

NEWS DIGEST ON GEORGIA

January 20-22

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❖ Occupied Regions

❖ Abkhazia Region

1. Georgia's Tsikhelashvili Discusses Occupied Abkhazia, Tskhinvali in European Parliament

Georgian State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality Ketevan Tsikhelashvili spoke of the situation in Georgia, primarily in its Russia-occupied regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia, at the European Parliament Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET) on January 21.

According to Minister Tsikhelashvili, "unresolved conflict and Russia's continued occupation of its territories" remains the major challenge for Georgia. "We are not dealing with the frozen conflict at all; the situation is by far not static, there is a dynamic on the ground, and it's a negative one when it comes to security and humanitarian implications," Tsikhelashvili stated.

The Georgian Minister said in her remarks that Moscow-backed authorities of both occupied regions "endorse black-and-white Russia's full and exclusive control of all spheres of life." She noted that Abkhazia and Tskhinvali "get increasingly isolated and militarized," and that the number of Russian military personnel "grew to ten thousand," while both occupied regions "get depleted from their original population 70 and 80% respectively."

Minister Tsikhelashvili highlighted that "130 military drills are conducted annually on these territories, which turn them, especially South Ossetia, with its current mere population [of] 20,000, into nothing more than an extended [Russian] military base." (*Civil.ge, January 22, 2020*)

❖ Tskhinvali Region (so called South Ossetia)

2. Georgia Security Service: Occupying Forces Continue Fencing on Tbilisi-Controlled Territory

The State Security Service of Georgia (SSG) informed Civil Georgia (Civil.ge) on January 20 that the forces of Russian occupation "continue provocative actions" along the dividing line between Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia and Georgia proper.

According to the SSG, "they have erected illegal installations on the Georgian central government-controlled territory in Gugutiantkari village of Gori Municipality."

"Barbed wires are being replaced with so-called border fencing, which is the part of so-called 'borderization' [process]," the SSG said. It further added that the European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM) has been informed, and the EUMM-managed hotline has been activated.

The SSG also noted that the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanisms (IPRMs) were not fully available at this stage, since IPRMs regular meetings were disrupted by Tskhinvali representatives since August 2019, following Chorchana-Tsnelisi crisis (*Civil.ge, January 21, 2020*).

3. EU Special Representative Meets Georgia Officials, Says Tskhinvali Crossing Points Need to be Reopened

Toivo Klaar, the European Union Special Representative for the South Caucasus and the crisis in Georgia, who arrived to Georgia for his week-long visit yesterday, kicked-off official meetings with Georgian officials on today on January 21.

In his remarks following the meeting with Georgian Foreign Minister Davit Zalkaliani today, the EU Special representative stressed that the crossing points connecting occupied Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia with Georgia proper “need to be reopened.” Klaar further noted that “the population on the ground should not be suffering as it is right now.”

“It is particularly important that we look to find ways to make things easier for the population of the ground, and in this regard, of course, in particular the closure of the crossing points to Akhlagori, to South Ossetia is incredibly important,” he said (*Civil.ge, January 21, 2020*).

❖ Foreign Affairs

4. PM Gakharia Attends World Economic Forum in Davos

Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia is visiting Davos, Switzerland to participate in the World Economic Forum’s 50th annual meeting on January 21-24.

On the sidelines of the forum today, Georgian Prime Minister held meeting with his Bulgarian counterpart, Boyko Borissov and spoke of “fruitful” economic ties between the two countries. The two PMs also discussed Georgia’s European and Euro-Atlantic integration, grave humanitarian situation on its Russia-occupied regions and the country’s peace policy.

Giorgi Gakharia thanked his Bulgarian counterpart for supporting Georgia’s territorial integrity and sovereignty, the Georgian PM’s press service reported (*Civil.ge, January 21, 2020*).

5. Georgian, Azerbaijani Defense Ministers Discuss Cooperation

On January 21, Georgian Defense Minister Irakli Garibashvili met with his Azerbaijani counterpart Colonel General Zakir Hasanov, who is on a one-day official visit to Tbilisi at the former’s invitation.

According to Hasanov’s press office, the defense ministers held “a thorough exchange of views” on the various areas of military cooperation, as well as on other issues of mutual interest.

