

GEORGIA UPDATE

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Foreign Minister Grigol Vashadze (left) met last week with his French counterpart, Bernard Kouchner, in Paris. The meeting took place amidst sharply escalating concerns about the possible sale of Mistral warship to Russia by France. The prospect has been denounced by all the Baltic states, Georgia, Ukraine, and others, as it would dangerously increase Moscow's capacity to rapidly invade its neighbors. The two foreign ministers also discussed Georgia's progress in its effort to integrate with its European partners. Last week, Georgia took a significant step closer to the EU by signing a mobility partnership with the Union, becoming just the third country to do so.

INTERNATIONAL MEDIA ON GEORGIA

LE MONDE: Arms sale—France sends a disastrous signal to Vladimir Putin

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LE MONDE: Georgia is worried by the possible sale of the "Mistral" French warship to Russia

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QUOTES OF THE WEEK

"For many Georgians with family on the other side of the Russian-patrolled administrative line that separates Russian-occupied S. Ossetia from Georgia, the nearly invisible line is as divisive and impregnable as the Berlin Wall once was. Reunifications can be wrenching affairs in such a confused atmosphere, as people come to realize that choosing between family members means having to choose whether to be Georgian or S.Ossetian—in some cases, children find themselves forced to decide between one parent or another."

—TIME Magazine

"Without any doubt, by purchasing such a ship and deploying it in the Baltic Sea, Russia's armed forces would gain additional capabilities both in terms of speed and range," Echoed the Latvian foreign ministry, "France is our strategic EU and NATO partner, and we hope France will make an appropriate decision."

—Senior Latvian defense minister representative Airis Rikveilis and Latvian Foreign Ministry.

UPCOMING MILESTONES

Dec. 3-4: Council of Europe Commissioner Hammarberg in Georgia

Dec. 3-4: NATO Ministerial in Brussels

Dec. 7-8: Eastern Partnership Ministerial in Brussels

Dec. 9-12: FM Vashadze visits Pope Benedict XVI at the Vatican

Dec. 13-14: FM Vashadze visits Switzerland

Jan. 28: Next round of Geneva peace talks

TOP STORIES

Russian-Backed Authorities Sentence Georgian Teenagers, Defying Plea by European Human Rights Authorities

Despite the efforts of Thomas Hammarberg, the Council of Europe's commissioner for human rights, S. Ossetian authorities on Wednesday sentenced two Georgian teenagers to a year each in prison. The children had been abducted in early November when one was seeking to visit his father across the "new Berlin Wall" that Russia has erected in Georgia. Two other boys, both aged 14 and apprehended in the same incident, were released.

Commissioner Hammarberg had come to Georgia, together with OSCE High Commissioner for National Minorities Knut Vollebakk, to help persuade the Russian occupation forces to release the children. Despite the sentencing, he said he was confident the two boys would eventually be let go. "The decision is that the two teenagers will be released and the other two boys sentenced to one year in prison," he said. "But I was promised that these two will be released as well, in 10 days."

Earlier in November, Hammarberg had criticized similar human rights violations in Russia's North Caucasus: "Increased activity by illegal armed groups, the lack of effective investigations into disappearances and killings, and murders of human rights activists are of particular concern." Meanwhile, also on Wednesday, Georgia released five S. Ossetians who had held since August under police guard in a house in the garrison town of Gori.

[AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE: Rebel S.Ossetia frees two Georgian teens, jails two others](#)

Potential Sale of French Warship to Russia Continues to Stir International Outcry

The potential sale of French Mistral-class warships to Russia continues to stir an international outcry. "Without any doubt, by purchasing such a ship and deploying it in the Baltic Sea, Russia's armed forces would gain additional capabilities both in terms of speed and range," said senior Latvian defense minister representative Airis Rikveilis. Echoed the Latvian foreign ministry: "France is our strategic EU and NATO partner, and we hope France will make an appropriate decision."

Critics say the planned deal comes too soon after Moscow's 2008 invasion of Georgia, as well as recent Russian exercises near the Baltic states. The ship on offer is a 21,000-ton, 200m amphibious assault ship that can carry heavy-lift helicopters, landing craft, tanks and up to 900 commandos. Mistral-class amphibious assault ships are intended for power-projection and landing operations. The sale of one or more such ships to Russia would seriously complicate the security environment for NATO member countries in the Black and Baltic seas, if deployed there; and it could become an outright threat to NATO's vulnerable partner countries Georgia and Ukraine.

