



# Weekly News Digest on Georgia

## January 18-25, 2021

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### Occupied Regions

#### 1. Russian Occupation Forces Illegally Detained 3 Georgian Citizens in Zugdidi Municipality

Russian occupation forces have illegally detained three citizens of Georgia near the village of Khurcha in Zugdidi Municipality, on territory controlled by the central government of Georgia, on January 18 at about 20:30, announces the State Security Service of Georgia. The State Security Service of Georgia has activated the hotline and demanded the immediate release of the illegally detained individuals. The co-chairs of the Geneva discussions were also involved in the process.

"The representative of the occupied Abkhazia confirmed the illegal detention of three people living in the occupied Abkhazia through the hotline, in addition, [they] noted that these individuals are no longer in illegal detention", reads the statement of the State Security Service of Georgia. The statement also reads that "this is a deliberate provocation by the occupation regime, which is significantly damaging the security environment on the ground and threatening the stability of both the local population and the region" (*Agenda.ge, January 19, 2021*).

#### 2. Georgian from Russia-Occupied Khurvaleti Village Attempts Suicide after Occupation Forces Forcibly Separate Him from Pregnant Wife

Georgian citizen Malkhaz Vanishvili (Kurtaevi), who lives in the village of Khurvaleti near Russia-occupied Tskhinvali (South Ossetia) region, attempted suicide on January 19 after occupation forces forcibly have separated him from his pregnant wife, Tatia Adikashvili, several months ago. Barbed wire fences erected by the Russian occupation forces divide the village of Khurvaleti in two, which complicates the daily life of locals. The village has been a hotspot for the detainment of locals and the construction of barbed wire by occupation forces for years. RFE/RL reports that Malkhaz Vanishvili was transferred to a hospital in occupied Tskhinvali region yesterday after he took pills allegedly with the intention to commit suicide. His life is no longer in danger (*Agenda.ge, January 20, 2021*).

#### 3. ECHR Judgement in 2008 War: Historic Recognition of Russia Violating Numerous Human Rights in Georgia

ECHR upheld Georgian application, and confirmed that Russia committed killings, torture of Georgians, caused forcible displacement of 23'000 people, looted and destroyed homes and schools. ECHR also established that from August 12/2008-October 10/2008 Russia was controlling South Ossetian authorities and occupied territories, and therefore is directly responsible for those human rights violations – ECHR omitted the "active phase of conflict" (August 8-12/2008), saying that it was chaos and difficult to establish facts definitively.

All government and opposition agree that this is a historic day for Georgia – first time Georgia is legally confirmed to be victim of Russia's actions in international court. President, Justice Ministers (former and current), Prime Minister – all reaffirm international importance of the decision. According to officials, this

during Government Session

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decision will serve as an important tool in international advocacy towards peaceful de-occupation of occupied territories.

According to the statement of the US Embassy in Georgia: "The Court's ruling adds further weight to the international community's demand that Russia cease its blatant violations of Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Russia's attempts to control and exploit the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia through borderization, arbitrary detentions, restrictions of movement across the administrative boundary lines, and establishment of socio-economic and military "agreements" between Russia and the two Georgian regions are particularly concerning and unacceptable. These actions threaten the lives, culture, and personal freedoms of people living in these Georgian territories, and deny them the ability to exercise rights and access opportunities that should be available to all Georgian citizens". (*ECHR, Ipn, January 21, 2021*)

#### **4. Int'l Reactions to European Court's Verdict**

- **The U.S. Embassy** said the ECHR ruling "adds further weight to the international community's demand that Russia cease its blatant violations of Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity."

- **Lead Spokesperson for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy of the European Union, Peter Stano** said that European Court's recent landmark ruling "clearly concludes that after 12 August 2008 the Russian Federation, exercising effective control over South Ossetia and Abkhazia, violated several provisions of the European Convention of Human Rights."

- **Latvian FM Rinkēvičs** welcomed the judgement and pointed to Russia's responsibility for "unlawful detentions of Georgians," "inhuman and degrading treatment" of war prisoners, as well as for the "expulsion of Georgians from their homes in South Ossetia."

- **Estonian MEP Marina Kaljurand** said: "Justice prevailed over policy," describing the court's decision as "historic." She also reiterated that Russia violated international law and the European Convention on Human Rights in the 2008 Russo-Georgian war (*Civil.ge, Euronews Georgia, January 22, 2021*).

#### **5. South Ossetian Leader Slams ECHR Verdict as 'Politicized'**

Moscow-backed leader of Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia Anatoly Bibilov said European Court's verdict in Georgia vs. Russia Case (ii) over 2008 August War is a "politicized" and "unilateral" document, which "has little to do with true events and facts."