The office also reported that the parties consider mutually supporting territorial integrity of each other’s countries important, and that the development of bilateral military cooperation will contribute to ensuring stability and security in the region (*Civil.ge, January 21, 2020*).

6. President Nausėda to PM Gakharia: Lithuania Cares about Democratic Future of Georgia

Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia and Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda held meeting at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland on January 21. Lithuanian President’s office reported that

Nausėda expressed support for Georgia's efforts to build a democratic society and integrate into transatlantic and EU structures, while noting that "Lithuania cares about the democratic future of Georgia." In this regard, President Nausėda said "we regret that last year the Georgian parliament failed to adopt amendments to the Constitution that would have consolidated democracy in the country. We encourage seeking consensus among all parties involved in the political process and not giving opportunity for external forces to use disagreements between the position and opposition to create instability in Georgia and the region."

Lithuanian President told Prime Minister Gakharia that his country supported and will continue its support to Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty. In this respect, Nausėda noted that "we condemn Russia's demonstration of power and the continuing occupation of the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. We are raising the issue at international level because we do not want Europe to forget this act of aggression in the face of new conflict zones emerging in the world." (*Civil.ge, January 22, 2020*)

7. In Quotes: MEPs on Recent Developments in Georgia

Marina Kaljurand (Estonia, Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats): "Unfortunately, we see that provocations by the Russian authorities and their proxies continue, and I would say even despite Russia's formal reintegration into the structures of the Council of Europe. Even more, I wonder if we have not lowered our guard, and by doing so emboldened Russia to continue on its destructive path. We see that Russia continues to violate its obligations under the EU-brokered 2008 ceasefire agreement, military drills, propaganda, creeping annexation strategy, and 'borderization' process fuels a significant threat to the entire region... Renewed tensions, in particular, on the administrative boundary line (ABL) with [Tskhinvali Region]/South Ossetia, have served as pretext for the arbitrary closure of crossing points, further blocking the freedom of movement of the local inhabitants, and dividing communities that used to live in harmony...

The human rights situation continues to deteriorate in both occupied territories. Bluntly, people die, because they cannot access Tbilisi-administered territory and receive appropriate medical care. We all applauded to the release of doctor Gaprindashvili. It was a symbolic, high-profile case but I fully agree [that] we should not forget the dozens of anonymous villagers who are every year arbitrarily arrested, detained and fined, because they cross the so-called border.

We should also monitor the political developments in Abkhazia, where so-called presidential elections were held last September despite protests from the international community. After weeks of tensions with the opposition the so-called president has resigned. Fortunately, no physical confrontation was there. But that being said, situation remains unstable and we must remain vigilant while new 'elections' will be organized soon.

And on general note, I want to conclude by stating that we must seize every possible occasion to express our firm commitment to Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders, and to the policy of nonrecognition of the puppet regimes created by Kremlin. We also should support Georgia's endeavors to progress towards the peaceful resolution of the conflicts by negotiation and diplomacy including through the Geneva International Discussions (GIDs) and to reach out [to] the

population living on both sides of the ABL as illustrated by the pragmatic A Step for a Better Future peace initiative.”

Sandra Kalniete (Latvia, European People’s Party/Christian Democrats): “I will speak about internal situation, about political crisis in Georgia... I have a long political experience of popular movements and I know that no political organization can incite tens and tens of thousands of people out on street. There are much more profound reasons and you just cited the fact (addressing Vice Speaker Kuchava – editor’s note) that Georgian support for European integration is growing, but in the same opinion poll, also you can see that Georgian people consider that democracy has taken a step back in the country and that is very worrying, because European Commission and also European Parliament, we always with great support and condescendence were looking to Georgia, trying to help, to promote as much as it is possible.

But if we compare Ukraine having war on its territory, persistently is introducing democratic reforms. And the fact that you were not able to fulfill the promise to move to proportional electoral system, it does not speak in favor of Georgia’s democracy. And there is in statement of Chairperson of Georgian Dream [Bidzina] Ivanishvili saying that many of opposition leaders will spend time in jail in the future, is something, which is very difficult to accept. And the fact that for Chairman of European Georgia [Giga] Bokeria the criminal case is renewed after five years of silence, is a very symbolic one.”

