

NEWS DIGEST ON GEORGIA

December 31-January 7

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❖ Occupied Regions

❖ Abkhazia Region

1. President Zurabishvili awards family of brutally murdered Giga Otkhзорia with Medal for Civil Commitment

President of Georgia Salome Zurabishvili has awarded the family of Giga Otkhзорia with the Medal for Civil Commitment today in Zugdidi, where she attended a Presidential Christmas Tree event with the children of the late Otkhзорia.

“I have handed the Civil Commitment Medal to the children of Giga Otkhзорia as a sign that the country does not forget its heroes. Commitment is what Georgia stands on,” President Zurabishvili said.

It has been more than two and a half years since Otkhзорia, who was 31 years old at the time, was killed.

He was trying to transport food into the breakaway region of Abkhazia for a funeral ceremony for his late aunt on May 19, 2016 (*Agenda.ge, January 5, 2019*).

❖ Internal Affairs

2. Georgian PM's New Year address: 2019 will be a year of success and progress

Georgian Prime Minister Mamuka Bakhtadze wished Georgian citizens good health, success and lots of reasons for happiness in 2019.

He sent special wishes to those carrying out their duties last night, such as Georgian servicemen participating in international missions, doctors, policemen, servicemen, border guards, rescuers, while the whole country rang in 2019 (*Agenda.ge, January 1, 2019*).

3. President of Georgia: Let 2019 be a year of reconciliation

I wish this year to be a year of peace and happiness, the year of unification and integration. Happy New Year to all Georgia”, Zurabishvili said in her New Year message.

“New Year is coming and I offer my heartfelt wishes! I send warm wishes to our citizens living in Tbilisi and in all regions and villages of Georgia. I wish a Happy New Year to our compatriots living abroad!

“I send warm wishes to the soldiers and the police officers who ensure peace and order this night, I congratulate our soldiers participating in international missions in the distant Mali and Afghanistan. I plan to visit them in the nearest future.

“I wish a Happy New Year to our heroic compatriots living across the occupation line, in Gali and Akhgori. I wish a Happy New Year to our Abkhaz and Ossetian brothers; Let 2019 be a year of reconciliation”, said Zurabishvili (*Agenda.ge, January 1, 2019*).

4. New laws come into force on New Year

Several major legislative changes came into play on January 1, 2019. One of the changes is the accumulated pension system.

The new programme is mandatory for legally employed people under 40, meaning they will be enrolled automatically. For the self-employed and those above the age of 40, enrolment in the programme is voluntary.

The system will work on a 2+2+2 scheme. This means that employees will pay two per cent of their salaries towards their pension, while employers and the government will add another two per cent each.

On the same day, pensions increased by 20 GEL and amounted to 200 GEL monthly. From January 1, 2019 all drivers are obliged to carry out technical inspections of their vehicles.

Mandatory vehicle inspections started in Georgia from January 1, 2018 and powerful engine vehicles (+ 3.5 tonnes) and passenger vehicles (+8 seats) were inspected during the first stage (*Agenda.ge, January 1, 2019*).

5. Georgian president issues first pardon, three women released from prison

The first female president of Georgia Salome Zurbashvili has issued her first pardon decree, releasing three female inmates.

The president's administration has reported that one of the women is pregnant, another has an underage child and the third is a mother of three children.

Zurbashvili says that she may change several members of the Pardon Commission in the coming days.

The President's Pardon Commission is composed of 11 individuals, mainly lawyers from the civil sector, public figures, the Public Defender and a spiritual representative from Georgia's Patriarchate (*Agenda.ge, January 2, 2019*).

6. Head, several members of President's Pardon Commission quit

Head of the President's Pardon Commission Zviad Koridze has left the post and several members of the commission, who served in the role under former President Giorgi Margvelashvili, did so.

Koridze stated today that he has already submitted a request on resignation, so did the head of the Transparency International Georgia NGO Eka Gigauri and another member of the commission Basa Janikashvili, Koridze stated.

Janikashvili said that a "new president means new members of the commission" and that is why he left the position.

Gigauri stated that she decided to quit at the final meeting of the commission under Margvelashvili is November.

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7. Georgian Dream withdraws party member from Parliament's Legal Affairs Committee

The Georgian Dream ruling party has withdrawn Gedevan Popkhadze from the Parliament's Legal Affairs Committee which makes it impossible for Popkhadze to take the post of deputy head of the committee, to which he was elected last week. The decision was made today at the meeting of ruling party members.

Leading figures of the ruling party, Parliament Speaker Irakli Kobakhidze among them, claimed that Popkhadze was elected the deputy head of the Parliament's Legal Affairs Committee through the violation of mandatory procedures, which was dismissed by Popkhadze.

"This was the decision of the faction and I do not intend to protest it," Popkhadze said today after the party meeting and added that his attitude to the decision is "negative".

He claims that the process related to lifetime appointment of judges to the Supreme Court of Georgia, which needs the approval of the Legal Affairs Committee, is more important than his post.

Head of Parliament's Legal Affairs Committee Eka Beselia quit the post on 27 December, as she said, "because of the unacceptable process related to judges." She put forward Popkhadze's and two candidates for the position of deputy head of the committee.

