

# NEWS DIGEST ON GEORGIA

March 28-31

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## ❖ Occupied Regions

### **1. State Security Service: Russian troops tried to use Georgian occupied territories for clandestine, illegal operations**

The Georgian State Security Service writes in its 2018 report that Russian forces tried to use the two occupied regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali (South Ossetia) to conduct clandestine, illegal operations.

"The operations and activities were of a destructive nature, aimed at staging provocations and stirring conflicts," SSS wrote in the report it presented to parliament.

The agency said that the intelligence services of foreign countries were also trying to change the public view in Georgia regarding the country's foreign course.

"With the use of political and public groups, [foreign forces] tried to decrease trust between the government, civil sector and political actors in Georgia. This aimed to generate a negative attitude amongst the public concerning the country's Euro-Atlantic course," reads the report (*Agenda.ge, March 28, 2019*).

### **2. Interior Minister visits occupation line**

Interior Minister Giorgi Gakharia traveled to the village of Khurvaleti in Shida Kartli region, alongside the occupation line with Tskhinvali (South Ossetia). In the village, the minister spoke of the security challenges with the local population.

Minister Gakharia also visited the family of Data Vanishvili, living behind the barbed wire fence on the Russian-controlled land (*Agenda.ge, March 30, 2019*).

### **3. Russian FM to meet with de-facto FM of occupied Abkhazia**

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov will meet with Daur Kove, de-facto foreign minister of occupied Abkhazia. According to the Russian Foreign Ministry, the meeting will be held in Moscow on April 1.

Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova said on Thursday that at the meeting the "sides will discuss strengthening of interaction in the context of foreign policy within the frameworks of Geneva discussions." (*lpn.ge, March 29, 2019*).

## ❖ Foreign Affairs

### **4. Georgian Parliament Speaker Visits Serbia**

Georgian Parliament Speaker Irakli Kobakhidze, who is on his first official visit to Serbia on March 27-30, met today with his counterpart Maja Gojkovic. Two speakers have pledged to deepen their countries' ties.

At the meeting, the two signed a Partnership Agreement which aims to “raise parliamentary cooperation to an institutional level,” according to the Serbian National Assembly’s press office.

Gojkovic believes the Partnership Agreement, “would also strengthen cooperation in the area of European integration since both countries strive to join the organization and help the development of cooperation in the spheres of foreign affairs and economy, as well as between the delegations in international parliamentary organizations.” (*Civil.ge, March 28, 2019*).

#### **5. Georgian PM: irresponsible parties make statements as if Georgia no longer on international agenda**

Georgian Prime Minister Mamuka Bakhtadze has stated that ‘irresponsible political parties’ are making statements to the effect that Georgia is no longer on the agenda of European countries.

“This is irresponsible and a lie,” Bakhtadze said, mentioning several events and statements of recent days to contradict the accusations of the opposition parties.

He said that on March 24-25 NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg visited Georgia and made “strong messages” supporting the country and its NATO aspirations (*Agenda.ge, March 28, 2019*).

#### **6. Georgia is the first in S. Caucasus becoming member of Eurojust**

Georgia has become the first country in the South Caucasus which signed an agreement with the EU agency Eurojust, created in 2002 to help EU member and several non-member countries cooperate more effectively to combat terrorism and serious crimes, the Georgian Justice Ministry reports. Negotiations regarding the agreement kicked off in 2015 which was led by Justice Ministry from Georgia.

The final document was signed in the Hague earlier today by Georgian Justice Minister Thea Tsulukiani, Chief Prosecutor Shalva Tadumadze and the head of Eurojust Ladislav Hamran (*Agenda.ge, March 28, 2019*).

#### **7. EU-Georgia Parliamentary Association Committee Holds Eighth Session in Strasbourg**

Members of the European Parliament and the Parliament of Georgia gathered for the eighth session of the EU-Georgia Parliamentary Association Committee in Strasbourg on March 27-28.

The Association Committee, which provides parliamentary oversight over the implementation of the EU-Georgia Association Agreement, was co-chaired by Tamar Khulordava, chairperson of the Parliamentary European integration committee, and Sajjad Karim, MEP from the United Kingdom (*Civil.ge, March 29, 2019*).

#### **8. Gov’t adopts 2019-2022 foreign policy strategy**

The Government of Georgia has adopted its foreign policy strategy for 2019-2022, which covers a wide range of issues that the country aims to address in the next four years.

Some of the key priorities for Georgia in 2019-2022 are:

- Sovereignty and territorial integrity,
- European Union and NATO integration,
- Sustainable economic development,
- Bilateral and multilateral cooperation in the region and worldwide
- Contribution to the global security (*Agenda.ge, March 29, 2019*).

