



Daily News Digest on Georgia

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Content

Internal Affairs

❖ Politics

1. Democracy Index 2020: Georgia ranks 91st of 165 countries
 2. UNM opposition chair may be arrested for refusal to pay bail
 3. Girchi considers entering parliament
 4. Speaker of the Parliament talks about importance of investigation election violations
- ##### ❖ COVID-19
5. Gov't lifts several coronavirus restrictions - public transport, open markets to resume operations
 6. PM Gakharia: 'Organizations that violate Covid-19 restrictions will no longer receive state subsidies'
 7. Gov't to subsidise 80% interest rate on loans to sports industry, private kindergartens, restaurants
 8. Restaurants rollback plan to open on February 6 despite Covid-19 restrictions
 9. PM Gakharia, World Bank VP discuss Georgia's vaccination plans, support for its post-pandemic recovery
 10. Tension occurs on Rustaveli Avenue, where the participants of the "march of disobedience" are holding a demonstration
 11. 11 Detained as Protesters Disobey COVID Curfew in Batumi
 12. Georgian healthcare

Internal Affairs

❖ Politics

1. Democracy Index 2020: Georgia ranks 91st of 165 countries

Georgia has ranked 91st of 165 countries and two territories in the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index 2020. Last year Georgia was 89th.

The report says that almost 70 per cent of countries covered by the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index recorded a decline in their overall score due to the pandemic (*Agenda.ge, February 4, 2021*).

2. UNM opposition chair may be arrested for refusal to pay bail

The new chair of the United National Movement (UNM) opposition party Nika Melia may be sent to pretrial detention for refusing to pay 40,000 GEL bail, the Georgian Chief Prosecutor's Office said earlier today. Melia was released on bail in November 2020.

He is charged with incitement to violence during the June protests in Tbilisi back in 2019 (*Agenda.ge, February 5, 2021*).

3. Girchi considers entering parliament

One of the leaders of libertarian political party "Girchi", Vakhtang Megrelishvili has been interviewed by Palitra TV about consultations with Georgian Dream. According to Megrelishvili they have offered Georgian dream ideal option, hold next elections through proportional model with the natural threshold (0%). If the ruling party agrees Girchi will take responsibility to negotiate with other oppositional parties to put away demand on snap elections and enter the parliament, as this amendment needs constitutional majority 120 MPs support (3/4 of the total number). In the case other parties' decision to break down negotiations Girchi takes responsibility to enter the parliament (*Palitra TV, February 5, 2021*).

4. Speaker of the Parliament talks about importance of investigation election violations

"We should use the period before the start of the fact-finding commission relating to the parliamentary elections in order to consult with the opposition and ensure the maximum participation of the opposition in the commission," - said the Chairman of the Parliament, Archil Talakvadze.

He appealed to the opposition from the bureau session. He called on them to take responsibility, get involved in the commission's activities and prove their allegations relating to the October 31 elections with facts. Otherwise, as Talakvadze said, as soon as the work of the commission is completed, the ruling team will consider that the allegations against the elections no longer exist (*lpn.ge, February 8, 2021*).

❖ COVID-19

5. Gov't lifts several coronavirus restrictions - public transport, open markets to resume operations

Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia stated that all public transport around the country will resume operations starting February 8, as well as open markets. Starting February 15 all food facilities, including restaurants will be able to

system spent over 200 mln GEL on COVID-19 response in 2020

❖ **Economy and Social Affairs**

13. National Bank of Georgia expects 4% growth of economy for basic scenario and 1% for pessimistic scenario (translated)

❖ **Occupied Territories**

14. Russian Parliamentary Delegation Visits Tskhinvali
15. Tskhinvali Sentences Georgian Citizen to over 12 Years in Prison
16. Georgian PM requests support from EU, US ambassadors in securing release of Georgian citizen in occupied Tskhinvali
17. Int'l community 'strongly condemns' Zaza Gakheladze's detention, demand his 'immediate release'
18. Woman dies in Russian-occupied Akhgori due to delayed medical aid

External Policy

19. Blinken Discusses Russian Military Aggression in Georgia with Lavrov
20. Russia ready to discuss €10 mln ECHR fine over 2006 deportations of Georgian citizens
21. EU Foreign Policy Chief Says Discussed Georgia with Russian Foreign Minister

provide their service only in open areas.

Starting February 15 in-person studies will resume in the cities of Tbilisi, Kutaisi and Rustavi (*Agenda.ge, February 4, 2021*).

6. PM Gakharia: 'Organizations that violate Covid-19 restrictions will no longer receive state subsidies'

"Our response to a deliberate violation of the rules will be very strict. We have decided that organizations that do not obey the restrictions will not receive subsidies and assistance provided by the state through economic support measures against the pandemic. In addition, they will no longer be able to participate in state support activities in the future", Gakharia said.

About 200 restaurants in Georgia plan to resume operations on Saturday, February 6 despite the Covid-19 restrictions, announced the chairman of the Restaurant Association, Shota Burjanadze (*Agenda.ge, February 4, 2021*).

