

NEWS DIGEST ON GEORGIA

December 23-26

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Date: **December 27, 2019**

❖ Occupied Regions

❖ Abkhazia Region

1. U.S. Budget Bans Aid to Governments Recognizing Abkhazia, Tskhinvali

The Further Consolidated Appropriations Act for 2020, the annual budgetary legislation that defines spending by various United States federal agencies, designates over USD 132 million for assisting Georgia. The Appropriations Act, which was endorsed by the United States Congress and signed by President Donald Trump on December 20, follows the previous year's practice and prohibits American aid to the governments that have recognized independence of Georgia's Russia occupied regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia.

According to the document, "none of the funds appropriated by this Act may be made available for assistance for the central government of a country that the Secretary of State determines and reports to the Committees on Appropriations has recognized the independence of, or has established diplomatic relations with, the Russian Federation occupied" Georgian territories (*Civil.ge, December 24, 2019*).

❖ Foreign Affairs

2. Georgian, Turkish Ministers Meet, Pledge to Deepen Defense Ties

Georgian Defense Minister Irakli Garibashvili, who visited Ankara on December 24, met with his Turkish counterpart Hulusi Akar, pledging to deepen defense ties.

Minister Garibashvili said that as part of the meeting, the two Defense Ministers also signed military financial agreement, which envisages 100 million Turkish Lira grant for the Georgian Defense Ministry (*Civil.ge, December 26, 2019*).

❖ Internal Affairs

3. Khazaradze's Lelo, New Rights, Development Movement Set up New Political Union

Public movement Lelo led by TBC Bank founder Mamuka Khazaradze, former Parliament Speaker Davit Usupashvili's Development Movement and the New Rights party set up a new political union "Lelo for Georgia" on Sunday. The three organizations announced about their plans to cooperate closely a couple of weeks ago.

The new party held its inaugural congress on December 22, where Mamuka Khazaradze was elected as the chairman of the party, Badri Japaridze – as the secretary general and Davit Usupashvili – as the chairman of the political council (*Civil.ge, December 23, 2019*).

4. Politicians Comment on Facebook's Removal of Georgian Govt Linked Pages

Ruling party assessments

Archil Talakvadze, Parliament Speaker: "It is not an exclusive case for Georgia. Facebook has such reactions constantly and it happens throughout the world, including in the United States. It was said that these subjects were spreading reports in support of the government. Facebook is an open space and everyone has seen that it contains a lot of information, disinformation against the government, as well as reports supporting the government. I do not rule out that those subjects, who are spreading disinformation against the government are spending much more money on it. The main trolls are still remaining in our country and these trolls are walking in Tbilisi, addressing the rallies and participating in TV programs [referring to the opposition]."

Mamuka Mdinardze, leader of the parliamentary majority: "The Georgian Dream party and its leadership has nothing to do with the group Facebook referred to. Besides Georgia, Facebook also removed unauthentic accounts of the United States and Vietnam. We are ready to start working on regulations to prevent disinformation. Although it is not difficult for leisured people to report and delete unauthentic accounts, the Natsis [referring to the opposition United National Movement, that in Georgia sounds as "nazis" – Civil.ge note], their bots and trolls are celebrating that Georgian Dream's bots and trolls were removed. In fact, unlike the National Movement and its satellites, Georgian Dream is not supported by bots and virtual people, but rather by real people who can never be defeated or deleted."

Kakha Kaladze, Georgian Dream's secretary general/Tbilisi Mayor: "We have nothing to do with these accounts and I do not actually know what accounts you are talking about... Generally, we know, who the main ideologists of fake news are and their name is the [United] National Movement. Of course, if regulating this [issue] is possible, the best examples of [relevant changes] implemented in European countries can be introduced here too."

Tea Tsulukiani, Justice Minister/Deputy Prime Minister: "I have been a victim of such trolls on Facebook. It is good that Facebook is working on it... facebook will have to work in this regard in the future not only in Georgia but elsewhere too, like in the U.S. as we have seen it... I have no information about fake news and trolls... As the Parliament Speaker [Talakvadze] said today , the main trolls are remaining in the streets, trying to sell you a lie. You'd better cover this issue and talk about it."

