

NEWS DIGEST ON GEORGIA

January 16-19

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❖ Occupied Regions

❖ Abkhazia Region

1. Russian-occupied Abkhazia comments on the possible resumption of negotiations

"The Ministry of Foreign Affairs drew attention to the reaction of the Georgian officials regarding the proposals on the need to start a dialogue between the two countries, received from some socio-political figures of Abkhazia.

In this regard, we cannot fail to note the astonishment regarding the information on the sudden readiness of the Georgian authorities to start a direct dialogue with the Abkhaz side. In turn, we support the possibility of resuming of the bilateral format of negotiations, which include a discussion of the problems of the isolation of the Republic of Abkhazia, regional security, the environment and other issues that are directly related to the theme of humanitarian cooperation.

It should be recalled that the Republic of Abkhazia led a negotiation process with Georgia, held under the aegis of the UN, with the mediation of Russia and several other countries from 1994 to 2008. In this negotiation format, Abkhazia acted as a party to the conflict, which had a positive effect on the achievement of the certain political and diplomatic results," the statement reads (*ITV, January 17, 2020*).

2. Reconciliation Minister: Tbilisi Ready to Expand Dialogue with "the Abkhaz, Ossetian Societies"

Ketevan Tsikhelashvili, State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality of Georgia stated on January 16 that Tbilisi has long expressed its willingness and is taking steps to expand dialogue with "the Abkhaz and Ossetian societies." Noting that dialogue is "necessary," Tsikhelashvili adds that there exist relevant "forms, spaces and issues" for such dialogue.

"The axis of our peace policy, among others, of new peace initiative "Step to a Better Future," and, overall, engagement policy is that there should be a dialogue, cooperation over the common interests," the Tsikhelashvili stated.

The Georgian minister overseeing country's Russian-occupied regions further added that fostering economic and trade relations among people is "very promising and directly addresses needs of the population" on both sides of the line of occupation.

"There is a space for dialogue about education, healthcare, environment, agriculture and other issues... It is doable to find proper forms [for expanding dialogue]..." Tsikhelashvili said, adding that "this is an

“unwritten chapter” of our peace policy, as many of the opinions, among them, in an informal manner, we have [already] discussed with the representatives of the Abkhaz society.” (*Civil.ge, January 17, 2020*)

❖ **Tskhinvali Region (so called South Ossetia)**

3. Bibilov turns down to open crossing points

“The border will be closed in Razdakhan until the illegal checkpoint in the village of Uista (Tsnelisi) is not removed,” the self-proclaimed President of South Ossetia stressed at the meeting with Russian so-called border guards.

De facto government of Tskhinvali closed crossing points with the rest of Georgia on September 4, 2019 (*1TV, January 17, 2020*).

❖ **Foreign Affairs**

4. Kelly Degnan Sworn-in as New U.S. Ambassador to Georgia

Kelly Degnan, who was confirmed by the Senate on December 19 as the next U.S. Ambassador to Georgia, was sworn in on January 16.

In her swearing-in remarks, Ambassador Degnan said she feels “particularly honored to be selected to be the U.S. Ambassador to Georgia, a country that shares America’s love of freedom and democracy.” “Like America, Georgia has had to fight for its independence – a hard-won independence that remains under threat from Russia,” she noted.

Degnan added that “now we are fighting together in NATO’s Resolute Support Mission to help Afghans secure their freedom and build their democracy.” (*Civil.ge, January 17, 2020*)

5. Sergey Lavrov – Moscow hopes that U.S. and NATO will stop inciting Georgia against Russia

Moscow hopes that the U.S. and NATO will stop inciting Georgia against Russia – reads the text prepared for an annual press conference held by Sergey Lavrov, acting Russian Foreign Minister on Russian foreign policy.

The text was posted on the webpage of the Russian Foreign Ministry after the press conference although the corresponding question was not asked during the press conference due to the lack of time.

