

GEORGIA UPDATE

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Swiss Foreign Minister and current president of the Council of Europe's (CoE) Committee of Ministers, Micheline Calmy-Rey, met with President Saakashvili, Foreign Minister Vashadze (above) and other senior members of Georgia's government and civil society last week to discuss Georgia-CoE cooperation initiatives on democratic reform and human rights.

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QUOTES OF THE WEEK

"I crossed over to the Georgian side because a human being should remain a human. It's like obeying an order without knowing what it's all about. You understand that the order violates people's honor. But no one questions it. An order is an order. "

"The Russian military is there illegally, because they're not doing any kind of protective work... There are some orders that you are supposed to carry out that you can't argue with. I think it's amoral, from a human point of view"

—Vitaly Khripun, a former FSB border guard in S. Ossetia who defected to Georgia

UPCOMING MILESTONES

Jan. 21: People-to-people working group under the US-Georgia Charter on strategic partnership meets in Tbilisi

Jan. 24-29: Parliament Speaker Bakradze visits Brussels

Jan. 28: Next round of Geneva peace talks

Feb. 1-3: Tajik FM visits Georgia

Feb. 5-7: Munich International Security Conference

Feb. 8-9: FM Vashadze visits Rome

Feb. 9-12: Parliament Speaker Bakradze in Ankara

Feb. 17: Acting Head of OSCE Mission in Georgia

Mar. 1-3: Greek Parliament Speaker visits Georgia

TOP STORIES

Parliament Elects New Chair of the Central Election Commission

Georgia's Parliament last week elected Zurab Kharatishvili as the new chairman of the Central Election Commission (CEC). Kharatishvili, a member of public broadcaster's board of trustees, was chosen among three candidates nominated by President Saakashvili last week, following a process endorsed by the opposition last summer. The former accountant was also a member of the campaign funds monitoring group of the CEC during the 2008 presidential elections. Kharatishvili will chair the 13-member CEC for a 5-year term.

[CIVIL GEORGIA: Parliament elects new CEC Chairman](#)

Government Approval Ratings Rise, New Poll Shows

Georgia's economic downturn and the war with Russia in 2008 are unlikely to affect President Mikheil Saakashvili's chances of serving out his second term, a poll shows. As many as 78 percent expect Saakashvili to serve out the term through 2013, according to the survey conducted by Washington-based research firm Greenberg Quinlan Rosner. The nationwide poll of 1,200 people was conducted between Dec. 2-9, 2009, and had a margin of error of 2.8 percentage points. A separate poll by the US-based National Democratic Institute (NDI) also showed majority support for the government.

[BLOOMBERG: Georgia's Saakashvili Expected to Complete Term, Poll Shows](#)

Russia Begins New Wave of Persecution in Occupied Gali Region and Perevi Village in Abkhazia

A new wave of oppression of ethnic Georgians has begun in the Gali district of Georgia's Russian-occupied territory of Abkhazia. Groups of Russian soldiers harassed local ethnic Georgians who had crossed the administrative line demarcating the occupied zone last week. The soldiers also kidnapped a bus driver and his 20 passengers and arrested 14 other ethnic Georgians, whose whereabouts remain unknown. The troops forced locals to sign statements that would deny their right to return home the next time they cross into Georgia proper. Meanwhile, Russian occupiers also have reinforced controls at the illegal check-point in the village of Perevi, stopping vehicles to register every person who crosses the check-point.

[RUSTAVI: Ethnic Georgians assaulted in Gali](#)

[RUSTAVI: Occupants reinforce control in Perevi village](#)

OSCE Hails New Funding System for Georgian Public Broadcaster; First Caucasian Launches Via Satellite

The OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Miklos Haraszti, welcomed Georgia's decision to reintroduce a public broadcaster's funding system linked to the country's GDP. "Georgia had pioneered the GDP-based financing of public television, and I am glad it has returned to this method, albeit with a lesser amount guaranteed. I see this as an affirmation of the principle that television must be exempt from government influences," Miklos Haraszti said in a statement in which he also welcomed Spain's reform of public broadcaster's funding system. "Along with a similar reform in France already in motion, the Spanish and the Georgian financing ideas demonstrate new, innovative ways to secure public-service broadcasting as an essential institution of democracy," he added. In December, the Georgian Parliament amended the law on broadcasting, stipulating annual funding of the public broadcaster with no less than 0.12% of the country's GDP; Georgia had a similar system until 2008, with 0.15% of GDP guaranteed as the broadcaster's funding. Prime-time advertisements are banned on Georgian public television, except during sport events. Meanwhile, after an initial launch on the internet earlier this month, the GPB's Russian-language TV channel, First Caucasian, is now available via satellite.

