NEWS DIGEST ON GEORGIA

December 3-10

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Foreign Affairs

1. Six Ukrainian, one Georgian citizens detained in Tbilisi, weapons and ammunition seized

One Georgian and six Ukrainian citizens were detained in Tbilisi yesterday. Their weapons have been seized and the Georgian Interior Ministry is investigating possible links between the detainees and the current, post-election political situation in Georgia.

The Georgian Interior Ministry has stated that the individuals have been detained in the Guru and Alliance Hotels in Tbilisi.

The ministry says that the individuals came to Georgia on 27 November. They have been charged with illegal purchase and possession of weapons and ammunition.

The Interior Ministry is investigating whether the individuals are linked with the current political process in Georgia [referring t yesterday's opposition rally in central Tbilisi and post-election situation in the country]" the Ministry of Internal Affairs stated *(Agenda.ge, December 3, 2018)*.

2. Extradition of former Georgian official from Ukraine delayed

The extradition of the former head of the Georgian military police under the United National Movement government Megis Kardava from Ukraine has been delayed as the latter has asked Ukraine for political asylum.

The Georgian Chief Prosecutor's Office says that Ukrainian law prohibits extradition from its territory before the completion of asylum-related procedures.

As soon as the procedures related to asylum are completed the Ukrainian Ministry of Justice will discuss Kardava's extradition to Georgia," the Georgian Chief Prosecutor's Office says (Agenda.ge, December 3, 2018).

3. NATO North Atlantic Council holds meeting with Georgian, Ukrainian officials

The North Atlantic Council (NAC), a principal political decision-making body of NATO, held a meeting with Georgian and Ukrainian officials in Brussels.

Regional security issues, along with Russia's recent activities against Ukraine in the Sea of Azov, were key issues on the agenda of yesterday's meeting, the Georgian Foreign Ministry reported.

It was the second time that Georgian and Ukrainian issues were discussed in the context of regional security," the Foreign Ministry stated (Agenda.ge, December 5, 2018).

4. Georgian Deputy Justice Minister becomes first Georgian elected to ICC Trust Fund for Victims' board

Georgian Deputy Minister of Justice Gocha Lortkipanidze has become the first Georgian to be unanimously elected today to represent Eastern Europe in the Trust Fund for Victims of the International Criminal Court (ICC) headquartered in The Hague, Netherlands. The fund is composed of five members tasked with responding to the harm resulting from crimes under the jurisdiction of the ICC by upholding the rights of victims and their families through the provision of reparations and assistance, ICC says.

The representatives of all 123 ICC member countries voted for Lortkipanidze's election to the position for two years (Agenda.ge, December 5, 2018).

5. Georgian Deputy Justice Minister tells ICC assembly what Georgia waits for its investigation of Russia-Georgia war

Georgian Deputy Justice Minister Gocha Lortkipanidze addressed the Assembly of States Parties (ASP) of International Criminal Court (ICC) yesterday and briefed the 123 state representatives about the expectations of Georgia regarding the ICC prosecutor's investigation of the Russia-Georgia war in 2008. Lortkipanidze was unanimously elected yesterday to the board of the ICC Trust Fund for Victims.

"We are sure that the investigation of the ICC prosecutor will become the basis for the enforcement of the international law, no matter how influential or powerful the offender is," Lortkipanidze stated.

Lortkipanidze stated that the ICC holds an effective tool to carry out justice and is able to provide practical support and not only diplomatic statements to victims (Agenda.ge, December 6, 2018).

6. Georgian FM speaks about severe violations by Russia in Georgia at OSCE Ministerial Council session

"Hundreds of thousands of IDPs and refugees, victims of continued ethnic cleansing remain to be deprived of the right to return to their homes in safety and dignity. The tragic case of Georgian IDP, Archil Tatunashvili who was illegally detained, tortured and killed by the occupation power in the Tskhinvali region last march as well as brutal murder of Georgian IDPs Giga Otkhozoria and David Basharuli are a clear reminder of an alarming humanitarian situation in both Georgian regions where no international monitoring mechanisms are allowed," Zalkaliani said *(Agenda.ge, December 6, 2018)*.