"We strongly oppose the sale of such ship to Russia," said Nika Laliashvili of the Georgian parliament's defense affairs committee. "It poses a serious danger to Georgia." André Glucksmann, one of France's leading opinion-makers as well as personal friend of French PM Sarkozy and French FM Kouchner, has publicly urged both of them to stop the Mistral sale: "By arming Putin for a [possible] rapid landing in Georgia, on the Crimea, even in the Baltic states, our message is clear: go ahead! Whatever Russian forces do, we shall only protest afterward, to a fait accompli."

Asked in which sea would Russia deploy the Mistral ship or ships if the deal is finalized, Putin last week told the media in Paris that Russia "would use the warships wherever they would be needed."

[LE MONDE: Ventes d'armes—la France envoie un signal désastreux à Vladimir Poutine](#)

[NEW YORK TIMES: Talks on Deal for Warship Upset Nations Near Russia](#)

Parliament to Debate Changes to Electoral Code After Cross-Party Working Group Advances Proposals

The robust debate over Tbilisi's electoral code moves to the Parliament after the inter-party working group advanced proposals last week on election code reform. Georgia's highest legislative body will discuss revised rules for electing the capital city's mayor, the composition of the Tbilisi City Council, the process for the appointment of the Central Election Commission chairman, and procedures for filing complaints about electoral violations. The election in Tbilisi, which will choose its mayor by direct vote for the first time, is expected to be held on or around May 30, 2010.

[CIVIL GEORGIA: Proposals on electoral rules to moves in Parliament](#)

NATO-Georgia Commission Meets as Alliance Reaffirms Commitment to Georgian Membership

The NATO-Georgia Commission meets today at the level of foreign ministers in Brussels, on the sidelines of the Alliance's foreign ministers' summit. Speaking at a news conference in Brussels on Wednesday, NATO Secretary-General Rasmussen reiterated the commitment NATO made at its 2008 Bucharest summit: "They [Georgia and Ukraine] will become NATO members, when they meet the standards and if they so desire." He said "progress in reform, which NATO will continue to support" will be discussed during the commission meeting. Rasmussen also thanked Georgia for "the very substantial contingent it is sending to Afghanistan." Georgia sent a company from the 2nd brigade's 23rd battalion to Afghanistan in November and plans to increase its presence to up to 800 soldiers next year.

[CIVIL GEORGIA: NATO-Georgia Commission to Meet in Brussels](#)

EBRD to Invest \$400 Million in Georgia in 2010 in Railway, Port

The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) plans to invest \$400 million in Georgia next year, including a project to improve a port bombed by Russia during Russia's invasion of Georgia last August. According to an EBRD regional representative Oliver Descamps, the EBRD may invest \$12 million to help build a new wharf at the port of Poti and \$125 million in a railroad bypass around Tbilisi. The bank will also invest in energy and water infrastructure projects, Descamps said. Meanwhile, Rakeen, the developer owned by the Gulf emirate of Ras al-Khaimah, will begin in a few months to build "the biggest airport in the Caucasus" at Poti, the rights to which it acquired last December.

[BLOOMBERG: EBRD to Invest \\$400 Million in Georgia in 2010](#)



As US President Obama called Tuesday for countries to contribute more troops to the NATO effort in Afghanistan, Georgian troops continued to prepare for their March deployment. By the middle of next year, Georgia's troop level in Afghanistan could exceed 800, making it the second-largest per-capita contributor of troops to the war (after the US). The Government also has offered to train Afghan police, a critical goal of NATO. After the Rose Revolution, Georgia managed to create a police force free of corruption—an accomplishment that, if transferred to Afghanistan, would be of enormous value there.

INTERNATIONAL MEDIA ON GEORGIA

LE MONDE: Arms sale—France sends a disastrous signal to Vladimir Putin

The “juicy” contract of the Mistral class ships is not only cutting France from our central European friends, it is disarming us in front of our rivals. By giving Putin arms for a rapid landing in Georgia, Crimea, or even in the Baltic countries, our message is clear: go ahead! Whatever the Russian army does, we will protest only after it is done, in vain because it’s too late. By signing the sale of Mistral type ships to Russia, President Sarkozy is paralyzing its democracy. This “commercial” contract means encouragement to the worst extent. Yet, it is never too late to block a stupid and grey thought.

www.lemonde.fr

TIME MAGAZINE: In S. Ossetia, families remain torn apart

For many Georgians with family on the other side of the Russian-patrolled administrative line that separates Russian-occupied S. Ossetia from Georgia, the nearly invisible line is as divisive and impregnable as the Berlin Wall once was. Reunifications can be wrenching affairs in such a confused atmosphere, as people come to realize that choosing between family members means having to choose whether to be Georgian or S. Ossetian—in some cases, children find themselves forced to decide between one parent or another. “I am too scared to take one of the secret paths through the woods and across the fields, but I really, really want to see my daughter,” says one woman, Zoya, in S. Ossetia. “I know blood has been spilled,” she adds. “But people need to go on living and forget the past.”

