

NEWS DIGEST ON GEORGIA

December 19-22

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❖ Occupied Regions

❖ Abkhazia Region

1. Moscow, Sokhumi Approve 2020-2022 Investment Program

At an "inter-governmental commission session" held in Sokhumi on December 18, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Vitaly Mutko and occupied Abkhazia's 'prime minister' Valery Bganba approved the investment program for 2020-2022. The program envisages Moscow to issue RUB 4.5 billion (about USD 72 million) to Sokhumi for improving road, energy and social infrastructure.

Hailing the program as "enough large and serious," Russia's Mutko said it aims at removing restrictions and raising the region's economic potential. "We agreed to elaborate a certain program to harmonize legislation, [aimed] at opening more opportunities to joint business activities", he said.

Mutko also spoke of implementation of other mutual agreements with Sokhumi, including on the establishment of the "Joint Information-Coordination Center of Internal Affairs Agencies," which aims to coordinate Russian and Abkhaz agencies to counter "organized crime and other dangerous crimes." (*Civil.ge, December 19, 2019*)

❖ Tskhinvali Region (so called South Ossetia)

2. Tskhinvali Sends Georgian Doctor to Prison for 21 Months

Court in Akhalkalaki district has sent Tbilisi-based doctor, Vazha Gaprindashvili to one year and nine months in prison for "illegally crossing the border" in occupied Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia.

Radio Tavisupleba's Goga Aptsiauri reported following the today's court hearing that the five-hour session was closed, and that 'the judge' Fatima Parastaeva chose the "strictest" measure for Gaprindashvili (*Civil.ge, December 20, 2019*).

3. Senator Risch 'Deeply Concerned' by Reports of Political Targeting of Georgia Opposition

The Chairman of U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, James E. Risch (R – Idaho) told Georgian Service of the Voice of America (VoA) that he is "deeply concerned by the increasing reports coming out of Georgia that the ruling party [of Georgian Dream] is politically targeting members of the opposition with assaults, detentions, and other forms of intimidation."

Georgian Service of the Voice of America (VoA) shared original comment in English with Civil Georgia (*Civil.ge*).

Senator Risch further said that "Georgia has had a bright democratic future and I am concerned that the events of the past months are once again moving the country backwards."

Chairman Risch urges "the Georgian government to fulfill its promise to vote on a new election law and to work with the opposition to find a reasonable, peaceful, and just solution to the current political problems." (*Civil.ge, December 20, 2019*)

4. Georgian, Foreign Officials Condemn Tskhinvali Decision to Imprison Doctor Gaprindashvili

Georgian and foreign officials have denounced the today's ruling of Akhalkalaki district 'court' in occupied Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, which has sent Tbilisi-based doctor, Vazha Gaprindashvili to one year and nine months in prison for "illegally crossing the border."

Foreign Minister Davit Zalkaliani said at a news briefing that today's decision has been "yet another proof" that Gaprindashvili's detention "was a deliberate provocation" [from Tskhinvali]. "We will by all means activate the action plan that we had in case of this bad scenario," Zalkaliani said, adding that Tbilisi will use all of its efforts to return doctor Gaprindashvili to his family "as soon as possible."

Meanwhile, President Salome Zurbishvili held a special meeting with foreign ambassadors accredited in Georgia, calling on the international community to strengthen their efforts to ensure that Vazha Gaprindashvili is released before New Year's (*Civil.ge, December 20, 2019*).

5. U.S. Embassy Calls on Occupied Tskhinvali, Russia to 'Immediately Release Doctor Gaprindashvili'

The U.S. in Georgia issued a statement in the late evening of Friday, December 20, in response to occupied Tskhinvali's decision to sentence Tbilisi-based doctor Vazha Gaprindashvili to prison for 21 months.

