.

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**10** Stakeholders Engagement Preliminary Plan (SEP) Georgia - COVID 19 Emergency Response Mechanisms Project, 19.04.2020

**11** The COVID-19 epidemic in Georgia Projections and Policy Options, Curatio International Fund, March 27, 2020

**12** The Government of Georgia Report on the COVID-19 Response Measures 2020, The Government of Georgia.

Starting from the first half of May, the viral reproduction rate dropped below one<sup>13</sup> and the stabilization trend was already noticeable. Consequently, the government was able to lift restrictions and reopen the economy. In the same period, many other countries started to loosen up restrictive measures too (France, Albania, Germany, Austria, Norway, Denmark, Czech Republic, Italy, Spain, Finland, Croatia). On April 24, 2020 the government of Georgia introduced the plan of gradual lift of the COVID-19 related restrictions and reopening of the economy. The government also presented the Anti-Crisis Plan focused on rationally redistributing financial resources according to economic and social needs. The plan envisaged different assistance types for the vulnerable groups of society and for the most affected sectors of the economy. Anticipated assistance to boost economic activity is 2 billion 110 million GEL, aimed to aid the private sector, enhance agriculture's effectiveness, and support domestic enterprise.<sup>14</sup>

Due to the relatively slow spread of the virus in summer, many restrictive measures were loosened up. People started traveling to Georgian resorts. Therefore, the mobility increased. The government actually called for a contribution to boosting internal tourism.

A new phase of coronavirus outbreak kicked off in September. As of October 22, 22803 confirmed cases and 178 deaths were reported. On October 22, a daily number of confirmed cases reached 1595.<sup>15</sup> According to Georgia's Disease Control Center's data, approximately 8000 tests run a day - more than 2200 per million. In Spring, only 200-300 people were tested daily.<sup>16</sup> The fact that the mortality rate remains as low as <1%, also clearly indicates that the identification of active cases in Georgia is significantly higher than it was in Europe in the early spring peak period. However, as specialists anticipate, a dramatic increase in infection cases is inevitable. Georgia is just starting to coexist with the coronavirus and the health system must be adequately prepared to persevere.

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**13** The reproduction rate shows how contagious the infection is and how many people might get infected from one source.

**14** EMC Assesses Government's Anti-Crisis Plan, April 27, 2020.

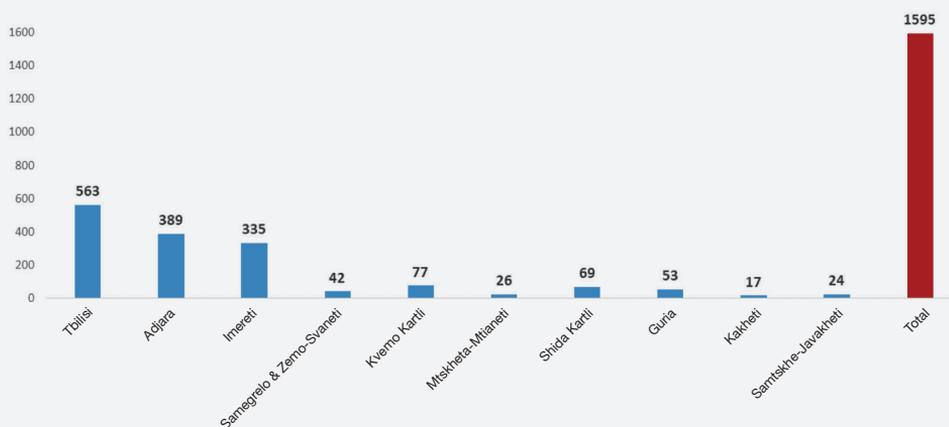
**15** <https://stopcov.ge/>

**16** [https://www.ncdc.ge/Pages/User/News.aspx?ID=137c9b94-0be5-4b2b-bfd4-135fa4ee00de&fbclid=IwAR2PNuaOAzpk0PdGzfwJ5UbFwG-CuRCSWeGyMgtSDYoUI6C\\_I-LgKupPMg](https://www.ncdc.ge/Pages/User/News.aspx?ID=137c9b94-0be5-4b2b-bfd4-135fa4ee00de&fbclid=IwAR2PNuaOAzpk0PdGzfwJ5UbFwG-CuRCSWeGyMgtSDYoUI6C_I-LgKupPMg)

## ANALYSIS OF CHALLENGES ON MUNICIPAL LEVEL

As enshrined in the Georgian constitution and legislation, protecting and improving public health is the government's responsibility. Providing public healthcare services locally is the responsibility of the local government.<sup>17</sup> It is essential to analyze the current crisis through the lens of regional and municipal levels. According to the National Center for Disease Control and Public Health, coronavirus confirmed cases are distributed regionally in the following way:<sup>18</sup>

### COVID-19 Confirmed Cases According to Regions, 22/10/2020



Notably, in September, the epidemiological situation markedly worsened in Adjara, particularly in Batumi. Government officials and epidemiologists recognized that the second wave had started. Necessary restrictions were brought back (such as a ban on public gatherings of more than 200 people and others), though Adjara and Batumi municipality, still a red zone, remained open and compared to the other municipalities, strict quarantine measures haven't been imposed. Considering the high epidemiological risks, it is recommended to tighten local control and/or impose tailored restrictions in order to respond and prevent the further spread of the virus effectively.<sup>19</sup> Though such local measures haven't been introduced in Adjara.