7. US Army unit trains with Georgian troops in "first ever" event

Georgian defence officials have praised a "new stage" in defence partnership between the United States and Georgia as a US Army unit joined Georgian troops in a combined live fire event this week. It represented the climax of the participation of the Cobra Company, 1st Armoured Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division of the US Army Europe in combat readiness assessment on Georgian training areas over the week.

The event marks the first case of a US unit holding training in the country, using local infrastructure, outside of annual multinational drills *(Agenda.ge, December 7, 2018)*.

8. OSCE Group of Friends of Georgia reaffirms support for country's territorial integrity

The OSCE Group of Friends of Georgia has reaffirmed its 'unwavering support' to Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty at the 25th Ministerial Council meeting in Milan, Italy.

The statement was supported by Bulgaria, Canada, Czech Republic, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Sweden, Ukraine, UK and the US and was delivered by the Foreign Minister of Canada, Chrystia Freeland.

"We believe that a peaceful resolution of Russia-Georgia conflict would have a transformative effect not only on Georgia but on the region as a whole. We express our deep concern over the increase of Russia's military exercises and its further military buildup in Georgia's Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions. Continuous violations of the EU mediated 12 August, 2008 ceasefire agreement by Russia destabilizes situation and harms those principles and norms upon which our security depends," Freeland stated (Agenda.ge, December 8, 2018).

9. Georgia, France move to next level of cooperation

Minister of Defence of Georgia Levan Izoria has signed an agreement with his French colleague Florence Parly on the purchase of an air defence management and control system. The agreement was signed as part of Izoria's visit to France.

He said the new contract allows Georgia to integrate into the NATO's united air defence management and control system in the future.

"This would significantly strengthen our defense capabilities in the air defence component what would guarantee the security of our airspace," Izoria added *(Agenda.ge, December 8, 2018)*.

10. Military exercises Didgori 2018 kick off with NATO, US involvement

The Didgori 2018 Command and Staff Exercise, supported by the NATO-Georgian Joint Training and Evaluation Center (JTEC), launched today.

The exercise aims to improve military coordination and organisation skills during critical situations, and will last for five days.

The opening ceremony was attended by Georgian PM Mamuka Bakhtadze, US Chargé d'affaires ad interim Ross Wilson, the Minister of Defence Levan Izoria, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Davit Zalkaniani, Chief of General Staff Major General Vladimer Chachibaia and other state officials (Agenda.ge, December 10, 2018).

11. Giorgi Margvelashvili congratulates acting Armenian PM on winning snap parliamentary elections

Georgian President Giorgi Margvelashvili has sent congratulations to Acting Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan on his political bloc's landslide victory in yesterday's snap parliamentary elections in Armenia.

Margvelashvili said the elections are a step forward in the development and democratisation of Armenia. Margvelashvili wished all the best in Pashinyan's future endeavors.

"Georgia firmly supports and stands by brotherly Armenia, the strong ties and friendship between our countries will further deepen", added Margvelashvili.

In turn, Pashinyan thanked Margvelashvili for congratulations and for the personal contribution that the Georgian president made for the development of relations between the two countries and said that Armenia greatly appreciates the support of Georgia as a friendly country and reliable partner (Agenda.ge, December 10, 2018).

12. MIA arrests 10 members of organised crime group in cooperation with French police

The Ministry of Internal Affairs has arrested two 'thieves-in-law' and eight members of an organised criminal gang in France on December 10.

An operation under the name "VORS 69-01" was carried out in Lyon and 22 members of a criminal gang acting in France and Belgium were arrested as a result.

10 among the detainees are Georgians. Two of them, Mindia Nizharadze and Revaz Seskuria, are 'thieves in law'.

Investigators said that the detainees were involved in the robbery of houses which were identified and studied in advance. They were also stealing cars, falsifying documents and involved in drug trafficking (Agenda.ge, December 10, 2018).

Internal Affairs

13. Former culture minister Nikoloz Rurua found dead in Tbilisi

Georgia's former Minister of Culture and opposition politician Nikoloz Rurua has been found dead in his Tbilisi apartment, local media reported on Tuesday.

The United National Movement figure, aged 50, died of suspected myocardial infarction, however the cause was not immediately confirmed.