Anna Fotyga (Poland, European Conservatives and Reformists): Minister, thank you for your briefing, I can echo every word of your statement. Obviously situation tends to deteriorate. We monitor it for many years already knowing the situation. Unfortunately, the environment for our monitors is also very bad that we have to put very strongly against the government of Russian Federation and partners elsewhere. Unfortunately, I think that Georgian society is very vigilant and understands this situation similarly to yourself, and therefore, it was allowing the Moscow ideologies to speak in Georgian Parliament that triggered whole range of avalanche of protests. I think also that the more prisoners the more assertive Russia becomes.”

Michael Gahler (Germany, European People’s Party/Christian Democrats): “There always will be unwavering support to your European orientation, but I think it has to go together with living up to your own commitments, and I think trying to sell us the failure to change the electoral law as a reason for high degree in a party democracy in Georgian Dream – I mean, there were members of Parliament who left your party, some of my best interlocutors – was it not (.if you are honest,) Mr. Ivanishvili was (...to the public still) telling, please, change it, but behind the scenes arranging the fact that it failed, and for obvious power-remaining purposes. If you are European, please admit that it was the case.”

Rasa Juknevičienė (Lithuania, Group of the European People’s Party/Christian Democrats): “Important year for Georgia. It will be like a test for democracy. We will be, of course, following very carefully and you have many friends of Georgia in European Parliament, not friends of one or another political party, but Georgia. Still concerns come how the ruling party will pass exam of democracy. And sorry to say, but for me it was bad to listen when ruling party representative speaks or complains against bad opposition in the country. It is not the rule in democracies, and when we see attacks against opposition, NGOs, media, protesters, it doesn’t help you – Georgia – to find more friends in European

Parliament, to convince more people to support your European path. So, this is what I wanted to say and pass my thoughts to my friends in Georgian Dream, including your leader Ivanishvili."

Andrius Kubilius (Lithuania, Group of the European People's Party /Christian Democrats): On forthcoming elections: when we had EuroNest session, as a leader of EuroNest delegation, I had a lot meetings both, with opposition and ruling party, including Speaker of the Parliament and including with Leader of the party. So, I would like to ask you to, bring my very simple message to leaders of your parties. They promised me that the dialogue will bring the results, proportional element into elections will be brought. I am still waiting when that result will come, because without that result, really, international trust to [elections] will be very much limited. And last point, can you say, are [t]here any leaders in opposition [that] are not invited to General Prosecutor's office? (*Civil.ge, January 22, 2020*)

8. Dutch FM Stef Blok Visits Georgia

Stef Blok, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, who is visiting Georgia on January 22, met with his Georgian counterpart Davit Zalkaliani earlier today, hailing the two countries' "longstanding and excellent bilateral relations."

"Our strong trade relations play important role. The Netherlands is Georgia's 12th biggest trade partner and its second biggest foreign investor," Blok said at a joint press briefing following the meeting, adding that this shows "confidence in Georgia's economy and future opportunities."

According to the Dutch FM, Georgia is also an important country in terms of security, rule of law, human rights and democracy, and that the country "has truly become an example" for the region, "due to hard work and reforms." (*Civil.ge, January 22, 2020*)

❖ Internal Affairs

9. TI Georgia: Selective, Disproportionate, Unreasonable Force Used against Civic Activists

Transparency International Georgia, a local human rights watchdog, stated on January 20 that Georgian authorities use force against civic activists "selectively, disproportionately and unreasonably."

In particular, TI Georgia said that the court used "administrative detention and solid amount of fines" against the activists detained during the June 20-21 unrest in Tbilisi without relevant substantiation and evidence, "neglecting the right to a fair trial."

"The same practice continued against the persons detained during other protests as well," the watchdog said, adding that civil society organizations (CSOs) are "carefully watching" the demonstrations following the June protests.

According to TI Georgia, police do not even provide explanation to the detainees on their minimum rights, defined by the Administrative Offences Code of Georgia. Moreover, during the court hearings, it said, representatives of Interior Ministry are unable to provide evidence to prove lawfulness of detention.

The watchdog also noted that court decisions are mainly based on testimonies of police officers. "Even in cases when interior ministry representatives provided video materials as evidence, mainly, they showed no facts of violations committed by the detainees," TI Georgia said (*Civil.ge, January 20, 2020*).

