

# GEORGIA UPDATE

WEEKLY EDITION • 4 June 2009

A Publication of the Government of Georgia

[www.georgiaupdate.gov.ge](http://www.georgiaupdate.gov.ge)

## TOP STORIES

- **Prospects of Successful Dialogue Grow, As Alasania Agrees to Talks, Reform Commission Established**
- **EU, US, NATO Condemn S. Ossetia Election; Efforts to Reduce Border Tensions Fail**
- **NATO Training Exercises Finish Smoothly, Underscore Interoperability of Georgian Forces**
- **Benetton Backtracks from Plan to Open Store in Abkhazia in Face of Georgian Backlash**
- **Assailants Arrested in Opposition Attacks on Policemen**



Defense Minister Sikharulidze (right) is in Washington this week, briefing Obama administration officials on developments in Georgia and working to strengthen the bilateral relationship. He underscored the dangerous Russian military buildup in Georgia, which echoes the Kremlin's moves in advance of last year's invasion. "They are better prepared than they were last year," Sikharulidze told the Associated Press.

## INTERNATIONAL MEDIA ON GEORGIA

**THE ECONOMIST:** The opposition locks itself up, and out

**EURASIANET:** Opposition coalition starts to splinter

**RFE/RL:** Does Russia even need to invade Georgia?

**AMERICAN THINKER:** The Caucasus tinder box

**RFE/RL:** Abkhaz opposition lambastes Ppresident

**OIL & GAS JOURNAL:** Georgia objects to Rosneft pact with Abkhazia

**REUTERS:** Georgia says UN's Ban blackmailed by Russia

**FOREIGN POLICY:** Rethink before you reset

## QUOTES OF THE WEEK

"The US regrets the decision to hold so-called 'elections' in the South Ossetia region of Georgia on May 31, 2009, and recognizes neither the legality nor the results. This represents a step away from a peaceful and negotiated solution to the conflict. The US reiterates its support for Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders."

—U.S. State Department statement on elections in S. Ossetia

## UPCOMING MILESTONES

**Jun. 1-4:** Defense Minister Sikharulidze visits Washington

**Jun. 7-8:** Armenian FM visits Georgia

**Jun. 9-10:** Estonian FM visits Georgia

**Jun. 11-12:** FM Vashadze visits Romania

**Jun. 15:** UN Security Council Resolution due on UNOMIG

**Jun. 30:** OSCE's monitoring mandate in Georgia expires

**Jul. 1:** Sweden takes over EU Presiden

**Jul. 1:** Next round of Geneva peace talks

**Jul. 6-8:** President Obama visits Russia

## TOP STORIES

### Prospects of Successful Dialogue Grow, As Alasania Agrees to Talks, Protests Fade

A sense of normalcy is returning to Georgia's political landscape. The makeshift "cells" blocking much of Tbilisi's center are slowly being removed and significant progress on democratic reforms was made in recent days. The parliamentary minority and Government agreed this week on a chairman and the composition of a new Constitutional Reform Commission. Meanwhile, moderate opposition leader Irakli Alasania reaffirmed his support for constructive dialogue with the government, urging the rest of the opposition to join talks on a more even distribution of power.

[CIVIL GEORGIA: Alasania reaffirms need for talks](#)

[REUTERS: Tactics test opposition street campaign in Georgia](#)

### EU, US, NATO Condemn S. Ossetia Election; Efforts to Reduce Border Tensions Fail

The international community roundly denounced S. Ossetia's controversial parliamentary elections as illegal and illegitimate, reaffirming support for Georgia's territory integrity. "The holding of such elections is illegitimate and represents a setback in the search for a peaceful and lasting settlement of the situation in Georgia," said Czech leader Vaclav Klaus, on behalf of the EU Presidency. Meanwhile, last week's talks between Georgia and S. Ossetian representatives ended in a stalemate, failing to reduce tensions on the administrative border.