In a statement of January 22, Bibilov accused the European Court of Human Rights of "putting the aggressor [Georgia] in the role of a victim," while claiming that Strasbourg-based court prioritized the documents presented by the Georgian side, without considering the Tagliavini commission report about the Russo-Georgian War of August 2008 (*Civil.ge, January 22, 2021*).

#### **6. De Facto Prime Minister of Occupied Abkhazia is in Critical Condition in Moscow Hospital with Covid-19**

The condition of the 68-year-old de facto Prime Minister of Occupied Abkhazia, Alexander Ankvab, who has been at a Moscow hospital since January 8 after confirmed infection with the coronavirus, continues to deteriorate. Doctors assess his condition as "persistently severe." Ankvab fell ill at the end of December 2020. In the first days, he was treated at home. Then he was hospitalized in Abkhazia, but was soon transported to Moscow for further

treatment. He was diagnosed with bilateral pneumonia.

10 days later, on January 18, the press service of the Cabinet of Ministers of Abkhazia notified that after some improvement in the condition of Alexander Ankvab, respiratory failure began to grow again and he was connected to a ventilator (*Jam-news.net, January 21, 2021*).

#### **7. Enguri Hydro Electro Plant Closing Down for 3 Months, Occupied Abkhazia to Receive Electricity from Russia**

Renovation of the Inguri HPP will amount to 45 million euros, and 7 million euros will be provided in the form of a grant from the European Commission. Moreover, in the next 15 years, Georgia will be receiving a loan of 38 million euros from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. The Ministry of Economy of Georgia claims that the last major repair works of the Enguri HPP were carried out 15 years ago. For three months, while the only hydropower plant supplying Abkhazia with electricity is shut down, it will be using electricity imported from Russia. Since December, due to the energy shortage caused by the uncontrolled mining of cryptocurrencies, the western part of Abkhazia, stretching all the way up to Sukhumi, has been powered by electricity received from Russia (*Jam-news.net, January 21, 2021*).

#### **8. FM Lavrov Hosts Tskhinvali's Medoev in Moscow**

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov hosted today the acting Tskhinvali "foreign minister" Dmitry Medoev in Moscow, where the parties signed 'the Consultation Plan 2021-2022,' aimed at "further enhancement of [bilateral] coordination" in foreign affairs.

Tskhinvali-based RES news agency cited FM Lavrov as hailing "intensive political dialogue" between Moscow and Tskhinvali upon the signing ceremony. The Russian Foreign Minister reportedly also spoke of growing bilateral ties in trade, culture, and humanitarian areas (*Civil.ge, January 25, 2021*).

### **Foreign Affairs**

#### **9. Secretary-Designate Blinken Says NATO Door Shall Remain Open to Georgia**

"If a country like Georgia is able to meet the requirements of membership and if it can contribute to our collective security, yes, the [NATO's] door should remain open," Blinken stated during U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing. The remarks came in response to Senator Rand Paul (R-Ky.), who asked the State Secretary nominee, whether he still supports "putting Georgia in NATO." (*Agenda.ge, January 20, 2021*)

#### **10. President Zurabishvili Meets NATO Secretary General in Brussels**

As part of her official visit to Brussels, Georgian President Salome Zurabishvili met NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg today, ahead of the NATO-Georgia Commission meeting.

During the joint press conference after the meeting, Secretary-General Stoltenberg listed secure communications, joint military exercises, enhancing maritime support and situational awareness, as some of the key priorities in NATO-Georgia relations.

The Secretary-General said he also discussed Georgia's progress on reforms, and underscored those as "a crucial" factor for bringing the country closer "to our shared goal – membership of NATO."

President Zurabishvili, on her part, asserted that "new energy, more movement,

more determination," are needed in NATO-Georgia relations, factoring in the new U.S. President Administration's eagerness to "reaffirm its ties to NATO," and the "new reconfiguration of forces" in the Black Sea and Caucasus regions (*Civil.ge, January 22, 2021*).

#### **11. PACE Debates Georgia Election Observation Report**

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) held the first day of its 2021 hybrid winter plenary session on January 25, debating, among others, the report on the observation of Georgia's October 31 parliamentary elections.

Opening the discussion, Head of the PACE Observer Delegation to Georgia, Dutch MP Tiny Kox noted that the "political climate in Georgia was tense before the elections, remained tense on election day and in the post-electoral period, which has lasted until now."

MP Kox urged the Georgian authorities to "check all complaints made about the electoral process," and called on all parties to "engage in meaningful dialogue to overcome the problems that have risen and to come to a further electoral and judicial reform jointly."

Having reiterated key points from the joint post-election statement made by four key international observation missions, MP Kox said "the main problem of these elections was not the freeness but the level of fairness." (*Civil.ge, January 25, 2021*).