Rurua served as Minister of Culture of Georgia between 2009-2012, during the UNM government in the country.

He also worked as First Deputy Chairperson of the Defence and Security Committee of the Parliament of Georgia.

Tbilisi-born Rurua was a graduate of the city's State Theatre University and the Georgia State University College of Law in Atlanta, the United States.

One of the founders of the Black Sea Jazz Festival in the seaside city of Batumi, Rurua was also part of in some of the early work for Georgia's participation in this year's Frankfurt Book Fair as the official Guest of Honour.

Rurua took part in the early 1990s War in Abkhazia, for preserving Georgia's territorial integrity following the country's declaration of independence from the Soviet Union. He was awarded the Vakhtang Gorgasali Third Degree State Medal for his part in the conflict *(Agenda.ge, December 4, 2018)*.

14. Inspection of petrol stations expected to reveal fuel quality in Georgia

In order to determine the lead quantity in the fuel employees of the Environment Protection Supervision Department of the Ministry of Agriculture and Environment Protection will inspect the stations without advance notice and collect about 240 fuel samples.

The Environment Protection Supervision Department will check whether the quality of fuel is in line with current legislation in the field.

In Georgia the import of fuel which fails to meet mandatory standards is subject to fines of up to 10,000 GEL, while the sale of such fuel is subject to fines of 8,000 GEL (Agenda.ge, December 5, 2018).

15. Portuguese, Iranian citizens detained for smuggling in heroin, cocaine in especially large quantities

Georgian police have detained one Portuguese and two Iranian citizens this week for smuggling drugs into Georgia in especially large quantities.

The Portuguese citizen, who has not been identified, was detained at Tbilisi International Airport after being caught trying to smuggle in more than three kilograms of cocaine.

"He came to Georgia from Brazil," the Interior Ministry stated. The individual faces 8-20 years in prison or the life sentence (Agenda.ge, December 5, 2018).

16. US Department of State says Georgian presidential elections went 'smoothly', with irregularities

The US Department of State says that the 28 November Georgian presidential elections went smoothly, but some irregularities took place and should be addressed by the Georgian government.

"And we are happy to see that the presidential elections went off as smoothly as they did. We are concerned about numerous irregularities that we saw in those elections but are very watchful now in how the Georgians implement their new constitution, and I think the early part of next year will be a test for democratic institutions in Georgia," the US Department of State official said yesterday when commenting on NATO Foreign Ministerial issues.

He also stated that the US stands by the Bucharest 2008 declaration affirming that Georgia has a future in NATO.

"Georgia has made tremendous strides in reform, particularly in the defense sector, is an outsized contributor to international security missions, so our policy position has not changed," the US Department of State senior official said *(Agenda.ge, December 5, 2018)*.

17. Georgian presidential inauguration ceremony to be held in Telavi

The inauguration ceremony of president elect Salome Zurabishvili will be held in the eastern town of Telavi on 16 December.

President-elect Salome Zurabishvili says that it was her idea for the ceremony to be held in Telavi.

"There are two reasons. First is that during my election campaign I promised the popularization of Georgia regions and the second is that Telavi residents did not vote for me and with this decision I want to show that I will be the president of each Georgian citizen-those who voted or did not vote for me," Zurabishvili said.

Head of the Georgian government administration Kakha Kakhishvili will chair the commission tasked to organise the ceremony (Agenda.ge, December 5, 2018).

18. Soldiers will run a school course on defence initiated by Georgian Education Ministry

The Georgian Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport says that a new elective course 'Defence and Security' will be introduced for 10th-graders in several Georgian public schools as a pilot project. The course will be taught by servicemen. The textbook for the new subject has already been drafted by the Georgian Defence Ministry. A separate section of the book is about the 2008 Russia-Georgia war.

The ministry says that the aim of the course will be to popularize the army among the young generation and to develop their sense of patriotism.

Soldiers have been chosen to teach the course and they have already undergone training for this," the ministry says (Agenda.ge, December 6, 2018).

19. Former member of Tbilisi City Assembly Elisashvili establishes civil movement

Former independent member of Tbilisi City Assembly and runner-up in the Tbilisi mayoral race of 2017 Aleksandre (Aleko) Elisashvili has established a civil movement today to replace current political forces in the future.

