

NEWS DIGEST ON GEORGIA

February 28-March 3

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❖ Occupied Regions

❖ Abkhazia Region

1. Occupying forces illegally detain Georgian citizen

The occupying forces have illegally detained Georgian citizen Guladi Khubua at the occupation line with the breakaway Abkhazia region for "illegally crossing the border" late yesterday, his family says.

The man was abducted from the village of Shamgona, Zugdidi municipality, in western Georgia, the Georgian Public Broadcaster reports. The local authorities say that all the relevant state agencies have been informed of the incident.

Usually, those individuals who are detained for the "illegally crossing the border between Abkhazia and the rest of Georgia" are taken to the Gali prison and are released after paying fine which amounts to about 32 USD (*Agenda.ge, March 1, 2019*).

2. Georgian citizen illegally detained by occupying forces released

Georgian citizen, Guladi Khubua, who was illegally detained by occupying forces at the occupation line with the breakaway Abkhazia region for "illegally crossing the border" was released yesterday.

His family said earlier that the 55-year old man was abducted from the village of Shamgona, Zugdidi municipality, in western Georgia late on 28 February (*Agenda.ge, March 3, 2019*).

3. Lukashenko says he did not recognize Abkhazia to avoid international isolation of Belarus

"I was ready to sign a decree on recognizing Abkhazia. But what will happen tomorrow? Javier Solana, NATO's former secretary general, arrive here. We had a long conversation, he told me : "If you recognize Abkhazia, we will disconnect you from the banking system, you will appear in full isolation and etc. He told me everything honestly and frankly, "Lukashenko told reporters on March 1.

The President of Belarus noted that after the meeting with Javier Solana, he met with then President of Russia Dmitry Medvedev and at the meeting he touched upon this issue, however, Medvedev did not appear ready to discuss this topic (*lpn.ge, March 2, 2019*).

4. Former de-facto PM hopes Belarus will recognize Abkhazia "someday"

Former de-facto prime minister of occupied Abkhazia Sergey Shamba hopes "someday, Belarus will recognize the independence of Abkhazia."

"Abkhazia has always had a good relationship with Belarus. We hope that someday Belarus will recognition us. We will wait for this moment, " Sergey Shamba said.

Belarus President Aleksandr Lukashenko said that he refused to recognize the independence of Abkhazia in order to avoid possible international isolation of Belarus (*lpn.ge, March 2, 2019*).

❖ Foreign Affairs

5. National Guard unit departs for EU Central African Republic mission

A platoon of the National Guard of Georgia departed for their rotation in an ongoing European Union training mission in the Central African Republic today.

In a third wave of rotational deployment for platoon-sized units from Georgia, the service members received a formal send-off ceremony involving armed forces commanders and families of the troops.

Brigadier General Shalva Jabakhidze, Georgian Defence Forces Deputy Commander, was in attendance at the occasion to wish the platoon personnel a successful participation in the EUTM RCA deployment (*Agenda.ge, February 28, 2019*).

6. NATO Vice Admiral praises Georgian Interior Minister for bringing Georgia close to NATO

Commander at the NATO Allied Maritime Command (MARCOM), Vice Admiral Sir Clive Johnstone has met with Georgian Interior Minister, Vice PM Giorgi Gakharia on his first visit to Georgia and praised him for taking steps towards Georgia's quick integration into the alliance.

Johnstone also stated that Gakharia is an "expert in regional issues" and he was eager to listen to his views regarding the current regional challenges.

"For me, as for the vice admiral of NATO Maritime Command, meeting with Mr. Gakharia was particularly important. He [Gakharia] has taken successful steps for supporting the policy which brings Georgia close to NATO," Johnstone said (*Agenda.ge, February 28, 2019*).

7. Georgian-French cooperation leads to detention of Georgian criminal group in France

Georgian and French law enforcers have conducted a joint investigation and special operation in France which led to the detention of members of an organised criminal group on 13 February, Georgian Interior Ministry has reported today.

