

NEWS DIGEST ON GEORGIA

February 6-9

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❖ Occupied Regions

❖ Tskhinvali Region (so called South Ossetia)

1. Tbilisi Speaks of 'Russification' in Occupied Akhagori, As Tskhinvali Fires Ethnic Georgian School Principals

Georgian State Ministry for Reconciliation and Civic Equality, overseeing the country's Russian-occupied regions, reported on February 7 that two ethnic Georgian principals of schools in Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, were dismissed a couple of days ago.

According to the State Ministry, the recent dismissal of Nino Amiranashvili and Mzia Psuturi, principals of Akhagori school #1 and an Ikoti village school, respectively, is yet another proof of "repressions that the occupying regime is carrying out" on the ground (*Civil.ge, February 8, 2020*).

❖ Foreign Affairs

2. FM Zalkaliani Meets U.S. Officials, Congressmen

Georgian Foreign Minister Davit Zalkaliani, who is visiting Washington DC on February 4-7, attended the inaugural official launch of the International Religious Freedom Alliance, hosted by the U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on February 5.

According to the Department of State, Georgia is among 26 countries, which joined the U.S. to create the first-of-its-kind International Religious Freedom Alliance.

At the meeting, FM Zalkaliani spoke of the "grave humanitarian situation" in Georgia's Russian occupied Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, including the restrictions for ethnic Georgians to attend services at Georgian churches (*Civil.ge, February 7, 2020*).

3. Adam Kinzinger – Our concern should not be perceived as disappointment

Our concern should not be perceived as disappointment or anger but as the form of relations between the friends – U.S. Congressman Adam Kinzinger said.

"We remain faithful to Georgian people. We have had good communication regarding the concern we are worried about and hope that we will see the result soon. We have communication with the government more often than others and we see the reason for this concern that we express," Kinzinger said (*1TV, February 6, 2020*).

4. Georgian Parliament Speaker meets Brock Bierman

Georgian Parliament Speaker Archil Talakvadze met with the USAID Assistant Administrator in Europe and Eurasian Countries, Brock Bierman.

According to the press office of the Parliament, the parties discussed the issues of cooperation between Georgia and the United States Agency for International Development, also, the Georgian Parliament's priorities for 2020 (1TV, February 7, 2020).

5. Parliament Speaker – During meetings in Washington, I was convinced that parties of low rating are conducting campaigning in U.S. to inflict harm to the image of our political environment

According to Talakvadze, he held more than 20 meetings in the U.S. Congress and Senate including with those Congressmen who were the authors of the latest critical letters addressed to the Georgian authorities. Talakvadze said that he had introduced American politicians with the visions and future plans of the Georgian ruling team (1TV, February 8, 2020).

6. Foreign Minister and Parliament Speaker meet with Senator Rojer Viker

Foreign Minister Davit Zalkaliani and Parliament Speaker Archil Talakvadze met with Senator Rojer Viker within the framework of their visit to the U.S.

“The meeting was yet another confirmation to the irreversibility of Georgia-US strategic partnership,” Zalkaliani wrote in the social network.

Zalkaliani has completed the visit. Talakvadze continues leading the visit of the Georgian parliamentary delegation in the U.S (1TV, February 7, 2020).

7. EU Report Underscores Importance of Maintaining Reform Momentum in Georgia

On February 7 the European Commission, EU's executive arm, released a report summarizing implementation of the Association Agreement (AA) with Georgia. The report, jointly prepared by the European External Action Service and the European Commission itself, covers the period since the last Association Council meeting in March 2019 and ahead of the next meeting in 2020. As stated by the report, Georgia remains committed to the obligations and undertakings of the AA. It notes that the process of Georgia's alignment to the EU acquis, as well as to European standards, particularly in the area of human rights, has “effectively continued.” (Civil.ge, February 7, 2020)

8. Chairman of Georgian Dream hosts U.S. Ambassador to Georgia at business center



Chairman of the ruling Georgian Dream-Democratic Georgia Party Bidzina Ivanishvili and his wife Ekaterine Khvedelidze hosted U.S. Ambassador to Georgia Kelly Degnan and her husband Doug Morris at the business centre.

During the meeting, talks were held about Georgia-US relations, strategic partnership and future cooperation plans (1TV, February 7, 2020).

9. EU report - Georgia remains committed to AA, however, has to tackle political polarization

The European Union ahead of the next EU-Georgia Association Council this spring has published the report on Georgia today.