"The government of the United States does not recognize as legitimate the de facto authorities in the occupied region," the U.S. Embassy noted, adding that "nor does it recognize as legitimate today's sentencing of Dr. Vazha Gaprindashvili." (*Civil.ge, December 21, 2019*)

6. EU Calls on Tskhinvali to 'Immediately Release' Georgian Doctor Gaprindashvili

The European Union released a statement late on December 20, in response to occupied Tskhinvali's decision to sentence Tbilisi-based doctor Vazha Gaprindashvili to prison for 21 months.

In the yesterday's statement, Peter Stano, Lead Spokesperson for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy noted that the EU "has repeatedly called for the immediate release of Mr Gaprindashvili since he was detained on 9 November," adding that "in light of today's developments, we again reiterate our expectation that the authorities in control in Tskhinvali release Mr Gaprindashvili immediately and reunite him with his family."

The Spokesperson also underlined "the importance of taking immediate steps to restore unrestricted freedom of movement for the local population." (*Civil.ge, December 21, 2019*).

7. British Ambassador says Georgian doctor should be released immediately

British Ambassador to Georgia Justin McKenzie Smith has commented on the extension of illegal detention of Georgian doctor Vazha Gaprindashvili for a further one year and nine months.

"My thoughts are with Dr Gaprindashvili & his family at this painful time. Locking up doctors when patients need them is beyond comprehension. He should be released immediately by those in control in Tskhinvali and their Russian backers," Justin McKenzie Smith has tweeted.

The occupied Tskhinvali court sentenced Vazha Gaprindashvili to one year and nine-months to prison during the trial on December 20.

Tbilisi-based doctor Vazha Gaprindashvili was illegally detained by Russian occupation forces near the occupation line with Akhalkalaki Municipality on November 9. He was sent to two-month pretrial detention on November 15 (*1TV, December 21, 2019*).

❖ Foreign Affairs

8. U.S. Senate Endorses Kelly Degnan as Next Georgia Ambassador

On December 19, the U.S. Senate confirmed by voice vote Kelly C. Degnan to be the next Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to Georgia.

Kelly Degnan, the U.S. Ambassador-designate to Georgia, spoke during her nomination hearing at the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on October 29.

In her hearing speech, military and security issues loomed large. Degnan also spoke of Georgia's Russian occupation, as well as stressed that Georgia's commitment to the rule of law and democracy "fundamental." (*Civil.ge, December 20, 2019*)

9. Georgian MPs Conclude United States Visit

Georgian parliamentary delegation, led by new Deputy Speaker Kakha Kuchava, and comprised of former Parliament Speaker and current executive secretary of the ruling Georgian Dream party Irakli Kobakhidze and chair of the Foreign Relations Committee Irakli Beraia, paid official visit to the United States on December 16-19.

As part of their Washington D.C. visit, the Georgian delegation met with the co-chair of the U.S. Congressional Georgia Caucus Adam Kinzinger, discussing U.S.-Georgia cooperation, reforms in Georgia and its challenges (*Civil.ge, December 20, 2019*).

10. US President signs National Defense Budget for 2020 that also envisages support to Georgia

The US President Donald Trump signed the 2020 National Defense Authorization Act. Based on the document, the defence budget for 2020 is USD 738 billion.

The National Defense Authorization Act, or NDAA, grants a base budget of \$658.4 billion and an additional \$71.5 billion for overseas contingency operations funding, a.k.a. the war budget.

This year's legislation includes a 3.1% pay increase for troops, the first-ever paid family leave for all federal workers and the creation of a Space Force — the first addition to the sister services in 72 years. The \$738 billion for fiscal 2020 represents a \$21 billion increase over what Congress enacted for fiscal 2019 (*Civil.ge, December 21, 2019*).

❖ Internal Affairs

11. Tbilisi City Council Member Expelled from Majority for his Controversial Remarks

The ruling Georgian Dream party has decided to expel Tbilisi City Council (Sakrebulo) member Erekle Kukhianidze from the majority, amid public protest against the latter's controversial remarks about Georgian doctor Vazha Gaprindashvili who remains in occupied Tskhinvali custody for a month.

