

GEORGIA UPDATE

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Spanish Foreign Minister Moratinos, whose country holds the EU's rotating presidency, arrived in Tbilisi on March 3 for meetings with President Saakashvili, Foreign Minister Vashadze, Parliament Speaker Bakradze, and other senior officials, as well as with opposition parties. After their meeting, FM Vashadze said visa facilitation and readmission agreements between Georgia and EU would soon be signed, and that there was a "high probability" that talks on a deep and comprehensive free trade agreement, as well as on an association agreement, would be launched by summer. Moratinos also visited the Verkhny Lars border crossing between Russia and Georgia which reopened on March 1.

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QUOTES OF THE WEEK

"The U.S. Marines, who are advising the training and who do this as a profession, said these are among the best troops that they've ever seen.... They are going into Afghanistan with no national caveats, and after they unpack and get acclimatized, they will be integrated into the Marine operations in Helmand."

"On a per capita basis, right now, they are—they appear to have—the highest per capita troop contribution of any country in the world. They'll be up to about 950 troops when this battalion gets there. It's an extremely important deployment and we are grateful for it. I want to express with great strength on behalf of the entire U.S. Government how much the United States Government appreciates the Georgian contribution."

—US Special Envoy Richard Holbrooke, during a March 2 briefing, discussing the Georgian troops deploying with NATO to Afghanistan

"We actually hope the reset will be successful, because this would mean that Russia is changing its behavior vis-à-vis Georgia rather than vice versa."

—National Security Advisor Eka Tkeshelashvili

UPCOMING MILESTONES

Mar. 4-5: Latvian Parliament speaker visits Georgia

Mar. 8-12: State Minister Yakobashvili visits Brussels

Mar. 11-12: Parliament Speaker Bakradze visits Lithuania

Mar. 24-25: State Minister Yakobashvili visits Berlin

Mar. 16-18: Slovak FM visits Georgia

Mar. 30: Next round of Geneva talks

Apr. 4: Orthodox & Catholic Easter

Apr. 19-20: Parliament Speaker Bakradze visits Rome

TOP STORIES

President Saakashvili's State of the Nation Address: "Our Choice is a European, Civilized, Modern & Democratic Georgia"

President Saakashvili, during his annual state of the nation address to Parliament, vowed to advance democratic and economic reforms and European integration. Despite setbacks caused by Russia's political and military intervention and the global economic crisis, he said, "Our choice is a European, civilized, modern and democratic Georgia." Georgia's foreign policy, he underscored, is aimed at "our return to the European family and integration into NATO and the EU." Saakashvili said municipal elections this spring, including direct election of Tbilisi's mayor, would be held fairly and called on Western nations to send monitors. "We want Georgia to become closer to Europe through these elections," he said. Meanwhile, Saakashvili announced plans to offer a tax amnesty to all the country's television channels "so that Georgia's democracy and political culture can be developed with their help." The president also pledged to continue reforming Georgia's education, healthcare, and judiciary systems. "Georgia is on the right track," he said. "There are a lot of opportunities, it is now important to work hard."

[AFP: Georgia president vows democratic, economic reforms](#)

[CIVIL GEORGIA: Saakashvili's State of Nation Address](#)

International Crisis Group Condemns Abkhazia's Deepening Dependence on Russia

A year-and-a-half after Russia's occupation of Abkhazia, the region "is undoubtedly more dependent than ever on Moscow," writes the International Crisis Group (ICG) in a key report released last week. "Abkhazia: Deepening Dependence" reveals that Russia is financing half the region's budget, and against vigorous Georgian protests, it is spending \$465 million to refurbish existing and build new military installations there. Although Russian officials have said armed forces deployed in Abkhazia range from 1,700 to 3,700, the ICG says there are in fact 4,000 to 5,000 Russian troops occupying Abkhazia. Abkhaz officials concede that the entity's "independence" is in effect limited by the asymmetrical nature of its relationship with Russia. The ICG recommends that Georgian authorities show constructiveness and not to try to isolate Abkhazia, "even though Moscow's flouting of the ceasefire agreements makes this a bitter pill to swallow." To enhance regional stability and security, ICG also suggests that Russia and Georgia focus on creating economic and humanitarian links without status preconditions in order to benefit both build stability and give momentum to a long reconciliation process.

[CIVIL GEORGIA: ICG Report on Abkhazia](#)

[ICG: Abkhazia-Deepening Dependence](#)

US Commits \$124 Million for Georgian Energy Projects at US-Georgia Charter Cooperation Meeting

The US last week signed a landmark agreement with Georgia during a US-Georgia Charter cooperation meeting, committing \$124 million toward enhancing Georgia's energy infrastructure. The assistance, which will be provided through USAID, is part of \$1 billion aid package pledged by Washington after Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008. "The agreement represents a significant step towards greater collaboration in development assistance programming; an important contribution to living conditions and livelihoods in Georgia; a valuable Georgian commitment to transparency in the energy sector, regulatory independence, and essential reforms for fostering private investment," the US embassy in Tbilisi said. Under the agreement, Georgia pledged to provide up to \$115 million of its own funding for the shared objectives of the agreement, which deals with three major energy infrastructure development projects. The three projects include a hydropower investment promotion project aimed at attracting foreign investment to develop a 400 MW carbon-friendly hydropower generator, a pipeline expansion project, and a project create to restructure Georgia's electricity transmission.