The report says “Georgia remains committed to the implementation of the EU-Georgia Association Agreement.” However, EU farther states that “it will be key for Georgia to tackle increasing political

polarisation and to demonstrate its continued reform commitment, particularly in the areas of electoral and judicial reform." (*Civil.ge, February 7, 2020*)

10. Three Georgian citizens returned home from China

Three Georgian citizens, who were unable to return home from Yangzhou City of China due to flight ban, have arrived in Georgia today.

Under the instruction of the Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development, the Georgia Airports Association ensured the transportation of citizens to their homeland.

According to the Association, Luka Bukhrashvili, Nino Vashalomidze and Ani Tatishvili arrived in Tbilisi by the flight of the airline "Dubai". Currently, they are underwent a special examination at Tbilisi Airport (*1TV, February 9, 2020*).

❖ Internal Affairs

11. OSCE/ODIHR on Opposition-proposed Amendments to Georgia's Election Code

ODIHR stated in its opinion that, "while acknowledging ongoing discussions with respect to the constitutionality of the proposed amendments as well as emphasizing that it is up to the national courts to make a final judgement on constitutionality of the legislation, this opinion covers the amendments submitted for review and analyses them against relevant international obligations and standards, including OSCE commitments, as well as international good practice with the aim to identify any shortcomings and make recommendations for consideration prior to the potential adoption of the legislation."

It also noted that "the choice of an electoral system, whether it should be a majoritarian, proportional, hybrid, or alternative system, should be subject to a broad inclusive debate which allows relevant stakeholders to bring forward positive and negative effects of the reform," and "any proposed changes have to be carefully considered, including their adoption by a large consensus among political parties."

In light of international standards and good practices, ODIHR made the following recommendations to enhance the proposed amendments:

- Amend the provision on how voters are required to mark the ballot to ensure that ballots where the will of the voter is clearly expressed are not considered invalid;
- Reconsider the provision that disregards the votes for the party lists of voters who voted in favor of a winning independent candidate in the majoritarian race in that district;
- Ensure the deadline for the Central Election Commission (CEC) to summarize final election results does not go beyond the period necessary for this purpose and is in line with deadlines for election disputes;
- Revisit the method for selecting the sub-district in which by-elections will be held to provide a politically neutral mechanism;
- Undertake analysis and, if necessary, include additional provisions to ensure as equal distribution of seats between the new multi-member constituencies as possible;
- Review the draft law to omit provisions which are not being amended, clarify which provisions are replaced, and ensure consistency of the amendments with the current provisions of the Election Code (*Civil.ge, February 6, 2020*).

12. Georgian Politicians, Ombudsperson Assess ODIHR Opinion on Amendments to Election Code

Ruling party assessment

Tea Tsulukiani – Justice Minister: The document does not indicate anywhere that the “German-model” proposed by them (opposition) is in accordance with the Georgian constitution. If it is written somewhere, I call on the opposition representatives to copy/paste this phrase and show it to us... But there is none... This is shameful, shameful because the opposition has shown its ignorance, as they did not even understand where the bill should be sent to check its constitutionality, and it is very shameful that ODIHR had to remind the opposition of independent Georgia that Georgia is a sovereign country and it should decide independently which model is relevant to its democratic development itself... Unfortunately, the opposition has placed the Public Defender – whom it asked to send its project to ODIHR – in a very awkward situation.

Irakli Kobakhidze – Former Parliament Speaker: A very simple response has been received – ODIHR cannot assess constitutionality of the bill, this is the main conclusion from this document... We have heard [numerous] lies from opposition about this document, which, in reality, has put the opposition into a difficult situation... In reality, two messages are clear from ODIHR’s opinion – that the selection of electoral system is the sovereign right of the state... and that the electoral system should not be changed during the election year.

Opposition assessment

Grigol Vashadze – United National Movement: This document has two main points, the first is that proportional elections and “German model” which is closest to proportional elections, do not contradict the Georgian constitution... the second important moment is that the OSCE is apparently requiring from the current Georgian authorities to accept the [electoral] model, which would be based on consensus. The consensus among the Georgian citizens, civil society, [and] entire opposition spectrum nowadays is to have an opportunity to hold proportional elections.

Otar Kakhidze – European Georgia: I would like to point out that when a bill has any problems with constitution, the OSCE/ODIHR always indicates that, even though their mandate does not envisage assessing its overall constitutionality. [Model developed through our draft amendments] did not have such a problem and therefore, there is no such indication [of its anti-constitutionality in the OSCE/ODIHR opinion] ... I think all of the objective observers should remove question marks regarding whether our model [draft amendments] contradicts the constitution or not.