Chair of the Georgian Dream-Democratic Georgia Beka Davituliani told media early on December 18 that Kukhianidze will also be dismissed as the Head of Environment Protection Commission of Tbilisi Sakrebulo. Davituliani also stated that the Sakrebulo majority does not have a right to terminate mandate to its member, and that the mandate can be suspended only after the Sakrebulo member's personal request.

On December 13, Kukhianidze wrote an offensive post on his personal Facebook page, accusing doctor Vazha Gaprindashvili, who was illegally detained by Russia-backed Tskhinvali authorities in mid-November, as well as the doctor's family of staging provocation against the Georgian government (*Civil.ge, December 19, 2019*).

12. Police Investigator Charged in Teen Suicide Case Sent to Pre-trial Detention

Tbilisi City Court sent the police investigator charged with forcing the confession from the teen, 15, to pretrial detention. The teen succumbed to his injuries on December 17, following the attempted suicide on December 12.

The Court made its ruling in a hospital where the said investigator was transferred for health related issues soon after the news of the teen's death broke on Tuesday.

The State Inspector's Service – a newly established body mandated to investigate crimes committed by police and public officials – took over the case on December 13, and charged the police investigator.

Additional disclosures

On December 19, the Prosecutor's Office stated that the police investigator failed to follow the procedures as envisaged by the Juvenile Justice Code. After initially failing to obtain the teen's confession, as the Prosecutor's Office noted, the police investigator confronted the witnesses that "made minors experience undue psychological stress." The confrontation during witness interrogation is expressly forbidden by the Juvenile Code.

Speaking at news-briefing of December 19, Londa Toloraia, the State Inspector, also said that the charged "inspector ... confronted the teen with the school administration representative, as well as other minors" against the teen so that to obtain his confession. "The minors... experienced very strong emotional stress," Toloraia added (*Civil.ge, December 20, 2019*).

13. Son of Former Georgian President Gamsakhurdia Stabbed in Tbilisi

The son of first Georgian President Zviad Gamsakhurdia was stabbed near his house at Tbilisi's Gali Street on December 19. Tsotne Gamsakhurdia was attacked with a sharp object in his back and chest. Following the attack, Gamsakhurdia was taken to Khechinashvili Hospital, where he had to undergo several urgent surgeries. Doctors say his condition remains "very serious."

Interior Ministry told Civil.ge that investigation has been launched under the articles 19-108 of the Criminal Code that envisages attempted murder. No one has been detained so far, police said (*Civil.ge, December 20, 2019*).

14. Police Detain Five over Gamsakhurdia's Attempted Murder Case

Georgian Interior Ministry has detained five people over the recent case of attempted murder of Tsotne Gamsakhurdia, son of the first Georgian President Zviad Gamsakhurdia.

Deputy Interior Minister Vladimer Bortsvadze announced late on December 20 that one person was detained for attempted murder, four others – for not reporting the crime.

According to Bortsvadze, investigation established that on December 19, T.Gh. inflicted several injuries with a sharp object to Gamsakhurdia "on the ground of the verbal assault that resulted into confrontation and fled from the crime scene."

The crime for attempted murder is punishable with seven to 15 years of imprisonment, while not reporting the crimes is punishable with three to seven years of custody (*Civil.ge, December 21, 2019*).

15. Health condition of Tsotne Gamsakhurdia remains grave

According to Besarion Gogitidze, a doctor at Khechinashvili University Hospital, Tsotne Gamsakhurdia remains connected to the artificial breathing device.

"The patient's health condition is still grave but stable, these days nothing has changed. The dynamics are unchanged, the situation remains difficult and stable. The hemodynamic data is stable and requires no additional intervention", – said Besarion Gogitidze (*Civil.ge, December 22, 2019*).

