

WEEKLY NEWS REPORT ON GEORGIA

Date: *March 19 - 25, 2018*

❖ Occupied Regions

❖ Abkhazia Region

1. US Ambassador condemns opening of Russian polling stations in occupied Abkhazia, Tskhinvali

The United States (US) Ambassador to Georgia Ian Kelly said it is inadmissible to carry out any activities in the Russian occupied regions of Georgia – Abkhazia and Tskhinvali (South Ossetia) - without the consent of the Government of Georgia.

Ambassador Kelly referred to the opening of polling stations in the two breakaway regions for yesterday's Russian presidential elections (*Agenda.ge, March 19*).

2. Putin receives 94.1% of votes in Georgia's occupied Abkhazia region

“Vladimir Putin received 20 percent more votes in Abkhazia than in Russia; candidate of the Communist Party Pavel Grudinin came in second with 2.46 percent of votes, while Vladimir Zhirinovskiy of the Liberal-Democratic party took third place with 1.56 percent of the vote,” said the de facto Ambassador of Russia in Abkhazia Semyon Grigoriev (*Agenda.ge, March 19*).

❖ Tskhinvali Region (so called South Ossetia)

3. Parliamentary majority, minority agree on joint resolution over Archil Tatumashvili's death

According to the resolution, the Government of Georgia will be obliged to come up with a list of individuals who have violated the human rights of Georgian citizens in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali, and the international community will be called on to take appropriate measures against those included on this list, also known as the "Otkhozoria-Tatumashvili" list (*Agenda.ge, March 19*).

4. 26 days from death: Occupied regime gives Tatumashvili's body to family

The body has been taken out of the occupied Tskhinvali by the International Committee of the Red Cross and is being transported to Tbilisi for autopsy, the Georgian Interior Ministry representative has stated.

“After several hours the body will be transported to the Tatumashvili family in the Tsilkani village,” the Interior Ministry representative told the media (*Agenda.ge, March 20*).

5. Tatumashvili is brutally tortured – witnesses say

According to the journalists and civil activists who have seen body of Tatumashvili, say that he was brutally tortured. Reportedly, his point finger of the right hand was cut off. This is the punishment for enemy soldiers who have pulled the trigger with this finger. Injuries on his hands are also visible. While reportedly Russian expertise says that reason of the death was cirrhosis and hepatitis (*Rustavi 2, March 21*).

6. EU Monitoring Mission releases statement on returning Tatumashvili's body to his family

“The EUMM, in its monitoring capacity and in line with its mandate, follows developments closely. The EUMM reaffirms its readiness to support ongoing investigations and to facilitate discussions

through the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM) and the hotline", the statement reads (*Agenda.ge, March 21*).

7. Georgian autopsy underway to reveal reasons behind Tatumashvili's death

Sozar Subari, Georgian Minister of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Accommodation and Refugees said yesterday that those 26 days were difficult for everyone.

It is always hard when a person is illegally detained and practically kidnapped, then allegedly tortured and killed", Subari told Imedi TV last night (*Agenda.ge, March 21*).

8. De facto Prosecutor's Office of occupied Tskhinvali charges Georgian civil activist

The de facto Prosecutor's Office of the Russia-controlled occupied Tskhinvali (South Ossetia) region of Georgia has launched a case against Georgian civil activist Tamar Mearakishvili in the occupied Akhalkalaki area.

It is the second case against the activist who has been active on social networks and is known for her criticism of the de-facto authorities.

Mearakishvili was illegally detained last year and released after pressure from the government of Georgia and the international community. The latest case concerns the "fabrication of official documents," Mearakishvili says (*Agenda.ge, March 21*).

9. Parliament adopts joint resolution on Tatumashvili case

Kobakhidze stated that the resolution condemned:

- The occupation of the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali (South Ossetia) by Russia
- Russian actions to annex and isolate the regions
- The erection of artificial barriers at so-called border points
- The blatant violation of Georgian citizens' rights in the occupied regions
- The deaths of Georgian citizens Giga Otkhozoria and Archil Tatumashvili
- The destruction of Georgian villages and the damaging of Georgian churches
- Attempts of occupying forces to erase traces of Georgian habitation from the occupied regions
- The cancellation of Georgian language education in the regions, and
- The violations of the rights of internally displaced people (*Agenda.ge, March 21*).