#### **12. President Zurabishvili Concludes Brussels Visit**

President Salome Zurabishvili concluded her the three-day working trip to Brussels on January 23. Along with other EU and NATO officials, Georgian leader met on January 22 with the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, Commissioner for Neighborhood and Enlargement Olivér Várhelyi, and European Commissioner for Justice Didier Reynders.

President Ursula von der Leyen said after the meeting that she reiterated EU's commitment to help neighbors "overcome the [COVID-19] pandemic and its economic consequences (*Civil.ge, January 25, 2021*).

### **Internal Affairs**

#### **13. Confrontation Inside Opposition over Snap Elections**

the leader of party "Citizens" – Aleko Elisashvili blames party Lelo for backdoor negotiations with Georgian Dream and Strategy Aghmashenebeli – for refusing to meet for discussions on possible solutions through plebiscite, while other parties claim Elisashvili will soon enter the Parliament, due to collaborating with Georgian Dream. While some parties do not want to give up the idea of snap elections (European Georgia, UNM) and UNM members are saying they plan massive protests in spring, some other parties – like Girchi and Citizens, say they should value achievements made so far and should agree to enter the Parliament if substantial enough offer is made instead of the snap elections (*Various Sources, January 18, 2021*).

#### **14. Prime Minister's Accents during Government Session**

According to Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia, during today's session, Government will approve the Vaccination Plan, according to which, by the end of the year, 60% of population will be vaccinated, in the order of priority, based on the most vulnerable citizens: medical workers, elderly, people under permanent medical care. Gakharia said it is of principal importance that the vaccine selected must be authorized and that Georgia is technically ready to receive any type of authorized

vaccine.

Gakharia also said that today's ECHR decision on 2008 War – a result of 12-year work, will be one of the most important days in Georgia's contemporary history, creating foundation for human rights protection of Georgians who suffered in this war. Gakharia also mentioned that this will be important for further work on de-occupation of Georgia.

He also said that Georgia's priorities are democratic and economic development, de-occupation and integration, emphasizing that it is critical for Georgia to answer occupation by Russia, to be ready for 2024 application for EU membership and integration in NATO (*Gov.ge, January 19, 2021*).

#### **15. Georgia Extends COVID Rules in Tbilisi, Kutaisi, Rustavi, Keeps Nationwide Curfew**

Georgian Deputy Prime Minister Maia Tskitishvili announced on January 22 that certain COVID-19 restrictions will be extended in some of the largest cities through March 1, while rules will be eased as planned in some others.

- The nationwide curfew – 21:00 to 05:00 – will also be prolonged to March 1;
- Both public transport and schools will remain closed in the capital city of Tbilisi, as well as in two large cities of Rustavi and Kutaisi until March 1;
- In the port cities of Batumi and Poti, as well as in Zugdidi, Gori and Telavi, physical attendance at schools and municipal transport (albeit available only on workdays) will resume as planned starting February 1;
- Since February 1, all kinds of shops and shopping malls will reopen in the cities, while open and closed marketplaces will also be back to work starting February 15;
- Starting from February 1, outdoor areas of restaurants and other food facilities will reopen exclusively in the coastal Adjara region, albeit will only be allowed to receive clients on weekdays. Takeaway, delivery, and drive-in services will be kept available elsewhere;
- Students will return to physical attendance at preschools and higher education facilities nationwide starting March 1;
- The ban on intercity public transportation, gyms, swimming pools, as well as the restrictions in place in Georgia's ski resorts – originally set to open on February 1 – have been kept in effect until further notice (*Civil.ge, January 22, 2021*)

#### **16. Prosecution Says Detained Cartographers Followed Superiors' Instructions**

The Prosecutor's Office of Georgia said it completed the criminal investigation against two official experts, Iveri Melashvili and Natalia Ilychova who are accused of ceding land to Azerbaijan during the border determination talks – a high-profile accusation that came to be known as the "The Cartographers' Case" in Georgia.

In the January 21 statement, the Prosecutor's Office said the two civil servants, acting upon their superiors' instructions, used maps which "substantially contradicted" what it dubbed "Georgia's historical borders" in demarcation talks with Azerbaijan.

According to the opposition, the main purpose of this statement is to link Saakashvili (Third President of Georgia) and then Chairman of the Security

Council, Giga Bokeria (now leader of the political party European Georgia) into this case (*Civil.ge, Ipn.ge, January 23, 2021*)

### **17. Agreement had not been achieved between Aleko Elisashvili – Citizens and Georgian Dream**

According to him, the meeting revealed that the Georgian Dream is ready to compromise on election issues and progress is being made in this regard. As for the snap elections and the issue of political prisoners, according to Elisashvili, there is no progress in this direction.