Parliament Speaker Kobakhidze said that Beselia had no right to nominate three candidates to the post.

He also says that Beselia decided to resign long before the presentation of the list of the Supreme Court Judges.

Mamuka Mdinaradze, one of the top figures of the ruling party, also says that there is "no connection" between Beselia's resignation and the list of judges for the Supreme Court (*Agenda.ge, January 3, 2019*).

8. Parliament Speaker denies connection between ruling party members' withdraw and recent appointment of controversial judge

"The decision has two reasons. One was the violation of mandatory procedures while electing Popkhadze to the post of the first deputy head of the committee which is confirmed by every qualified lawyer. The second reason is related to the issue of how committed he has been to the team and this has been discussed inside the party," Kobakhidze said (*Agenda.ge, January 4, 2019*).

9. Swine flu death toll reaches eight people

The H1N1 virus has caused the death of eight people in Georgia this winter.

In every case, delayed hospitalisation caused fatal results, stated Amiran Gamkrelidze, director of the National Centre for Disease Control and Public Health.

One out of the eight victims was a pregnant woman, another was a young man who had severe pneumonia and was hospitalised late; the rest had chronic diseases, such as tumor, acute heart failure and other issues", added Gamkrelidze. Today, Rustavi Central Hospital was quarantined due to an outbreak of the H1N1 virus (*Agenda.ge, January 4, 2019*).

10. Ministry of Health expands list of people eligible for free antiviral medication, delivers additional supply to pharmacy network

Four pharmacy chains have received an additional supply of anti-flu medicine Tamiflu, totalling 800 packages from the Ministry of Health. The medicine is also distributed in Georgian regions where there are risks of a medication deficit.

The Ministry of Health announced yesterday that it would share its reserves of the medicine with private pharmacy chains as the increased demand for Tamiflu over the last two days has caused a deficit.

When the level of infection decreases, the pharmacies will return the store of Tamiflu back to the ministry.

Simultaneously, the Ministry of Health has expanded the list of people who are eligible to get the medicine for free (*Agenda.ge, January 5, 2019*).

11. Six Ukrainian, one Georgian citizens stop 20-day hunger strike in Tbilisi prison

Six Ukrainian and one Georgian citizens, who were detained in Tbilisi in early December for the purchase and possession of weapons, have stopped more than 20 days of hunger strike after the request of doctors and relatives, a lawyer said today.

Lawyer Giorgi Rostomashvili claims that the detainees are not waiting for the fair investigation and continue to say that they are innocent.

He says that the Ukrainian consul has visited the detainees, however, the detainees did not like the attitude and questions of the diplomat. One Georgian and six Ukrainian citizens were detained in Tbilisi on 2 December.

It was reported by the Georgian law enforcers that “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 stated that the individuals were detained in the Guru and Alliance Hotels in Tbilisi (*Agenda.ge, January 4, 2019*).

12. Georgian Orthodox Church celebrates Christmas

The Georgian Orthodox Church celebrates Christmas today according to the Julian calendar.

A special liturgy took place at the Holy Trinity Cathedral in Tbilisi at midnight, led by Georgia's Patriarch Ilia II.

Delivering the customary Christmas Epistle, Ilia II emphasised a number of issues, including:

- Problems in the education system and a need for the increased involvement of parents in their children's school life;
- Need for measures against abortion, drug addiction and gambling;
- The risks coming from increased cases of the abuse of freedom of speech, especially on social media in the form of hate speech, disinformation or defamation.

❖ Economy and Social Affairs

13. Georgia fulfills state budget in 2018

Georgia's state budget income as well as revenue was fulfilled by 100% this year, announces the treasury service of Georgia's Ministry of Finance. As for the 2019 state budget, Georgia will have over 12 billion GEL in the state budget next year.

Next year's budget is planned with a 4.5% economic growth forecast, and if the actual index is higher, the budget will be amended in 2019 (*Agenda.ge, December 31, 2018*).

14. Q3 Of 2018: Georgia's external debt decreases, totals \$17.2 billion

Georgia currently owes \$17.2 billion in external debt, and this amount is decreasing, says the National Bank of Georgia (NBG).

During the third quarter (Q3) of 2018, the gross external debt of Georgia decreased by \$195.1 million. Out of that a \$145.8 million decrease was due to exchange rate changes, transactions led to \$65.5 million decrease and price changes to \$10.9 million decrease. At the same time other changes led to 27.0 million USD increase of the external debt.

As for Georgia's international investment position (IIP), the IPP amounted to -\$23.1 billion for September 30, 2018. Net IIP improved by \$551.1 million compared to the previous quarter (*Agenda.ge, December 31, 2018*).

15. Inflation in December: Price for food, non-alcoholic beverages increases by 2.3%

Prices of bread and cereals, vegetables, milk, cheese and eggs, fish, fruit and grapes have increased in Georgia, reports the National Statistics Office of Georgia (Geostat).

