

# NEWS DIGEST ON GEORGIA

February 14-17

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## ❖ Occupied Regions

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

#### 1. South Ossetia honors Russian journalists who covered 2008 war

Separatist leader Anatoly Bibilov from the breakaway region South Ossetia presented awards to Russian journalists for 'objectively' covering the 2008 war.

The event in Moscow on Tuesday honored a number of journalists with medals dedicated to "the 10th anniversary of the Victory of South Ossetians in the Patriotic War" in August.

Among the recipients of the 'state award' were reporters, producers and cameramen at Russian state TV channels, RT, VGTRK and TV Центр (TV Center).

"On behalf of the people of South Ossetia, I am honored today to give the state awards to those Russian journalists who showed bravery, courage and genuine heroism when covering tragic events of Georgia's vicious aggression," said Anatoly Bibilov at the award ceremony (*DFWATCH.NET, February 12, 2019*).

## ❖ Foreign Affairs

#### 2. US Senators present strong sanctions bill against Russia for its aggression in Georgia, Ukraine

Five US senators have introduced a bill to the Senate which provides tougher sanctions against Russia for its illegal activities in Ukraine, Georgia and for its support of the violent regime of Bashar-al-Assad in Syria.

"The bill seeks to increase economic, political, and diplomatic pressure on Russia and establishes a comprehensive policy response to better position the US government to address Kremlin aggression by creating new policy offices on cyber defenses and sanctions coordination," the Georgian Foreign Ministry cited the bill as saying (*Agenda.ge, February 15, 2019*).

#### 3. Georgian, Turkish Speakers Meet in Ankara

Georgian Parliament Speaker Irakli Kobakhidze, who is visiting Turkey on February 12-14, met yesterday with his counterpart, Binali Yildirim. The two speakers discussed deepening of the bilateral ties.

In his remarks following the meeting, Kobakhidze stressed importance of friendship between Georgia and Turkey, and their cooperation on political, economic and cultural levels.

"We of course spoke of the issues of strategic and national importance for our countries as well," Kobakhidze said, noting that the two parliament speakers "once again focused on the issues of territorial integrity," with Kobakhidze thanking his Turkish counterpart for the support from "Turkish friends" over this issue (*Civil.ge, February 15, 2019*).

#### **4. Georgian President Zurabishvili to visit Germany, meet with Chancellor Merkel**

Georgian President Salome Zurabishvili will visit Germany on 20-21 February and meet with Chancellor Angela Merkel, the president's press office says.

Bilateral relations, situation in the South Caucasus and the Georgian-EU relations will be discussed by Georgian President Salome Zurabishvili and German Chancellor Angela Merkel," the German Foreign Ministry says.

Zurabishvili will head to Germany from France, where she is scheduled to meet with her French counterpart (*Agenda.ge, February 15, 2019*).

#### **5. NATO Sec-Gen says Georgia always on agenda when he meets with Russian officials**

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg says that Georgian issues are always raised when he meets with Russian officials, Stoltenberg told Georgian media outlet 1TV.

1TV asked Stoltenberg whether he intends to touch on Georgian issues during his meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov during the 55th Munich Security Conference.

"There is no clear agenda of the meeting. However, Georgian and Ukrainian issues are always raised during the meetings with Russian government members. The issues are also discussed within the NATO-Russia council," Stoltenberg said (*Agenda.ge, February 15, 2019*).

#### **6. Georgian PM meets with high-ranking officials of US, UK and Belgium**

The Prime Minister of Mamuka Bakhtadze is attending the 55th Munich Security Conference and is holding meetings with high-ranking officials of several countries to discuss bilateral relations and further cooperation plans.

He met with the US Acting Secretary of Defence, Patrick M. Shanahan and discussed the strategic partnership between the US and Georgia.

PM Bakhtadze also held a meeting with the UK Minister of State for Europe and the Americas, Sir Alan Duncan and discussed the positive dynamics of trade and economic relations between the two countries, as well as the process of Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration.

Another meeting was held with the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Affairs of Belgium, Didier Reynders (*Agenda.ge, February 16, 2019*).

#### **7. President of Montenegro to visit Georgia**

President of Montenegro Milo Djukanovic will visit Georgia in the near future as agreed between him and the Prime Minister of Georgia, Mamuka Bakhtadze at a meeting held at the 55th Munich Security Conference.

