

NEWS DIGEST ON GEORGIA

January 14-15

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Date: **January 16, 2020**

❖ Occupied Regions

❖ Tskhinvali Region (*so called South Ossetia*)

1. Security Service Reports on Illegal 'Borderization' on Tbilisi-Controlled Territory

The State Security Service of Georgia (SSG) informed Civil.ge today that the occupying forces erected "illegal installations" on Tbilisi-controlled territory near Chorchana village of Khashuri Municipality, at the dividing line with Tskhinvali Region.

Slamming the fact as "provocative action," SSG said the action showcases "illegal borderization." It further noted the process is part of "the illegal activities," that the occupying forces have been carrying out along the line of occupation since 2011.

"The issue of provocative actions of the occupying forces in the forest near the villages of Chorchana and Tsaghvli of Khashuri Municipality has been strongly put forward both at the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM) meetings, as well as the rounds of Geneva International Discussions (GIDs)," the Security Service added (*Civil.ge, January 14, 2020*).

2. Georgian Politicians on Renewed 'Borderization' on Tbilisi-administered Territory

Georgian politicians have denounced the ongoing "borderization" on Tbilisi-controlled territory near Chorchana village of Khashuri Municipality, at the dividing line with Russian-occupied Tskhinvali Region.

Georgian President Salome Zurbishvili commented on the issue, noting that as Georgian government cannot exercise control over its Russian-occupied territories, intensifying diplomatic efforts remains the only mechanism at Georgia's disposal.

"I have said for multiple times that we should intensify the Geneva format, hold it at a higher level and return a political context to it. We should work actively in terms of bilateral diplomacy. We should use all our diplomatic, peaceful levers," she stated.

Ketevan Tsikhelashvili, Georgian minister overseeing occupied regions, slammed Tskhinvali for "total restriction" of freedom of movement between Georgia proper and occupied Akhalgori district, home of ethnic Georgian majority. She stressed that Moscow-backed Tskhinvali is holding the local population "hostages" amid Chorchana checkpoint crisis.

"With that, they want to exert pressure... which is unacceptable not only politically and legally, but in terms of human [rights] norms as well, as it creates humanitarian crisis; it is necessary to restore [freedom of] movement to avoid worse [consequences]," Tsikhelashvili stated.

Parliament Speaker Archil Talakvadze also commented on the issue, saying the provocations “that we observe on a daily basis,” contradict with international law and Georgian legislation. Therefore, “the Russian Federation will have to revoke occupation,” Speaker Talakvadze noted.

“These walls of barbed wires will become more and more incompatible with modernity and dissolve. We will restore relations and bridges with the Abkhaz, Ossetians... Georgia will get united,” Talakvadze stated (*Civil.ge, January 14, 2020*).

3. Reactions from the opposition on Renewed ‘Borderization’ on Tbilisi-administered Territory

Lawmakers from United National Movement and European Georgia, Salome Samadashvili and Giga Bokeria, respectively, spoke of Russian occupation as well.

MP Samadashvili considers that the ruling Georgian Dream party “continues to cooperate” with Russia despite the existing situation at the occupied territories and its adjacent areas, while Russia is carrying out its agenda on the ground.

“The issue of occupation in Georgia has factually disappeared from the international organizations’ agenda... [We have] no steps forward, but a lot of steps back,” she stated.

European Georgia’s Bokeria considers that in the best case, the ruling party has a naïve [position,] in the worst case scenario, this is their [deliberate] harmful [position]. Bokeria noted that after assuming power in 2012, ruling Georgian Dream party “pulled riot police back from the occupation line and did nothing to force the Russian Federation to pay a high political price for pushing the occupation line [further into Tbilisi-administered territory], kidnappings and killings.” (*Civil.ge, January 14, 2020*)

❖ Foreign Affairs

4. Incident took place on undefined section of Georgian-Azerbaijani border, one person detained

The employees of the Border Police of the Ministry of Internal Affairs detained Georgian citizen G.I. on the undefined section of Georgian-Azerbaijani border for illegal purchase-keeping and carrying of a firearm as well as for the attempt to take a hostage.

“On January 14 of the current year, Georgian citizen G.I. was in the border zone. Under the pressure of the firearm and hand grenade, he forced the Georgian border guard to start moving to the direction of the undefined section of the state border. During the incident, detainee made several gunshots.

As a result of the operative and effective measures taken by the Border Police officers of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the situation was timely resolved,” – the statement of MIA reads.

The investigation is in progress under article 236, III and IV parts and article 144, II part, sub-paragraph “H” envisaged by the Criminal Code of Georgia. Ministry of Internal Affairs has already expressed gratitude towards Azerbaijani colleagues for the effective cooperation during the aforementioned incident (*ITV, January 14, 2020*).