Generally, municipal services of public health play an important role in managing the crisis on local levels. Naturally, the central government's decisions are crucial, but local government's effective participation in crisis management is also essential. According to Georgia's local self-government code, in order to provide public healthcare

**17** „Concerning the function of the Public Healthcare Municipal Services”, Approved by the Minister of Labor, Health and Social Affairs of Georgia on July 20, 2017, Order №01-163.

**18** <https://www.ncdc.ge/Pages/User/LetterContent.aspx?ID=161b884d-ef3c-426c-9ddc-29f9b8fc09d1>

**19** Adaptation with the Virus and Its Management <https://stopcov.ge/>

services, local government authorities are authorized to undertake some measures in coordination with the relevant central government agency. Local self-government has the authority to promote a healthy lifestyle and create a safe and healthy living space for its citizens.<sup>20</sup> Municipal public healthcare services are funded by the local budget, though their management is the prerogative of the National Center for Disease Control and Public Health. Notably, programs in which local healthcare services are engaged may be funded by the central government too. The coronavirus pandemic demonstrated that the lack of human resources is the primary challenge on the municipal level. Effective management of the crisis is largely dependent on the epidemiologists' and healthcare professionals' efforts on local levels. For instance, despite the rapid growth of the infection cases, Kakheti remains the green zone due to the low level of coronavirus proliferation in the region, in which local health service providers played a huge role. Raising public awareness is also a crucial element, especially in the virus containment phase, and the local self-government has an important role in this regard too. It is necessary to inform citizens on the preventive measures and the success of its response mechanisms, using various methods, such as: communication with the public, door-to-door information campaign, publishing information booklets, promote personal hygiene and other protective measures (washing hands, wearing a face mask properly, keeping physical distance). Local governments are responsible for creating communication channels with their citizens and guiding them through the system if they get infected. Behavioral change is a long-term process, in which local and central governments should act in a consistent and coordinated manner.

On the official websites of Tbilisi, Telavi, Gori, Kutaisi and Batumi Municipalities, basic information about the coronavirus is not accessible. Every citizen should be aware of the pandemic and the ways to protect themselves from it. To ensure the adequate fulfillment of the imposed restrictions, clearly prescribed guidelines for their fulfillment should be easily available. International practice in this regard should be shared and utilized. For example, according to the US Center for Disease Control and Prevention, since a face mask became mandatory in Arizona and solid fines were introduced for violating the rule, the spread of the virus was reduced by 75 percent.<sup>21</sup> In this example, local authorities' efforts proved to be very successful in curbing the spread of the virus. Therefore, targeted, effective and coordinated efforts are extremely important and in the time of healthcare crisis management, the role of primary healthcare level is tremendous. Mobilization of the primary healthcare services, effective control of infection spread locally and timely referral services for infected patients are absolutely fundamental. The virus's effective containment by the epidemiologists and primary healthcare system professionals serves to gain additional time to supply with testing and breathing equipment for hospitals. Hence, the role of public healthcare services on the local municipal level is immeasurable.

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**20** Local Self-government Code, 2014 <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/2244429?publication=53>

**21** [https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2020/10/10/arizona-coronavirus-cases-dropped-mask-mandate/5952950002/?fbclid=IwAR06smXhvCdScBla8d\\_DMMyOO6ZlHsHrqN-Fv2eCqLFLttUd0INWPPpSDXfaVs](https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2020/10/10/arizona-coronavirus-cases-dropped-mask-mandate/5952950002/?fbclid=IwAR06smXhvCdScBla8d_DMMyOO6ZlHsHrqN-Fv2eCqLFLttUd0INWPPpSDXfaVs)

## RECOMMENDATIONS

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Increase the role and broaden the functions of the public healthcare facilities on municipal, regional and autonomous republic levels. This will serve to strengthen the national healthcare system further;

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Provide municipal healthcare services with relevant material and technical resources in accordance with the national guidelines;

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Train the existing medical staff and further expand the pool of medical professionals at the municipal level, responding the number of local populations in the municipality. Highly qualified professionals, particularly epidemiologists, public healthcare workers, parasitologists, entomologists and statistics are crucial for forming capable healthcare services locally;

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Train the local staff of municipal healthcare facilities in emergency preparedness, rapid diagnostic, containment of infection spread, data analysis and other issues;

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Coordinate with the central government, exchange the information on a timely manner and rapidly respond to the situation on local level. Cross-sectoral efforts, which requires cross-sectoral coordination, should be enhanced on a local level;

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Improve the quality of public communication on a local level. General preparedness to tackle the crisis is largely dependent on effective public communication.

It would be premature to assess the overall impact of the coronavirus yet. However, it is obvious that global challenges require global solutions. Every country has its own story of coronavirus and has its own role in defeating it – dependent on the capacity of its socio-economic and healthcare system. To tackle the pandemic, individual responsibility, either local or central government’s role is tremendous, and the world is united around the primary goal – end the COVID-19 pandemic.

