

NEWS DIGEST ON GEORGIA

February 13-16

Compiled by: **Aleksandre Davitashvili**

Date: **February 17, 2020**

❖ Occupied Regions

❖ Tskhinvali Region (so called South Ossetia)

1. Geneva Talks Co-Chairs Hold Meetings in Tbilisi, Tskhinvali, Moscow

Co-Chairs of Geneva International Discussions (GID) from the European Union, United Nations and OSCE, Toivo Klaar, Cihan Sultanoğlu and Rudolf Michalka, respectively, held meetings in Tbilisi, Tskhinvali and Moscow between February 6-12.

According to Toivo Klaar, in Tbilisi, they held “important discussions” regarding the security on the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetian Administrative Boundary Line (ABL) and the continued closure of crossing points (*Civil.ge, February 13, 2020*).

❖ Foreign Affairs

2. Georgia’s Shadow Boss Hires a New Lobbyist in Washington

“Disturbed by the country’s slide into authoritarianism, Congress has sent his hand-picked prime minister a succession of letters that have pricked him into action. Earlier this month, the law firm of Hogan Lovells signed a \$75,000 a month contract to represent the Georgian Dream party, which Ivanishvili founded in 2012 and runs to this day.

A letter attached to the firm’s Foreign Agent Registration Act filing with the Justice Department promises assistance in everything from legal analysis to public advocacy in Washington. What stands out, though, is that the firm will be representing Ivanishvili’s political party and not the government that party currently controls. The Firm will be collaborating with and may be receiving guidance from Georgian elected officials,” former Republican Senator Norm Coleman wrote in a January 21 letter to Ivanishvili. “But will be acting solely at the direction and control of the political party itself, Georgian Dream.”

The lobbying contract itself was signed after letters were sent by Senator Roger Wicker, the Republican chairman of the U.S. Helsinki Commission and bipartisan leaders of the House Georgia Caucus to Georgia’s prime minister protesting the arrests and plans to pack the Supreme Court. The latest letter from Congress raising concerns about these matters was sent last month from the Republican chairman and a leading Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee” – reads the article (*Bloomberg.com, February 13, 2020*).

3. Ombudsperson: Georgia Should not Agree on More Charges against Extradited Russian National

On February 12, Nino Lomjaria, the Public Defender of Georgia, released a statement addressing Russian national's extradition to his home country. The Ombudsperson called on the Georgian government not to agree on additional charges against extradited Yaroslav Sumbayev at the behest of the Russian Federation.

In October, 2019, Georgia extradited Sumbayev, who had been accused by Moscow of committing cyber-crime and a murder.

Georgian law enforcement officers arrested Sumbayev in November 2018, prompting Russia to demand his extradition. Sumbayev's defense lawyers claimed that he would become subject to torture and inhuman treatment once extradited to Russia. In May, 2019, Tbilisi City Court found his extradition lawful. The upper instance courts upheld the ruling.

The Public Defender stressed that this move would violate the European Convention on Extradition, as "a person who has been extradited shall not be proceeded against, sentenced or detained with a view to the carrying out of a sentence or detention order for any offence committed prior to his surrender other than that for which he was extradited." The Convention specifies that extradition may not be carried out if the offence for which extradition is requested is punishable by death under the law of the requesting Party and if the Party cannot give sufficient assurance that the death-penalty will not be carried out (*Civil.ge, February 13, 2020*).

4. Georgian Parliament Speaker to Zakharova: 'If Russia really takes Georgia as a sovereign state, then withdraw your troops'

Georgian Parliament Speaker Archil Talakvadze has responded to Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, stating that if her words that 'Russia takes Georgia as a sovereign country' are not empty, 'withdraw your troops from Georgian territory.'

Zakharova earlier spoke about the upcoming CoE ministerial in Tbilisi and the recent turmoil around the possible visit of Russian officials to Georgia during the event, stating that 'visits of foreign officials must not be a problem for any sovereign state (*Agenda.ge, February 13, 2020*).

5. EPP's Tusk Concerned Over Ugulava's Jailing

Donald Tusk, head of the European People's Party, the grouping of European centre-right parties, publicly expressed his concern with regard to Gigi Ugulava's imprisonment. Tusk, former president of the European Council, stressed that justice system should not be exploited against political opponents.

"The ruling elite must guarantee fair competition," Tusk wrote. EPP's President emphasized the importance of the rule of law under the EU-Georgia Association Agreement (*Civil.ge, February 13, 2020*).