5. Human Rights Watch launches report on Georgia

Human Rights Watch (HRW) has published a new report saying that “2018 presidential election brought Georgia’s past and current human rights problems to the forefront of political debates. Authorities took

steps to establish a mechanism to investigate abuse by law enforcement, but did not give it full independence. Other areas of concern included unjustifiably harsh drug laws, occupational safety and labor rights, discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people, and threats to media pluralism.”

“According to local and international observers “candidates were able to campaign freely and voters had a genuine choice,” but there were instances of the ruling party’s misuse of administrative resources. The second round was scheduled for late November. Lack of Accountability for Police, Security Service Abuse Impunity for abuse by law enforcement officials remained a persistent problem. Investigations, if launched, often led to charges that carry lesser, inappropriate sanctions and rarely resulted in convictions. Authorities routinely refused to grant victim status to those who alleged abuse, depriving them of the opportunity to review investigation file,” report reads.

As for freedom of Media and Civil Society, report mentions the cases of Rustavi 2 and Iberia TV and says “the dispute raised concerns over government interference with media.”

“The ownership dispute over Georgia’s most-watched television broadcaster, Rustavi 2, remained pending before the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). A former owner alleged that he had been forced to sell the station below the market value and sought to restore his rights. Rustavi 2’s current owners allege the lawsuit is government-orchestrated to take over the opposition-minded station.

In October, Iberia TV suspended broadcasting, alleging that the authorities were trying to shut down the critically-minded broadcaster by worsening the owner’s financial problems. The owners alleged that the authorities proposed they forfeit the channel in exchange for resolving their tax debt. Authorities denied the allegations,” HRW says.

The 652-page annual report discusses drug laws in Georgia and says “the authorities continued to use harsh drug laws to prosecute people for mere consumption or possession of drugs for personal use.” (*ITV, January 15, 2020*)

6. Military maneuver “Defender Europe 2020” starts in January

Massive military drill “Defender Europe 2020” starts in January. A total of 37,000 soldiers from 18 nations would participate in the exercise. The exercises would take place in Germany, Poland, Georgia and the Baltic States.

General Andrew M. Rohling, the deputy commander of the US Armed Forces in Europe, said “military maneuver is not related to any particular country. It aims to respond quickly to any crisis.”

“The goal is to send a signal that the United States of America Responsibility for Europe and the NATO partners would do justice,” Andrew M. Rohling stressed (*ITV, January 15, 2020*).

❖ Internal Affairs

7. ISFED: Electoral Bill Poses Threat to Transparency of Elections

International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED), a local election watchdog, has strongly criticized the bill initiated by the Central Election Commission and the Parliament’s Legal Issues Committee bypassing a group working on electoral reforms.

In a statement released on January 14, ISFED said that part of the initiated amendments are dangerous for “democratic, free and transparent elections.”

The organization emphasizes that according to the bill:

- Final vote tallies of precinct election commissions (PECs) will be sent to the Central Election Commission (CEC) not directly but through district election commissions;
- Vote-buying will be banned not for the whole election period, but only from the day polling date is announced through the election day;
- Excludes representatives of the media from being appointed as election observers.

ISFED also noted that “part of the electoral amendments profoundly change the principle of transparency of election results” that in turn, contradicts the principle of the Venice Commission on the stability of the electoral law, according to which “amendments to electoral legislation should be discussed at least a year before elections takes place, unless these amendments aim at establishing European election standards and fulfilling the recommendations of international organizations.”

ISFED calls:

- On the Georgian Parliament – to discuss all initiatives on electoral reform in the format of the group working on electoral reform with the involvement of all stakeholders;
- On the Central Election Commission – not to take the steps that will worsen the standards of transparency of electoral procedures, reduce trust towards election administration and increase the risks of manipulation with election results (*Civil.ge, January 14, 2020*).

8. Prosecutorial Council presented two more candidates for post of General Prosecutor

The Prosecutorial Council has been presented two more candidates for the vacant post of General Prosecutor of Georgia – Lawyer Valerian Vacharadze and lawyer Merab Gamkrelidze.

Vacharadze has been nominated by the Juridical Company GMG &Partners. Gamkrelidze personally applied to the Council for registration.

There are 7 candidates presented for the post for the time being. Their personal information is posted on the webpage <http://pc.gov.ge>. Presentation of the candidates will continue till January 17, 2020 (*ITV, January 15, 2020*).

❖ Economy and Social Affairs

9. Georgia’s Foreign Trade in 2019

Georgia’s foreign trade turnover increased by 2.7% in 2019 year-on-year, reaching USD 12.8 billion, according to the preliminary figures released by the National Statistics Office of Georgia (Geostat) on January 14.