Elisashvili says that that the country is damaged by the mutual attacks of the country's two strongest political parties, referring to the ruling Georgian Dream party and the United National Movement opposition. "The parties are so engaged in confrontations with each other that they completely forget about the country," Elisashvili said.

He stated that he is in the process of creating a team whose members will meet two criteria: high qualifications and honesty.

"[We will have a team], no matter whether [its members] are known to the public or not...it is not excluded that the movement to turn into a political unity in the future," Elisashvili said (Agenda.ge, December 7, 2018).

20. MIA arrests one for racial discrimination

The Ministry of Internal Affairs has arrested one individual born in 1975, charged with violent racial discrimination on a court decision.

"The detainee has verbally and physically assaulted a citizen of Cameroon in public transport in Rustavi," the MIA said in a release. The crime is punishable by imprisonment from two to five years *(Agenda.ge, December 8, 2018).*

21. MIA arrests US citizen trying to import large quantity of drugs to Georgia

A US citizen born in 1976 was arrested today at Tbilisi International Airport for attempting to bring in large quantities of drugs into the country. The detainee is facing eight to 20 years of imprisonment. Investigators said the detainee was found 229 in possession of packages of heroin, 101 pills of narcotic substances and eight jars of different kind of drugs. Forensic studies will reveal the exact substance of the drugs.

The MIA has arrested 116 people for drug trafficking and seized 35 kilograms of heroin, more than six kilograms of cocaine and up to 12 thousand pills of subutex, as well as up to three kilograms of MDMA this year alone *(Agenda.ge, December 8, 2018)*.

22. Ombudsman reviews current state of human rights protection in Georgia

Public Defender of Georgia Nino Lomjaria held a press conference before releasing her office's annual report on the state of human rights in Georgia.

During her speech, Lomjaria touched broadly on civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights and focused on positive and negative trends identified in the field of human rights. Lomjaria ended her press conference by summarising her office's key recommendations to further develop human rights in the country.

Protecting women's rights, gender equality and children's rights remains some of the biggest challenges facing Georgia", Lomjaria said (Agenda.ge, December 8, 2018).

23. UNICEF survey: majority of Georgian parents raise children with 'authoritarian style'

A majority of Georgian parents raise their children with an 'authoritarian style' of parenting, a UNICEF survey reports, adding that parents often employ physical and psychological punishment to discipline their children.

The findings of the UNICEF 'National Study on Parenting of Adolescents and Parenting Support Programmes in Georgia' released today says that Georgian parents are mostly engaged in caring for their adolescent's material and physical wellbeing, less in their psycho-emotional development.

Adolescence presents a crucially important window of opportunity to influence the development of children's brains – and thus, their futures," said UNICEF Representative in Georgia Dr. Ghassan Khalil.

Parents need to know just how influential they are in their adolescent life. Parents need to impact their children's skills to cope with different developmental challenges. But parents also need guidance to understand all this. In Georgia there are no parenting support programmes. The objective of our study is to support the Government in developing national policies and programmes for parents of adolescents, so that they are equipped with competencies they need for positive parenting and constructive support for adolescents." (Agenda.ge, December 8, 2018).

Economy and Social Affairs

24. New record: Georgia hosts over 8 million international travelers in 2018

More specifically, Georgia hosted 8,105,829 international travellers in January-November 2018, showing an increase of 10.6% year-on-year (y/y). Of these travellers, 4,486,595 were tourists, which is 17.2% more compared to the same period of 2017.

The majority of foreign travellers were from:

- ▶ Russia -1,341,127 travellers (+23.8%)
- > Azerbaijan 1,311,907 travellers (+9.8%)
- Armenia 1,162,220 travellers (+0.3%)
- > Turkey 1,031,147 travellers (+11.6%) (Agenda.ge, December 3, 2018).

25. Nov 2018: Passengers traffic up by 132% at Kutaisi Airpor

Kutaisi International Airport has served 47,868 passengers in November – a 132% year-on-year increase, United Airports of Georgia reports.

In November 2018 Kutaisi International airport performed 178 flights which is 85% increase year-onyear.

In all of 2018 up until now, Kutaisi International Airport has carried out 1,969 flights, which is a 29% y/y increase.

