

NEWS DIGEST ON GEORGIA

January 30-February 2

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Date: **February 3, 2020**

❖ Foreign Affairs

1. Georgian President Zurabishvili's Q&A Session at PACE

Following her 47-minute address to the winter session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) on January 28, Georgian President Salome Zurabishvili, responded to the questions fielded by the assembly members as well.

As Zurabishvili's speech lasted twice longer than expected, the Assembly members had less time to ask questions. Therefore, President Zurabishvili had to answer several questions fielded by different assembly members at once.

Full Q/A can be read on the following [link](#) (*Civil.ge, January 30, 2020*).

2. Ruling Party on President Zurabishvili's PACE Address

Archil Talakvadze, Parliament Speaker: "President Zurabishvili touched upon very important issues in her speech, among others territorial integrity, institutional reforms implemented in Georgia, Georgia's European choice and foreign political course as well as human rights. I would say that she spoke about all important issues of [national] importance. I do not think that it is correct on my part to make interpretations on her concrete quotes. As for my general assessment, I have already noted that she spoke about all important issues, called on the international community for stronger support and expressed readiness for more cooperation under Georgia's presidency."

Irakli Kobakhidze, Georgian Dream: "She spoke comprehensively about all important issues. Very interesting questions were asked to the President and very interesting answers were given. Let me reiterate, all key issues were outlined in the President's address. Thus, any speculations by the opposition are absolutely groundless." (*Civil.ge, January 31, 2020*)

3. Opposition on President Zurabishvili's PACE Address

MP Salome Samadashvili, the United National Movement: "Her statements were shocking, because she had an opportunity to once again raise the issue of occupation in the context of Gavrilov's visit and instead, she actually took Gavrilov's side against Georgian people... The agenda of the incumbent government and Salome Zurabishvili is to create as much comfort to Russia as possible, including on international arena."

MP Davit Bakradze, European Georgia: "I have no special expectations towards Zurabishvili's address, but she again managed to frustrate my expectations. I will say nothing about those lies which we heard once again. For example, about judicial independence, election environment, media and minorities...She recollected about occupation only on the 40th minute of her address... I have listened to tens of presidents and prime ministers from this rostrum and it was the first case when the head of state was rebuked in connection with the form and duration of her speech."

Davit Berdzenishvili, Republican Party: "A person, who is appointed and works as the President of Georgia constantly manages to 'astonish' us. Each of her addresses inside the country are alarming, [while her speeches] outside the country [are] catastrophic... I can hardly recollect such useless and harm[ful] politician." (*Civil.ge, January 31, 2020*)

4. Georgian FM Addresses OSCE Permanent Council

Georgian Foreign Minister Davit Zalkaliani addressed the OSCE Permanent Council in Vienna on January 30, in his capacity as the Chair of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe (CoE).

According to Georgian Foreign Ministry, FM Zalkaliani spoke of the priorities of Georgia's six-month presidency. "The cooperation of the OSCE and the CoE [is] based on common values of democracy, human rights, rule of law. Human dimension is solid link between the activities of the two organizations," Georgian Foreign Minister tweeted.

On behalf of the CoE Committee of Ministers, Zalkaliani also expressed his support to sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia and Ukraine, and stressed that Russia should fulfil its obligations (*Civil.ge, January 30, 2020*).

5. Georgia in PACE Resolution

On January 30, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) adopted a resolution on the progress of the Assembly's monitoring procedure between January and December 2019, among others, on Georgia.

The adopted text concerns ten countries under a full monitoring procedure – Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, the Russian Federation, Serbia, Turkey and Ukraine, and three countries engaged in a post-monitoring dialogue – Bulgaria, Montenegro and North Macedonia.

The resolution, based on the report of Roger Gale (United Kingdom, EC/DA), was adopted with 49 votes in favor, 17 against and three abstention, at the PACE winter session, held in Strasbourg on January 27-31. Noteworthy, those, who voted against included ruling Georgian Dream party member Irakli Beraia along with nine Russian and seven Turkish MPs.

According to the resolution, PACE welcomes the positive developments and the progress made during the reporting period in "the adoption of a new set of rules of procedure for the Georgian Parliament with a view to reinforce parliamentary oversight and political accountability of the executive," as well as "the broad agreement with all stakeholders about the adopted fourth wave of judicial reforms with the aim of further strengthening the independence of the judiciary and efficiency of the administration of justice."

