

# NEWS DIGEST ON GEORGIA

February 17-19

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Date: **February 20, 2020**

## ❖ Occupied Regions

### ❖ Abkhazia Region

#### 1. Three to Run for Abkhazia 'Presidency'

Three candidates will run for "presidency" of occupied Abkhazia on March 22. "President" and "Vice President" will be elected simultaneously for the term of five years. Thus, the region's "election administration" also registered three vice presidential candidates.

The three to run for Abkhazia "presidency" are:

Adgur Ardzinba (38) – "Economy Minister" since 2015, who also serves as "Vice Prime Minister" since December 2019;

Aslan Bzhania (56) – Opposition MP and head of Apra foundation, served as head of the Abkhaz "security service" from 2010 to 2014;

Leonid Dzapshba (60) – leader of Akzaara party; served as "interior minister" twice in 2010-2016.

The three to run for "vice presidency" are: Arda Ashuba, Badra Gunba and Victor Khashba, respectively (*Civil.ge, February 17, 2020*).

#### 2. Aslan Bzhania on Russian Interests in Caucasus and Relations with Tbilisi

Abkhaz opposition "MP" Aslan Bzhania, who is undergoing rehabilitation in Sochi after suffering from poisoning with heavy metals in April 2019, stated that Russian interests should be taken into consideration while conducting "hypothetic negotiations" with the Georgian side, because "Russia has maintained its interests in the Caucasus for several centuries."

Bzhania made these remarks in the interview with Abkhaz TV program Tete-A-Tete on January 27, answering a question about possible relations between Tbilisi and Sokhumi in case of his election in the March 22 snap "presidential elections."

"What I will say now mainly concerns Georgian viewers, who will watch this interview... Russia has its own interests in the Caucasus for already several centuries. For a given period, the territory of Caucasus and Transcaucasus used be part of the Russian Empire. Certainly, there are a number of negotiations in which Russia should also take part; this factor should definitely be taken into consideration," he said, adding that "Europeans and especially Americans are more remote than Russians."

Bzhania also noted that there are certain issues, which should be resolved immediately with the Georgian side. Among others, he pointed out the problem of combating crime and humanitarian issues, such as providing medical aid to those in need but who cannot receive it in the occupied region; economic relations, which are presently illegal and inflict damage to Sokhumi's budget (*Civil.ge, February 19, 2020*).

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

### **3. Tskhinvali Seizes Tbilisi-Produced Medicines**

On February 17, "interior ministry" of Moscow-backed Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia reported that following raids they have seized several "Georgia-produced medicines" from the two pharmacies of the occupied region.

In particular, it said "Voltaren, Flucold N, Krestor, Hemoral, Kolkhuri, Tolarin Plus and other medicines with Georgian inscriptions" were seized due to illegal possession (*Civil.ge, February 17, 2020*).

### **4. President Zurabishvili Addresses Intl Community over Situation in Occupied Tskhinvali**

Georgian President Salome Zurabishvili has called on the Director-General of the World Health Organization, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus; the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet Jeria; and the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatović, "to react through all possible means" to the "violations of humanitarian principles" in the Russia-occupied Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia.

In particular, President Zurabishvili referred to the recent seizure by Moscow-backed Tskhinvali officials of the Tbilisi-produced and labeled medicines, which, according to Zurabishvili is "creating serious deficit of drugs, especially for pensioners." "The situation on the ground is deteriorating continuously. In addition to the constant moving of the barbwire, closure of the crossing point aggravates the humanitarian situation for the local population, President Zurabishvili said (*Civil.ge, February 19, 2020*).

### **5. Reconciliation Minister Speaks of Humanitarian Crisis in Tskhinvali Region**

etevan Tsikhelashvili, Georgian State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality, stated that there is "a real humanitarian crisis" in Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, which "is deteriorating on a daily basis." (*Civil.ge, February 19, 2020*)

## ❖ **Foreign Affairs**

### **6. Georgian Leaders Conclude Munich Security Conference Visit**

Following his meeting with the United States Secretary of Defense Mark Esper on the first day of the conference, PM Gakharia met with his Albanian counterpart Edi Rama. The two sides discussed "the humanitarian crisis in the occupied territories of Georgia, and the importance of its EU integration." "We agreed to continue to enhance cooperation with Albania and other EU member states," Gakharia tweeted.

The following day, Georgian PM met with his Romanian counterpart Ludovic Orban, with whom Gakharia discussed "the benefits of greater connectivity across the Black Sea region." (*Civil.ge, February 17, 2020*)

### **7. Estonian Intelligence Service Report: Russia Stepped up Pressure on Georgia in 2019**

On February 12, the Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service (EFIS) published a report which discusses the latest security developments in the region, including Georgia and the South Caucasus.