560,254 passengers were served by Kutaisi Airport during the eleven months of this year in total, which is a 47% y/y increase (Agenda.ge, December 4, 2018).

26. Georgia exports 8,595 tonnes of mandarins this year

Georgia has exported 8,595 tonnes of mandarins this year as of 3 December 2018, announces Georgia's Ministry of Agriculture and Environment Protection.

Taking into account the fact that this year is a very rich and high quality citrus harvest, exports are also proceeding actively", the ministry said.

Georgian mandarins were mainly exported to Russia, Ukraine, Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Uzbekistan and Latvia. The price of mandarins varies from 0.40 GEL to 0.70 GEL (Agenda.ge, December 4, 2018).

27. Jan-Nov 2018: Georgia earns \$184 mln by exporting 78 mln bottles of wine

Georgia exported about 78 million bottles of wine to 53 countries in January-November of 2018, announces the Georgian National Wine Agency. In the reporting period Georgia generated \$184.1 million from the sale of wine abroad.

Revenue increased by 19% from January-November 2017, while the volume of exports increased by 11%, said the Georgian National Wine Agency.

The top five countries that imported the most bottles of Georgia wine in January-November 2018 were:

- \succ Russia 48,587,707 bottles
- \succ Ukraine 9,525,172 bottles
- ➢ China − 6,275,909 bottles
- \succ Kazakhstan 3,396,452 bottles
- Poland 3,026,652 bottles (Agenda.ge, December 5, 2018).

28. Olive oil, whisky, tea - Georgia's next export products to China

Georgia is increasing its role as an important trade partner for China, adding new products to its export list.

After successfully exporting wine to China, now olive oil, whisky and tea will be Georgia's next export products to China, announces the Partnership Fund.

The decision to export new Georgian products to China came at a forum for trade-economic relations in China, where 15 Georgian companies were represented. At the forum the Georgian pavilion showcased Georgian tea, hazelnuts, mineral water, alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages.

As for Georgian wine, it first appeared in China in 2017 and was sold in the stores of Cheers Wines in Beijing. Dozens of Chinese wine importers have come to Georgia, while Georgia has been actively participating in food exhibitions in China. Also, a number of Georgian wine houses have been opened in China recently *(Agenda.ge, December 5, 2018)*.

29. Jan-Nov 2018: Passenger traffic up by 23% at Georgian airports

Georgia's three international airports served 4,688,177 passengers in the last 11 months, which is a 23% increase in comparison to last year, says the United Airports of Georgia.

The number of passengers who took regular or charter flights in Georgia increased in all three main airports of the country: Tbilisi Shota Rustaveli International Airport, Batumi International Airport and Kutaisi David Aghmashenebeli International Airport.

More specifically:

- ▶ Tbilisi International Airport served 3,547,553 passengers a 21% increase y/y
- ➢ Kutaisi International Airport served 560,254 passengers − 20% increase
- Batumi International Airport served 580,370 passengers 20% increase (Agenda.ge, December 6, 2018).

30. Batumi in Airbnb's top 19 destinations to visit in 2019

Georgia's Black Sea resort city of Batumi is one of Airbnb's top 19 trending destinations for 2019 as it is one of the most searched cities on the online marketplace connecting travellers with local hosts.

"This second-largest city of Georgia has become increasingly popular amongst locals and travelers particularly due to the cost and year-round moderate climate. With a population of 160,000, this Black Sea resort and port city has a lively promenade for nightime revelry and an old town district to take you back in time, along with beaches and ski resorts to take part in. And with an extensive train connection between the capital of Tbilisi and Batumi, you can travel from one to the other in around four hours for just under \$10", read the article on Airbnb *(Agenda.ge, December 6, 2018)*.

31. Medicines for epilepsy and Parkinson's Disease to be added to the Free Medicine State Program The socially vulnerable population of Georgia and people with disabilities will soon be able to buy more medicines at a symbolic or halved price starting next year, with medicines for epilepsy and Parkinson's being added to the list. The medicines on the list are for chronic and cardiovascular diseases.

"I am happy to say that medicines for epilepsy and Parkinson's will be added to the list. We expect that the list will include 60 medicines at least," Health Minister David Sergeenko stated.

