

WEEKLY NEWS REPORT ON GEORGIA

Date: April 2-8, 2018

❖ Occupied Regions

❖ Abkhazia Region

1. Russia bans fruit and vegetables from Abkhazia, which in turn blocks same products from Georgia

Moscow will prohibit the import of fruit, vegetables and herbs from breakaway Abkhazia, which heavily relies on selling agricultural commodities to Russia. Sokhumi responded by imposing an embargo on Georgia barring people from carrying agricultural produce across the administrative borderline even for personal use.

The reason behind both embargos is fear of spreading of a bug, the brown marmorated stink bug (BMSB), which caused immense damage for farmers in eastern Georgia and has spread also to Abkhazia. Moreover, Russia's agricultural supervision service, Rosselkhoznadzor, even suggests this "maybe the biological sabotage of Georgia against Abkhazia." (*DFWATCH.NET, April 2*)

2. State Security Service – challenges are related to threats coming from occupied territories

The challenges currently facing the country are related to threats coming from the occupied territories by the Russian Federation, international terrorism, activities of intelligence services of foreign countries, corruption and possible distribution of weapons of mass destruction – reads the 2017 report of State Security Service.

The report is already presented in the parliament. The State Security Service names provision of national security and environment of peaceful coexistence of the society as the main priority of activities.

The service acts with purpose of identification of threats, their prevention and aversion to protect national interests and security of every citizen, reads the report (*ITV, April 4*).

3. Security Service: Presence of Russian forces in Georgia is the main threat to the state

The Georgian State Security Service wrote in its annual report released today that the presence of Russian forces in Georgia's occupied Abkhazia and Tskhinvali (South Ossetia) regions is the "major threat" to the Georgian state.

"The ongoing, informal annexation of the Georgian occupied territories by Russia, increasing militarization, deliberate isolation of the occupied territories, illegal detention of Georgian citizens and the ethnic discrimination of Georgians remain key challenges for the Georgian state security," the report reads.

The report noted that the illegal detention and murder of Archil Tatunashvili once again revealed the "grave situation" in the occupied regions (*Agenda.ge, April 4*).

4. Sokhumi, Tskhinvali Authorities Reject Georgian Government's Peace Initiative

The Russian-backed authorities of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia rejected in their statements the Georgian Government's new peace proposal intended to enhance economic and people-to-people exchanges between residents of the two regions and the rest of the country.

Commenting the proposal on April 4, Abkhaz “foreign minister” Daur Kove said Tbilisi had “exhausted its leverages of pressure on Abkhazia,” and was now “skilfully masking its real intentions” through demonstrating its “supposed friendliness” before the international community (*Civil.ge, April 6*).

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

5. Security Service: 178 Georgians illegally detained for crossing occupation line in 2017

Georgia’s State Security Service (SSS) has released its annual report today, listing the country’s biggest security issues and challenges to face in 2018.

The report says that 126 Georgian citizens were illegally detained by Russia-controlled border guards last year at the Georgia-breakaway Tskhinvali (South Ossetia) occupation line and 52 others at the Georgia-occupied Abkhazia so-called boundary line.

The individuals were detained for the “illegal crossing of the border” and many of them were released shortly after paying a fine (*Agenda.ge, April 4*).

6. 2 kidnapped in occupied Tskhinvali released

Two people kidnapped near the occupation line between Georgia and its Russian-occupied region of Tskhinvali (South Ossetia) have been released today.

According to preliminary information, the two were detained in the local church and taken to the Tskhinvali preliminary detention facility allegedly for “illegally crossing” the so-called border (*Agenda.ge, April 8*).

❖ **Foreign Affairs**

7. Giorgi Kvirikashvili: No compromise will be made regarding the country's sovereign decisions and territorial integrity

“Unification and the de-occupation of the country remain number one task. Despite challenges, grave provocations and important security risks, we are convinced that the long-term stability and peace can be achieved by pragmatic and balanced policy”, – Giorgi Kvirikashvili, Prime Minister of Georgia said at the conference of the “Georgian Dream” party in Telavi town (*ITV, April 2*).

8. Georgia-Turkey-Azerbaijan sign military deal

Georgia, Turkey and Azerbaijan have signed a new military deal that will further enhance cooperation in the defence field, the Georgian Defence Ministry stated on Sunday. The agreement came within the sixth defense ministerial in the Turkish city of Giresun held on April 1 (*Agenda.ge, April 3*).

9. No information if Russian diplomat left Georgia

The Swiss Embassy in Georgia has no official information if an employee of the section representing the Russian Federation’s interests expelled based on the decision of Georgian Foreign Ministry, has left Georgia’s territory. There is no official information from Foreign Affairs Ministry either (*ITV, April 3*).