[CIVIL GEORGIA: OSCE Hails Georgia's Public TV GDP-based Funding](#)

Court Sentences Leaders of Attempted May 2009 Mutiny

A Tbilisi Court judge delivered last week a split verdict into the trial over the Mukhrovani mutiny, a staged effort last May to thwart NATO's training exercises in Georgia and overthrow the government using military force. The court cleared retired Gen. Koba Kobaladze of coup charges, but sentenced him to eight months in prison for illegal possession of firearms and hand grenades. Other key defendants, including Koba Otanadze, a retired army colonel; Levan Amiridze, a rangers' battalion commander; and Shota Gorgiashvili, a tank battalion commander, were convicted of attempted mutiny and sentenced to 29, 28, and 19 years of prison, respectively. Numerous other defendants involved in the Mukhrovani base mutiny were also found guilty of similar charges and sentenced to prison terms varying from two to ten years.

[CIVIL GEORGIA: Mukhrovani Verdict: Kobaladze Partially Cleared, Others Jailed](#)

Swiss Foreign Minister, in Visit to Tbilisi, Underscores Georgia's Reform Progress

Micheline Calmy-Rey—Switzerland's foreign minister and current president of the Council of Europe's (CoE) Committee of Ministers—visited Georgia last week to review Georgia's reform progress. After her meetings with President Saakashvili and senior Georgian officials, Calmy-Rey said Georgia was making progress in implementing its obligations as a member of the Council of Europe, a press statement issued by the Swiss foreign ministry. Calmy-Rey also discussed Georgia's judicial system, the electoral environment, and human rights issues with representatives of Georgia's civil society.

[RUSTAVI: CoE representative meets with NGOs, opposition members in Tbilisi](#)

[SWISSINFO.CH: Foreign minister visits Georgia and Russia](#)

Georgia Sends Aid, Rescue Workers to Devastated Haiti

Joining the international relief effort, Georgia pledged to send 40 tons of humanitarian aid, worth \$250,000, and 10 rescue workers to Haiti, where nearly 200,000 people are feared dead after a 7.0 magnitude earthquake last week. "Georgia itself faces financial and economic difficulties," said deputy FM Nino Kalandadze. "Nevertheless, Georgia cannot remain indifferent towards people of Haiti." In addition to sending supplies, 20 representatives of the Georgian security services will head to Haiti on the special relief flight.

[CIVIL GEORGIA: Georgia to send aid, rescuers to quake-hit Haiti](#)



On January 21, a special concert was organized by renowned Georgian opera singer Paata Burchuladze and his charitable foundation Iavnana to assist children injured during the Haiti earthquake last week.

INTERNATIONAL MEDIA ON GEORGIA

JAMESTOWN FOUNDATION: The Georgian dimension of the Sochi Olympics

Sochi, the site of the 2014 Winter Olympics, has one of the worst corruption and human rights records across the vast domains of the Russian Federation. Apart from outstanding political aspects, yet another dimension of the Sochi Olympics is the harmful impact on Georgia's environment. Located very close to the future Olympic city, resources found in the Russian-occupied Georgian region of Abkhazia have the potential Moscow deems essential for its construction efforts at Sochi. Georgia fears that in the course of Russia's illegal extraction of inert materials from Abkhazia, the unique and fragile environment of the subtropical Black Sea coastal zone will suffer heavy, irreparable damage. Many analysts believe that the international community should take immediate and decisive steps to make Russia comply with its international obligations, including those under the Olympic Charter.

jamestownfoundation.blogspot.com

WALL STREET JOURNAL: Russian presence grows in Abkhazia

Russia is steadily building its military and economic presence in Abkhazia, more than a year after the Russia's invasion that cost Georgia the tiny-but-strategic Black Sea coastal region. There are 3,000 Russian troops in Abkhazia now. There is also a provision in the current defense cooperation agreement for around another 1,800 to arrive within the next year, said Garry Kupalba, Abkhazia's deputy defense minister. Meanwhile, two Russian coast-guard ships were deployed recently to Abkhazia's borders to keep Georgian vessels out of the waters in advance of Abkhazia's first "presidential poll" since Russia recognized its declaration of independence in August 2008.

online.wsj.com

THE INDEPENDENT: Russians are coming, but with news or propaganda?