Exports from Georgia increased by 12.4% y/y to USD 3.8 billion, while imports decreased by 0.8% y/y to 9.1 billion. The trade gap stood at USD 5.3 billion (*Civil.ge, January 14, 2020*).

10. Government launches procedures for new tender of Anaklia Deepwater Port Project

The Georgian government launches procedures for the new tender of Anaklia Deepwater Port Project – Ministry of Regional Development and Infrastructure reports after the government suspended an investment agreement with Anaklia Development Consortium.

The Ministry explained that any statement to be made about the possibility for resumption of relations between the government and Consortium will be false and will only serve interests of political speculations. The Ministry also reiterates the Georgian government's readiness for the construction of Anaklia Deepwater Port and underlines the project's strategic and economic importance (*ITV, January 14, 2020*).

11. Mayor of Tbilisi announces large-scale projects

"We will launch large-scale projects this year," Mayor of Tbilisi Kakha Kaladze said at the meeting of the municipality government on Wednesday.

As Kakha Kaladze noted, 1 billion 245 million GEL will be spent on two main directions – infrastructure and healthcare.

"European Bank for Reconstruction and Development will allocate 270 million Euros which will be spent on the renovation of the public transport in Tbilisi. In total, the City budget will be 1 billion 500 million GEL," Kakha Kaladze said.

Mayor of Tbilisi added that project implementation may cause some discomfort.

"This year we will start many large-scale projects and people may face some discomfort. I would like to apologize for that," Kaladze said (*ITV, January 5, 2020*).

12. Tbilisi Mayor warns services against corruption

Tbilisi Mayor Kakha Kaladze announced about large-scale infrastructure projects planned for 2020 during the city governmental sitting and warned all municipal services and their heads to be alert about prevention of any kind of corruption.

"You know my attitude that nobody will be forgiven anything. Corruption is unacceptable. If anybody needs help, we will be there and nobody will be left face to face with problems. The support will be provided but if there is any indecency, we will be principal," Kaladze said (*ITV, January 15, 2020*).

13. Tbilisi City Hall hands over 80 new ambulance vehicles to MOH

Tbilisi City Hall handed over 80 new ambulance vehicles to the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labor, Health and Social Affairs of Georgia (MOH) earlier today.

Mayor of Tbilisi Kakha Kaladze, Minister of Labour, Health and Social Affairs, Ekaterine Tikaradze and Director of Emergency Situation Coordination and Urgent Assistance Center Avtandil Talakvadze attended the presentation (*ITV, January 15, 2020*).

14. NBG publishes money transfers statistics for December 2019

The National Bank of Georgia (NBG) has published money transfers statistics for December 2019 earlier today. According to the report, in December 2019, the volume of money transfers from abroad constituted 172.3 million USD (500.5 million GEL), which is 14.2% (21.4 million USD) more than the amount in December 2018.

"95.0% percent of the total money transfers from abroad came from 19 largest partner countries, with the volume of transfers from these countries each exceeding 1 million USD in December 2019. In December

2018 the share of these 19 countries constituted 94.8% percent of the total volume of money transfers," NBG said.

The National Bank of Georgia noted that in December 2019, 25.5 million USD (or 74.1 million GEL) was transferred from Georgia, which is 17.7% more as compared to 21.7 million USD in December 2018 (ITV, January 15, 2020).

15. NBG – Revenues from tourism increased by 1.4% in 2019

Revenues from tourism increased by 1.4% in 2019 in comparison to 2018 based on the preliminary estimations of the National Bank of Georgia (NBG). The revenues from tourism in 2019 reached USD 3 billion and 268 million. The amount in 2018 was USD 222 million.

According to the NBG, revenues were increasing at the beginning of the year but after activation of sanctions by official Moscow, a decrease was fixed in July-September period. Increase of revenues resumed starting October. The NBG also reports that the number of international visitors exceeded 9 million in 2019 in Georgia (ITV, January 15, 2020).

❖ Sports and Culture

16. Historic Victory - Georgia Defeated France in Water Polo | Budapest 2020

Georgian Water Polo National Team has defeated France within the European Water Polo Championship in Budapest, Hungary.

Georgian Team defeated the rival with a final score of 9:7 and has been ranked among the 12 best teams of the continent (ITV, January 14, 2020).

Additional Information

January 16, 2020
OFFICIAL EXCHANGE RATES

1 USD - 2.8862 GEL	1 GBP - 3.7509 GEL	100 RUB -4.6881 GEL
1 EUR - 3.2138 GEL	1 TRY - 0.4899 GEL	100 JPY - 2.6267 GEL

Thursday 16 January	Friday 17 January	Saturday 18 January	Sunday 19 January	Monday 20 January
				
0° 4°	-4° 4°	-3° 7°	-2° 4°	-2° 5°

-  [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](#)