The ministry says that the detainees were engaged in robbery, and the possession and sale of valuable robbed items from shops and other facilities. "The criminal group was connected with 17 cases of robbery," the ministry reports (*Agenda.ge, March 1, 2019*).

8. Inaugural Georgian-Polish Assembly Opened in Warsaw

Parliament Chairman Irakli Kobakhidze, who visited Poland on February 27-28, opened on Wednesday the inaugural plenary session of the Polish-Georgian Parliamentary Assembly together with heads of the upper and lower branches of the Polish Parliament – the Senate and the Sejm, Stanisław Karczewski, and Marek Kuchciński, respectively.

In his remarks, Kobakhidze spoke on the centennial ties between the two countries, and hailed friendly relations between Georgians and Poles. "Freedom and democracy are the basis of our history and present, [and] the future of Georgian and Polish peoples," Kobakhidze stated (*Civil.ge, March 1, 2019*).

9. Georgian PM: Georgia will be able to meet its EU integration commitments much earlier

Georgian Prime Minister Mamuka Bakhtadze says that Georgia will be able to meet its European Union integration commitments earlier than planned.

Bakhtadze stated that significant reforms were carried out and the quality of relationship and integration with the EU 'has never been so high.'

PM Bakhtadze made these statements at the joint session with government commission for EU integration and state commission of NATO integration (*Agenda.ge, March 1, 2019*).

10. Travel with ID cards launched between Georgia and Ukraine

According to Vladimir Konstantinidi, a representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, the agreement on visa-free travel between the governments of Ukraine and Georgia has taken effect today.

"This agreement allows our citizens to travel between Ukraine and Georgia with electronic ID cards. The agreement was signed in October last year by the Prime Ministers of the two countries (*lpn.ge, March 1, 2019*).

11. Georgian FM on official visit to Romania

On 4 March Minister Zalkaliani will meet his Romanian, Azerbaijani and Turkmen counterparts to discuss developing a transport corridor between the Black and Caspian Seas.

The foreign ministers will sign a joint declaration, expressing their countries political will to develop new transport corridors in the region (*Agenda.ge, March 3, 2019*).

❖ Internal Affairs

12. Georgian Chief Prosecutor's Office releases new details on TBC case

The Georgian Chief Prosecutor's Office has released new details regarding the high profile money laundering case involving TBC Bank founders Mamuka Khazaradze and Badri Japaridze.

The office has "identified" a third former TBC figure who could have been involved in the possible transaction.

The Prosecutor's Office stated that they decided to reveal the details as the public interest in the issue is high.

The Prosecutor's Office repeated that they launched the investigation of the case on 2 August 2018, after the Georgian Financial Monitoring Service sent them a written note about the possible violation the day before.

In April-May 2008 the TBC Bank gave 17 million USD to LTDs Samgori M and Samgori Trade as a loan and on the same day the money was placed on the private bank accounts of Khazaradze and Japaridze," the office said.

The Prosecutor's Office stated that in October-November 2008, so that the companies even did not start covering the interest rate for the loan, they were given one more year to close the loan without providing any reasons (*Agenda.ge, February 28, 2019*).

13. ODIHR Issues Final Election Observation Report on Georgia

On February 28, the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) issued its [final report](#) based on findings of the election observation mission (EOM) during Georgia's last direct presidential polls, with a list of recommendations aimed to "support efforts to bring the electoral process in Georgia further in line with OSCE commitments and other international obligations and standards for democratic elections."

According to the [report](#), priority recommendations relate to:

- eliminating gaps and ambiguities from electoral legislation,
- ensuring more balanced political representation in election commissions,
- establishing an effective and timely mechanism to address complaints on the misuse of administrative resources,
- preventing possible dissemination of hate speech and xenophobia,
- ensuring efficient oversight and transparency of campaign finance,
- simplifying the complaints procedures,
- eliminating restrictions on standing and ensuring that voters cast their ballot free of fear of retribution (*Civil.ge, March 1, 2019*).