Davit Zalkaliani, Foreign Minister: "I am sure that those official websites through which the government is communicating with the public are truly official websites. Neither the government, nor the ruling party have any fake account. Reputational problems are not new for Facebook. We remember that quite recently Facebook had to answer the questions of the members of the U.S. Congress... the so called fake news were used to bully and blackmail the government. [If you remove the Facebook pages/accounts], you need to be objective: not a single account that used to spread fake news against the government had been deleted

[by Facebook]. The government has voiced its initiative for multiple times to fight against this problem at a legislative level and we expressed our readiness for our political opponents to be involved in this process.”

Opposition’s assessments

Zaal Udumashvili, National Movement: “Investigation about pages [of Facebook with inauthentic coordinated behavior] would have been launched immediately in any democratic country. It is the gravest crime, when [the government] is artificially trying to incite a strife in the public, as well as to incite an anti-Western campaign... Another issue is where these troll factories were being financed from. The money spent on advertising – almost one million – was black money laundered in the organizations like Panda [an advertising agency]. It is unlikely that this government will investigate the case.”

Giga Bokeria, European Georgia: “They were spending so much money in this poor country for strengthening our enemy and discrediting free world, free idea. Such things cannot take place in a normal situation. We can suppose that such political decisions are made by one man – [ruling Georgian Dream party leader] Bidzina Ivanishvili.”

Shalva Shavgulidze, Free Democrats: “It does not undermine Georgia’s reputation, but rather discloses Bidzina Ivanishvili. He had hidden his pro-Russian orientation for a long time and now he failed to do the it. This latest disclosure by Facebook is the disclosure of his trolls’ pro-Russian orientation. Ivanishvili would better give people the right to fair elections.”

Ana Natsvlishvili, political movement Lelo: “This development – creation of trolls and bots and the machinery of lie – once again shows the huge problem in which our society has been sunk: it is a falseness, lie and fear of the truth.”

Davit Berdzenishvili, Republican Party: “These bots, trolls and the entire factory, are in the arsenal of the present government and Facebook has now unmasked it.”

Giorgi Vashadze, New Georgia: “All of this points at that the Georgian Dream is the main weapon in hands of Russia in terms of hybrid warfare. They manipulate exactly with internet resources, [they] manipulate with various false information and abuse people’s brains... to spread anti-western and pro-Russian rhetoric absolutely everywhere. Factually, what Facebook has done has fully confirmed that the Georgian Dream is the main weapon of hybrid warfare in Georgia.” (*Civil.ge, December 23, 2019*)

5. TI Georgia Urges Prosecutor’s Office to React to Facebook’s Statement

Transparency International Georgia, a local human rights watchdog, has called on the Prosecutor’s Office to immediately launch an investigation in response to the statement made by Facebook on December 20.

In the statement released on December 23, Transparency International Georgia said that “Facebook has deleted hundreds of fake pages, groups and users caught out of coordinated unauthentic behavior, who were posting materials discrediting the non-governmental sector, Public Defender, opposition and various civic activists.”

The statement stresses that the signs of certain crimes can be observed in the actions standing behind these groups.

Transparency International Georgia supposes that the investigation should clarify whether:

- The persons standing behind fake groups were using illegal money for their activities;
- Budgetary funds were used illegally for promoting the activities of persons behind fake groups;
- The persons behind fake groups were acting with the help of public servants or other officials;
- The actions carried out by the persons behind fake groups involved humiliating or degrading treatment;
- The activities of fake groups were accompanied by obtaining, storing, using or spreading of personal secrets;
- The actions of persons behind fake groups contained public calls for violent actions to incite a discord between the groups on racial, religious, national, local, ethnic, social, political, language and/or grounds (*Civil.ge, December 24, 2019*).

6. U.S. State Department on 'Democratic Developments in Georgia'

The U.S. Department of State Spokesperson, Morgan Ortagus stated on December 23 that "we urge the Georgian government to reinforce its commitment to the principles of democracy, individual liberty, and rule of law by ensuring that its judicial and prosecutorial system is free of political bias."

Spokesperson Ortagus also noted that "the United States supports a secure, prosperous, and democratic Georgia," adding that "we commend the recent progress made on the fourth wave of judicial reform."

