

# NEWS DIGEST ON GEORGIA

January 17-20

Compiled by: *Aleksandre Davitashvili*

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## ❖ Occupied Regions

### 1. Georgian gov't calls upon Russia, de facto authorities to reopen so-called borders

The central Georgian government has called upon Russia and the de facto leaderships of the two Georgian occupied regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali (South Ossetia) to reopen so-called borders with the rest of Georgia, which were closed on 11 January “to avoid the spread of swine flu.”

Georgian Foreign Minister David Zalkaliani has condemned the step and stated today that the international community and co-chairs of the Geneva International Discussions [on Georgian conflict issues] have been informed regarding the closure (*MFA.GOV.GE, January 18, 2019*).

### 2. Procedure to receive Georgian passport for residents of occupied regions simplified

The central Georgian government has simplified the procedure to receive a Georgian passport for individuals residing in the Georgian occupied regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali (South Ossetia).

Receiving Georgian passports will provide opportunities for individuals to travel visa free in the EU Schengen Zone and enjoy other achievements of the country.

Receiving the Georgian passport in a one-month time period will be free of charge, while receiving the passport in an accelerated manner, in 15 days, will cost 50 GEL (*Agenda.ge, January 18, 2019*).

### 3. Airbnb removes listings in Russian occupied Abkhazia and Tskhinvali

“Pursuant to application of the company’s global framework for disputed territories, Airbnb had concerns that because homes — the core of the Airbnb business — are a central element of the dispute among stakeholders in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Airbnb’s listings could be implicated in ongoing tensions. In applying the global framework to these disputed territories, Airbnb determined that the existence of the listings in these disputed territories has a direct connection to the larger conflict in the region,” the company said in a release published on its website.

Airbnb is a global platform operating in 191 countries and regions and more than 81,000 cities (*Agenda.ge, January 19, 2019*).

## ❖ Foreign Affairs

### 4. EU transfers 110 million GEL to support gov't reforms in Georgia

The European Union has transferred 110 million GEL (about \$ 41.28m/€36.8m) to the government of Georgia in acknowledgement of government reforms conducted in 2017 and 2018.

EU funds are transferred in exchange for government progress in areas of agriculture and rural development, justice, public administration reform, legal approximation and business support, and education and labour market policies.

“EU cooperation with the government through our sector reform performance contracts allows the government to achieve results that would not be possible without our funding.

Our annual assessments show the substantial impact these programmes achieve, as for example the improved access to legal aid, increasing compliance with EU standards in food and labour safety, and extended support to business development. This support is creating tangible improvements in the lives of Georgians”, said EU Ambassador to Georgia Carl Hartzell (*Agenda.ge, January 17, 2019*).

#### **5. Georgia’s Chief of Defence, NATO top commanders in anniversary Military Committee meeting**

Georgia’s Chief of the General Staff of Armed Forces was among the most senior NATO military commanders for the alliance’s 180th Military Committee meeting in Brussels this week.

Major General Vladimer Chachibaia rubbed shoulders with top-ranking defence chiefs and officials for the conference that concluded on Wednesday after two days of review of security and defence challenges for NATO.

Opened by the Committee’s Chairman, Air Chief Marshal Sir Stuart Peach, the meeting involved an address by Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg before the military brass got involved on the agenda (*Agenda.ge, January 17, 2019*).

#### **6. Facebook pages from Georgia, former Soviet countries removed for fraudulently boosting Kremlin outlet**

Facebook pages created for Georgia were among nearly 300 taken down by the platform on Thursday for misleading users about their origin and purpose while serving social media reach for Sputnik, a Kremlin media outlet.

An analysis of takedowns by the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab said the hundreds of pages, removed for what Facebook calls "coordinated inauthentic behaviour", included those created for users in the country.

Pages ostensibly created on neutral subjects like "famous Georgians", as well as apparently fake personal accounts, actively shared material from Sputnik, increasing its user reach (*Agenda.ge, January 17, 2019*).

#### **7. New deployment of Georgian soldiers leaves for NATO peace mission in Afghanistan**

A new wave of over 100 Georgian soldiers will soon leave for a NATO peacekeeping mission in Afghanistan for seven months, announces the Ministry of Defence of Georgia.

Georgian soldiers of I Infantry Brigade were given a military send-off today in Gori, a small town near Tbilisi host to a large military base (*Agenda.ge, January 18, 2019*).

