



Weekly News Digest on Georgia

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Occupied Regions

1. Security issues for Tskhinval become more urgent after the conflict in Karabakh – Medoev

The escalation of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh has made security issues of particular relevance for South Ossetia. This was announced on Monday by Acting Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic Dmitry Medoev in talks with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

He has noted that Tskhinval will continue to work in the Geneva discussions on security and stability in Transcaucasia. "The issues of security and non-resumption of confrontation and military aggression become especially urgent for us after the war in Nagorno-Karabakh," Medoev stressed. "The South Ossetian side will continue to insist on the need for Georgia to sign a binding document that would exclude the use of force in international affairs and bilateral relations." (*Cominf.org, January 26, 2021*)

2. US Mission to OSCE: Russia's attempts to control, exploit Georgian regions of Abkhazia, S. Ossetia unacceptable

The United States mission to the OSCE has stated that the recent judgement of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in the Russia-Georgia 2008 war case '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 borderisation, arbitrary detentions, restrictions of movement across the Administrative Boundary Lines, and establishment of socio-economic and military 'agreements' between Russia and the two occupied regions of Georgia are unacceptable", Chargé d'Affaires Courtney Austrian stated on January 28 (*Agenda.ge, January 30, 2021*).

3. Abkhazia's Shamba Calls for Legalizing Trade with Tbilisi

Sergei Shamba, former "foreign minister" of Abkhazia, who now serves as the head of the security council of the occupied region, called for "legal trade" with Tbilisi, stating that official commercial relations with Georgia proper could provide financial funds to the Abkhaz treasury.

In the January 30 interview with the Abkhaz TV, Shamba said that the entire income from the traded cargo and goods flowing across dividing line with Tbilisi-controlled territory goes to the individual dealers, who benefit from the existing regime and, therefore, oppose "legalization of the process" with Georgia proper. Abkhaz security council head also noted that this "illegal" trade network is being operated "even in the difficult times of COVID-19." Shamba stated that despite "the closed borders," Georgian goods can still be found in the Abkhaz markets (*Civil.ge, February 1, 2021*).

4. Russia is the guarantor of security and development for us - Anatoly Bibilov

De-facto President Anatoly Bibilov met with Acting De-facto Foreign Minister Dmitry Medoev, reports the press service of the head of state.

During the meeting, Dmitry Medoev told to Bibilov about the results of his

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working trip to Moscow, where he had met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

According to Dmitry Medoev, a wide range of issues related to bilateral relations were discussed at the meeting.

"We signed the consultations plan between the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of South Ossetia and the Russian Federation for 2021-2022. This is a document, according to which the work will be expanded in these years, including in the international arena," said Medoev.

Additionally, he mentioned that Russian side had provided the Embassy of the Republic of South Ossetia with a new building, where renovation work is already being completed and an "official" opening will be scheduled in the near future.

"Russia for us is the guarantor of security and the guarantor of the development of the Republic of South Ossetia. One cannot fail to note the attitude of Russian colleagues to the internal processes in South Ossetia. Here some politicians talk about the illegitimacy of the Government. However, our partners think differently. This is evidenced by the meetings of our Government members with their colleagues, in particular, your meeting with Sergei Viktorovich, as well as the scheduled meeting and signing of an agreement through the Ministry of Defense. I think some of our politicians need to start working for the good of our state, as the executive branch, represented by you and other heads of departments, is doing," said de-facto President, Bibilov (*Cominf.org, February 1, 2021*).

Foreign Affairs

5. Georgian ombudswoman: ECHR ruling in Russia-Georgia war case likely to have impact on ICC war investigation

Georgian Public Defender Nino Lomjaria has stated that the recent judgement of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in the Russia-Georgia 2008 war case 'is of great legal and historic importance for Georgia,' and that the judgement is likely to have an impact of the International Criminal Court's (ICC) investigation of the war.

"Since 2016 the Office of the Prosecutor of ICC has been investigating the alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity committed during the August 2008 war. We believe that the judgment of the ECHR will have an impact on this process, especially on the part referring to the torture of Georgian prisoners of war. The European Court unanimously ruled that there had been torture of Georgian prisoners of war and found Russia responsible for this," Lomjaria stated (*Agenda.ge, January 26, 2021*).

6. Georgian leaders discuss bilateral, regions issues with Iranian FM visiting Tbilisi

Georgian President Salome Zurbishvili and Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia have held separate meetings with Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif who has arrived in Tbilisi.