14. MP Anri Okhanashvili says OSCE report is not concerning

"There is nothing alarming in the OSCE report. There are two directions, for example, professional administration of the electoral process is praised, while further reforms are recommended for the challenges," Anri Okhanashvili said (*lpn.ge, March 1, 2019*).

15. Number of foreign students in Georgia doubles in four years

The number of foreign students has doubled during the last four years, from 4,812 in 2015 to 9,710 in 2018-2019, according to data provided by the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport, and reported by the news agency IPN.

India is the top country of origin. 10,428 students from India are enrolled at Georgian educational institutions. The second highest number are from Azerbaijan with 8,439 students, next is Iraq with 2,299 students, and Turkey with 1,422 students, Nigeria with 1,895 students, Russia with 1,183 students, Iran with 742 students and Syria with 433 students (*DFWatch.net, March 2, 2019*).

16. Verbal conflict takes place before meeting between Mikheil Saakashvili and his supporters in Rome

A verbal conflict took place before the start of the meeting between ex-president Mikheil Saakashvili and his supporters in Rome. One of Saakashvili's supporters and a Georgian emigrant attending a demonstration against Saakashvili confronted each other.

"No violence" is the slogan of demonstrators against Mikheil Saakashvili., who showed up at the meeting between Saakashvili and his supporters.

Attendance of the media at the mentioned meeting is restricted. Only cameramen were able to enter the hotel, where the meeting is underway (*lpn.ge, March 3, 2019*).

❖ Economy and Social Affairs

17. International Monetary Fund forecasts 4.6% economic growth in Georgia in 2019

Economic growth in Georgia is projected to reach 4.6% in 2019, says the International Monetary Fund.

An IMF team led by Mercedes Vera-Martin visited Tbilisi during 20-26 February 2019 to discuss recent economic and financial developments and progress with structural reforms.

At the end of the visit, Vera-Martin issued a statement in which she said that significant infrastructure investment is expected to compensate for weaker external demand and slower credit growth in Georgia.

“Scaling up infrastructure expenditure will need to be accompanied by improved project selection and management. The current account deficit is projected at around 8% of GDP, owing to still robust growth in exports and remittances” said Vera-Martin (*Agenda.ge, February 28, 2019*).

18. Georgia’s economy grows 3.5% in January 2019

Georgia’s economy is growing steadily, show the latest data from the National Statistics Office of Georgia (Geostat).

The estimated real gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate in January 2019 equaled 3.5% year-on-year (y/y).

Last month the estimated real growth, compared to the same period of the previous year, was posted in the following activities:

- Trade
- Hotels and restaurants
- Financial intermediation
- Real estate, renting and business activities (*Agenda.ge, February 28, 2019*).

19. Japanese government finances four projects in Georgia

The agreement was signed and the projects will be implemented within the ‘Grant Assistance for Grassroots Human Security Projects’.

The four projects are:

- The construction of potato storage units in Georgia’s Tsalka municipality that will allow the local population of eco-migrants to increase their income. The project will be carried out by organisations Environment and Development and Bediani Children Center. The grant amount for this project is \$86,526.
- The construction of two workshops to produce biological bricks in Tsalka municipality. This project is going to substitute the use of firewood with biologically clean bricks and will create a good precedent for replication, to potentially avoid deforestation in Georgia. It will also cost about twice less than firewood, which is very important for poverty alleviation among ecological migrants, residing in Tsalka. Grant amount is \$71,498.
- The rehabilitation of the building to create the Agricultural Hub in Akhaltsikhe, which will involve an agricultural laboratory and training center for farmers. The laboratory will provide the possibility to

test soil, water and dairy products. This project will help to produce biologically clean agricultural produce and to promote responsible farming among the local population. Grant amount: \$71,547.