Epilepsy, also known as seizure disorder, affects people of all ages and is in the top five of most common neurological disorders spread worldwide (Agenda.ge, December 7, 2018).

32. Foreign citizens have 9 days to register their lands in Georgia

Foreign citizens living in Georgia have nine days to register their land plots until the new State Constitution, banning Georgia's agricultural lands to be sold to foreign nationals, comes into force on December 16.

Today the Constitutional Court of Georgia declared unconstitutional the moratorium imposed by the Government of Georgia regarding the sale of agricultural lands to foreign citizens. The lawsuit was filed by citizens of Greece, who failed to register their inherited land plots in Georgia.

The moratorium on alienation of agricultural lands to foreigners has been declared void, although the restrictions were withdrawn only until December 16 when the new constitution comes into effect. The new Constitution will again impose restrictions envisaged by the moratorium. But the foreign citizens have a nine-day deadline to register their lands *(Agenda.ge, December 7, 2018)*.

33. Municipal funding increases by more than 100 million GEL

Municipal fundings will increase by more than 100 million GEL, Georgian Vice Prime Minister and Minister of Infrastructure and Regional Development Maia Tskitishvili has stated today in parliament.

"This is an increase of more than 13 per cent compared to last year," Tskitishvili said.

She spoke about the importance of powerful local governments and stated that a local government is strong when it has the opportunity and resources to independently settle problems affecting its population, without the involvement of a central government *(Agenda.ge, December 7, 2018)*.

34. Q3 2018: Georgia attracts \$322.6 mln in foreign direct investments

Foreign direct investments (FDI) in Georgia amounted to \$322.6 million in the third quarter (Q3) of 2018 as shown by preliminary data published by the National Statistics Office of Georgia (Geostat). Q3 FDIs were down by 48.2% compared to the adjusted data for Q3 of 2017.

The main reasons for the decrease in FDIs is the completed pipeline project, transferring of ownership in some companies from non-resident to resident units and reduction of liabilities to non-resident direct investors", said Geostat (Agenda.ge, December 10, 2018).

35. Website to initiate debt cancellation programme for 600,000 Georgian citizens launches today At first, customers with the three leading banks in Georgia – TBC Bank, Bank of Georgia and Liberty Bank – will be able to apply, while other financial institutions will be added gradually as well.

"The website will become active today at 6 p.m., and some citizens will be able to register", Georgian Prime Minister Mamuka Bakhtadze says.

"Today and tomorrow, all the databases of TBC Bank, Bank of Georgia and the Liberty Bank will be uploaded and every other day new bases will be added to the website. The process of signing agreements with financial institutions continues but I assure [you] that those citizens who are on a 'blacklist' will meet the New Year without loans", said Bakhtadze *(Agenda.ge, December 10, 2018)*.

36. Georgia to have new, European standards customs code in 2019

A new, European style, customs code will come into force in Georgia in 2019, announces Prime Minister of Georgia Mamuka Bakhtadze.

With the new customs code we will be able to more effectively integrate Georgia into the global economy", said Bakhtadze.

Bakhtadze said that the existing customs code failed to respond to current challenges and that is why the government initiated the new customs code *(Agenda.ge, December 10, 2018)*.

37. International companies that open regional offices in Georgia to enjoy tax benefits

Georgia is striving to become a regional financial centre, inviting large transnational companies to open regional representations in Georgia and receive unique tax benefits. The Prime Minister of Georgia Mamuka Bakhtadze announced the initiative today.

International companies, large transnational organisations, including representatives of the world's 500 largest companies, if they open offices in Georgia and serve the region from here will benefit from unique tax benefits", said Bakhtadze.

Earlier in October 2018 Bakhtadze announced a new initiative that introduces the concept of electronic residency, which will allow citizens of 34 countries to electronically register their companies and open bank accounts in Georgia.

We are introducing the practice of electronic residency that will enable the citizens of 34 countries to electronically register their companies and open bank accounts in our country. All these 34 countries are economically developed... All agencies will be given tasks, while a draft law of the amendments will be sent to the Parliament of Georgia", said Bakhtadze a month ago (Agenda.ge, December 10, 2018).

Additional Information