10. CSOs: Competition Selecting Independent Inspector Not Transparent

The Coalition for Independent and Transparent Judiciary, uniting over 40 Georgian local civil society organizations (CSOs), calls on the High Council of Justice (HCoJ) to suspend the competition that aims at selecting new Independent Inspector – responsible for revealing possible disciplinary misconducts of judges – until the selection procedures are improved.

In a statement released on January 20, the Coalition said that the legislation does not yet provide adequate guarantees necessary for ensuring independence of the inspector. “S/he is being elected by the majority of HCoJ’s full composition, and its non-judge members lack the ability to influence on the selection-appointment process,” the Coalition stated (*Civil.ge, January 20, 2020*).

11. CSOs Call for Minister Tsulukiani’s ‘Political Responsibility’

A group of local civil society organizations, including Georgian Democracy Initiative, Rehabilitation Initiative for Vulnerable Groups, Transparency International – Georgia, International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED) and Article 42 of the Constitution, has slammed Georgian Justice Minister Tea Tsulukiani for publishing the footage of monitoring carried out by the Public Defender’s National Preventive Mechanism, as well as for voicing unconstructive criticism towards one of the experts of this group.

In a statement released on January 21, the CSOs wrote that such action “grossly violates” the principles set by Georgian legislation and “contradicts international commitments undertaken by Georgia.” “This action by the Georgian Justice Minister should become the reason for raising her political responsibility,” the statement reads (*Civil.ge, January 22, 2020*).

12. Ombudsperson Calls on State Inspector to Study Lawfulness of Minister Tsulukiani’s Actions

On January 22, Georgia’s Public Defender Nino Lomjaria issued a request addressed to the State Inspector, to examine lawfulness of Justice Minister Tea Tsulukiani’s actions, as Tsulukiani publicly disclosed video footage depicting a meeting between inmates and representatives of Public Defender.

As stated by Public Defender’s Office, Minister Tsulukiani’s actions contradicts the Organic Law on the Public Defender of Georgia which “prohibits any kind of video-audio surveillance of meetings between the Public Defender’s representatives and prisoners by the Ministry of Justice.”

The Ombudsperson adds that Order 35 signed by the Minister of Corrections sets out rules for carrying out visual and/or electronic surveillance, in addition to retaining, deleting and destroying recordings in the penitentiary establishments (*Civil.ge, January 22, 2020*).

❖ Economy and Social Affairs

13. 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 20.

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.

Trade turnover with the European Union (EU) member states stood at USD 3.1 billion, which is a 2.8% decrease compared to 2018. Exports from Georgia to the EU-member states increased by 13% y/y to USD 825.7 million, while imports constituted USD 2.3 billion, which is 7.4% lower than in 2018.

Trade turnover with the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) increased by 1.8% y/y to USD 4.4 billion. Georgia's exports to CIS countries were up by 20% y/y to USD 2 billion, and imports were down by 9.5% to USD 2.4 billion.

Turkey remains Georgia's largest trading partner with USD 1.8 billion in 2019, followed by Russia, China, Azerbaijan and Armenia with USD 1.5 billion, USD 1.1 billion, USD 1.1 million and USD 679.7 million, respectively.

They are followed by Ukraine with trade turnover of USD 659.5 million; United States – USD 521.9 million; Germany – USD 497.4 million; Bulgaria – USD 408.2 million and Romania – USD 390.2 million.

Azerbaijan tops the list of largest trading partners by exports with USD 498.7 million, followed by Russia, Armenia, Bulgaria and Ukraine with USD 497.1 million, USD 412.2 million, USD 284.2 million and USD 244.7 million, respectively.

Turkey, Russia, China, Azerbaijan and Germany are the top trading partners of Georgia in terms of imports with USD 1.6 billion, USD 975.9 million, USD 858.7 million, USD 559.1 million and USD 443 million, respectively (*Civil.ge, January 20, 2020*).

Additional Information

January 23, 2020
OFFICIAL EXCHANGE RATES

1 USD - 2.8895 GEL	1 GBP - 3.7748 GEL	100 RUB -4.1854 GEL
1 EUR - 3.2045 GEL	1 TRY - 0.4868 GEL	100 JPY - 2.6576 GEL

Thursday 23 January	Friday 24 January	Saturday 25 January	Sunday 26 January	Monday 27 January
				
-2° 7°	-3° 4°	-2° 4°	-2° 9°	-1° 8°

-  **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](#)**