10. State Security Service – Special Services of foreign countries are trying to strengthen lobbyist groups

Special services of foreign countries acting across Georgia's territory are trying to strengthen lobbyist groups, expand infrastructure of political influence, political unions, public organizations, foundations and manipulate with economic and energy mechanisms – reads the 2017 report of State Security Service, which is already presented in the parliament.

According to the report, Special Services of foreign countries are trying to establish expert or scientific-research centres and agencies to influence public opinion (*ITV, April 4*).

11. Foreign security agencies operation on Georgian territory have their goals

As the report of State Security Services reads their main aim is to stir up Anti-Western inclination in Georgian society, negatively impact Georgia's image of trustful partner, raising nihilism and hopelessness in the society, creating destabilization based on religious and ethnic bases. Above mentioned goals have one major umbrella, to develop disintegration process to polarize Georgian people (*Sakartvelos Respublika, April 5*).

12. Russia starts active works on the restoration of Soviet Union

“Georgia is one little part of a big plan. This kind of force planning first of all is oriented on ensuring efficiency of force allocation and transportation Middle East and Central Asia. For today Putin has actually restored offensive doctrines of the Soviet Union. He is planning to restore Soviet Union and tries to change Georgia's foreign policy with the demonstration of hard power. For this moment Russia has established its dominance in Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia, plus Central Asian countries. For example President of Turkmenistan has congratulated women International Women's Day with old popular Soviet song. Underlining his that Turkmenistan is also part of this Eurasian geostrategic space. Russia threatens Baltic states with direct intervention, tries to introduce “Russian Peacekeepers in Karabakh and Ukraine.” – Vakhtang Maisaia, Security and South Caucasus Researcher said during the interview with Rezonansi (*Rezonansi, April 5*).

❖ Internal Affairs

13. Tbilisi to have master plan for spatial development by June 1

Tbilisi Mayor Kakha Kaladze has announced today that the Georgian capital will have a master plan for land use within just a couple of months. Kaladze said the master plan is vital for Tbilisi and himself as the mayor of the capital.

It cost 2.8 million GEL for the budget to cover all the expenses related to the provision of the master plan. The plan consists of several phases, including the concept of the capital's territorial development, zoning map, potential development of transport system, further development prospects for brown fields and recreational zones (*Agenda.ge, April 2*).

14. So-called Girgvliani Amendments to be initiated at Bureau Sitting

The legislative changes envisage criminal responsibility of state-political high-ranking officials for giving illegal order and misuse of authorities as well as conceal of crime. Extortion or destruction of other individual's property will be punished with imprisonment term from 5 to 8 years.

Based on the project, infringement of confidentiality of private life will be punished with imprisonment with term from 8 to 11 years (*ITV, April 3*).

15. Gov't says mining companies must stop polluting environment

Georgian Agriculture and Environment Minister Levan Davitashvili has stated today that mining company RMG Gold and Copper is polluting local environment- air, ground and rivers in Bolnisi region in east Georgia.

Davitashvili stated that the Rich Metals Group, a company registered in Netherlands, must cease polluting the environment and the Mashavera, Poladauri and Kazretula rivers in Bolnisi region, which affects the local environment and inhabitants (*Agenda.ge, April 3*).

16. Prosecutor's Office charges 5 former policemen, meets demands of European Court

The Georgian Chief Prosecutor's Office has charged five former employees of the Ministry of Internal Affairs for exceeding official authority under the leadership of the United National Movement in 2005-2006.

By conducting an "effective investigation and bringing the five to court" the Prosecutor's Office has met the demands of a verdict issued by the European Court of Human Rights delivered in 2012, saying that two Georgian citizens suffered physical abuse and ill-treatment from police officers (*Agenda.ge, April 3*).

17. Mikheil Saakashvili addresses population of Georgia

The third president of Georgia releases a video address on behalf of UNM. The leader of the party claims that he will return to the country and is going to fulfill the promises given to the population.

In his video address, Mikheil Saakashvili speaks about a hard social background in the country. He claims that he has a specific plan to improve social conditions.

The third president of Georgia says that he will be able to defeat "mafia" in Georgia together with the team members.

According to Saakashvili, the teacher's salaries should be increased as soon as the authorities change, and the minimum salary of the police officers should be 2000 GEL. According to him, pensions should increase and become 400 GEL (*Rustavi 2, April 3*).

18. Ministry of Internal Affairs confirms death of 6 miners in Tkibuli

According to the Ministry, the initial results of the investigation show that a ceiling collapsed as a result of the deformation of walls in one of the tunnels. The accident claimed lives of 6 miners, while three others were injured.

An investigation has been launched under the article pertaining to the violation of safety rules, which is punishable by 5-year imprisonment (*ITV, April 5*).