The report outlined Russia's increased sway in South Caucasus. "In 2019, Russia continued to use military pressure, exploitation of conflict zones, influence activities, and a mix of economic pressure and

incentives to maintain its leverage in South Caucasus," the report stressed. According to EFIS, Russia sees the region as "a geopolitical buffer zone." (*Civil.ge, February 17, 2020*)

### **8. Georgian, Malaysian Speakers Pledge to Deepen Ties**

On February 19, Georgian Parliament Speaker Archil Talakvadze met with his Malaysian counterpart, Mohamad Ariff Md Yusof, who is paying an official visit to Georgia on February 18-20.

At the meeting, the Georgian and Malaysian Speakers spoke about deepening bilateral cooperation in the spheres of trade and economy, as well as on developing tourism ties.

According to Talakvadze, he also briefed his Malaysian counterpart on the situation in Georgia's Russian occupied regions and the country's ongoing reforms (*Civil.ge, February 19, 2020*).

### **9. Staff Director of U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee Meets Georgian PM, Opposition Leaders**

On February 19, Chris Socha, Staff Director of U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, arrived in Tbilisi to hold talks concerning the current political environment in Georgia with Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia and other government officials, political party leaders, Speaker of the Parliament and other MPs, as well as representatives civil society and international non-governmental organizations.

As stated in a press release, Socha reiterated U.S.'s commitment to Georgia's territorial integrity and Euro-Atlantic integration in all of his meetings. Socha also raised the situation in occupied Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali region (*Civil.ge, February 20, 2020*).

## **❖ Internal Affairs**

### **10. Journalists, Activists Rally to Support Adjara TV Staff**

A solidarity rally was held outside the Parliament on February 17 to support the employees of Adjara TV and Radio Company, Batumi based public broadcaster. The rally, organized by the Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics and journalists, was attended by journalists and civic activists.

Protesters carrying the banners reading "Do not interfere," "Freedom to Adjara TV," "You will not overpower us" gathered outside the Parliament at 4pm and protested recent developments at Adjara TV (*Civil.ge, February 17, 2020*).

### **11. Irakli Shotadze Regains Chief Prosecutor's Post**

On February 18, with 82 votes in favor and none against, the Parliament of Georgia has confirmed penultimate Chief Prosecutor Irakli Shotadze to take back the post, amid opposition boycott. Shotadze will serve a non-renewable six-year term (*Civil.ge, February 17, 2020*).

### **12. Politicians on Irakli Shotadze Regaining Chief Prosecutor Post**

#### **Ruling party assessments**

**Giorgi Gakharia, Prime Minister:** "Irakli Shotadze is a dignified professional, who is able to make difficult decisions as well as to assume responsibilities."

**Archil Talakvadze, Parliament Speaker:** "Under Irakli Shotadze's tenure, the prosecutor's office was one of the most effective agencies... He really has an experience in management, he is one of the [most] professional prosecutors... As far as his resignation is concerned, he took a worthy decision and showed the entire public that not his position, but rather his moral principles and accountability to the public are what truly matter to him."

**Mamuka Mdinardze, leader of the parliamentary majority:** “Irakli Shotadze is a person, who quit the post immediately after [a single] question was raised. He is a worthy person and real professional.”

**Gia Volski, First Vice Speaker of the Parliament:** “The main question is that the Prosecutor’s Office should work for the public and I am sure that the Prosecutor General will ensure it.”

### **Opposition’s assessments**

**MP Tina Bokuchava, the United National Movement:** “[Shotadze] a slave among the slaves, understands very well, why Ivanishvili has selected him; because he will have to put his signature under all dirty cases, when Ivanishvili will use the Prosecutor’s Office as a tool of political persecution ahead of elections, the elections, where he will participate without any public support, thinking that by arresting and intimidating political opponents, exerting pressure on and bribing the media, he will manage to avoid an irreversible failure that expects him during the polls. That is why Shotadze was appointed to this position.”

**MP Giorgi Kandelaki, European Georgia:** “Naming Irakli Shotadze was an insulting step on the part of Ivanishvili and what happened now is disrespect towards the Parliament.”

### **Independent lawmakers’ Assessments**

**MP Levan Koberidze:** “The faction of Independent Lawmakers distance themselves from the process of reelecting Irakli Shotadze as the chief prosecutor... Irakli Shotadze will be the Prosecutor General who will a priori promote political [interests] and pressure in Georgia ahead of elections.”