6. ODIHR Director Concerned about 'Recent Developments in Georgia'

Ingibjörg Sólrún Gísladóttir, Director of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) tweeted on February 13 that she shares "concerns raised by the international community about recent developments in Georgia that have contributed to the breakdown of important political dialogue." Gísladóttir encourages all sides to re-engage in this process (*Civil.ge, February 13, 2020*).

7. Garibashvili Attends Meeting of NATO Defence Ministers in Brussels

Georgian Defense Minister Irakli Garibashvili attends a meeting of NATO Defense Ministers, which takes place at NATO headquarters, in Brussels on February 12-13.

On February 12, Garibashvili held a bilateral meeting with his Lithuanian colleague Raimundas Karoblis. Defense Minister underlined Lithuania's "great importance" in supporting Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration and defense transformation (*Civil.ge, February 13, 2020*).

8. Opposition MP Urges Georgian Govt to Disclose Joint Letter by French, German FMs

MP Giorgi Kandelaki of the opposition European Georgia party called on the Georgian government through his Facebook page on February 13 to publicize a joint "critical" letter sent by the French and German Foreign Ministers.

"We have been informed that the government has received a joint letter from the Foreign Ministers of Germany and France, and it will not be either the first or the last letter. The pressure will further intensify," Kandelaki told TV Pirveli on February 13 (*Civil.ge, February 13, 2020*).

9. EU-Georgia Parliamentary Association Committee Fails to Adopt Joint Statement

On February 12-13, European Parliament in Strasbourg hosted the 9th meeting of EU-Georgia Parliamentary Association Committee (PAC). The Committee failed to adopt a joint statement, which later triggered ruling Georgian Dream party and the opposition to trade accusations.

The Association Committee, which provides parliamentary oversight over the implementation of the EU-Georgia Association Agreement, was co-chaired by Davit Songulashvili, chairperson of the Parliamentary European integration committee, and Marina Kaljurand, social-democrat MEP from Estonia (*Civil.ge, February 14, 2020*).

10. Ruling Party on EU-Georgia Parliamentary Association Committee's Failure to Adopt Joint Statement

Archil Talakvadze, Parliament Speaker: "The issue of adopting the statement will not change Georgia's European choice and European path; we continue our cooperation with friends and partners... As for the opposition, we will face them in the [parliamentary] elections... We see that a part of the opposition with zero or low support is carrying out election campaign abroad... With reference to the European Parliament, you all know that the European People's Party was the National Movement's ally in 2012 and even earlier... It is a political process, the European Parliament is a political body and naturally, political divergence is normal there; it should not trigger any additional tension."

Mamuka Mdinaradze, leader of the parliamentary majority: "Such resolutions and declarations have always been a matter of agreement. [They] could not forgive the ruling party delegation that unfounded critic concerning Ugulava's case, as well as June 20 case was not included in the pertinent declaration. The United National Movement [opposition party] did its best to convince its partners not to support the declaration. This was a mere sabotage against their own country, rather than against Georgian Dream. Failure to agree on this document will actually change nothing and the Association Agreement will be continued when it comes to enforcement ... it is a subversive act carried out by both branches of the National Movement."

David Zalkaliani, Foreign Minister: "This is not the first case; the same precedent took place in 2013 and you all know well how EU-Georgia relations developed since 2013, among them visa liberalization, enlarged association as well as establishment of new formats. So, dynamics of relations with the EU did not slow down in 2013 and we all remember how opponents were trying to resist granting of visa liberalization to Georgia in such formats." (*Civil.ge, February 14, 2020*)

11. Opposition assessments on EU-Georgia Parliamentary Association Committee's Failure to Adopt Joint Statement

Tina Bokuchava, National Movement: "It is all clear for our international partners who [actually] puts at risk Georgia's relations with the EU as well as with other strategic partners, like the United States. That is why they began to openly talk about the need to change the government peacefully in order to ensure that a normal, democratic, pro-Western coalition group comes to power."

Otar Kakhidze, European Georgia: "The results of the voting procedure are known. They gave these texts to MEPs and told them to adopt the declaration without any amendments, as if everything were okay in the country. Of course, MEPs gave a response to this impudence and for the first time in the history of Georgia-EU, the joint declaration was voted down. It is impossible to constantly deceive someone. Ivanishvili's efforts to mislead our western partners have come to an end. They know the truth and they stand side by side with the Georgian democracy, Georgian society."