www.time.com

AFP: Baltic nations concerned about Russian ship deal

Concerns mounted last week in Latvia over France’s potential sale of a French warship to Russia, as the former Soviet republic joined Baltic neighbors Lithuania and Estonia in pressing Paris for an explanation. “Without any doubt, by purchasing such a ship and deploying it in the Baltic Sea, Russia’s armed forces would gain additional capabilities both in terms of speed and range,” said senior Latvian defense minister representative Airis Rikveilis. Critics say the planned deal comes too soon after Moscow’s 2008 war with pro-Western, ex-Soviet Georgia—which highlighted a lack of such craft in its Black Sea fleet—as well as recent Russian exercises near the Baltic states.

www.defensenews.com

LE MONDE: Georgia is worried by the possible sale of the "Mistral" French warship to Russia

For the Georgians, the Russian military threat is still a reality and the possible sale of the Mistral warship by France to Russia raises many concerns. “Everyone is very worried in the region, everyone knows that it would be deployed to the Black Sea, against Ukraine and Georgia,” said an Estonian political representative last week. “The Russians have the financial and logistic resources to be finished with Georgia and its government,” said Georgia’s foreign minister. “They already occupy 20 percent of our territory. The only thing that holds them back from a complete takeover is the very high political price that they would have to pay.”

www.lemonde.fr

AP: Georgian FM urges Western security guarantees

Georgia is very worried about the possible sale of French warships to Russia and intends to press the issue of security guarantees in France. “Georgia needs long-term security guarantees” said Georgian FM Vashadze prior to his meeting with French FM Kouchner. André Glucksmann, a leading French philosopher, said in an editorial in *Le Monde* that it was “regrettable” that Sarkozy was “cheaply selling off our principles of humanity for hypothetical contracts.”

www.washingtonpost.com

BLOOMBERG: Georgia to return body of man beaten to death by Moscow police

The Georgian government will pay to return the body of a man beaten to death by Moscow police last week, the country’s refugees and accommodation minister said. “We expect his body to be brought to Georgia as early as tomorrow and we will cover the transportation and funeral expenses,” said Koba Subeliani. “It’s an enormous tragedy for his family, who have lived in Georgia as refugees since fleeing Abkhazia.”

www.bloomberg.com

THE GUARDIAN: Pierre Morel on “Dialogue works for Georgia”

The concrete framework of dialogue between Georgian, Russian, and de facto authorities representing Georgia’s Russian-occupied territories of S. Ossetia and Abkhazia is certainly both fragile and insufficient. The cease-fire agreements of August 12 and September 8 have not been fulfilled. However, continued dialogue is a process that is recognized and used by all participating parties. Given the high emotions wrought by last year’s war, that is no small achievement.

www.guardian.co.uk

BALTIC NEWS SERVICE: Russia views "near abroad" as zone of exclusive interests-Study

Russia has not rejected yet its idea of having a “near abroad” as a zone of its exclusive interests. According to a study by the International Center for Defense Studies, Russian NGOs, foundations, and pro-Moscow organizations abroad are used to fan separatist tendencies in countries like Moldova and Georgia, increase influence in domestic policy, and serve as supporting groups in Russia’s foreign-policy implementation process. In order to reduce the risks posed by Moscow’s “compatriots” policy, it is important for the neighboring countries to step up democratization and integration processes, in which the EU’s Eastern Partnership program is of particular importance.

georgiandaily.com

BLOOMBERG: European rights chief seeks talks on arrested Georgian teens

Thomas Hammarberg, the Council of Europe’s commissioner for human rights, entered the separatist Georgian region of S. Ossetia at the second attempt, seeking talks on the release of four Georgian teenagers. S. Ossetian authorities said they arrested the four boys, aged 14 to 17, on Nov. 5 for illegally crossing the border and storing explosives and weapons. Georgian Interior Ministry spokesman Shota Utiashvili said the charges were fabricated.

www.bloomberg.com

THINK TANKS & NGOS**Cory Welt’s Blog on Georgia**

Cory Welt, the director of the Eurasian Strategy Project at Georgetown University, has started a blog on Georgia; what follows is a brief excerpt from a recent posting.

Local elections are to be held next year, tentatively on 30 May, and negotiations regarding new electoral rules are underway. Local elections are not only important for their contribution (at least in principle) to local government, they are also a dress rehearsal for the 2012 and 2013 parliamentary and presidential elections. The electoral campaign, election day, and the postelectoral count and handling of appeals will all be indications of government and political party commitment to democratic practices. No less significantly, local elections—particularly for the Tbilisi city council and mayoral races—will define many of the leading actors in the next national elections.

democraticgeorgia.blogspot.com