“The actual threat of escalation of tension and the main challenge for regional security in the South Caucasus is the speeded build-up of military-political development on part of the NATO across the territory of Georgia.

We witness political and military-technical cooperation of the alliance and Washington with Georgia. We hope that the U.S. and NATO take our warnings seriously and stop inciting Georgia against Russia. Normalization of bilateral relationship is in our constant interest,” reads the text (*1TV, January 17, 2020*).

6. Lavrov - Georgian radicals' provocation had a negative impact on the process of normalizing bilateral relations

"Unfortunately, provocation took place in June by Georgian radicals had a negative impact on the process of normalizing bilateral relations started in 2012. With regards to this fact, we were forced to temporarily ban flights between Georgia and Russia. We hope they will learn from this lesson.

Within the framework of the 74th session of the UN General Assembly in New York, the first meeting in 12 years was held between the Russian Foreign Minister and his Georgian counterpart. The sides had an honest talk on the problematic issues of bilateral relations. However, the remarks after the meeting from Tbilisi were unfortunate.

For our part, there is a constant interest in the consistent normalization of bilateral relations," Russia's foreign policy chief stressed (*ITV, January 17, 2020*).

7. Ukraine, Georgia file complaint to IMO over Russia's unlawful actions in Black, Azov Seas

Ukraine and Georgia have filed a complaint with the International Maritime Organization (IMO) over Russia's unlawful actions obstructing search and rescue operations in the Black Sea, the Sea of Azov, and the Kerch Strait, as UNIAN News Agency reports.

"Delegations of Ukraine and Georgia drew the attention of the IMO HQ Member States to the unlawful actions of the Russian Federation and the relevant implications for search and rescue operations in the Black Sea, the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait," the Embassy of Ukraine in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland wrote on Twitter on January 17.

The European Union and the United States have supported the document co-sponsored by Ukraine and Georgia, the Embassy added. Counselor, Deputy Permanent Representative of Ukraine to the International Maritime Organization (IMO) Vitalii Moshkivskiy earlier said that Ukraine had expressed its protest at the IMO over the unauthorized expansion by the Novorossiysk NAVTEX station of its service area into the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait.

"Only the Berdiansk NAVTEX station of Ukraine has full responsibility for broadcasting MSI [Maritime Safety Information] into this service area. Called on the IMO to consider the unauthorized unilateral actions of the Russian Federation, which threaten the safety of navigation," he wrote on Facebook on January 17 (*ITV, January 18, 2020*).

8. US Congressman Markwayne Mullin addresses Georgian PM with open letter

A Republican member of the US Congress, Markwayne Mullin addresses the Georgian Prime Minister with an open letter.

"As a member of Congress, I am writing today because of my increasing concern regarding Georgia's continued decline from democratic values and associated decay of its economic prosperity.

With that in mind, I join my colleagues in Congress, who represent the Georgia Caucus, Chairmen Adam Kinzinger and Garry Connolly, in their letter to you of December 13, 2019 that highlighted concern over to forego promised democratic reforms, as well as reports of violence against the associated peaceful protests.

Despite Georgia's progress since declaring its independence in 1991, recent years have revealed a continued negative trend in democratic and free-market economic indicators that has not gone unnoticed in the United States.

The result is that foreign direct investment in Georgia is on the decline because US and European business interests have been subjected to harassment and expropriation attacks. A notable example of this is the oil and gas company from Houston, Texas, Frontera Resources. Moreover, the US social media Facebook has announced that it recently shut down an extensive network of accounts linked to the ruling Georgian Dream party, that were found to advance “coordinated inauthentic behaviour” in order to crush opposition views in Georgia and advance anti-Western sentiments, especially towards the United States.

This deteriorating environment has resulted in both the House of Senate passing and the President of the United States signing into law, two consecutive annual appropriation bills for 2019 and 2020 that have addressed regarding Georgia’s government’s progressively antagonistic actions against democratic values, free-market principles and American business interests. For the first time in Georgia’s modern history, your country has been cast in negative and cautionary light with respect to appropriations from the US government.