#### **8. German Bundestag passes bill including Georgia on safe countries list**

The German Bundestag has declared Georgia a safe country on January 18, meaning that Georgians will not be eligible to seek asylum in Germany.

The draft law also needs to be approved by the Bundesrat, the upper house of the bicameral parliament of Germany.

Georgian Ambassador to Germany Elguja Khokrishvili said that the bill was supported by 509 lawmakers at the Bundestag while 138 voted against (*Agenda.ge, January 19, 2019*).

#### **9. MIA arrests two citizens of Turkey for illegal border crossing**

The Ministry of Internal Affairs has arrested two citizens of Turkey for illegally crossing the border near Sarpi, Adjara. Investigators said that the two detainees were trying to cross the state border from Turkey, avoiding the checkpoint (*Agenda.ge, January 19, 2019*).

## ❖ Internal Affairs

### 10. ISFED conducts 1st social media monitoring study for elections: dubious Facebook accounts, pages tripled ahead of presidential runoff

Major findings of the monitoring are as follows:

- ✓ Attempts to discredit candidates and political actors through social media using sponsored content published on anonymous Facebook pages became intensive [in the pre-election period].
- ✓ Discrediting Facebook pages operated against Salome Zurbashvili, an independent candidate endorsed by the Georgian Dream ruling party, as well as the opposition candidate Grigol Vashadze and parties that endorsed them, using clearly negative messages.
- ✓ During the campaign period of the second round, it became evident that discrediting pages from both sides attacked one another in an organised manner and engaged in smear campaigns in response to discrediting messages coming from the opposing side.
- ✓ Ahead of the second round, fake media pages were created or became active, acting against the opposition candidate.
- ✓ Pages that aimed to confuse and disorganise voters became active ahead of the second round.
- ✓ Following the first round of the election, pages spreading ultra-nationalist narratives became active on Facebook in favor of Zurbashvili. Prior to that, majority of these pages were actively disseminating posts with xenophobic, homophobic and anti-liberal contents.
- ✓ Pages of presidential candidates, parties that nominated/endorsed them and official campaign pages on Facebook mostly operated in abidance by requirements of the law.
- ✓ The Georgian Dream made illegal donation in favor of Zurbashvili using their official Facebook page-
- ✓ published sponsored posts on its official page, openly expressing their support for Zurbashvili.
- ✓ Instances of misuse of administrative resources during the pre-election period were not found on official Facebook pages of municipalities and Adjara Autonomous Republic bodies.
- ✓ Local self-government employees (civil servants) often violated the Election Code by campaigning during working hours using social media (*IDFI.GE, January 17, 2019*).

### 11. Georgia receives condolences after deadly blast in Tbilisi

The Lithuanian Foreign Ministry expressed its condolences to the loved ones of the victims following the deadly gas explosion.

The UK Ambassador to Georgia Justin McKenzie Smith writes that “he is deeply saddened” by last night’s tragic accident in an apartment block in Didi Digomi district of Tbilisi. The Embassy of Italy in Georgia also tweeted about the explosion: “Our deepest condolences to Georgia and to the families affected by the terrible explosion in #Tbilisi.”

Armenian PM Nikol Pashinyan has sent a letter to the Georgian PM, where he expressed his sorrow regarding the tragic incident, the Armenian Embassy to Georgia reports (*Agenda.ge, January 17, 2019*).

### 12. Energy Ombudsman demands explanation from KazTransGas Tbilisi over explosion

“The procedure of connecting the residential building to the natural gas network will be thoroughly studied”, announced the Energy Ombudsman. The Energy Ombudsman has demanded an explanation from KazTransGas Tbilisi.

The Energy Ombudsman's interest is also in why the technician could not find a point of leakage. It is likely that negligence or unprofessionalism of the employee is evident”, reads the statement (*Agenda.ge, January 17, 2019*).

### **13. Tbilisi Mayor: it is the responsibility of gas providers to ensure safety**

Tbilisi Mayor Kakha Kaladze has stated that it is not the responsibility of Tbilisi City Hall to check the safety of natural gas networks, responding to speculations that the 16 January deadly explosion in the Didi Digomi district of Tbilisi was the fault of the local authorities.

“Providing gas and electricity and checking the safety of networks are the responsibilities of energy-provider companies”, Kaladze said.

Kaladze also responded to accusations that the nine-storey residential building where the explosion took place had not been fully certified by the City Hall Supervisory Agency for safety issues (*Agenda.ge, January 18, 2019*).