Iranian FM also held a phone conversation with his Georgian counterpart David Zalkaliani who is in self-isolation after he tested positive for coronavirus earlier this week.

At the meeting with PM Gakharia the parties spoke of bilateral and regional cooperation, among others pledging to deepen trade and economic relations, Gakharia's press office reported.

Salome Zurabishvili's administration also added that at the meeting with the President, Mohammad Javad Zarif reiterated his 'firm support' to Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity (*Agenda.ge, January 28, 2021*).

7. 2020 Corruption Perceptions Index: Georgia ranks 45th among 180 countries

Georgia ranks 45th among 180 countries and territories across the world in the latest Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) 2020 published by the Transparency International, standing on top of all Eastern European and Central Asian countries.

In the index, which measures sector corruption according to experts and business people, Georgia has received 56 points of total 100.

Georgia's score of 56 points in the index is unchanged from 2019, when it dropped by two points compared with 2018.

With an average score of 36, Eastern Europe and Central Asia is the second-lowest performing region on the CPI and vulnerable to corruption compounded by Covid-19 (*Agenda.ge, January 28, 2021*).

8. UK PM Johnson to Georgian PM: 'I pay tribute to the courage you, your gov't have shown in firmly resisting Russian pressure'

UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson has congratulated Georgian PM Giorgi Gakharia on his reappointment as the country's prime minister last month and stated that he pays tribute to the courage shown by Gakharia and his government in 'firmly resisting Russian pressure.'

"The UK will continue to strongly support Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty, and remains committed to supporting your NATO membership aspirations. A strong commitment to democratic values is a key underpinning of the NATO alliance. It is important that your government continues its ongoing program of electoral reform. As a friend of Georgia, the UK stands ready to assist with this," reads the letter by Johnson which has been released by the government of Georgia press office (*Agenda.ge, January 29, 2021*).

Internal Affairs

9. Discontent Simmers in Tbilisi Over Extended COVID-19 Restrictions

The Georgian Government's decision to extend COVID-related restrictions through March 1, including the ban on municipal transportation, nationwide curfew, and the closure of food facilities and winter resorts, sparked social discontent and minor protests in the capital city of Tbilisi on January 26.

Business owners, civic activists, street vendors, ski-related business representatives, as well as opposition politicians, once again gathered outside the Government Chancellery building and demanded that the authorities lift restrictions, warning to picket administrative buildings otherwise (*Civil.ge, January 26, 2021*).

10. NCDC Releases Fifth Report on COVID-19 Outbreak in Georgia

Georgia's chief public health authority provided a breakdown of data collected from 228,410 patients treated for the disease caused by the novel coronavirus.

Case fatality rate remained low, sitting at 1.1% by the end of the year, with 2,528 deaths attributed to COVID-19.

In 98.2% of fatal cases, the disease was severed with underlying pneumonia. NCDC reported that 62.2% of deceased COVID patients had various comorbidities, including cardiovascular diseases (52%), hypertension (20.6%),

diabetes (17.3%) as well as oncologic diseases (4.3%) and chronic lung diseases (2.3%).

Full report in Georgian:

<https://www.ncdc.ge/Handlers/GetFile.ashx?ID=fbe9d198-2788-42ed-93ab-7d8109609acc>

11. PM Gakharia: reopening of economy will be possible if community transmission rate drops below 4%

Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia said at today's inter-agency coordination council meeting that if the community transmission rate continues to remain at over 4% any talk about normal economic performance is 'nothing more than gossip'.

If the community transmission rate drops under 4% in the coming weeks, we will be able to talk about the resumption of municipal transport in the capital city and reopening of those economic sectors that will be permitted by the epidemic situation", Gakharia said.

He said that since imposing targeted coronavirus restrictions in Georgia the number of test-positive cases has been declining (*Agenda.ge, January 26, 2021*).

12. Parliament to approved the vaccination plan

Parliament approved the vaccination plan on January 28. During the session, the Health Care and Social Issues Committee approved the Bill on Public Health with the II reading.

The change aims at effective implementation and management of the COVID-19 distribution, namely the special article is introduced to the law determining the parties responsible for the possible damage entailed by the pharmaceutical product (vaccine or medicine).