Tamar Chugoshvili, independent lawmaker: "[Failure to adopt the statement] does not pose a threat to the Association Agreement, but it shows the attitudes that western structures have towards us... We have damaged the country's reputation so much that nothing surprises any longer."

Khatuna Samnidze, Republican Party: "All of our western partners emphasize that political persecution takes place in the country; today we hear about the attacks against opposition, as if it were opposition's fault that the document had been voted down. In fact, Georgian Dream's responsible for the political crisis in the country and [because of] that we receive critical assessments from our western partners on an hourly basis." (*Civil.ge, February 2020*)

12. Georgian Leaders at Munich Security Conference

Georgian delegation, led by Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia and comprised of Defense, Foreign and Justice Ministers, Irakli Garibashvili, David Zalkaliani and Tea Tsulukiani, respectively, is attending the annual Munich Security Conference on February 14-16.

According to their press offices, the Georgian delegation will hold meetings on the sidelines of the annual conference.

On February 14, PM Gakharia met with the United States Secretary of Defense Mark Esper. The two parties discussed mutual commitment to stability and security. "The U.S. supports Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and we are grateful for Georgia's many contributions to global security," Esper stated (*Civil.ge, February 14, 2020*).

❖ Internal Affairs

13. Media Watchdogs Address Int'l Organizations over 'Alarming' Process in Adjara TV

The Media Advocacy Coalition, a group of over ten watchdog and media organizations, have addressed international organizations over "alarming" processes developing at Adjara TV and Radio company based in Georgia's coastal city of Batumi, noting that the current situation "involves the risks of violation of both media freedom and human rights."

The Coalition's member organizations claim that they will again defend the idea of public broadcaster within their competence. They ask international partner organizations for help in ensuring their freedom of expression.

Later on the same day, two local watchdogs, Transparency International Georgia and Georgian Young Lawyers Association released separate statements regarding the developments at Adjara TV. They expressed solidarity to Adjara TV's staff and expressed their commitment to defending their interests once they need it.

Prior to the NGO statements, Teona Bakuridze, anchor of Adjara TV's main news program, posted on her Facebook page on February 14 that Adjara TV's Board of Advisers and the Director were involved "in persecuting undesirable people." (*Civil.ge, February 15, 2020*)

❖ Economy and Social Affairs

14. "Difficulties Faced by Georgian Companies Exporting to the EU Market"

The European Business Association in Georgia (EBA), held a public-private dialogue "Difficulties Faced by Georgian Companies Exporting to the EU Market" on February 11th, 2020 at the member hotel - Sheraton Grand Tbilisi Metechi Palace.

More than 100 people attended the event including experts and representatives of business, EBA Members, the EU Delegation, the Government and Parliament of Georgia and European Embassies: Embassy of Italy, Germany, France, Netherlands, Greece, Czech Republic, Slovak Republic, Lithuania, Estonia.

It has been noted that the difficulties faced by companies operating in the EU market have changed since the 2016 (enactment of DCFTA). Currently the main problems are connected to: product quality and volume, marketing, logistics, access to finance and education. Additionally, special attention needs to be given to the issue of laboratories and the difficulties connected to service export (*Commerzant.ge, February 13, 2020*).

15. Problems of Turkish investors in Georgia




Chairman of Georgia-Turkish Businessmen Association Osman Turan had talked about the problems Turkish companies and businessmen are facing in Georgia. According to him at this moment there are following issues to be resolved: delayed construction permits, delayed decisions on the court cases and the bank assurances.








Osman Turan emphasizes that the biggest problem from these three is the bank assurances, which Turkish investors bring from their homeland and is not recognized in Georgia. "This is the biggest concern that hinders investments from Turkey to Georgia" – said Turan (*BM.GE, February 14, 2020*).

Additional Information

February 17, 2020 **OFFICIAL EXCHANGE RATES**

1 USD - 2.8718 GEL 1 GBP - 3.7402 GEL 100 RUB -4.5228 GEL
1 EUR - 3.1127 GEL 1 TRY - 0.4739 GEL 100 JPY – 2.6150 GEL

Monday 17 February	Tuesday 18 February	Wednesday 19 February	Thursday 20 February	Friday 21 February
				
-2° 5°	-2° 8°	0° 13°	0° 13°	2° 13°

-  **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](#)**