Davit Usupashvili – Lelo for Georgia: The OSCE says that this model is fully relevant to international standards, it ensures more free and proportional representation in parliament. The OSCE has no questions about the constitutionality of this model... This conclusion has again proved the rightfulness of our model.. it is unlikely that the authorities will have enough sense to listen to the OSCE’s conclusion, our demands, public demands, recall its own promises... We will make steps forward in the right direction.

Public Defender’s comment

Nino Lomjaria – Ombudsperson: I think as Public Defender I have played a very positive role. It is a fact that both parties are satisfied with conclusions and use them for strengthening their own

arguments... Now it is the turn of government and opposition. Of course, they can make any political assessments considering their political interests. I have explained to media and also told opposition for many times that they (ODIHR) would not have assessed the constitutionality of the bill, but indirectly they might have touched upon this issue as well. However, as we saw, ODIHR decided not to discuss this issue at all... The OSCE/ODIHR has made a very important statement that it does not matter which type of electoral system the country would choose, [rather] the electoral system should be selected based on wide, inclusive debates and political consensus (*1TV, February 6, 2020*).

13. Shame Movement Activists Send Open Letter to Ambassador Degnan

Anti-occupation Shame Movement, which has been demanding the transfer to the proportional electoral system in Georgia since June 2019, has called on the new United States Ambassador Kelly Degnan, "to persuade the ruling party to adopt a fairer electoral system."

In an open letter of February 6, the Shame Movement noted that for 93 consecutive days after the so-called "Gavrilov night" in June, the protesters have been demanding resignation of then Interior Minister Giorgi Gakharia, who was instead tapped Prime Minister, the release of the "unjustly detained demonstrators" and the introduction of the fully proportional electoral system, "which would clear path for our country's democratic development."

According to the letter, "the fight for the fair electoral system" had started much earlier than the Russian Duma MP Sergei Gavrilov's visit to Georgia, which triggered wide public outcry (*1TV, February 6, 2020*).

14. Reporters Without Borders Concerned over Adjara TV Deputy Director's Resignation

The Reporters Without Borders (RSF), a Paris-based watchdog, expresses its concern about "under pressure" resignation of Natia Zoidze, deputy director of Batumi-based public broadcaster Adjara TV. RSF said Zoidze's resignation is "the latest example of political pressure undermining media pluralism and free speech in Georgia."

In a statement released on February 5, the head of RSF's Eastern Europe and Central Asia desk, Jeanne Cavalier, said Zoidze's resignation "is indicative of the growing political pressure on state-owned media in Georgia."

Cavalier considers that "government allies are increasingly getting control of critical or independent media, such as Rustavi 2." "In the run-up to next October's parliamentary elections, we ask the Georgian authorities to guarantee media independence and pluralism, which are essential for a democratic debate," Cavalier noted (*Civil.ge, February 6, 2020*).

15. Court Releases Moris Machalikashvili from Jail in Plea Deal

Moris Machalikashvili was released from courtroom on February 6 after Tbilisi City Court approved a plea bargain deal between him and the prosecution.

Moris Machalikashvili, a cousin of a terror-related case suspect Temirlan Machalikashvili, who was shot dead during a detention operation in December 2017, participated in the rally outside the Parliament building on June 20, 2019. He was detained on July 26 on charges of group violence, attacking police officers and an attempt to storm the Parliament building (*Civil.ge, February 7, 2020*).

16. Former Chief Prosecutor Irakli Shotadze Nominated to Regain Post

The Prosecutorial Council, a body responsible for the selection of the new Prosecutor General, has selected penultimate chief prosecutor Irakli Shotadze to take back the post.

11 out of 12 members of the Prosecutorial Council voted in favor of Shotadze on February 7. His candidacy will now be submitted to the Parliament for approval, and will need support of 76 lawmakers (of sitting 150 MPs) to be confirmed as a new Prosecutor General.

The position became vacant last December as the Georgian Parliament confirmed Shalva Tadumadze as the Supreme Court justice for the lifetime tenure (*Civil.ge, February 7, 2020*).

17. Georgian State Inspector Speaks of Additional Violations into Teen Suicide Case

The State Inspector Service of Georgia has reported that it has revealed additional violations committed by law enforcement agencies and Tbilisi's private secondary school with regard to the suicide case that left a 15-year-old boy dead.

In a statement released on February 7, the State Inspector Service noted that as part of its investigative activities, the agency has revealed alleged violations of the Juvenile Justice Code and Police Code of Ethics by investigator Mariana Choloyan and other police officers (*Civil.ge, February 7, 2020*).