The bill imposes the responsibility to the state for the possible damage resulted from the use of the pharmaceutical product, authorized or pre-qualified by WHO or WHO-recognized regulatory bodies, imported for vaccination against COVID-19, other than the events when the responsibility for the damage is imposed to the importer, medical personnel, medical institution, or manufacturer pursuant to the contract concluded with the manufacturer (*Rustavi 2, January 27, 2021*).

13. Health official on first doses of Pfizer vaccine: 'the beginning of the end of the pandemic'

Head of Infectious Diseases and AIDS Centre Tengiz Tsertsvadze says the reception of the first doses of the Pfizer vaccine will be 'the beginning of the end' of the coronavirus pandemic.

Congratulations! It has been officially confirmed that Georgia will be one of the first developing countries to receive the first doses of the highest quality vaccine in the shortest time", Tsertsvadze wrote in a Facebook post yesterday.

He also noted that vaccination is 'the most effective way' to reduce the cases of COVID-19 and related deaths, as well as to gradually and safely remove all of the restrictions and regulations (*Agenda.ge, January 31, 2021*).

Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia announced yesterday that the first doses of Pfizer vaccine that will be administered to health workers are due to arrive in Georgia by late February.

Deputy Health Minister Tamar Gabunia has also confirmed that the country will initially receive a total of 29,250 doses of the vaccine. Georgia is also expected to receive over 300,000 doses of the vaccine produced by AstraZeneca (*Agenda.ge,*

January 30, 2021).

14. Boycotting Opposition Parties Call on GD to Resume Talks

In a January 26 joint statement, the United National Movement-led Strength in Unity bloc, as well as European Georgia, Lelo, Strategy Aghmashenebeli, Girchi – More Freedom and Labor parties call on the Georgian Dream to return to the negotiating table “timely.”

The parties argue GD should “realize the only solution to the [political] crisis is holding democratic, snap elections and resolving the issues opposition and therefore the majority of voters have raised.”

The statement argues that the ruling party attempted to coerce the boycotting parties into giving up on their demands, instead of taking up the opposition-offered “rational compromises.” (*Civil.ge, January 26, 2021*)

15. Suspects in Georgia-Azerbaijan ‘land forfeit’ case released on bail (translated)

Two detainees in the Georgia-Azerbaijan ‘land forfeit’ high-profile case Iveri Melashvili and Natalia Ilichova have been released on 20,000 GEL bail each earlier today.

The Georgian Chief Prosecutor’s Office requested the bail, stating that there was no need for pretrial detention.

Melashvili and Ilichova will not be able to leave the country before the court delivers a verdict in the case.

The Prosecutor’s Office said that they have already completed investigation into the case and that there is ‘genuine evidence’ that Melashvili and Ilichova were involved in the border agreement with Azerbaijan under the United National Movement leadership which led to the forfeit of 3,500 hectares of lands against Georgia’s interests.

CSO **Shame Movement** raised 40 000 GEL to help convicts to pay the bail. According to them they have been imprisoned due to the political speculation and are considered as political prisoners by them. Therefore, it does not matter at this moment what the government is planning to do next, important thing is that these people will return to their homes.

When the Prosecutor’s office deemed it necessary, they demanded arrest, but now they have considered that it was necessary to demand the release on bail. All people are equal. Those who commit an offence must be held accountable - be they ministers, ordinary employees or heads of departments”, - commented Minister of Interior Vakhtang Gomelauri (*Agenda.ge, Rustavi 2, TV Pirveli, January 28, 2021*).

16. They cannot even dream about revolution – Vakhtang Gomelauri

“A revolution is not possible”, - said today the Minister of Interior Affairs, while commenting the statements of the opposition.

“They have been talking about a revolution for years. This is nonsense. No revolution can take place. We will always perform our duties. We may change a government through elections only. They cannot even dream of this”, - said Vakhtang Gomelauri (*Rustavi 2, January 28, 2021*)

17. ISFED on Discrepancies in Summary Protocols

The International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED), a key election watchdog in Georgia, discussed and reaffirmed today its earlier PVT finding that showed disbalance in 8% of final vote tallies of October 31 parliamentary, a

finding disputed by the ruling Georgian Dream party.

The watchdog asserted that in 8% of the proportional summary protocols of the 850 polling stations sampled in the Parallel Vote Tabulation, the sum of votes received and annulled votes exceeded the number of voter signatures. The organization added that proportional vote ballots fell behind the signatures in 25.8% of the precincts (*Civil.ge, January 29, 2021*).