[BBC: Disputed South Ossetia holds poll](#)

[AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE: Georgia sees no progress in talks with rebels](#)

### NATO Training Exercises Finish Smoothly, Underscore Interoperability of Georgian Forces

NATO underscored again last week that Georgia will eventually become a member. The statement came shortly before the Alliance wrapped up a successful pair of month-long military exercises in Georgia that involved over 1,000 troops from numerous NATO members and partners. The exercises highlighted the interoperability of Georgian forces and helped paved the way for future membership. NATO's special envoy to the region, Robert Simmons, said President Saakashvili's deft handling of opposition protests, which unfolded virtually unhindered and with little violence, was a positive sign and had helped strengthen relations with NATO.

[ASSOCIATED PRESS: NATO says Georgia will join as maneuvers are held](#)

### Benetton Backtracks from Plan to Open Store in Abkhazia in Face of Georgian Backlash

Benetton's controversial plan to launch a retail store in the occupied Georgian territory of Abkhazia drew it into a bitter political dispute. The Italian clothier revoked its decision to open the shop after senior Georgian politicians expressed anger and Benetton retailers in Georgia closed their stores in

protest. This is the first time an international brand has been targeted over its links to Abkhazia. According to Georgian laws on the occupied territories, foreign investors must obtain official permission from the government of Georgia before engaging in any economic activity

[WALL STREET JOURNAL: Georgian Protest Forces Benetton to Backtrack](#)

### Assailants Arrested in Opposition Attacks on Policemen

Opposition protestors attacked Georgian police last week, stabbing three plain-clothed policemen. Georgia's Interior Ministry said one officer was in serious condition, and expressed alarm at the opposition's surge in violent and extreme tactics. The radical opposition's new strategy, which also involved blocking Georgia's main highway and a vital railway line, was condemned by most of the international community.

[REUTERS: Georgia says policemen stabbed in protest clash](#)



Forty Pablo Picasso drawings, sketches, and linocuts from France's Zervos Museum are spending the summer in Georgia. It marks the country's first high-profile art exhibit since the fall of the Soviet Union, and seeks to burnish its image as a regional cultural hub. For Georgian officials, the exhibit also offers a way to redirect international attention away from the images of last year's five-day invasion by Russia. "What this means is that finally we have seen a serious exhibition in Georgia," said Culture Minister Rurua at the Picasso show's May 30 opening. "We have been waiting for it for a very long time and I think this is a fore-runner for things to come." During the Soviet era, Georgia had the reputation as being a cradle of creative talent—from artists and sculptors to writers and filmmakers. Aside from Tbilisi, the works will make stops in the Kakhetian village of Signaghi in eastern Georgia and the Black Sea port town of Batumi.

[EURASIANET: Tbilisi Looks to Picasso for Positive Post-War PR](#)

## INTERNATIONAL MEDIA ON GEORGIA

### **THE ECONOMIST: The opposition locks itself up, and out**

For all of Russia's talk of "blood on the streets," Saakashvili did not play his appointed role as a hot head and instead let the opposition isolate themselves. Fears that Georgia might slip back into chaos, and recognition of Saakashvili's role in building a functioning state, have deterred most Georgians from backing the opposition. Indeed, Saakashvili's approval rating has risen by five points to 43% since the protests began. He also earned credit for reaching out to the opposition, including offering to set up an opposition-led commission to draft a more balanced constitution.

[www.economist.com](http://www.economist.com)

### **EURASIANET: Opposition coalition starts to splinter**

A mass protest in Tbilisi on May 26 hinted at the end of opposition unity in the fight against Saakashvili. After drumming up 60,000 protesters in Tbilisi's Dinamo stadium, opposition leaders appeared to argue frantically about what to do next. While several opposition leaders championed new campaign tactics and blocked Georgia's main railroad and highway transit lines, moderate leader Alasania refused to participate.

[www.eurasianet.org](http://www.eurasianet.org)

### **RFE/RL: Does Russia even need to invade Georgia?**

Some observers, including former EU Ambassador to Georgia Denis Corboy, have warned that fighting in the region could flare up again in coming months. They suggest that Russia's aim is to control the export of Caspian energy. The harsh Western rejection of the Georgian opposition's ongoing protest campaign suggests Saakashvili is still regarded as the sole guarantor of stability and the most committed adherent in Tbilisi to a pro-Western foreign policy.