"We agreed to continue the high level dialogue. We are glad that our bilateral relations are improving on every day basis. I invited PM Bakhtadze to Montenegro, he also invited me to Georgia and I accepted with pleasure," Milo Djukanovic said adding that Georgia and Montenegro are allies.

The two leaders said they are ready to intensify bilateral relations and economic ties, especially emphasising the rich potential in terms of tourism development and need for sharing each other's experience in this regard (*Agenda.ge, February 16, 2019*).

#### **8. Georgian PM: It's in NATO's interests to help Georgia approach membership**

Prime Minister of Georgia Mamuka Bakhtadze spoke about Georgia's expectations towards possible NATO membership while delivering a speech at a round table devoted to alliance enlargement prospects hosted by the Munich Security Conference.

While delivering a speech at the event he said it is in the alliance's interests to advance Georgia on its way towards membership (*Agenda.ge, February 16, 2019*).

### **9. Georgian and Greek PMs discuss prospects for further cooperation**

Prime Minister of Georgia, Mamuka Bakhtadze met with the Prime Minister of Greece, Alexis Tsipras last night in Munich.

The two leaders met at the 55th Munich Security Conference to discuss bilateral relations and further cooperation plans.

In this regard, they have especially emphasised the existing potential in terms of intensified trade and economic cooperation (*Agenda.ge, February 17, 2019*).

### **10. Salome Zurabishvili: As a child, I could never imagine I would come to Leuville as president**

President Salome Zurabishvili has visited the Leuville cemetery during her visit to France and paid tribute to the memorial of compatriots that died in emigration, the chairman of the first democratic Republic of Georgia and her parents.

The president was hosted in Leuville by mayor Eric Braive. She also visited the Leuville Estate of Georgia and recalled her childhood years.

"As a child, I could never imagine I would arrive in Leuville as a president. A lot of unexpected things may occur in life", Zurabishvili noted. The Leuville Estate was handed over to Georgia in 2016 (*Civil.ge, February 17, 2019*).

## **❖ Internal Affairs**

### **11. Georgian National Bank demands withdrawal of TBC bank top figures from its supervisory council**

The National Bank of Georgia (NBG) has demanded the withdrawal of the head of the supervisory council of the Georgian leading TBC bank Mamuka Khazaradze and the deputy head of the council Badri Japaridze from the council due to a money laundering case being investigated by the Georgian Chief Prosecutor's Office.

Khazaradze, who founded the bank 27 years ago, says that he is not going to leave the bank and connects the "deliberate campaign against him" with the construction of Anaklia deep sea port in western Georgia of international importance.

NBG gave two months' time to the shareholders' assembly of the bank to withdraw the two top bankers from the supervisory agency.

The reason behind the decision is the violation of the Interest Conflict Regulatory Law by Khazaradze and Japaridze in connection with the transaction conducted in 2007-2008," NBG says (*Agenda.ge, February 15, 2019*).

## **12. CSOs Call for Higher Transparency in TBC Bank Case**

Five local watchdogs released a statement on February 15 in response to the recent sanctioning of the TBC Bank board chiefs by the National Bank of Georgia, saying that hasty decisions against a "particularly successful" financial organization "raise questions" and may affect the country's economic development and financial stability.

"Due to high public interest, it is important that the National Bank of Georgia (NBG) explains its decision to demand recalling specific persons from the TBC Bank's Supervisory Board... The relevant law enforcement agencies should provide the public with information about the investigation against TBC Bank and/or its shareholders," the statement reads.

According to the statement, signed by Open Society Georgia Foundation (OSGF), Georgian Democracy Initiative (GDI), Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI), International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED) and Transparency International Georgia (TI), it is important to ensure that the ongoing investigation does not hamper TBC Bank's activities, as well as to respond to the public interest so as "to rule out any doubts about using selective justice." (*Civil.ge, February 15, 2019*).

## **13. TBC Bank files suit, requests abolition of administrative acts of National Bank**

TBC Bank has filed a suit requesting the abolition of the National Bank's administrative acts, - the Bank's press office told InterPressNews.

"TBC Bank disagrees with the National Bank's position that the Bank violated the law regulating the conflict of interests in 2007-2008," the statement reads.