16. Georgian Dream Offers to Tweak Current Mixed Electoral System

The ruling Georgian Dream party offers the opposition new proposal to solve the political crisis that emerged following the former's backtracking on its key promise to transfer Georgia to fully proportional electoral system from 2020 instead of 2024. Georgian Dream proposes tweaking existing mixed electoral system, that envisages decreasing the number of places reserved for majoritarian MPs from 73 to 50, while the number of lawmakers elected through proportional party-lists should increase from 77 to 100.

Parliament Speaker Archil Talakvadze told media following the fourth round meeting between ruling party and opposition today that their proposal is a "compromise," that was reached within the party following difficult negotiations. Hailing the mixed electoral system as "democratic and balanced," Talakvadze stated that "the compromise" should be adopted not only for 2020, but the future parliamentary polls as well (*Civil.ge, December 21, 2019*).

17. CSOs Call for Govt to Fulfill Promise on Moving to Proportional Electoral System

fifteen Georgian local civil society organizations, including Transparency International Georgia, Open Society Georgia Foundation and ISFED, released a statement on December 20, calling on the ruling Georgian Dream party "to fulfill its promise on moving to proportional electoral system" from 2020 (*Civil.ge, December 21, 2019*).

18. Facebook Removes Hundreds of Georgia Govt Linked Pages for 'Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior'

Facebook, one of the most popular social media platforms, announced today about first ever Georgian takedown, that affected Georgian-government linked network on the platform.

"Today, we removed 39 Facebook accounts, 344 Pages, 13 Groups and 22 Instagram accounts as part of a domestic-focused network that originated in the country of Georgia," Nathaniel Gleicher, Head of Security Policy of Facebook said on December 20..

"These Pages posed as news organizations and impersonated political parties, public figures, activist groups and media entities. The Page admins and account owners typically posted about domestic news and political issues such as elections, government policies, public officials, criticism of the opposition and local activist organizations," Gleicher noted.

Facebook's statement stressed that "although the people behind this activity attempted to conceal their identities and coordination, our investigation linked this activity to Panda, an advertising agency in Georgia, and the Georgian Dream-led government."

The statement revealed that about 442,300 accounts followed one or more of these Pages, about 52,000 accounts joined at least one of these Groups and around 2,100 people followed one or more of these Instagram accounts (*Civil.ge, December 20, 2019*).

❖ Economy and Social Affairs

19. Georgia's Foreign Trade in January-November 2019

Georgia's foreign trade turnover in the first eleven months of 2019 increased by 1.4%, compared to the same period last year, amounting to USD 11.5 billion, according to the preliminary figures released by the National Statistics Office, Geostat, on December 19.

Exports from Georgia were up by 11.7% year-on-year to USD 3.4 billion, and imports were down by 2.3% y/y to USD 8.1 billion in January-November. The trade gap stood at USD 4.7 billion.

Trade turnover with the European Union (EU) member states stood at USD 2.8 billion, which is a 2.5% decrease over the same period of last year. Exports from Georgia to the EU-member states increased by 14.2% y/y to USD 752.3 million, while imports constituted USD 2.1 billion, which is 7.4% lower than the same period last year.

Trade turnover with the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) increased by 0.9% y/y to USD 4 billion. Georgia's exports to CIS countries were up by 21% y/y to USD 1.8 billion, and imports decreased by 11.3% to USD 2.2 billion (*Civil.ge, December 19, 2019*).

Additional Information

December 23, 2019
OFFICIAL EXCHANGE RATES

1 USD - 2.8957 GEL	1 GBP - 3.7772 GEL	100 RUB - 4.6589 GEL
1 EUR - 3.2186 GEL	1 TRY - 0.4892 GEL	100 JPY - 2.6483 GEL

Monday
23 December



1° 11°

Tuesday
24 December



4° 14°

Wednesday
25 December



4° 14°

Thursday
26 December



3° 14°

Friday
27 December



3° 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](#)**