At the same time, PACE "expresses its concern" about Georgia's "failure to pass the required constitutional amendments to introduce a fully proportional election system by 2020; the lack of investigation and follow up given to alleged incidents and violations of the electoral code during the 2018 presidential election; the shortcomings in the functioning of the High Council of Justice, including the lack of a clear and uniform selection criteria, the excessive use of discretion failure to give full and reasoned decisions with regard to the selection of Supreme Court judges." (*Civil.ge, January 31, 2020*)

6. U.S. Ambassador Kelly Degnan Assumes Duties, Meets Georgian Leaders

New United States Ambassador Kelly Degnan, who arrived to Georgia on January 29, presented her credentials to Foreign Minister Davit Zalkaliani and President Salome Zurbishvili, officially assuming her duties as the Chief of Mission of the U.S. to Georgia on January 31.

In her remarks following the meeting with FM Zalkaliani, Ambassador Degnan said the U.S. is “looking forward to helping Georgia continue its efforts to integrate with the West, to try and combat some of the destabilizing activities of Russia in trying to upset the progress that Georgia has made through such hard work over the years, and of course to strengthen Georgia’s relationship with the United States.”

Following the meeting with the Georgian President, Ambassador Degnan noted that the two “had a lovely discussion about many of the concerns that we are working on together.”

Degnan said that she is looking forward to working with the President, the Georgian Government, and the Georgian people “on number of our important priorities,” including helping the country with its integration with the West, strengthening the U.S.-Georgia partnership, as well as “combatting, wherever we can, efforts to undermine the progress that Georgia has made, by Russia and other actors.” (*Civil.ge, February 1, 2020*)

7. Georgian FM leaves for Washington

Georgian Foreign Minister David Zalkaliani will visit Washington, USA, to participate in the Annual Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom taking place on February 4-7. The Georgian FM was personally invited to the event by Mike Pompeo, the US Secretary of State.

Within the framework of the visit, David Zalkaliani will meet with the members of the US State Department and the Congress (*1TV, February 2, 2020*).

8. Two Georgians are being evacuated from Wuhan

“With the help of France, two Georgians are being evacuated from Wuhan,” the representative of the Georgian Foreign Ministry Vladimer Konstantinidi stated.

Konstantinidi added that “the evacuated individuals will have to stay in isolation for a while, under the observation of medics, then they can leave for Georgia.”

“188 Georgian citizens requested for consular registration. Besides, there are Georgian citizens who did not apply to the Embassy of Georgia to the People’s Republic of China.

However, the official statement was published on the Embassy’s website. In addition, through social networks and personal contacts, we managed to identify their whereabouts and gave them recommendations as well as information about potential risks. Most of them left China,” Konstantinidi noted (*Civil.ge, February 2, 2020*).

❖ Internal Affairs

9. Media Coalition Calls for Timely Investigation into Physical Assault against Gvaramia

The Media Advocacy Coalition, uniting twelve local watchdog and media organizations, released a statement on January 30, calling for “timely, effective and impartial” investigation into physical assault against Nika Gvaramia, director general of pro-opposition Mtavari Arkhi TV.

Mtavari Arkhi reported on January 30 that Nika Gvaramia was physically assaulted by three persons outside the Tbilisi City Court, where he came to attend a hearing into the case of Giorgi Rurua, one of the founders of Mtavari Arkhi. Gvaramia sustained light bodily injuries.

Gvaramia said that it was an attack masterminded by the ruling Georgian Dream party, noting that the assailants were performing the orders by Parliament's Vice Speaker Gia Volski – the allegations the latter categorically denies.

"Nika Gvaramia is a dishonest man, he invents fake news. I do not think that this should have a serious response," MP Volski told reporters on January 31.

The Interior Ministry has launched investigation under article 126 of the criminal code of Georgia, involving violence. No charges have been brought against anyone so far (*Civil.ge, January 31, 2020*).