The move comes a day after the National Bank demanded resignation of the chairman and deputy chairman of the supervisory board of TBC Bank in connection with the transactions carried out in 2007-2008, during which.

Investigation into legalization of illegal income is ongoing in the Prosecutor's office of Georgia in connection with the TBC Bank (*lpn.ge, February 15, 2019*).

## **14. PM calls on everyone to stop political speculations around TBC Bank**

"Sadly, we once again heard political speculations about this issue. TBC Bank is a strong financial organization of systemic importance. Of course, the fact that TBC Bank is represented on the London Stock Exchange is a success of our economy and we are well aware of it.

The National Bank made a decision as a regulator and naturally, I cannot evaluate the content of the decision, but I know one thing - the National Bank is always guided by very high professional standards and this is a position shared by all international financial institutions.

TBC Bank is a strong, systemic bank and one of the leading financial institutions not only for the financial sector but for our national economy in general. Therefore, I would like to once again call on everyone to stop political speculations. This has nothing to do with politics," the PM said (*lpn.ge, February 17, 2019*).

## **15. Mamuka Khazaradze: The Anaklia port will have its own legislation – we want to have the analogue of London arbitration in this zone**

The Anaklia port will have its own legislation that will enable investors to resolve any legal dispute on the ground. Businessman Mamuka Khazaradze, one of the founders of "TBC Bank", stated at the meeting with students of Caucasus University.

According to him, there is a need to introduce legislation in the free trade zone that will allow any investor who has arrived from a modern country to make business in a clear and legal framework. Mamuka Khazaradze noted that there are many gaps in the Georgian legislation in this regard.

In addition, at the meeting Mamuka Khazaradze stressed the importance of the Port of Anaklia (*lpn.ge*, February 18, 2019).

#### **16. Fady Asly : Ivanishvili wants to seize TBC Bank and Anaklia Port through getting rid of the bank's board chiefs**

"According to our information, Bidzina Ivanishvili's ultimate goal is to assist the Russian companies, which are under sanctions to enable them to avoid the sanctions via TBC Bank and fake companies founded in Georgia...In the near future we should expect an attempt to get rid of Khazaradze and Japaridze. If this first stage is successfully implemented, then we should expect the change in the bank's management, which will be replaced by the management fulfilling Ivanishvili's orders," Fady Asly said adding this process will damage Georgia's reputation. "This is a very dangerous game," Fady Asly, Chairman of the National Committee of International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) added.

#### **17. Mandate of Interior Ministry Human Rights Department expands**

The Georgian Ministry of Internal Affairs has decided to expand the mandate of its Human Rights Department created in early 2018.

Monitoring of the investigation of crimes against life and health will be added to the obligations of the department starting from the year, Deputy Interior Minister Natia Mezvrishvili stated today.

- In 2018 the department was tasked with monitoring:
- Investigations of domestic violence by the ministry and its various agencies.
- Investigations of violence against women.
- Investigative cases dealing with crime motivated by discrimination and hate.
- Cases involving the crime of trafficking.

Mezvrishvili stated that the reason of the expansion of powers is that the department dealt with its obligations "very successfully in 2018."

#### **18. Survey: 51% of Georgian population satisfied with judiciary independence**

51% of the Georgian population is satisfied with the level of the independence of the judiciary.

The results were announced yesterday at a presentation of the Evaluation of Judiciary System Reforms in Georgia today.

IPSOS France, Amicus Curiae, Professor Jan Van Dyke and GORBI have conducted the research on the request of Georgia's Ministry of Justice.

2013 respondents were directly interviewed from 10 September through 25 October 2018 across Georgia.

The research showed that 51% of those polled have praised Georgia's judiciary system in terms of courts' and judges' independence while 52% have assessed the Georgian court as reliable;

41% of the respondents say the Georgian court has an equal attitude to all; 52% have declared that the judiciary reforms conducted starting with 2013 led to an improvement of [judiciary] services (*Agenda.ge, February 15, 2019*).

### **19. CSOs, Citizens Start Petition 'to Save the Judiciary'**

A group, consisting of civil society organizations, political parties and private citizens have started a petition entitled "For Saving the Judiciary". The petition is addressed to the Parliament of Georgia and the High Council of Justice. It voices demands for finding the ways out of the perceived crisis of confidence in the judicial system.