The U.S. Department of State Spokesperson also stated that the U.S. supports "the ongoing dialogue between representatives of the ruling party and the opposition parties on electoral reform." (*Civil.ge, December 24, 2019*)

7. Ruling party assessment of the U.S. State Department's Statement

Gia Volski, Parliament's First Vice Speaker: "No translation will distort what is really written in the State Department's statement. A couple of days ago, the Acting Ambassador of the United States said the same. The Prosecutor's Office, the judiciary and the work of any public agency should be improved. The activities of the Prosecutor's Office are especially interesting. The Prosecutor's Office should enjoy more public trust than it enjoys now, but it has more trust now than it had before 2012 and this is the fact."

Kakha Kaladze, Georgian Dream's Secretary General, Tbilisi Mayor: "Most important is that they are positively evaluating judicial reform. They are positively evaluating the steps taken by us in terms of democratic consolidation. It once again proves that Georgia enjoys a huge support from our strategic partner that can only be welcomed. They actually see and appreciate positive processes ongoing in the country. Of course, challenges do exist. There is not a single country, even the most developed and democratic countries, where everything is okay. So, we will do our utmost to respond to these challenges in a dignified manner."

Kakha Kuchava, Vice Speaker: "We understood the tone very well, because the statement was released in both English and Georgian languages and everyone could see whether it was praising us or slapping us in the face. But it obviously contains praising. We should remember one thing that when such supporting statements are made, there will always be the means spreading fake news and trying to neglect this support."

Irakli Kobakhidze, Georgian Dream: “Not only the opposition understood this statement differently, but they even translated it differently and it points at their bias. The statement says nothing about politically [biased] prosecutor’s office or politically [biased] judiciary; it simply calls on Georgia to intensify its efforts to ensure that the prosecutor’s office and the judiciary are not biased... I know for sure that our opponents can also read this statement correctly, but they voice it otherwise. Actually, this statement expresses support [towards the government].” (*Civil.ge, December 24, 2019*)

8. Opposition assessment of the U.S. State Department’s Statement

Roman Gotsiridze, the United National Movement: “The statement directly says that Georgian justice, judiciary and prosecutor’s office are biased and that they are used for political repressions; that there is a police regime in the country and opponents are politically persecuted.”

Otar Kakhidze, European Georgia: “The U.S. State Department’s statement is part of the United States’ reaction – we listened to the statement by the Congress members, the statement made by the Senate’s Foreign Affairs Committee and these statements were very strict and this latter statement is a continuation of this line. Of course, when the government is called on that the prosecutor’s office should not be politically biased, it points at the gravest problem in the justice system.”

Ana Natsvlishvili, Lelo for Georgia: “This statement contains a clear and strict emphasis regarding the prosecutor’s office, because the latter has been persecuting at least one leader of all important political forces. In addition, there is almost not a single critically disposed media outlet in the country whose founder or director is not facing criminal charges. So, these cases are clear examples of selective justice, and many of them do not have any legal ground at all.” (*Civil.ge, December 24, 2019*)

9. Public Defender Speaks of ‘Informal Governance’ in Penitentiary Facilities

Georgian Public Defender Nino Lomjaria released a [report](#) on December 24 on the results of monitoring carried out at four penitentiary facilities, according to which “informal governance in these facilities” creates a serious threat of inmate ill-treatment.

The report was prepared on the basis of the monitoring conducted by the Special Preventive Group of the Public Defender of Georgia in penitentiary establishments N2 (Kutaisi), N8 (Tbilisi, Gldani district), N14 (Mtskheta, Ksani settlement) and N15 (Tskaltubo, village of Geguti) in July and August 2019. Over 60% of all Georgian inmates are serving their sentences in the above mentioned four penitentiary facilities.

According to the official statistical data, as of October 2019, 8,075 inmates were serving their sentences in 15 penitentiary facilities under the Georgian Justice Ministry. According to the data for October, number of inmates placed in prison N15 exceeded the admitted norm by 39% (*Civil.ge, December 25, 2019*).

10. Georgian Dream Leaders Congratulate Orthodox Patriarch Ilia II on Enthronement Anniversary

Leaders of the ruling Georgian Dream – Democratic Georgia party attended a solemn service held at Mtskheta’s Svetitskhoveli Cathedral, one of the most revered religious sites for many Georgian Orthodox believers, and congratulated Patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church, Ilia II on the 42nd anniversary of his enthronement.