19. Labour Inspection representative - Seismic Service confirmed no seismic tremors have been observed on incident day

Working Group of Labour Inspection will once again visit Mindeli mineshaft today in order to study the field and tunnel of mineshaft in detail and afterwards, it will be possible to say whether rock burst took place, – Irakli Iobidze, the representative of Labour Inspection Department of the Ministry of Health made the regarding statement. According to him, it was impossible to reach the specific places due to existing threats yesterday.

“The Labour Inspection Department and the Technical Supervision Agency of the Ministry of Economy will once again try to reach the site where accident happened. We will study the situation and afterwards continue investigation” – Irakli Iobidze said (*ITV, April 6*).

❖ Economy and Social Affairs

20. Free trade deal between Georgia and 4 European countries comes into play in May

The free trade agreement between the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) and Georgia will enter into force for Switzerland on 1 May, announces the Federal Council of Switzerland, which constitutes the federal government of the Swiss Confederation.

Georgia and EFTA states - Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland – signed the free trade agreement in June 2016, while it entered into force on September 1, 2017. At this stage the agreement entered into force only among Georgia, Norway and Iceland. For Switzerland and Liechtenstein the agreement will enter into force in three months after the ratification of the agreement by both countries (*Agenda.ge, April 2*).

21. Giorgi Kvirikashvili: Winegrowers received revenues of 615 million GEL in Kakheti in 2013-2017

Winegrowers received revenues of 615 million GEL in Kakheti in 2013-2017 –Prime Minister of Georgia, Chair of the Georgian Dream – Democratic Georgia party Giorgi Kvirikashvili made the regarding statement at the city conference of Georgian Dream held in Telavi town today.

Prime Minister talked about projects implemented in the Kakheti region and emphasized the importance of vintage, He said that as a result of right policy of the state such results became possible (*ITV, April 2*).

22. Georgia hosts 33% more tourists in March 2018

A total of 578,514 international travellers visited Georgia in March 2018 of which 292,017 were tourists, says the Georgian National Tourism Administration.

Year-on-year, the number of international travellers (tourists, transit, other) increased by 13.2 percent, while the number of tourists (individuals that spend more than 24 hours in the country) increased by 33 percent (*Agenda.ge, April 3*).

23. Cost of food rises in Georgia as annual inflation posts 2.8% increase in March

In March 2018 monthly inflation rate amounted to -0.4 percent. Compared to the same month of the previous year the Consumer Price Index change (annual inflation rate) posted a 2.8 percent increase (*Agenda.ge, April 3*).

24. NBG buys USD 20 million

The National Bank of Georgia (NBG) bought USD 20 million at today's foreign exchange auction. According to NBG, the average rate was 1 USD = 2.3941 GEL. The Georgian national currency has slightly gained value for the last several days (*ITV, April 3*).

25. 62.2% of population has loans from the financial sector

Credit-info, indicates that 2,537,374 persons and 94,193 legal entities have addressed either banks, micro financial organizations or other financial institutions for the loans. According to the latest census total amount of the population of Georgia is 3.7183.200 and 62.2% from them have utilized loans (*Akhali Taoba, April 4*).

26. Cargo turnover decreased in Georgia

According to the final data in January-February cargo turnover decreased in Georgia. For these two months turnover amounted 5.5 tons of cargo and it is 0.3 tons less than previous year's data (*Akhali Taoba, April 4*).

27. 3 new tax initiatives to support local and foreign businesses in Georgia

The first initiative is exempting entrepreneurs from any additional bureaucracy-related challenges. In particular, instead of five tax documents, the entrepreneurs will be required to present only one tax document.

The second initiative will ease the procedures as well as tax burdens of purchasing products from local entrepreneurs or farmers in the rural areas of Georgia. For example, hotels or other type of hospitality or food facilities will be able to buy local products with better tax conditions and will not have to bring products from the capital city of Tbilisi.

The third initiative aims at turning Georgia into a regional financial centre. The initiative will allow non-resident entities to register companies in Georgia online (*Agenda.ge, April 4*).

28. PM optimistic about Georgia's economic growth in 2018

Georgia's Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili is optimistic about the country's economic performance this year and predicts "very good indicators" by the end of 2018.

This is very important for investors to implement new plans and new investments", said Kvirikashvili at today's government meeting, where he discussed recent economic growth indicators.

He said that real economic growth in 2017 hit five percent, which was a result of the "correct and consistent" economic policy of the Government of Georgia (*Agenda.ge, April 4*).

❖ Culture and Sport

29. Levan Tsaguria - New President of Georgian Sumo Federation

Former Sumo wrestler, Levan Tsaguria (KOKAI) has been elected as the new President of Sumo Federation of Georgia. KOKAI was the first Georgian, who had put path to the world of Sumo in Japan. According to Tsaguria his main aim will be to popularize Sumo in the regions and attract youth to this sport (*ITV, April 3*).