The statement says the years of reforms "failed to achieve their objectives". According to it, the key reason is that the ruling parties did not show the political will to relinquish their control over the judiciary. The group believes that this "had adverse effects on the rights of each and every citizen Georgia, as well as the country's [international] reputation and [its] democratic development."

The petition has been signed, among others, by Transparency International Georgia, Human Rights and Monitoring Center, Georgian Democracy Initiative, Institute for Development of Freedom of Information, International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy. The Petition is open to signatures from any interested citizen. The petition requires 1000 signatures to be carried forward and has been signed by 425 at the time of writing (*Civil.ge, February 15, 2019*).

### **20. Release of maps of Georgia portraying occupied regions as independent to be criminally tried**

The distribution or publication of a map of Georgia in which the occupied territories of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali (South Ossetia) are not presented as a part of the Georgian state will become punishable under the criminal code of Georgia.

The parliament's Legal Affairs Committee will discuss the bill tomorrow.

The bill says that the production, release, import and export of a printed map of Georgia on which country's territorial integrity is put under question will be punishable by fine or imprisonment of up to two years (*Agenda.ge, February 15, 2019*).

### **21. 61 Civil Servants to Leave President's Administration – Reports**

President's administration said 61 employees will be made redundant as a part of an ongoing reorganization, Georgian media reported on February 15. The report says the qualification criteria were re-assessed, and the employees passed tests and interviews during in December 2018-January 2019.

President's administration explained that only 37 employees from the previous composition of were retained, after passing all necessary qualification requirements. 11 employees are on their maternity leave and thus preserve their positions by law.

The 61 persons will now have to be either re-assigned by the Civil Service Bureau to the positions commensurate to their grade, or will receive one-time compensations, should they decide to quit the civil service. The remaining vacancies will be advertised for competition among civil servants (*Civil.ge, February 15, 2019*).

## ❖ Economy and Social Affairs

### 22. 24 Georgian wines receive highest awards at Japanese international contest

Twenty-four Georgian wines have received two double-gold, 15 gold and seven silver medals at the 6th Sakura Japan Women's Wine Awards 2019, the National Wine Agency of Georgia says. [See the winning wines here.](#)

Different Georgian wines were selected among 4,326 items from 34 countries after the tasting assessment held from 29 January to 30 January, while the results have been announced today (*Agenda.ge, February 14, 2019*).

### 23. Eight million tourists visited Georgia in 2018

More than eight million international, non-resident travellers came to Georgia in 2018, the Georgian National Statistics Office (Geostat) reported today. The number of arrivals equalled 8.7 million which is 9.8% higher compared to 2017," Geostat says (*Agenda.ge, February 14, 2019*).

**DISTRIBUTION OF VISITS BY THE MAIN PURPOSE OF THE VISIT IN 2018, THOUSAND**

	NUMBER OF VISITS	%
Holiday, Leisure, Recreation	3,075.8	42.7
Transit to other country	1,463.1	20.3
Visiting friends/relatives	1,189.6	16.5
Business or Professional	623.8	8.7
Shopping	498.4	6.9
Health and Medical Care	196.2	2.7
Other	156.3	2.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>7,203.4</b>	<b>100.0</b>

### 24. Georgia-Hong Kong free trade deal takes effect

The free trade deal signed between Georgia and Hong Kong took effect yesterday. The deal was signed back on 28 June 2018, within the framework of the Belt and Road summit in Hong Kong, the Georgian Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development reports.

It will enable Georgian entrepreneurs to provide their produce to Hong Kong's seven-million market of high purchasing capacity.

The agreement is aimed at defining shipping and customs conditions between Georgia and China's administrative region (*Agenda.ge, February 14, 2019*).

## **Additional Information**

**February 18, 2019**

**OFFICIAL EXCHANGE RATES**

1 USD - 2.6413 GEL

1 GBP - 3.3851 GEL

100 RUB - 3.9608 GEL

1 EUR - 2.9791 GEL

1 TRY - 0.5010 GEL

100 JPY - 2.3916 GEL

Monday 18 February	Tuesday 19 February	Wednesday 20 February	Thursday 21 February	Friday 22 February
				
1° 8°	-3° 6°	-2° 4°	0° 12°	0° 10°

- **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](#)**