[www.rferl.org](http://www.rferl.org)

### **AMERICAN THINKER: The Caucasus tinder box**

Having failed to provoke internal tumult within Georgia, Russia is driving out the OSCE observers in preparation for a future insurgency. Hopefully, Russia will not have launched a full-scale invasion of Georgia before Obama's July visit with Medvedev. If it hasn't, Obama must make clear to Medvedev that the NATO alliance will not allow Russia gobble up Georgia the way the USSR gobbled of Czechoslovakia.

[www.americanthinker.com](http://www.americanthinker.com)

### **RFE/RL: Abkhaz opposition lambastes president**

A coalition of opposition parties lambasted Abkhazia's de facto leader, Sergei Bagapsh. The question thus arises: in addition to paving the way for the S. Ossetian opposition to demand a referendum on the incorporation of S. Ossetia into the Russian Federation after President Eduard Kokoity falsifies the outcome of the May 31 parliamentary elections, is Moscow scheming to engineer Bagapsh's ouster as a precondition for a similar "lofty union" between Abkhazia and Russia?

[www.rferl.org](http://www.rferl.org)

### **OIL & GAS JOURNAL: Georgia objects to Rosneft pact with Abkhazia**

Georgia condemned Russian energy giant Rosneft for signing an exploration and development agreement with Abkhazia, calling the document a violation of Georgia's laws and territorial integrity.

"The Russian authorities, as well as representatives of both public and private structures, need to be reminded that any deal or agreement...is a violation of Georgian law...and will be declared null and void," the Georgian Foreign Ministry said.

[www.ogj.com](http://www.ogj.com)

### **REUTERS: Georgia says UN's Ban blackmailed by Russia**

Georgia accused Moscow of blackmailing UN SG Ban Ki-moon to change his latest report on the security situation in the Caucasus state. "It is very unfortunate (and) alarming that the (U.N.) Secretariat submitted to the Russian blackmail," said Georgia UN Ambassador Lomaia. The UN's 129-member observer mission in Georgia's conflict regions will expire in June, unless a new mandate is approved by the UN Security Council.

[www.reuters.com](http://www.reuters.com)

### **FOREIGN POLICY: Rethink before you reset**

President Obama should rethink US foreign policy toward Russia and identify a "Plan B" before pressing a realist reset. Plan B should involve measures to dispel the Kremlin's impression of Western weakness and should confront the Kremlin's foreign policy belligerence. If Russia sends the message that the road to Kabul runs through Moscow—as it did when it enticed Kyrgyzstan to shutter a US military base while kindly offering to facilitate a new supply line through Russia—the US should send a stronger message by exploring a new base in Georgia.

[www.foreignpolicy.com](http://www.foreignpolicy.com)

### **THINK TANKS/NGOS**

#### **JAMESTOWN FOUNDATION: Georgian MP Identifies expat oligarch in Russia as a financier of a failed coup**

Expat oligarch and millionaire Alexander Ebralidze was the primary financier behind last month's failed mutiny in Georgia, alleges a prominent member of Parliament in Georgia. Despite an extensive criminal record and lack of Georgian citizenship, the well-connected Ebralidze recently announced his interest in running for Georgian presidency.

[www.jamestown.org](http://www.jamestown.org)

### **WEBSITES @ GEORGIA**

**Civil Georgia:** independent English-language news site: [www.civil.ge](http://www.civil.ge)

**Georgia Update:** Official government information service:

[www.georgiaupdate.gov.ge](http://www.georgiaupdate.gov.ge)

**Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies:**

Leading NGO focusing on domestic, foreign policy: [www.gfsis.org](http://www.gfsis.org)

**Georgian Mission to NATO:** [embassy.mfa.gov.ge](http://embassy.mfa.gov.ge)

**Georgian Parliament:** [www.parliament.ge](http://www.parliament.ge)

**Government of Georgia:** [www.government.gov.ge/eng](http://www.government.gov.ge/eng)

**Tbilisi:** Official website of Georgia's capital: [www.tbilisi.gov.ge](http://www.tbilisi.gov.ge)

**Ministry of Foreign Affairs:** [www.mfa.gov.ge](http://www.mfa.gov.ge)

**National Investment Agency:** [www.investgeorgia.org](http://www.investgeorgia.org)

**President Saakashvili's official website:** [www.president.gov.ge](http://www.president.gov.ge)