Because of the negative trend I’ve described and in an attempt to encourage a reversal the voice of concern and calls for consideration of sanctions and other penalties are increasing. I have joined this call for reform by introducing the Georgia Fair Business Practices Sanctions Act earlier this year in the US House of Representatives.” – the letter published by US congressman on Twitter reads.

Markwayne Mullin expresses hope that the Georgian government will halt aggressive actions against US companies.

“While it is my hope that Georgia will continue to be the strategic partner of the US for many years to come. I also hope that your government will halt aggressive actions against US companies and act quickly on the increasing warning signs that represent a threat to the democracy and economic prosperity that the Georgian people deserve so much”, – He added (*1TV, January 19, 2020*).

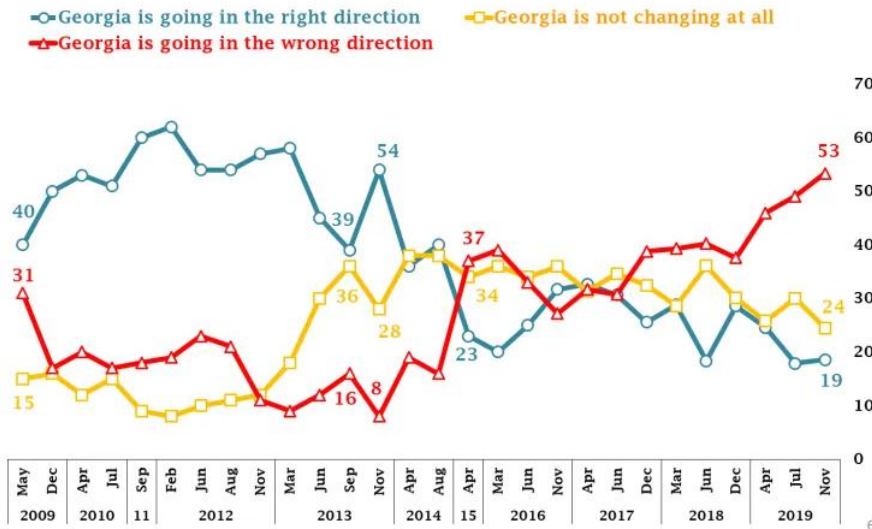
❖ Internal Affairs

9. Public Attitudes, Political Ratings in NDI-commissioned Survey

On January 16, National Democratic Institute (NDI) released its public opinion survey results, which show respondents’ attitudes towards broad range of issues, among them perceptions of state of democracy, foreign policy, current issues, trust towards politicians and institutions.

Country direction

There are different opinions regarding the direction in which Georgia is going. Using this card, please, rate your answer. (q1)



According to the survey, 64% of the respondents rate government performance as “bad,” 15% increase compared to March 2018. Those who rate government performance as “good” represent 30% of the respondents, 15% drop compared to March 2018.

Institutions with the highest performance ranking are Georgian army – 52% (53% in July 2019) and Georgian Orthodox Church – 50% (64% in July 2019). Georgian police

ranks at 43%, with 35% rating it as average and 19% – as “bad” or “very bad.”

The respondents named the Courts (45%) and the Parliament (57%) as the lowest performing national institutions. They enjoy 10% and 9% of positive evaluations, respectively.

Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Education and Ministry of Defense are seen as top performing ministries, assessed positively by 32%, 23% and 23%, respectively. Their performances are viewed as bad/very bad by 27%, 30% and 28%, respectively.

Ministry of Economy and Ministry of Finance got lowest positive assessments by 10% and 8%, respectively. 42% see Ministry of Economy’s performance as bad/very bad, while the number stands at 38% for Ministry of Finance.