- Humanitarian Demining by HALO Trust in the village Chonto in the Imereti region, which will help to make the area safe for the local population. Grant amount: \$63,693.

The Human Security Grant Assistance for Grassroots Projects (GGP) provides assistance to relatively small projects and aims at improvement of human security in Georgia (*Agenda.ge, February 28, 2019*).

20. \$10 mln programme kicks off to strengthen management, financial stability of 12 protected areas in Georgia

Twelve protected areas in Georgia will receive support from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Global Environment Facility (GEF) to strengthen their management and financial sustainability, which will help the country conserve and protect its unique biodiversity, the UNDP and the Georgian Environmental Ministry say.

The five-year programme will be carried out by the Caucasus Nature Fund (CNF) and the National Agency of the Georgian Protected Areas. The programme budget is \$10 million," the UNDP says.

The financial contribution is as follows:

- GEF funding- \$1.8 million
- Georgian Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture- \$4.8 million.
- CNF- \$3.1 million.
- Bank of Georgia- \$200,000 (*Agenda.ge, March 1, 2019*).

21. New fruit, vegetable preserve factory opens in eastern Georgia

A brand-new fruit and vegetable preserve factory has opened in the eastern region of Georgia, Shida Kartli. Ltd Agro Leader has built a new factory in Ptsala village in Kareli region with funds from the United Agro Project. In total, up to 1,212,000 GEL (\$453,932/€398,684*) has been invested in the factory. The new factory is capable of preserving 720 tones of various fruits and vegetables per year, which will be sold on local markets (*Agenda.ge, March 2, 2019*).

22. February inflation: tobacco prices increase by 13% in Georgia

Tobacco prices in February have increased in Georgia by 13% in comparison to January, show the latest inflation data from the National Statistics Office of Georgia (Geostat).

Prices for alcoholic beverages increased by 6.7% in February in comparison to January. On the other hand, prices for clothing and footwear decreased by 4.6% and 4.8% respectively. The monthly inflation rate in February was mainly influenced by price changes in these categories (*Agenda.ge, March 3, 2019*).

23. Foreigners owning agricultural land in Georgia to be fined in case of not tilling the land

A foreigner or a legal person of private law, who is registered in Georgia and whose dominant partner is a foreigner or a legal person registered overseas, shall be obliged to till agricultural land. In case of failure to comply with the obligations within three years, they shall be sanctioned.

The legislative package drafted by the Parliament provides for an administrative fine - 500 GEL and 300 GEL for each another hectare of plot, but no more than 20 000 GEL. Non-fulfillment of the above-

mentioned obligation in each following year shall result in the GEL 700 fine and 400 GEL for each another hectare of plot, but no more than 30 000 GEL (*lpn.ge, March 3, 2019*).

❖ Sports and Culture

24. Works of Georgia's Niko Pirosmani and Vincent van Gogh on display at French exhibition

From March 2, some of the most notable works by the self-taught primitivist artist — recognised as one of the major figures of Georgian art — are taking up the space of a brand-new exhibition venue in the city of Arles, where the Dutch painter spent the latter years of his life.

A dual show of works by Pirosmani and van Gogh was prepared in a collaboration between the Georgian Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport, Georgian National Museum (GNM) network, Informatart Foundation Vienna and the Vincent van Gogh Foundation in Arles (*Agenda.ge, March 2, 2019*).

Additional Information

March 4
OFFICIAL EXCHANGE RATES

1 USD - 2.6736 GEL	1 GBP - 3.5420 GEL	100 RUB -4.0624 GEL
1 EUR - 3.0415 GEL	1 TRY - 0.4989 GEL	100 JPY - 2.3903 GEL

Monday 4 March	Tuesday 5 March	Wednesday 6 March	Thursday 7 March	Friday 8 March
				
-1° 8°	1° 13°	4° 16°	3° 11°	2° 13°

-  **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](#)**