18. Two Citizens' MPs Strike Deal with GD, Enter Parliament

Aleko Elisashvili said Friday the two Citizens' MPs, himself and Levan Ioseliani, will quit the opposition's boycott and take up their mandates, after having signed electoral reform deal with the ruling Georgian Dream party earlier today.

The move will make the Citizens the first opposition party, having crossed the 1% threshold of October 31, 2020 parliamentary elections, to enter the new parliament. Four other opposition MPs already in parliament were elected through the nativist Alliance of Patriots party list, but they left the AoP to join parliament and found new European Socialists party, as the Alliance leaders rejected mandates.

MP Elisashvili said the agreement envisages "fundamental changes" in electoral legislation, including introduction of digital voting through electronic booths and fingerprint identification, as well as live streaming processes in polling stations (*Civil.ge, January 29, 2021*).

19. Georgian Dream-Citizens Election Reform Memorandum: Key Points

Georgian media published the text of the document, of the agreement signed between Georgian Dream and Political Party "Citizens":

- the 2024 parliamentary election threshold will be set at no more than the current 5% and no less than 3%, while for the Tbilisi City Council (Sakrebulo) polls it will stand at 2.5%. The threshold will be fixed at no more than 3.2% for all other Sakrebulo elections; (*Changing the parliamentary election threshold would require a constitutional majority vote (113 of 150MPs) in the Parliament, however, which so far seems less likely. The GD and six opposition lawmakers in the legislature defying the opposition boycott have 96 mandates in total*).
- The agreement also pledges to conduct Sakrebulo elections in the city-municipalities of Tbilisi, Kutaisi, Batumi, Rustavi, and Poti with 80% of the Sakrebulo members elected proportionally, and the rest by the majoritarian system;
- The minimum number of MPs necessary to form a parliamentary faction will correspond with the election threshold, meaning that it will take four MPs to form a faction in the incumbent parliament;
- As for election administration reform, according to the memorandum, the Central Election Commission (CEC) will be composed of 7 to 11 members "selected on a professional basis."
- The Chairman and members CEC will be nominated by the President from the long-list of candidates put forward by the special commission under the President, comprised of "independent NGOs and local observer organizations;
- District Election Commissions will be composed of five members selected on a professional basis by the CEC, put forward by the special commission – under CEC – composed of "independent NGOs and local

observation organizations.”

- Precinct Election Commissions (PEC), lowest-level election administrations, will be composed of members elected on a professional basis, namely with “six members plus one registrar per 300 voters on PEC.”

The agreement also promises to review norms on the use of administrative resources “in accordance with the OSCE / ODIHR recommendations,” (*Civil.ge, January 30, 2021*)

20. Up to 20 opposition MPs want to enter the Parliament, but due to blackmail they are unable to take this step - Irakli Kobakhidze

“We gave the MPs another opportunity, to respect their voters’ will. As we know, up to 20 opposition MPs want to enter the Parliament, but due to blackmail they are unable to take this step.

Today’s decision does not mean a change in the attitude of us and our supporters towards the radical opposition. Our position remains unchanged that the participation of the radical part of the opposition in the parliamentary and political processes plays a qualitatively negative and counterproductive role in the democratic development of our country. Based on the above considerations, we will refrain from terminating parliamentary seats for them today.” – said Kobakhidze

21. Parliament rejects opposition request to suspend status for 51 opposition MPs

The Georgian parliament has not suspended the MP status of 51 opposition MPs earlier today per their request.

None of the ruling party MPs, who are 90 in the 150-member parliament, voted for the cancellation of MP status.

Member of the United National Movement opposition party Roman Gotsiridze has stated that the ruling party ‘is afraid of the reactions of international partners’ and that is why they refused to vote for the suspension of status for opposition MPs.

However, he said that the political crisis will not be solved if the ruling party will not accept the conduct of repeat parliamentary elections.

The leader of Strategy Agmashenebeli opposition party Giorgi Vashadze said that ‘now the ruling party will have to make some new offer to the opposition.’ (*Agenda.ge, February 2, 2021*).

Economy and Social Affairs

22. December 2020: number of foreign visitors down 90.8%

A total of 49,260 international visits have been carried out to Georgia in December 2020 which is a 90.8 per cent decrease compared to the same period of last year, says the Georgian National Tourism Administration.