## **9. Georgia joins global Earth Hour campaign**

Georgia has joined the annual global campaign of Earth Hour by switching off lights for an hour last night to contribute to saving energy.

Georgia was one of the 188 countries and territories worldwide that joined Earth Hour 2019 to speak up for nature and inspire urgent action for the environment (*Agenda.ge, March 30, 2019*).

## **10. Volodymyr Zelenskiy: Mikheil Saakashvili is a serious diplomat and his assistance would be useful for everyone**

"He should come to Ukraine. I think Mikheil Saakashvili is now playing the biggest role by protecting Ukraine's democracy in Europe. He is a serious diplomat and a serious consultant for everyone, all candidates. I think we need the assistance of a person like Saakashvili," the presidential candidate said.

Georgian ex-President Mikheil Saakashvili has already responded to the mentioned statement on Facebook and noted that Zelenskiy is different from traditional politicians.

Zelenskiy is leading presidential elections in Ukraine. According to rumors he might appoint former President of Georgia on the post of Prime Minister of Ukraine (*lpn.ge, March 31, 2019*).

## **11. Defense Minister says Georgia is ready for NATO membership**

"There is just one thing – a political decision, which should be made by NATO member states. I am sure the Alliance member states will make this decision based on consensus. But I would like to note, and it was underlined by Mr. Stoltenberg, that Georgia is ready to become the NATO member state and it depends just on the political decision," Levan Izoria said (*lpn.ge, March 28, 2019*).

## **12. Georgian Interior Ministry to strengthen ties with NATO for Black Sea security**

Georgian Interior Minister Giorgi Gakharia says that the ministry and NATO will cooperate more actively in Black Sea security, as Georgia has no naval forces and the ministry is responsible for the coast's protection.

Georgia has no naval forces and protection of the Black Sea is critically important for state security," Gakharia told Imedi TV. He said that the coast guard system will see major changes and improvements.

Georgian Foreign Minister David Zalkaliani stated back in February that it is time NATO offer a more comprehensive strategy to the Black Sea region, as a "secure Europe is unimaginable without a secured Black Sea."

Delivering his speech at the event dedicated to Black Sea security at the Munich Security Conference , Zalkaliani said that accepting countries from the Black Sea region into the alliance will benefit NATO (*Agenda.ge, April 1, 2019*).

## **❖ Internal Affairs**

### **13. 4 detained for possession, distribution of private footage released on bail**

Four individuals detained back in February 2019 for the possession and distribution of the personal footage of MP Eka Beselia, have been released on bail after the request of the Prosecutor's Office to the court.

The prosecution requested the bail after uncovering new evidence, which was followed by the suspension of the pre-trial detention of Zaal Lataria, Zurab Solomnishvili, Temur Iremadze and Anton Glonti. The individuals have been released on 5,000 GEL [\$1,900] bail.

The footage was released again on Tuesday and a minor was detained, Deputy Interior Minister Natia Mezvrishvili said, claiming that the offence had no client (*Agenda.ge, March 28, 2019*).

#### **14. Two workers die in Tbilisi sinkhole during construction**

Two workers died after a sinkhole opened up during construction on a hospital on Chavchavadze Avenue, central Tbilisi late yesterday.

The body of the first worker, 26-year-old David Avesadze, was found shortly after the incident, at 8 pm yesterday.

The body of another missing worker, 40-year-old Edvard Varishiv, was sought for more than eight hours by rescue workers.

The construction process has been suspended. An investigation is now trying to clarify the reasons behind the incident.

Human Rights Monitoring and Education Centre says that between 2011 and 2018, 376 workers died and 1,081 received injuries at their workplace. Last year alone 199 individuals received injuries and 59 died at their workplaces (*Agenda.ge, March 31, 2019*).

#### **15. Ivanishvili Travels to Samegrelo Region**

Georgian Dream leader Bidzina Ivanishvili made rare public appearances on March 29-30 in the western Georgian region of Samegrelo, in what many observers saw as an attempt to cajole the voters ahead of the upcoming mayoral by-elections in Zugdidi, the regional capital.

On March 29, Ivanishvili visited Dzveli Khibula, a village in Khobi Municipality where the first President of Georgia, Zviad Gamsakhurdia died in still unclear circumstances on December 31, 1993. The GD leader was accompanied by municipality officials and representatives of his charity foundation, Cartu (*Civil.ge, April 1, 2019*).

#### **16. Far-right groups anti-liberal but also mostly anti-Russian: Report**

CRRC-Georgia, a pollster, has published a report ([full text PDF file available here](#)) on anti-western discourse in Georgia's social media, which says far right groups push anti-liberal agendas, but in most cases, they are also anti-Russian.