The Independent's Moscow correspondent, Shaun Walker, disputes the notion of journalistic freedom on the Kremlin-founded news channel, Russia Today (RT). "The channel's coverage of Russia's war with Georgia was particularly obscene. With Western TV networks hooked on a 'New Cold War' headline and often not too well versed in the nuances of the region, there was a gap in the market for a balanced view of the conflict that explained Russia's position. Instead, RT blasted "GENOCIDE" across its screens for most of the war's duration, produced a number of extraordinarily biased packages, and instructed reporters not to report from Georgian villages within S. Ossetia that had been ethnically cleansed."

www.independent.co.uk

THE ECONOMIST: Border controls

In a crunch, would NATO stand by its weakest members—the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania? After five years of dithering, the answer now seems to be yes, with a decision in principle by the alliance to develop formal contingency plans to defend them. Indeed, until late 2008 NATO's threat assessment—the basis for its military planning—explicitly discounted any threat from Russia. That seemed to send a dangerous signal that north-eastern Europe was a security soft spot, open to mischief-making and meddling from outside.

www.economist.com

BLOOMBERG: Bush aides weighed attack to halt Russia-Georgia war

New evidence illustrates how the West failed to get to grips with an emboldened Russia during their five-day invasion of Georgia in 2008. According to former US deputy assistant secretary of State Ronald Asmus: George W. Bush's national security team considered launching air strikes to halt the invasion. Russian PM Putin boasted that he alone could be trusted. And French President Sarkozy badgered Georgia's leader into signing a cease-fire.

www.bloomberg.com

DESERET NEWS: Must-see foreign documentaries

Ever since Sundance essentially divided in two, filmgoers have been discovering the joy and the excitement of films from not only European, Asian and South American capitals, but also from far-flung places. Among this year's promising collection of new documentaries, Russia, Georgia and Norway have teamed together to produce an eye-opening documentary called "Russian Lessons," which examines Russia's motives and actions in 2008 when news of "ethnic cleansing" in the region of Georgia was reported.

www.deseretnews.com

IMF SURVEY MAGAZINE: Georgia sees early signs of recovery

Georgia's economy is showing tentative signs of turning around, but a full-fledged recovery will depend on a more upbeat global environment and the easing of credit conditions in the country, says the IMF. According to IMF's Georgia representative, Edward Gardner: "The economy is slowly turning the corner. The immediate objectives of the IMF-supported program were to restore confidence and stabilize the financial situation, and I think these objectives have been met."

www.imf.org

EURASIA DAILY MONITOR: Azerbaijan considers Georgia-Black Sea-Bulgaria route

Azerbaijan's and Bulgaria's energy ministers recently signed a memorandum of inter-ministerial cooperation on gas export and transportation from the S. Caucasus region to European markets. The agreements' centerpiece concerns transportation of compressed natural gas from Azerbaijan, via Georgia and the Black Sea, to Bulgaria and farther into EU territory. Azerbaijan's State Oil company is considering building a gas-pressurizing installation in the Georgian Black Sea port of Kulevi as a starting point for CNG transportation by tankers to Bulgaria and potentially also to Romania.

www.jamestown.org

RADIO FREE EUROPE/RADIO LIBERTY: FSB defector describes "amoral" conditions in S. Ossetia

In his first interview since his defection, former FSB border guard Vitaly Khripun says he was motivated to defect from Russia's Federal Security Service by the culture of corruption and cruelty he witnessed in S. Ossetia. "There are some orders that you are supposed to carry out that you can't argue with. I think it's amoral, from a human point of view," says Khripun. "The Russian military really is there illegally, because they're not doing any kind of protective work." "I was there from 9th until the 21st of Dec.-- long enough to understand what the military's role is there, and what it's doing. I could tell you about corruption. For example, local Georgians have to pay money just to collect firewood. There are so many unregistered firearms that it's very easy to kill someone and simply say he was killed by the Georgian side. It's not difficult."

www.rferl.org

EURACTIV: Füle—"I'll make enlargement more political"

EU commissioner-designate for enlargement, Štefan Füle, convincingly refuted the notion of "spheres of influence" in which Europe and Russia compete to wield power in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus. Some MEPs, however, pointed to situations where European and Russian interests cannot be easily reconciled, such as in Georgia. Füle backtracked on this point, claiming that the EU would not negotiate its principles and would press Russia to comply with its international obligations.

www.euractiv.com

RFE/RL: Georgia's rising star, soprano Nino Machaidze

In an interview with Georgian opera singer, Nino Machaidze, RFE/RL inquired how the young, rising star felt about being compared to Angelina Jolie and Russian soprano, Anna Netrebko. Said Machaidze: "I take it as a compliment, because I think that Angelina Jolie is a very beautiful woman. But as for a "new Anna Netrebko" -- I always say that I am not a new Anna Netrebko. She is a great singer, and I admire Anna and her voice. But I am Nino Machaidze."

www.rferl.org