Party Support and future vote

According to the survey, Georgian Dream–Democratic Georgia (GD) enjoys the strongest public support with 19% saying GD is “the party is closest” to them. Ex-President Mikheil Saakashvili’s United National Movement (UNM) enjoys 13% of support, European Georgia – Free Democrats – 7%, Labor Party – 6%, Alliance of Patriots – 5%.

20% of the respondents say “No Party” is closest to them, 14% refused to answer, while 6% responded “don’t know.”

Responding to the question “if parliamentary elections were held tomorrow, would you say you are decided or undecided about how you would vote?” 56% say they are undecided, 39% is decided, while 3% does not know. The poll also found that 65% would be “likely voters” and 35% would be “likely abstainers” if the elections were held tomorrow.

Asked which party they would vote for if parliamentary elections were held tomorrow, 20% says they would vote for GD, 13% would vote for UNM, 8% – European Georgia 0 Free Democrats, 5% – Labor Party, 4% – Alliance of Patriots. In this respect, 14% refused to answer, 14% said “no party” and 12% says they “don’t know.”

EU and NATO support

The number of respondents who support Georgian government's stated goal to join the European Union (EU) increased to 82% from 78% in July 2019. (83% in December 2018; 74% in February 2012). 74% approve government's stated goal to join the NATO, 3% increase from July 2019 (*Civil.ge, January 16, 2020*).

10. Kakha Kaladze assesses NDI-Commissioned Survey

Kakha Kaladze, Georgian Dream's secretary general/Tbilisi Mayor: "My position towards NDI surveys remains the same. I think these are deliberate political manipulations aimed to somehow mislead the society, but in vain. I know public attitudes towards my party and towards me very well; so, we have very good relations with the public, people... They [NDI] write these figures in a way they want, they do not have this problem." (*Civil.ge, January 16, 2020*).

11. Opposition assess NDI-commissioned survey

Salome Samadashvili, United National Movement: "The great majority of people want changes in the country, because 80% of our voters will not actually cast their votes for this party [Georgian Dream]. Now, the main task of the opposition parties and, firstly, our party is just to convince undecided voters. Such negative attitude is a continuation of general attitude our voters have towards Bidzina Ivanishvili [founder and chairman of Georgian Dream party], because they see very well that the Parliament is not the representative body, but rather it has turned into Ivanishvili's subordinate agency, rubber-stamping his instructions."

Giga Bokeria, European Georgia: "The survey reflects the gravest situation Ivanishvili and the army of his clowns have led the country to. It reveals historical anti-record of number of people, saying that the government leads the country in the wrong direction, towards political abyss. Historical anti-record has also been observed in assessing the quality of democracy in the country and it is natural because the society, our citizens see that this shameful leader and his clowns have turned into a national threat."

Shalva Natelashvili, Labor Party: "The survey has shown that a deplorable situation has been established in our country under the oligarchic rule. The poll made it clear that the state has been bought, all branches of government have collapsed, this regime enjoys no public trust, there is no democracy in our country and the government, judicial authorities and Parliament are not authoritative, and unfortunately, the Georgian Orthodox Church is also ranked among those [that are not authoritative/reputable] largely due to objective reasons. The survey results are not the fault of respondents [of the poll] or NDI, but rather it is the result of the incumbent government's politics, which has led the country to this chaos. Incumbent and future politicians will draw lessons on how politics and politicians should not look like." (*Civil.ge, January 16, 2020*)

12. OSCE/ODIHR Welcomes Announced Halting of Top Bench Judicial Appointments

The OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) "welcomes" the announcement that Georgia's Supreme Court judicial appointments "have been halted for now."

In a statement released on its official Facebook page on January 15, ODIHR also reiterated its willingness to work with the Georgian authorities "to address the shortcomings in the process and improve the legal framework for judicial appointments." (*Civil.ge, January 16, 2020*)

13. Watchdog Calls on Prosecutorial Council Not to Nominate Irakli Shotadze as Chief Prosecutor

A local watchdog, Human Rights and Monitoring Center (EMC) calls on the Prosecutorial Council, a body responsible for the selection of the new Prosecutor General, not to support Irakli Shotadze's candidacy, who resigned the post over the controversial Khorava street incident following mass demonstration in May 2018.