10. Expert – Dead body of Archil Tatumashvili has multiple injuries

According to the decree of the Prosecutor's Office, based on preliminary data, there are multiple injuries on the body of Archil Tatumashvili, indicating the trace of torture. The experts of the Center EMPATHY consider it necessary to conduct a complex-commissioned expertise in accordance with international standards," – the statement reads (*ITV, March 21*).

11. Archil Tatumashvili was killed by torture - Irakli Kobakhidze

Speaking at the session of the Inter-Parliamentary Union in Geneva, Chairperson of the Parliament of Georgia drew attention to the Russian aggression and the murder of Archil Tatumashvili in Tskhinvali region. Irakli Kobakhidze spoke about the gross violations of human rights by Russia on the occupied territories of Georgia (*Rustavi2, March 25*).

12. President awarded Archil Tatumashvili with the Order of Honor

The President of Georgia, Giorgi Margvelashvili awarded Archil Tatumashvili with the Order of Honor. The Georgian soldier was buried at Mukhatgverdi Brothers Cemetery with the heroes of the war in 2008, and thus his will was fulfilled (*Rustavi2, March 25*).

❖ Foreign Affairs

13. Cyprus parliament speaker pays historic visit to Georgia

The Parliament Speaker of Cyprus Demetris Syllouris has held his first historic visit to Georgia, as despite the 25-years of diplomatic relations none of the parliament speakers of Cyprus has ever conducted an official visit to Georgia.

“We have excellent political, economic and cultural ties. We have also spoken about Georgian reforms and our steps taken towards Euro-Atlantic integration,” Kobakhidze stated after the meeting (*Agenda.ge, March 19.*).

14. Georgia moves up 76 positions in UN agency aviation rating

As Georgia’s Ministry of Economy today announced, Georgia moved from 106th to 30th position in the ICAO rating according to the preliminary data.

“For the first time in the history of Georgian aviation the country has shown 87.5 percent in terms of compliance with ICAO standards. This is the highest indicator in the region”, announced the Ministry of Economy (*Agenda.ge, March 20.*).

15. US to increase funding for Georgia, Ukraine to counter Russian influence

The US House Appropriations Committee has introduced the Fiscal Year 2018 State and Foreign Operations Bill that contains funding to bolster US allies and key partners in strategic and challenging areas of the world and provides critical humanitarian aid.

“To respond to instability caused by Russian aggression, the bill increases funding for Ukraine and Georgia and provides \$250 million for the Countering Russian Influence Fund authorized by Congress, which is \$150 million above the prior year”, the document reads (*Agenda.ge, March 22.*).

16. Georgia-Belarus sign bilateral visa free deal

The Georgian and Belarus foreign ministers signed bilateral visa free deal late on Thursday during Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko’s visit to Georgia.

The former travel agreement, which also provided for visa free travel and dates back to 2014, included Belarus as one of 24 countries with which Georgia introduced visa-free travel (*Agenda.ge, March 22.*).

17. Georgian prisons 5th lowest in mortality rates of 47 Council of Europe states

The report, which includes data through 2016, shows that Georgia comes in fifth after Finland, Iceland, Monaco and San Marino, with 12 deaths in 2015, including two cases of suicide (*Agenda.ge, March 22.*).

❖ Internal Affairs

18. “Rescuers worked professionally and fast” – witnesses speak about Gudauri incident

“With respect to the cable accident in Gudauri, I have decided to provide my own feedback, since unlike many mass media outlets or in-cabinet analysts, I personally was at the spot and witnessed the accident and had to react to it by jumping from the ski lift”, wrote Ibragimov (*Agenda.ge, March 19.*).

19. Several persons detained at the rally at Rustavi 2 building, Journalist Davit Eradze transferred to hospital

Several people have been detained at the protest rally organized by the members of the “Georgian March” outside the building of the Rustavi 2 TV.

The protesters have blocked the road and besieged a car of journalist Giorgi Gabunia. They demanded an apologize from the journalist for his remarks during the TV program, as they believe that Gabunia's statement insulted Christians.

Davit Eradze, Journalist of Rustavi 2 TV Company has been transferred to hospital. According to doctors, the patient has various injuries (*ITV, March 19*).