**MP Levan Gogichaishvili:** “All of the important decisions are agreed [with Bidzina Ivanishvili]... These members of Georgian Dream would not have elected Shotadze, if it had not been Ivanishvili’s demand to return him to the post.” (*Civil.ge, February 18, 2020*)

### **13. Opposition on Boycott while Speaker Talakvadze Addresses Parliament**

On February 18, Georgian Parliament Speaker Archil Talakvadze delivered an annual report summing up the parliament’s activities during the last year; none of the opposition members attended the session in protest.

Addressing his fellow lawmakers, the cabinet of ministers, and authorities of Adjara and Abkhazia autonomous republics, Speaker Talakvadze said that in current “political opposition” there are people who “sold our strategic objects to Russian companies, abandoned soldiers on the battlefield, and left peaceful population [behind] in the war zone [during Russo-Georgian war of 2008].”

While Talakvadze was slamming the Georgian opposition for signing the Council of Europe resolution, “which accused Georgia of starting military actions [against Russia in 2008],” the opposition European Georgia MPs Elene Khoshtaria and Irma Nadirashvili entered the hall to interrupt the session with the Soviet Union anthem. The two opposition lawmakers were immediately forced to leave the session (*Civil.ge, February 18, 2020*).

### **14. Parliament Endorses Credentials of New MP**

On February 18, the Parliament of Georgia endorsed the credentials of Valeri Gelashvili, a new MP from the ruling Georgian Dream–Democratic Georgia party, with 82 votes in favor and none against.

Valeri Gelashvili replaced Karlo Kopaliani, who was suspended of his mandate at the Parliament’s February 5 session (*Civil.ge, February 18, 2020*).

### **15. Interior Minister Appointed as National Security Council Secretary**

On February 19, Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia appointed Interior Minister Vakhtang Gomelauri to simultaneously serve as the Secretary of the National Security Council (NSC).

The post became vacant in late January after Levan Izoria, who also served as the the Secretary, quit the position of the Chief of Intelligence, reportedly to become next Georgian Ambassador to Germany.

Gomelauri, who previously served as the Head of State Security Service, became Interior Minister last September, when Parliament of Georgia confirmed Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia's new government (*Civil.ge, February 19, 2020*).

### **16. Vano Merabishvili Released from Prison**

Former long-time and influential Minister of Interior of Georgia, Vano Merabishvili, was released from prison on February 20.

Merabishvili, who served as the Prime Minister for few months before the United National Movement was defeated in the 2012 parliamentary elections, was arrested in May 2013 and charged with misspending and vote-buying; other set of criminal charges were filed against him later – all of them denied by Merabishvili as politically motivated. Merabishvili was found guilty and sentenced to prison terms in several separate trials in 2014.

Merabishvili told journalists upon his release that he intends to return to "active politics." "I am content that I did not do any compromise [with the Georgian Dream-led government]," he stressed (*Civil.ge, February 20, 2020*).

## **❖ Economy and Social Affairs**

### **17. Georgia's Foreign Trade in January 2020**

Georgia's foreign trade turnover in the first month of 2020 increased by 5.7%, compared to the same period last year, reaching USD 882.5 million, according to the preliminary figures released by the National Statistics Office, Geostat, on February 19.

Exports from Georgia increased by 10% year-on-year to USD 262.6 million, and imports were up by 4% y/y to USD 619.8 million in January, with trade gap standing at USD 357.2 million.

Turkey remains Georgia's largest trading partner with USD 117.1 million in 2020, followed by China, Russia, Azerbaijan and Ukraine with USD 109.4 million, USD 106 million, USD 102.7 million and USD 42.4 million, respectively.

China tops the list of largest trading partners by exports with USD 44.4 million, followed by Azerbaijan, Russia, Bulgaria and Turkey with USD 44. million, USD 33.4 million, USD 24.1 million and USD 19.9 million, respectively (*Civil.ge, February 19, 2020*).








## **Additional Information**

**February 20, 2020**

### **OFFICIAL EXCHANGE RATES**

1 USD - 2.8422 GEL      1 GBP - 3.6914 GEL      100 RUB - 4.4678 GEL  
1 EUR - 3.0701 GEL      1 TRY - 0.4692 GEL      100 JPY - 2.5763 GEL

Thursday 20 February	Friday 21 February	Saturday 22 February	Sunday 23 February	Monday 24 February
				
1° 12°	2° 13°	2° 12°	2° 12°	2° 12°

-  **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](#)**