The report is based on the analysis of more than 26 thousand social media posts between 2015 and 2018, harvested and analyzed by CRRC team. The work was solicited by East West Management Institute (EWMI), an non-governmental organisation funded by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) (*Civil.ge, April 1, 2019*).

## **❖ Economy and Social Affairs**

### **17. First Passenger Train Arrives in Georgia by Baku-Tbilisi-Kars Railway**

First passenger train launched by the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway arrived in Georgia, Trend reports citing Georgian media.

The passenger train of the Swiss company Stadler launched by BTK in test mode. The train belongs to "Azerbaijan Railways". A few days ago the train arrived in Istanbul from Switzerland. From Turkey, the train headed for Georgia via the Istanbul-Kars-Akhalkalaki-Tbilisi-Baku railway.

Regular passenger transportation by the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway is expected to begin in the third quarter of 2019 (*CBW.GE, March 27, 2019*).

### **18. Wizz Air adds new flights to 8 European destinations**

Hungarian low-cost airline Wizz Air will add new routes from Georgia's Kutaisi International Airport to eight European cities, announces the Georgian Civil Aviation Agency.

This summer Wizz Air will launch flights to Eindhoven (Netherlands), Bari (Italy), Copenhagen (Denmark), Basel (Switzerland), Tallinn (Estonia), Brussels (Belgium), Gdansk (Poland) and Krakow (*Agenda.ge, March 28, 2019*).

### **19. New rope adventure attraction opens in Mtirala National Park**

A new ecotourism attraction, a rope adventure park, has opened in Mtirala National Park, in the Adjara region of Georgia.

The park was created with the financial support of the Caucasus Nature Fund. A total of 168,000 GEL (about \$62,453.53/ €55,596.13) was spent on it (*Agenda.ge, March 29, 2019*).

### **20. 71 mln GEL to be invested in new reservoir in Georgia's Shida Kartli region**

A new reservoir will be built in the Shida Kartli region of Georgia, providing safe drinking water to five villages and 10,000 inhabitants, and irrigation water to 7,000 hectares of land in 22 villages.

Georgian Prime Minister Mamuka Bakhtadze presented the project today. This will be the first large scale construction of a reservoir in the last 50 years in Georgia", said Bakhtadze.

The reservoir will be built on the river of Tedzami in Shida Kartli region of Georgia. Construction will start this year and is due to be completed in 47 months.

A total of 71 million GEL (about \$26.39m/€23.50m) will be invested in the project which will employ 500 locals in construction (*Agenda.ge, March 29, 2019*).

### **21. International Experts on Georgia's Drug Policy Reform**

On March 26-27, Tbilisi hosted a National Harm Reduction Conference, gathering some 150 participants from local and international rights organizations, health professionals and civic activists to discuss Georgia's drug policy.

All of the experts underline turbulence in the existing law and policy of drug abuse. According to them the problem is that the strict policy now but this is not the guarantee for decreasing the consumption. They underline that the youth has more healthy approach towards this problem as they demand humanization of the policy. Experts are saying that Georgia is now on the crossroads of this acute problem (*Civil.ge, March 28, 2019*).

### **22. Georgia's Gross External Debt Exceeds 7.4 Billion USD**

The gross external debt of Georgia amounted to 17.8 billion USD (47.5 billion GEL) as of 31st of December 2018. It accounted for 109.6 percent of the last four quarters' GDP.

During the fourth quarter of 2018, the gross external debt of Georgia increased by 533.3 million USD. Out of that 616.5 million USD increase was due to transactions and 7.8 million USD – due to other changes. Meanwhile, exchange rate and price changes led to a decrease by 65.7 million USD and 25.3 million USD, respectively (CBW.GE, March 29, 2019).

## ❖ Sports and Culture

### 23. Gudauri hosts ski competition for diplomats

Georgia's mountain resort of Gudauri has hosted a ski competition involving the diplomatic corps accredited in the country.

There were four winners:













- Lauren Bahr from the British Embassy to Georgia;
- Peter Dennis from the European Union Delegation to Georgia;
- Ekaterine Alania from the Georgian National Tourism Administration;
- Shota Brelidze from the Georgian National Tourism Administration (*Agenda.ge, March 31, 2019*).


## Additional Information


### April 1, 2019


#### OFFICIAL EXCHANGE RATES


1 USD - 2.6914GEL	1 GBP - 3.5147 GEL	100 RUB -4.1638 GEL
1 EUR - 3.0203GEL	1 TRY - 0.4764 GEL	100 JPY - 2.4288 GEL


Tuesday 2 April 12–18	Wednesday 3 April 12–18	Thursday 4 April 10–16	Friday 5 April 10–16	Saturday 6 April 10–16	Sunday 7 April 10–16
					
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 **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](#)**