In his address, Bidzina Ivanishvili, chairman of the ruling party, spoke about the huge role played by the Georgian Orthodox Church and the Patriarch and noted that during 42 years, amid numerous of challenges and perils, "frequently, the Church as well as his Holiness was the greatest stronghold." (*Civil.ge, December 25, 2019*)

11. President Zurabishvili Speaks of Recent Developments in Georgia

Inmate pardoning

Speaking on the recent inmate pardoning that triggered sharp criticism among both the ruling party and opposition, President Zurabishvili said that many questions related to the issue were raised "gloatingly." She noted that main attention was drawn to the fact why the President did not explain based on which particular circumstances she pardoned certain inmates, that, according to President Zurabishvili, is incorrect.

David Gareji

Salome Zurabishvili also spoke about the issue of demarcation of the state border with Azerbaijan, saying that "all actions in [terms of] foreign [policy] are agreed [with the government]." She explained that "the President is responsible for territorial integrity, including on the borders."

Polarized political environment

The Georgian President also focused on the polarized environment in the country, saying that polarization is "a great disease facing not only Georgia, but the entire world" that, according to her, "is mainly linked to social [media] networks."

Occupation and dialogue with Russia

During the interview, Salome Zurabishvili also spoke about the country's foreign policy priorities and Russian occupation, saying that recent development around Georgian doctor Vazha Gaprindashvili demonstrate that existing technical formats of dialogue with Russia "bring nothing" and that they are "useless."

"It is clear that bureaucrats fail to make political decisions that we expect," the President said, adding that political content should be returned to the Geneva International Discussions.

Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration

President Salome Zurabishvili also spoke about Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration, saying that "we have no other perspective" and that "our perspective is Europe, the European Union and Euro-Atlantic space." (*1TV, December 24, 2019*).

12. Georgian Gov't Slammed for Selective Sanctioning of Indebted Televisions

The decision made by the Finance Ministry's Revenue Service on December 24 to levy the accounts of three TV channels – Pirveli, Kavkasia and Rustavi 2, due to their debts accumulated since October 1, has triggered strong criticism among opposition, media and civil society.

Once the accounts are levied, funds placed on or transferred to the TV channels' accounts can be taken at any time in favor of the State Treasury.

A day before imposing the sanction, the Finance Ministry released a special statement, warning the televisions about their debts to the state budget and giving them one day for paying them off.

Representatives of Kavkasia TV and TV Pirveli said that the government puts “critically-disposed” televisions under “unequal” conditions, adding that Imedi TV, Rustavi 2 and Maestro TV, who are loyal towards the government, have the debts totaling GEL 55 million; however, their accounts have not been levied (*Civil.ge*, December 26, 2019).

❖ Economy and Social Affairs

13. The underpaid Georgian workers who risk their lives for your Christmas tree

“In Georgia’s northern mountains, workers scale daunting heights in search of the fir cones seeds that produce Europe’s favourite Christmas tree. But while foreign importers line their pockets, the climbers hazard all for a pittance” – reads the first lines of the article published on the Guardian.

Each season, says Sopromadze, one of the cone collectors – who wears a T-shirt despite the cold wind – he earns between 1,000 and 2,000 lari (£262 and £524). The price per kilo varies from year to year, from one to two lari – a fraction of the price for a full-grown tree in Europe.

“The foreign companies earn most from this. We just have the cones, no factories or plantations,” says Violeta Katsitadze, also from Tlugi.

She sits at the kitchen table in her house, next to her 77-year-old mother, Lamara Katsitadze-Jikhvashvili. Beans and peppers have been laid out to dry near the window. It is the end of harvest, and the entire village is preparing for winter (*theguardian.com*, December 23, 2019).

Additional Information

December 27, 2019

OFFICIAL EXCHANGE RATES

1 USD - 2.8694 GEL	1 GBP - 3.7210 GEL	100 RUB -4.6437 GEL
1 EUR - 3.1810 GEL	1 TRY - 0.4830 GEL	100 JPY - 2.6193 GEL

Friday 27 December	Saturday 28 December	Sunday 29 December	Monday 30 December	Tuesday 31 December
				
4° 11°	1° 11°	1° 8°	0° 8°	1° 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](#)**