The watchdog says the "figures responsible for the systemic failure" should not be taking back their positions.

The Prosecutorial Council is the 15-member body in charge of nominating candidates for the chief prosecutor, which was previously subordinated to the Justice Ministry, but the new Constitution of Georgia made it an independent body directly accountable to the Parliament (*Civil.ge, January 17, 2020*).

❖ Economy and Social Affairs

14. Gardabani Thermal Power Plant 2 opened

The 230 MW Gardabani Thermal Power Plant 2 has been opened in Gardabani, Kvemo Kartli region of Georgia.

Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia, Minister of Economy and Sustainable Development Natia Turnava and representatives of the Georgian Oil and Gas Corporation attended the opening ceremony.

A new Combined Cycle Thermal Power Plant is said to increase the country's power generation and move Georgia one step closer towards energy independence.

The plant will have a function "launching from zero", which is provided via autonomous/independent diesel generator (Black Start Diesel Generator). This function enables the TPP to be started even during the so-called System Black-out. A similar TPP with an installed capacity of 230 MW, Gardabani 1, has been in operation since 2015 (*ITV, January 17, 2020*).

15. PM - Gardabani Thermal Power Plant will ensure Georgia's energy security

The goal is to create job places and economic growth for which energy efficiency and new sources are vitally important – Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia said during the opening ceremony of 230 MW Gardabani Thermal Power Plant 2.

"Our energy system was added 1 billion and 100 thousand MW capacities from 2012 to 2019 that is very important. This has to be continued because our economy and energy consumption increases and we need new sources of generation for sustainability of the system," Gakharia said (*ITV, January 17, 2020*).

❖ Sports and Culture

16. Six best Georgian sportsmen of 2019 are all World Champions

Georgian sportsmen won more than 1200 medals in 2019. The best sportspersons were also revealed in 11 different nominations and nine special prizes were awarded.

- The six Georgian World Champions are Lukhum Chkhvimiani, Lasha Talakhadze, Geno Petriashvili, Beka Lomtadze, Nugzar Tsurtsumia and Lasha Gobadze.

- The title of best team of 2019 went to Water Polo National Team;
- Best Veteran Sportsman – Nona Gaprindashvili;
- Best young sportsmen – Lasha Bekauri;
- Best region of 2019 – Adjara;
- Best sportsman in non-Olympic kind of sports – Vakhtang Chidrashvili;
- Best Referee of 2019 – Rusudan Khoperia;
- Best team in individual kind of sports – Georgian National Team in Greek-Roman style of Wrestling;
- Best Federation of 2019 –National Wrestling Federation;
- Best Female Sportsman – Eter Liparteliani;
- Best Sports Volunteer – Tatia Darsavelidze;
- Best Para-Sportsman – Irma Khetsuriani and Revaz Chikoidze;
- Discovery of 2019 – Maia Bochoridze and Ana Lapiashvili;
- Best Trainer – Giorgi Iantbelidze;
- Best Legioner – Giorgi Shermadini;
- Best event in the history of Georgian Olympics – Nino Salukvadze (*1TV, January 19, 2020*).

Additional Information

January 20, 2020

OFFICIAL EXCHANGE RATES

1 USD - 2.8781 GEL	1 GBP - 3.7556 GEL	100 RUB -4.6888 GEL
1 EUR - 3.2002 GEL	1 TRY - 0.4900 GEL	100 JPY - 2.6136 GEL

Monday 20 January	Tuesday 21 January	Wednesday 22 January	Thursday 23 January	Friday 24 January
				
-3° 3°	-1° 7°	-1° 6°	0° 6°	-3° 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](#)**