7. Gov't to subsidise 80% interest rate on loans to sports industry, private kindergartens, restaurants

In addition to restaurants, the Government of Georgia has decided to subsidise 80% of the interest rate on loans to the sports industry and private kindergartens, announces Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia.

The government launched the bank loan subsidy programme for restaurants in December, 2020, and about 2,000 restaurants applied for the programme, but 'for some technical reasons' only 420 met the requirements and received the subsidy, said Gakharia.

"Today we will approve a decision to alleviate these technical requirements in order for about 2,000 restaurants that applied to the programme earlier to be able to benefit from this state-sponsored activity. In addition, the subsidy will not apply only to restaurants, but also to the sports industry, sport facilities and also private kindergartens, because there was a very serious demand from them", said Gakharia (*Agenda.ge, February 4, 2021*).

8. Restaurants rollback plan to open on February 6 despite Covid-19 restrictions

Restaurant business representatives have changed their mind to resume operations tomorrow despite the Covid-19 restrictions following the decision of the government of Georgia which allows restaurants to provide their services only in open areas starting February 15 (*Agenda.ge, February 5, 2021*).

9. PM Gakharia, World Bank VP discuss Georgia's vaccination plans, support for its post-pandemic recovery

Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia and the World Bank Vice President for Europe and Central Asia Anna Bjerde discussed the country's national vaccination plan as well as their 'efficient and effective cooperation' at a video conference earlier today.

PM Gakharia thanked the World Bank for the support during the pandemic. He noted that apart from the Covax platform, the government of Georgia is 'actively interacting with various countries to ensure a timely supply of vaccines' (*Agenda.ge, February 6, 2021*).

10. Tension occurs on Rustaveli Avenue, where the participants of the "march of disobedience" are holding a demonstration

Tension occurs on Rustaveli Avenue, where the participants of the "Disobedience March" are marching. The law enforcers initially did not let the demonstrators to

move to the roadway, however, after a confrontation, the participants of "disobedience march" were allowed to move on one side of the road.

According to civil activists, their main demand is the abolition of the so-called curfew and the lifting of other existing regulations.

Representatives of various sectors as well as politicians take part in the "disobedience march" together with civil activists (*lpn.ge, February 6, 2021*).

11. 11 Detained as Protesters Disobey COVID Curfew in Batumi

In protest against the COVID-19 restrictions, civic and opposition activists marched to defy the 21:00 – 05:00 curfew on the night of February 6-7 in Tbilisi and Batumi, leading to 11 arrests in the Black Sea coastal city.

Footage filmed by a protester in Batumi showed police forcefully detaining activists, as a confrontation between law enforcement officers and the demonstrators turned into a minor scuffle.

One of the activists, Keti Gogolauri, later told Georgian media she was detained during the protest, claiming that police verbally abused her and one of the officers put her in a chokehold. Gogolauri says police let her go after finding out she was a U.S. citizen (*Civil.ge, February 7, 2021*).

12. Georgian healthcare system spent over 200 mln GEL on COVID-19 response in 2020

Georgia's healthcare system spent over 200 million GEL (about \$60.2 million) on its Covid-19 response in 2020, reports local media outlet Interpressnews (IPN).

IPN reports that Georgia spent \$45.7 million under the loan agreement between the country and the International Bank of Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

Out of the \$45.7 million, about \$1.65 million was spent on personal protective equipment for medical workers and diagnostic materials, including COVID-19 tests (\$29.3 million).

Georgia spent 3.16 million GEL (about \$952,000) in providing quarantine spaces with medical staff.

A total of 6.3 million GEL (about \$1.9 million) was spent in diagnosis and treatment of Covid patients, while 62.1 million GEL (about \$18.6 million) was spent on medical bed supplies.

In 2020 the Health Ministry spent 19.1 million GEL (about \$5.7 million) on the purchase of personal protective equipment (*lpn.ge, February 8, 2021*).

❖ Economy and Social Affairs

13. National Bank of Georgia expects 4% growth of economy for basic scenario and 1% for pessimistic scenario (translated)

According to the basic scenario of the National Bank of Georgia, the economic growth of the country should be 4% in 2021, and according to the pessimistic scenario, the growth will be 1%.

Archil Mestvirishvili, Vice-President of the National Bank of Georgia spoke about macroeconomic forecasts on the program "Business Morning". He said if the pandemic continues for a longer period of time, then economic recovery will be difficult (*BM.GE, February 4, 2021*).

❖ Occupied Territories

14. Russian Parliamentary Delegation Visits Tskhinvali

Russian parliamentary delegation, headed by Konstantin Kosachev, chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Russian Federation Council, and MP from

Putin's United Russia party, paid a visit to occupied Tskhinvali today to meet South Ossetian leader Anatoly Bibilov, as well as the members of 'parliament.' The visit comes as opposition 'lawmakers' of the occupied region have been disrupting the 'parliamentary' work since September 2020, as they are demanding, albeit in vain so far, the resignation of prosecutor-general over the alleged torture death of 28-year-old inmate Inal Jabiev (*Civil.ge, February 5, 2021*).