In December 2018 the prices of food and non-alcoholic beverages increased by 2.3%. The prices in the group increased for the subgroups of:

- Bread and cereals (5.9%)
- Vegetables (5.6%)
- Milk, cheese and eggs (2.8%)
- Fish (2.4%)
- Fruit and grapes (1.7%)
- Meanwhile, the prices decreased for oils and fats (-1.6%) and coffee, tea and cocoa (-1%).

Prices for transport also decreased by 0.6% in Georgia last month. The prices decreased for the operation of personal transport equipment (-0.9%) (*Agenda.ge, January 2, 2019*).

16. Georgia's new pension system comes into play

This month, the employed in Georgia will transfer money to the country's pension savings system for the first time, as it was launched on January 1, 2019.

Starting from January 1, 2019 the accumulated pension system is mandatory for legally employed people under 40, meaning they will be enrolled automatically. For the self-employed and those above the age of 40, enrolment in the programme is voluntary.

The special website pension.ge and the national system of pension deposits administration were launched today to allow citizens to better administer their funds accumulated in the pension system.

The pension savings system applies to Georgian citizens, foreign citizens living in Georgia with permanent residency in the country and stateless persons who are employed or self-employed and receive an income. This system applies to employees of both the public as well as private sectors.

The system will work on a 2+2+2 scheme. Each employee, employer and the government will make a contribution of 2% of the gross volume of the employee's income to an individual retirement account. As for the self-employed, they will make a deposit of 4% of their income, and the state will match another two per cent. The new law on pension savings does not envisage the annulment of the current pension system.

On January 1, 2018 pensions increased by 20 GEL in Georgia and amounted to 200 GEL monthly (*Agenda.ge, January 3, 2019*).

17. Record numbers of international visitors flock to Georgia in 2018

Georgia has set a new record, hosting over eight million international travellers this year, the Prime Minister of Georgia Mamuka Bakhtadze announces.

More specifically, Georgia hosted 8,679,544 international travellers in 2018, showing an increase of 9.8% year-on-year (y/y). Of these travellers, 4,756,820 were tourists, which is 16.9% more compared to 2017.

Bakhtadze said that these numbers prove that interest towards Georgia is increasing every day. He also recalled the important international ratings in which Georgia moved forward in 2018 (*Agenda.ge, January 4, 2019*).

18. Georgia exports 86.2 mln bottles of wine in 2018, record high of last 30 years

Georgia exported about 86.2 million bottles of wine to 53 countries in 2018, which is a record high in the last 30 years, announces the Georgian National Wine Agency.

Last year Georgia generated \$203 million from the sale of wine abroad.

Revenue increased by 20% from 2017, while the volume of exports increased by 13%, said the Georgian National Wine Agency.

The top 10 countries that imported the most bottles of Georgia wine in 2018 were:

- Russia – 53,682,627 bottles
- Ukraine – 10,687,835 bottles
- China – 6,951,019 bottles
- Kazakhstan – 3,599,143 bottles
- Poland – 3,508,122 bottles
- Latvia – 1,711,078 bottles
- Belarus – 1,606,002
- Estonia – 581,190
- Lithuania – 488,154
- Germany – 483,791

To European countries:

- Switzerland – 378% increase (25,350 bottles)
- Denmark – 111% (17,834 bottles)
- Romania – 100% increase (99,774 bottles)
- Czech Republic – 81% increase (61,908 bottles)
- Italy – 69% increase (17,244 bottles)

To Asian countries:

- South Korea - 275% increase (68,124 bottles)
- Turkmenistan -196% increase (197,694 bottles)
- Kyrgyzstan - 63% increase (218,550 bottles)
- Azerbaijan - 40% increase (197,724 bottles)
- Japan - 37% increase (211,883 bottles) (*Agenda.ge, January 5, 2019*).

19. 2018-2019 orange harvest: Export of Georgian mandarins up 25%

Georgia exported 26,775 tonnes of mandarins during the 2018-2019 orange harvest season, announces the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture.




Export of mandarins grew by 25 percent compared to the 2017-2018 harvest. Georgian mandarins were mainly exported to Russia, Ukraine and Armenia. The price of mandarins varies from 0.40 GEL to 0.70 GEL (*Agenda.ge, January 5, 2019*).

Additional Information

January 8, 2019

OFFICIAL EXCHANGE RATES

1 USD - 2.6744 GEL 1 GBP - 3.3895 GEL 100 RUB - 3.9241 GEL
1 EUR - 3.0491 GEL 1 TRY - 0.4941 GEL 100 JPY - 2.4772 GEL

Tuesday 8 January	Wednesday 9 January	Thursday 10 January	Friday 11 January	Saturday 12 January
				
-1° 4°	-2° 5°	-4° 6°	-2° 7°	0° 8°

- **Movie Events - English Sessions - [Tickets](#)**
- **Friends of Museum (Membership to access Georgian National Museums For free of charge after one payment) - [Membership](#)**
- **Marjanishvili Theatre – [Events and Tickets](#)**
- **Rustaveli Theatre - [Events and Tickets](#)**
- **Opera and Ballet – [Events and Tickets](#)**
- **Concerts – [Events and Tickets](#)**
- **Sports – [Events and Tickets](#)**