20. Parliamentary majority holds closed door meeting

As Archil Talakvadze, leader of the parliamentary majority told reporters the MPs will discuss the issues which are listed in the agenda of the plenary session, Including: constitutional amendments, the draft resolution, the women's quotation issue (*ITV, March 19*).

21. Most of buses in Tbilisi did not pass technical inspection

The State Audit Office publishes a conclusion on the technical state of the vehicles. According to the document, 76% of cars in Tbilisi, have not passed such technical check in 2016. The police response is irrelevant to this violation. According to the conclusion, only 14% of violators are fined.

The conclusion of the Audit Office reveals that most of Tbilisi municipal buses will not pass technical examination due to their age and technical state (*Rustavi 2, March 19*).

22. Appointment of judges with life-term may be suspended

According to Dolidze, the Georgian parliament expressed willingness to carry out reforms in the court authorities that is welcoming.

"The supreme legislative body and lawmakers acknowledge that court authority is the laboratory, which tests Georgia's being the state based on supremacy of law," Dolidze claimed (*ITV, March 20*).

23. PM welcomes all initiatives boosting women's rights in parliament

"Improving legislation for gender equality and boosting women's labour rights is part of our obligations within the Georgia-EU Association Agreement. I believe that the draft law being discussed in Parliament over introducing obligatory gender quotas in the country's Election Code will be a significant mechanism for increasing women's involvement in politics," Kvirikashvili stated (*Agenda.ge, March 22*).

❖ Economy and Social Affairs

24. Georgia's external trade with EU up 10.8%, with CIS up 26.5%

In January-February 2018, trade turnover with EU countries increased by 10.8 percent and with CIS countries by 26.5 percent year-on-year (y/y), says the National Statistics Office of Georgia (Geostat).

In the reporting period trade turnover with EU countries amounted to \$446.5 million, while with the CIS counties external trade of Georgia reached \$620.2 million (*Agenda.ge, March 19*).

25. Georgian Industrial Group to purchase KazTransGas Tbilisi

The news was published today by Forbes.kz, while Georgian news agency Interpressnews reported that the press centre of Georgian Industrial Group confirmed this information to the news agency.

During the last period, the Georgian Industrial Group was negotiating with the Kazakh side, and specifically with the corporation Kazmunaygas, in order to redeem 100 percent of the corporation's shares in KazTransGas Tbilisi's authorised capital", read the announcement of the Georgian Industrial Group, published by Interpressnews (*Agenda.ge, March 20*).

26. Georgia bans import of Turkish potato due to potato cancer risks

Georgia's Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili has already signed the order, which states that the purpose of the ban is to avoid the spread of potato cancer in Georgia. Potato cancer is considered the most serious and devastating disease for the vegetable (*Agenda.ge, March 20*).

27. Georgia's nominal GDP amounted to 38 billion GEL in 2017

Georgia's nominal Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2017 amounted to 38 billion GEL, up by 11.8 percent year-on-year (y/y), shows the preliminary data from the National Statistics Office of Georgia (*Geostat.ge, March 21*).

28. New specialty store in Belarusian capital to sell Georgian products

The store will cover 1 200 sq.m; Georgian wine, mineral water and agricultural products will be sold there.

Georgia's Economy Minister Dimitry Kumsishvili met Deputy Prime Minister of Belarus Mikhail Rusyi today in Tbilisi, where they talked about new initiatives that could further facilitate trade relations (*Agenda.ge, March 21*).

29. Economy Minister predicts Georgia's economy to grow almost 5% in 2018-2022

"The average growth of the gross domestic product amounted to five percent. The year 2018 has started with an impressive economic growth rate. According to preliminary estimates, in January 2018, the economy grew by 4.4 percent. The government forecasts Georgia's economy to grow by 4.5 percent in 2018. It is important that Georgia will have 4.9 percent, one the highest growth rates in the region in 2018-2022", said Kumsishvili (*Agenda.ge, March 22*).

30. EBRD, EU provide €1.15 billion to support business in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine

The EBRD and the EU are extending their support to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine to the total of almost €1.1 billion in credit lines and trade finance and €58.3 million in EU grants (*Agenda.ge, March 22*).