Positions on the issue of electoral reform are so close that I think it may become the subject of an agreement and end with a positive result, meaning that we may see another opposition political party in the parliament, - Parliament Speaker Archil Talakvadze said after talks with the leaders of the Citizens Party.

According to him, the government wants the people's choice to be fully reflected in the parliament. Therefore, the Speaker expressed hope that the agreement will be achieved and that the space of the agreement will be open to other political parties as well.

**Additionally, Talakvadze said that one week is left for the opposition parties to reconsider their decisions and the terms of the talks and to make a final decision on the termination of their parliamentary powers**

**Meanwhile, Mamuka Khazaradze promises hot spring if GD finally terminates oppositional mandates**

If Parliament finally terminates its mandates and makes no compromises with the opposition, then the spring will be very hot. No one will give in to the government's intention to seize the people's votes, - said Mamuka Khazaradze, one of the leaders of "Lelo".

According to the leader of "Lelo", the time for early elections will come, as "the country has no other solution."

On the other hand Georgian Dream reports that an extraordinary session of the parliament will be convened on January 27-28 and the main item on the agenda will be the termination of parliamentary powers of opposition members (*Various Sources, January 24, 2021*).

### **18. GD elects political leaders**

The political council of the Georgian Dream-Democratic Georgia party has approved the composition of the party secretariat.

- Executive Secretary - Mamuka Mdinaradze;
- Secretary General - Kakha Kaladze
- Political Secretary - Irakli Gharibashvili
- International Secretary - Kakha Kuchava;
- Regional Secretary - Dimitri Samkharadze

### **19. Protesters demand abolition of restrictions**

A protest rally is being held by political parties, civil society representatives and business associations in front of the governmental administration.

They demand from the government to lift restrictions imposed for the prevention of the spread of coronavirus.

As Zurab Japaridze, leader of Girchi More Freedom, told journalists, restrictions further impoverish the country.

The protesters gave members of the government 48 hours to lift restrictions on ski resorts, otherwise warned of picketing as one of the state agencies (*Ipn.ge,*

January 24, 2021)

## **20. GD Tables Controversial Changes to Parliamentary Rules of Procedure**

The ruling Georgian Dream party lawmakers proposed on January 25 amendments to the Parliament Rules of Procedure, which envisage granting opposition MPs without parliamentary factions the right to nominate Vice-Speaker and Committee Deputy Chairperson candidates.

Some of the opposition and civil society representatives said by the move – that is expected to be discussed at the Plenary Session this week – the Georgian Dream is trying to “buy off” opposition MPs (*Civil.ge, January 25, 2021*).

## **21. NDI publishes a new survey**

### **Major Findings:**

#### **Expectations towards the new Parliament**

**Redistribution of the responses on the statement:** *In order for the new parliament to represent interests of people like me it is important that all elected political parties participate in the parliament*

- 76% agrees to this statement;
- 13% disagrees to this statement;
- 9% does not know;
- 1% refused to answer.

**Redistribution of the responses to the statement:** *In order for the new parliament to represent interests of people like me, it is important for all elected political parties participate in the parliament*

- **GD Supporters (31%):**
  - 87% agree;
  - 8% disagree;
- **Opposition supporters (14%):**
  - 65% agree;
  - 29% disagree;
- **Those who didn't name a party (54%):**
  - 72% agree;
  - 12% disagree.

### **Party Support:**

- **Georgian Dream** – 31%;
- **UNM** – 5%;
- **Other parties** – 9%;
- **No Party** – 25%;
- **Refuse to answer** – 24%;
- **Don't Know** – 5%.

## **Economy and Social Affairs**

### **22. Fifteen Business Associations Demand Re-Opening of the Economy, Offer 6-Point Plan**

Fifteen business associations in Georgia have sent an open letter to the government of Georgia today in which they demand coronavirus-related restrictions to be lifted step by step. To help the government in this process they gave a six-point plan aiming to save the Georgian economy. The business associations state that hotels, restaurants and shopping malls should be opened

in Georgia, transport and air traffic should be restored in accordance with the coronavirus regulations. Also those operating in ski resorts of the country demand the opening of the winter season on February 1 and tax benefits. They said that many industries have gone bankrupt due to the restrictions; that Georgia has made a lot of international financial commitments, which is why the only way out of the crisis is the business sector to begin work (*Agenda.ge, January 20, 2021*).

**23. Regular flights to be resumed in all directions from February**

Regular flights will be resumed in all directions from February, - Minister of Economy and Sustainable Development Natia Turnava said after the meeting of the Interagency Coordination Council.

According to her, flights will be carried out in accordance with the rules of all medical protocols (*lpn.ge, January 22, 2021*).