### **14. Two charged with negligence in Tbilisi residential home explosion given pretrial detention**

A Tbilisi court has given two individuals charged with negligence for their responsibility in failing to detect a gas leak in a residential home in Tbilisi to pre-trial detention.

The explosion took place on 16 January, killing four and injuring eight. The two individuals have pleaded not guilty and plan to appeal the court decision. The next trial date has been scheduled for 14 March.

“They are charged with negligence, facing two to five years of imprisonment. When they arrived at the spot there was no smell of gas and the equipment showed that there was no leak”, lawyer Tamar Japaridze said before today’s court session.

The defence earlier requested that bail be granted and set at 50,000 for Vazel Mamamdiani and 10,000 for Tornike Tatishvili while the prosecutor requested detention (*Agenda.ge, January 18, 2019*).

### **15. Government and prosecutors office definitively separated after 5-year process**

The process of separating the government and the Prosecutors’ Office, which started back in 2013, has finally come to an end.

Minister of Justice Thea Tsulukiani headed the final prosecutors council meeting yesterday where the members elected new a chairwoman, Nana Khunjua. Tsulukiani also summarised the five-year period of the reform and wished success to the Prosecutor's Office on its independent future development.

“We have finished a five-year process aimed at strengthening the Prosecutor's Office and making it more independent. I wish the Prosecutor General to work in accordance with the principles we have outlined in the law: political neutrality, fairness, competence and professionalism,” Tsulukiani said.

Tsulukiani was the initiator of the reform in 2013 when she rejected her function as Chief Prosecutor and elaborated a reform project aimed at creating a prosecutors council, conference and the ad hoc prosecutor's institution. The council was made a constitutional body afterwards (*Agenda.ge, January 17, 2019*).

### **16. New services available for persons with disabilities in all public service halls in Georgia**

Georgian public service halls have added services for disabled persons, becoming the only state service body to work in full compliance with the needs of the disabled.

The results of the project “Improved Services for All” were presented to the public by Minister of Justice Thea Tsulukiani. The project was carried out with the support of the United Nations

Development Fund (UNDP) and Swedish government and lasted for seven months, from June to December 2018.

As a result of the project:

- ✓ All front desk personnel (750 in total) were trained across the country, special guidelines became an obligatory part of the training module for new staff
- ✓ A new communication and ethics guideline was created based on international practice and standards
- ✓ Rules from this guideline are obligatory for all employees in all branches
- ✓ 400 new sign language terms were created for service-related words
- ✓ Graphic and video vocabulary of the new terms was produced
- ✓ 20 workers of Tbilisi Public service hall have learnt sign language and do not need a translator's help to serve people with hearing disabilities (*Agenda.ge, January 17, 2019*).

### **17. City of Education and Science to be Built in Tbilisi**

By the initiative of the Minister of Education, Science, Culture and Sport of Georgia, Mikheil Batiashvili, city of education and science will be built in Tbilisi, namely, in the big Dighomi area, which will play the role of multifunctional educational complex.

According to the minister, "The City of New Education and Science" will become a model of high-quality education, which will fully serve the goals set out in the education reform.

Mikheil Batiashvili laid the foundation for the construction of the capsule. According to him, the science museum, library, garden and laboratories will be arranged at the territory of school. The Komarov school branch will also be opened here (*CBW.GE, January 18, 2019*).

### **18. Swine flu death toll reaches 18 in Georgia**

Eighteen people have died because of the swine flu (H1N1) in Georgia this winter, the Georgian National Disease Control Centre says.

The most recent fatality took place yesterday, when a 41-year-old man died in Zugdidi, western Georgia.

Health officials stated that the man suffered a chronic illness and he was transported to the hospital six days after being infected.

The Georgian Health Ministry reports that currently 253 people are infected with flu per 100,000 (*Agenda.ge, January 18, 2019*).

### **19. Human Rights Watch: Georgian gov't took steps to investigate abuse by law enforcement, but mechanism lack independence**

The recent Human Rights World Report by the Human Rights Watch summarises human rights problems in Georgia.

The watchdog organisation is concerned by cases of abuse by law enforcement officials and emphasises that even though the authorities took steps to establish a mechanism to investigate such cases, these mechanism are not fully independent.

Other areas of concern included 'unjustifiably harsh' drug laws, occupational safety and labor rights, discrimination against LGBT people and threats to media pluralism (*Agenda.ge, January 18, 2019*).