15. Tskhinvali Sentences Georgian Citizen to over 12 Years in Prison

Zaza Gakheladze, a Georgian citizen illegally detained by the Kremlin-backed Tskhinvali authorities, was sentenced to twelve and a half years in prison, the State Security Service of Georgia (SSG) reported on February 5.

Gakheladze, a resident of village Kvemo Chala of Kaspi Municipality, adjacent to Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia occupation line, was reportedly shot and wounded by occupation forces prior to taking him to Tskhinvali custody in July last year.

Reports said today that the Georgian citizen has been convicted under Articles 317 and 322 of the Russian Criminal Code, involving "assault on the life of a law enforcement officer" and "illegal crossing of the state border." (*Civil.ge, February 5, 2021*)

16. Georgian PM requests support from EU, US ambassadors in securing release of Georgian citizen in occupied Tskhinvali

Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia has met with the Head of the EU Delegation Carl Hartzell and US Ambassador Kelly Degnan requesting support to secure the release of Georgian citizen Zaza Gakheladze who has been recently sentenced in occupied Tskhinvali.

At the meeting earlier today the Georgian and foreign dignitaries spoke of the importance of 'making use of diplomatic and legal mechanisms on an international level' to put an end 'to illegal detentions and blatant violations of fundamental rights along the occupation lines' (*Agenda.ge, February 6, 2021*).

17. Int'l community 'strongly condemns' Zaza Gakheladze's detention, demand his 'immediate release'

EU Ambassador Carl Hartzell has stated that since his illegal detention on July 11 last year, 'the EU has been urging his prompt release', including through the hotline managed by the EU Monitoring mission, within the framework of the Ergneti Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM) and the Geneva International Discussions.

The US Embassy also said that Russia 'must reverse its recognition of the so-called independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and fulfil its obligation under the 2008 ceasefire agreement to withdraw its forces to pre-conflict positions and its commitment to provide unfettered access for the delivery of humanitarian assistance'.

The Estonian Foreign Ministry has tweeted: Estonia strongly condemns the decision of the occupation regime in Tskhinvali to extend the illegal detention of Georgian citizen Zaza Gakheladze by 12+ years.

The Lithuanian Foreign Ministry has also tweeted: Lithuanian MFA strongly condemns sentencing of #Georgia's citizen Zaza Gakheladze by so-called court of Russian controlled South Ossetia. This is in clear breach of 2008 ceasefire

18. Woman dies in Russian-occupied Akhalkalaki due to delayed medical

aid

Zamira Chochieva, a teacher living in Georgia's Russian-occupied Akhagori district, has died of a heart attack due to delayed medical aid, local civic activist Tamar Mearakishvili reported yesterday.

Mearakishvili says that Akhagori, which has been isolated from the rest of Georgia for one year and five months, faces a 'severe humanitarian crisis' and locals are unable to receive vital services, including quality medical assistance.

She said that Chochieva was eventually transported to Tbilisi-controlled territory thanks to the efforts of her family. However, intervention came too late and Chochieva died (*Agenda.ge, February 8, 2021*).

External Affairs

19. Blinken Discusses Russian Military Aggression in Georgia with Lavrov

New U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov held a phone talk today, discussing Georgia among others.

According to the readout from the U.S. Department of State Spokesperson Ned Price, with the Russian counterpart Secretary Blinken "raised Russian interference in the 2020 United States election, its military aggression in Ukraine and Georgia, the poisoning of Aleksey Navalny, and the SolarWinds incident, among other issues."

The Russian Foreign Ministry also released a press brief after the phone talk, without any reference to the question of Georgia being a discussion topic, however (*Civil.ge, February 4, 2021*).

20. Russia ready to discuss €10 mln ECHR fine over 2006 deportations of Georgian citizens

Russia is ready to participate in discussions over its obligation of paying €10 million in compensation to Georgian citizens who were illegally deported from Russia back in 2006, Georgian Justice Minister Gocha Lortkipanidze stated earlier today.

The Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruled in January 2019 that Russia must pay out the compensation. However, Russia has refused to do so.

The Committee of Minister of the Council of Europe has urged Russia several times to abide by the verdict.

Lortkipanidze says that the January 21, 2021 judgement of the ECHR in the Russia-Georgia war case may have had an influence on Russia's decision to take part in the discussions with the mediation of the Committee of Minister of the Council of Europe (*Agenda.ge, February 8, 2021*).

21. EU Foreign Policy Chief Says Discussed Georgia with Russian Foreign Minister

Josep Borrell, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Vice-President of the European Commission said on February 7 that at the meeting with Russian Foreign Sergey Lavrov in Moscow he discussed the question of Georgia, among others.

Top European Union diplomat said: "Respect for the territorial integrity of Georgia, the situation in Nagorno Karabakh, and the Syrian and Libyan crises were also among the issues we touched upon in a review of our troubled neighbourhood, where Russia and the European Union remain more often than

not at odds.”

“In discussing all of this, I stressed here should be full respect for OSCE commitments, including respect for territorial integrity,” High Representative Borrell underscored (*Agenda.ge, February 8, 2021*).