International visitors carried out 44,723 visits to Georgia by land, 3,563 by air, 755 by sea and 219 by rail.

The top three countries from where visits have been carried out were:

- Tukey – 19,698 visits (down 75.6%)
- Armenia – 9,324 visits (down 93.1%)
- Russia – 4,404 visits (down 93.3%)

Other countries from where most visits have been carried out were Georgia (non-residents), Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan,

Kyrgyzstan, Bulgaria, France, USA and Israel (*Agenda.ge, January 28, 2021*).

23. Georgian gov't to begin reforming state-owned enterprises in 2021-2024

The government of Georgia is starting to reform state-owned enterprises, announced Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia at today's government meeting, adding that this will be 'an extremely important process during the economic life of Georgia in 2021-2024'.

"The goal that we set while reforming the state-owned enterprises is to bring their management closer to the highest standards of corporate governance. This is not just our desire, it is a necessity due to the current economic situation in the country and the global economic crisis", said Gakharia.

The first state-owned enterprise to undergo reforms will be Georgian State Electrosystem (GSE), an electricity transmission system operator (*Agenda.ge, January 28, 2021*).

24. Georgia, Japan Agree on Investment Protection, Evasion of Double Taxation

To deepen Georgia-Japan economic cooperation and attract investments, two important treaties were signed today, the government administration reports.

Based on official sources, Georgia and Japan, represented by Georgia's Finance Minister and Japan's Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, signed a treaty of the avoidance of double taxation.

Last June, the Finance Ministry launched negotiations with Japan on the resumption of the Treaty for the Avoidance of Double Taxation.

Another document signed between Georgia and Japan today is the Treaty on Investment Liberalization, Promotion and Protection. The document was signed by Georgia's Minister of Economy and Sustainable Development and Japan's Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary.

The treaty involves the adoption of legal protection mechanisms for investments made in both countries. This will promote private capital flows between Georgia and Japan, stimulate entrepreneurial investments, boost the effective development of economic resources, and deepen economic relations. Japan is a large investor in Georgia, and Japanese investments are valued highly.

16 companies presently operate in Georgia with the participation of Japanese capital (*GeorgiaToday.ge, January 30, 2021*).

25. Asian Development Bank offers \$4 million loan to support small agri-businesses in Georgia

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) and Georgia's Credo Bank (Credo) signed a \$4 million loan to support agricultural micro, small and medium-sized enterprises, low-income farm households, small businesses run by women, and agri-tourism in Georgia.

"Around 40% of Georgia's active working-age population are employed in agriculture. Most of them are self-employed and have limited access to social welfare support systems. ADB's financing will help Credo to provide additional lending to its clients in the sector to mitigate the resurgence of poverty incidence caused by the pandemic", reads the press-release published by the ADB (*Agenda.ge, January 29, 2021*).

26. Geostat: Georgia's GDP Declined by 6.1% in 2020

Georgia's real GDP contracted by 6.1% in 2020, according to rapid estimates

released by the National Statistics Office (Geostat) on January 29. Geostat also reported that real GDP declined by 7.9% year-on-year in December 2020.

Despite the overall decline, Geostat said in December growth was registered in financial and insurance activities; water supply, sewage and waste management; information and communication; mining and quarrying (*Civil.ge, January 29, 2021*).

27. Namakhvani HPP Works Resume Defying Local Protest

Tensions were running high in western Tskaltubo Municipality's Rioni River gorge yesterday, where the Enka Renewables company, backed by the police force, resumed construction works for Namakhvani Hydropower Plant, despite local protests.

Law enforcement officers removed a tent set up near the project site, where protestors, citing devastating environmental and social impacts of the project been taking shifts for 98 days to prevent the HPP construction.

Varlam Goletiani, a local young activist who led the local anti-dam resistance movement, "promised" the Georgian authorities and the company that the protesters will not allow them to finish the job. Goletiani asserted: "They should be here for construction works for at least seven years. Addressing these violent methods is not in their interests in the first place... In the long run... locals will not allow them to proceed with the works."

"You are serving the Turks [Turkish interests]," one of the protestors addressed the law enforcement officers during the minor skirmish, alluding to the Istanbul-based engineering company ENKA, that along with Norway's Clean Energy Group has the right to develop, construct, own and operate the Namakhvani HPP Cascade (*Civil.ge, January 31, 2021*).