### **20. Interior Ministry to receive modern DNA lab for criminal evidence analysis**

Law enforcement professionals in Georgia will be able to hold expedited and high-quality DNA evidence tests in a modern laboratory approved at a government meeting on Friday.

The Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia said it would be equipped with the DNA forensic laboratory within the ongoing project for upgrading police infrastructure.

The lab will enable professionals to test evidence obtained from crime scenes and prepare forensic reports in a timely fashion, the state agency said.

Operation of the laboratory will be augmented by an existing database of the Levan Samkharauli National Forensics Bureau, while samples will also be submitted from the lab to the Bureau (*Agenda.ge, January 18, 2019*).

## ❖ Economy and Social Affairs

### 21. EU Committed to Finance The Construction of Anaklia Port

The European Union is planning to finance major infrastructure projects across the Eastern Partnership countries (EaP) the European Commission and the World Bank have co-authored a Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) Investment Action Plan that identifies priority projects across the EaP countries. The combined amount of investment projects is about €12.8 billion.

The official document published by the EU notes Anaklia Deep Sea Port as a top priority project in Georgia. The amount of financing of the second phase of construction will be about €233 million. In addition, EU is committed to finance the construction of a new railroad with 100 million euros. New railroad will connect Anaklia to the central railroad system of Georgia.

Anaklia Deep Sea Port will be constructed in 9 Phases. The total investment value of the project is \$2.5 billion USD.

Projects identified as top priority are:

- ✓ The second phase of construction of Anaklia Port – €233 million;
- ✓ Construction of railroad to Anaklia Port – €100 million;
- ✓ Construction of Chumateliti-Argveti highway – €1 billion;
- ✓ Construction of Grigoleti-Poti bridge – €25 million;
- ✓ Construction of Grigoleti-Kobuleti highway – €101 million;
- ✓ Construction of Batumi bypass road – €115 million;
- ✓ Construction of Kutaisi airport cargo terminal – €61 million;
- ✓ Construction of Rustavi-Red Bridge Highway – €115 million (*CBW.GE, January 17, 2019*).

### 22. Georgian PM: administrative fines worth 22 mln GEL will be cancelled

The government of Georgia continues to ease financial burdens on the citizens of Georgia. Georgian Prime Minister Mamuka Bakhtadze announced that administrative penalties will be annulled for citizens who committed administrative offenses up until 15 January 2019.

Our goal is to release socially vulnerable citizens, pensioners, war veterans, people with disabilities, single parents and their families from financial burdens”, said Bakhtadze. In total, administrative fines worth 22 million GEL (about \$8.27m/€7.25m) will be written off (*Agenda.ge, January 18, 2019*).

### 23. Georgian PM dismisses risk of financial instability due to TBC Bank case

“I think that all questions should be raised and answered, and I cannot agree with the idea that this can negatively affect Georgia's financial stability, because it is far from reality.

It is a great achievement for us that our companies are on the London Stock Exchange. I want to thank all those who contributed to this, because this has opened a way for the Georgian companies to

have access to international capital. Our financial stability is very high and this is confirmed by all international financial institutions”, said Bakhtadze (*Agenda.ge, January 18, 2019*).

#### 24. 7.5km long cable car opens connecting Kobi, Gudauri ski resorts

A 7.5 km long cable car between the ski resorts of Kobi and Gudauri opened earlier today, connecting the Stepantsminda region to Gudauri in just 15 minutes.

The cable car will serve to make both Kobi and Gudauri more functional winter resorts, offering easier transportation in the area.






“Georgia will take its place on the global map as a country with the most successful ski resort. Number of tourists has increased by 500 percent in Gudari during last six years. This is a great success but not enough. This cable car is truly unic which will unify Gudauri and Kobi in one cluster. Outstanding Swiss and Austrian resorts have managed to achieve best results through realisation of the same strategy and I am sure that we are also getting closer to this level,” PM Bakhtadze said at the opening ceremony (*Agenda.ge, January 18, 2019*).

### Additional Information

**January 21, 2019**  
**OFFICIAL EXCHANGE RATES**

1 USD - 2.6629 GEL	1 GBP - 3.4463 GEL	100 RUB - 4.0103 GEL
1 EUR - 3.0368 GEL	1 TRY - 0.4974 GEL	100 JPY - 2.4339 GEL

Monday 21 January	Tuesday 22 January	Wednesday 23 January	Thursday 24 January	Friday 25 January
				
-2° 8°	-2° 10°	-2° 8°	-1° 9°	2° 11°

- **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](#)**