10. Three Tbilisi Sakrebulo Members from Ruling Party Charged over Violence against Opposition Member

The Prosecutor's Office has charged three members of the Tbilisi City Council (Sakrebulo) from the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party – Alexander Khujadze, Avtandil Tsintsadze and Tarash Shurgaia – over group violence against opposition Sakrebulo member, Levan Khabeishvili.

Incident took place at Sakrebulo on January 24, during a joint session of the Commissions for Education and Culture, Sports and Youth Issues, and Audit. The Georgian Dream members physically insulted Levan Khabeishvili with the latter sustaining injuries in his face.

The confrontation continued in the foyer where Levan Khabeishvili assaulted Irakli Zarkua, deputy chairman of the Sakrebulo. The Interior Ministry launched investigation into the incident after several days (*Civil.ge, January 31, 2020*).

❖ Economy and Social Affairs

11. Geostat: GDP Growth 5.2% in 2019 – Preliminary Data

Georgia's average growth of real Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2019 equaled 5.2%, according to preliminary data released by the National Statistics Office (Geostat) on January 31.

Geostat also reported that real GDP grew by 3.8% in December 2019 compared to the same period of 2018.

According to the report, in December, real growth was registered in the following sectors: manufacturing; transport and storage; wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles; hotels and restaurants (*GEOSTAT.GE, January 31, 2020*).

12. About Thirty Social Workers Dismissed Amid Reorganization

About thirty social workers will be dismissed from the 1st of February as part of the ongoing reorganization at the Social Service Agency under the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labor, Health and Social Affairs of Georgia. The decision comes almost a year after hundreds of social workers across the country went on strike for higher wages and better working conditions back in March 2019. The dismissed social workers will receive two-month salaries as a compensation.

News about the dismissal emerged on January 29 after Ketii Khutsishvili, representative of the social workers' trade union, told Netgazeti that the Ministry did not explain a concrete reason of their dismissal and cited reorganization as the only argument behind the decision (*Civil.ge, January 31, 2020*).

13. Ministry of Health and Labour on dismissed social workers

Giorgi Tsotskolauri, Deputy Minister of Labor and Social Affairs, explained that the reorganization started at the Social Service Agency in early March 2019 and that social workers have been provided with “comprehensive information about the process.”

“I have personally explained them the reasons behind their dismissal...as well as the situation that may follow the reorganization,” he told reporters (*Civil.ge, January 31, 2020*).

14. Response of Georgian Association of Social Workers to the Ministry of Health and Labour

In response to social workers’ dismissal, Georgian Association of Social Workers released a statement on January 30, calling on the public agencies to respond to some of their questions. The Association is particularly interested in knowing the Agency’s plans in connection with the cases of dismissed social workers, whether it will be possible to provide timely and high quality services to the beneficiaries, especially in critical and urgent situations; what criteria were used while sacking the social workers. The Association is also interested to know the criteria for the selection of new employees for vacant positions.

The Association of Social Workers hopes that the public agencies will respond timely to their questions, adding that they expect Sophio Kiladze, chair of the Parliament’s Human Rights Committee, to have an adequate reaction to the case (*Civil.ge, January 31, 2020*).

15. CSO response to the dismissal of social workers

A group of six civil society organizations, including Social Workers’ Union, Human Rights and Monitoring Center (EMC) and Open Society Georgia Foundation released a joint statement.

The signatory organizations demand the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labor, Health and Social Affairs of Georgia:






- To substantiate the need of social workers’ dismissal amid reorganization and explain the criteria for their dismissal.
- To ensure transparent reorganization process and engagement of social workers and trade unions in the process.
- To carry out the process of reorganization in line with the December 11, 2019 legislative amendment and to appoint social workers in the agency without any competition.
- To immediately revise social services and social work, to plan, based on relevant research and engagement of field experts, all necessary steps needed for implementing reforms in this sphere, including in terms of creating new services (*Civil.ge, January 31, 2020*).








Additional Information

February 3, 2020

OFFICIAL EXCHANGE RATES

1 USD - 2.8898 GEL 1 GBP - 3.7882 GEL 100 RUB - 4.5523 GEL
1 EUR - 3.1880 GEL 1 TRY - 0.4831 GEL 100 JPY - 2.6536 GEL

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
3 February	4 February	5 February	6 February	7 February
				
1° 11°	1° 10°	2° 10°	4° 15°	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](#)**