18. Kakha Kaladze – Only Georgian Dream has real chance to win with high percentage in elections

Election systems do not win in the elections, elections are won by people and support of voters – Kakha Kaladze, Tbilisi Mayor and Secretary-General of the ruling Georgian Dream-Democratic Georgia Party said.

According to Kaladze, Georgian Dream proposed a compromise version of the election system to the opposition – 100/50, and if the opposition does not agree, then the 2020 parliamentary elections will be held with the acting, mixed system.

Kaladze agreed on the statement made by Majority MP Irakli Kobakhidze about chances of the ruling party. "Only Georgian Dream has the real chance to win with a high percentage in the elections," he said (*1TV, February 7, 2020*).

19. Gia Volski – Deadline for reaching consensus over election legislation is end of February

Volski commented about the statement made by Parliament Speaker Archil Talakvadze who said that if the opposition did not agree on the proposal of the ruling team over 100/50 model of election legislation, the window for reaching an agreement would be closed at the end of February (*1TV, February 8, 2020*).

20. Member Leaves UNM Citing Shortfalls in Party Democracy

Chiora Taktakishvili, member of the political council of the United National Movement (UNM), Georgia's ruling party in 2004-2012, announced her decision to leave the party on her Facebook page on February 7, citing shortfalls in party democracy.

"In the first place, it troubles me not to see many like-minded members left in the [UNM] political council," said Taktakishvili, who set twice as UNM MP. She stressed that "it is terribly painful that compromising on ideals and values become a norm [in the UNM], which is reflected in its staffing as well." (*Civil.ge, February 8, 2020*)

21. Leader of European Georgia – It is upon Mikheil Saakashvili to decide what kind of movement he will establish

It is upon Mikheil Saakashvili to decide what kind of movement he will establish – Giga Bokeria, Leader of European Georgia Party told journalists when commenting about the plan of former Georgian President.

According to Bokeria, the whole oppositional spectre has one common goal, to use all the tools and resources to transform Georgia onto a proportional election system.

“We must get rid of the plague that is called Ivanishvili’s regime. We have good coordination in this process. I would say that it is unprecedented one in the newest history of Georgia,” Bokeria said.

Saakashvili said in his video address to the Georgian people that starting March 1, he was opening his own headquarters at the Saakashvili Presidential Library base.

“I am opening a personal headquarter, which will work along with the National Movement, other opposition forces and new people to accelerate the removal of Ivanishvili’s regime and to save Georgia,” Saakashvili posted on Facebook (1TV, February 8, 2020).

22. Local authorities provided drivers and passengers with food and water in Zhinvali



For already the four days, trailers and cars have been stuck in the area of the Zhinvali village. Traffic movement for all kinds of transport means is prohibited due to avalanche threat and heavy snow. Today, representatives of local authorities provided drivers and passengers with food and water.

The Mayor of Dusheti has been at the site since morning. As he claims all relevant services are mobilized on the spot.

Department of Roads is awaiting permission from the National Environmental Agency to begin clearing works (1TV, February 9, 2020).

❖ Economy and Social Affairs

23. Former employees of Frontera demand salary arrears payment



Former employees of the Oil Company Frontera Eastern Georgia are holding a protest rally demanding salary arrears payment.

Former employees of the company, together with members of the United Trade Unions and representatives of sectoral organizations, gathered in front of Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University and held a march to Tbilisi central office of Frontera.

Protesters demand 11 months of payroll and returning them to their workplaces. As former employees explain, they were dismissed after when they held a protest rally on December 17 (1TV, February 6, 2020).

24. Parliament Speaker - Our goal is to find a new, reliable investor, who will be able to implement the Anaklia project

According to Chairman of the Parliament of Georgia Archil Talakvadze, the aim of the government is to do its best to implement the project of deep-water port of Anaklia.






As Talakvadze told reporters after his visit to Washington, economic projects were one of the topics discussed at the meeting with congressmen.








“We have been talking to the Department of State about the economic projects that our government has planned, including the Anaklia project, where our goal is to find a new, reliable partner investor, who will be able to implement this project. We are ready to support this project in the future too”, he said (1TV, February 8, 2020).

Additional Information

February 10, 2020
OFFICIAL EXCHANGE RATES

1 USD - 2.8629 GEL	1 GBP - 3.7009 GEL	100 RUB - 4.4852 GEL
1 EUR - 3.1354 GEL	1 TRY - 0.4780 GEL	100 JPY - 2.6079 GEL

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
10 February	11 February	12 February	13 February	14 February
				
-7° 2°	-6° 4°	-2° 7°	-1° 8°	-3° 7°

-  **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](#)**