[CIVIL GEORGIA: US Pledges 124M for Georgia's Energy Sector](#)

US Navy Undertakes Training Exercises in Black Sea With Georgian Coast Guard

The US guided missile destroyer John L. Hall arrived in Georgia's Black Sea port of Poti last week, assisting US-led training exercises for Georgia's coast guard. The American warship will also make a port call in Batumi during its week-long stay. The US has also helped to enhance Georgia's coast guard capabilities by funding a new radar station in Gonio, Adjara, a region located near the Black Sea. The station installed is the last of four stations funded by the US. "These radar stations are important for the overall security of Georgia," the US said in a statement.

[CIVIL GEORGIA: US Warship Makes Port Call in Georgia](#)

As Georgia and Russia Reopen Border Crossing, President Predicts Eventual Return of Normal Relations

Georgian and Russian officials reopened the Verkhny Lars mountain pass this week, closed since 2006 after relations deteriorated. The checkpoint is the only land crossing connecting Russia with Georgia proper. Other passages are located in Georgia's Russian-occupied territories of S. Ossetia and Abkhazia, yet Russia has denied Georgians access to these transit points. There was no immediate comment from Russia. In his annual address to Parliament, President Saakashvili predicted normal relations would resume. "I have no doubt that one day we will have open air links with Moscow, normal cooperative relations," Saakashvili said. "Yes, it won't be a flight for 37 roubles, but believe me it's much better to pay market price to fly to Moscow and go as free Europeans, than to pay a low price and have the status of provincial vassal."

[REUTERS: Georgia and Russia re-open Land Border Crossing](#)

[CIVIL GEORGIA: Georgia-Russia Border Crossing Point to Re-open](#)

After Vancouver, the World Asks: Will Olympic Flame Dim in Sochi?

As the Vancouver Olympic Games came to a close and eyes turned to 2014 host Sochi, commentators worldwide questioned the logic of holding the next Winter Games in Russia. Wrote *Der Spiegel* in a typical story: "Unlike Vancouver, Sochi... is synonymous with poverty, corruption, and violence. The region is also a nest for organized transnational crime. It is both a source and a route for trafficking people, drugs, and weapons—including documented instances of radioactive materials—into Europe. If Russia is not serious and makes no real effort to improve the situation, the tension between rival athletes during the Games will be nothing compared to the real tensions only miles away from the Olympic village." Meanwhile, Georgia's Olympic team issued a somber call to the international community: "We hope that the world will not forget that just a few miles from Sochi, Russian troops have invaded a sovereign country and brutally seized and occupied an entire region," they declared. "We ask our fellow athletes, and people who believe in freedom everywhere, to join us in demanding that Russia end its occupation of Georgia, that it stop exploiting the people and resources of Abkhazia's fragile Black Sea coastal zone for construction of Olympic facilities in Sochi, and that it allow Georgia's internally displaced people to return to their homes. The Olympic Games should not be built on a foundation of violence and ecological disaster."

[CBS NEWS: Georgian Olympic Team Spotlights Russian "Occupation"](#)

[DER SPIEGEL: Will Olympic Flame Dim in Sochi?](#)



National Security Advisor Tkeshelashvili—in Washington last week to meet with US officials—told *Foreign Policy* magazine in an interview: "We firmly believe that Russia's aim when invading Georgia was not to annex Abkhazia and South Ossetia through occupation. The aims were much larger. Even larger than Georgia itself. And that those aims are not yet fulfilled" (see page 3).

INTERNATIONAL MEDIA ON GEORGIA

FOREIGN POLICY: Interview—Eka Tkeshelashvili

"We firmly believe that Russia's aim when invading Georgia was not to annex Abkhazia and S. Ossetia through occupation; the aims were much larger," Georgia's National Security Advisor Eka Tkeshelashvili told *Foreign Policy*. "And that those aims are not yet fulfilled." She also expressed heightened concern with France's decision to sell advanced arms to Russia: "The Mistral sale is a political sign from France, which was the broker of our cease-fire agreement, to Russia that it's okay that they continue to occupy the territory of Georgia and are still aggressive in their rhetoric," she said, adding: "It sends the signal that the occupation of our territory is a fait accompli. It's not even appeasement of Russia; it's a reward for Russia."

www.foreignpolicy.com

THE ECONOMIST: Charlemagne—Europe's bear problem

Nowadays, diplomats detect a chill in Russian attitudes to EU projects in its backyard, especially the "eastern partnership" with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. Russia wants a say before any "rapprochement" between the EU and countries like Ukraine, says its deputy foreign minister. Projects such as visa liberalisation or energy links must not make former Soviet republics "choose" between the EU and Russia. "The EU should not move ahead with projects in the eastern partnership that are not also the fruit of Russia-EU dialogue." Europe should take such hostility as a compliment. Bringing ex-Soviet republics into a rules-based system would challenge the bleakness of Putinism. It will be hard. But Europe's values are a source of its strengths. To play to them, Europe must be clearer-eyed about who shares its values—and who does not.

www.economist.com

PROJECT SYNDICATE: Ron Asmus on "Europe's contested neighborhood"

What is Western policy? In reality, the West today no longer has a grand strategy toward the East. The moral and strategic vision of the 1990's has exhausted itself and come to a grinding halt after the shock of Russia's invasion of Georgia and the recent Ukrainian election. It is time for the West to openly debate what its strategy is—and what it is not. Two decades ago, the West rejected "spheres of influence," because Europe's bloody history taught us that compelling nations to align themselves with others against their will was wrong and a recipe for future conflict. If we still believe that today, we need an updated moral and strategic vision for such countries, and to back it up with a real strategy. We need to be clear that Moscow has a right to security, but that it does not have the right to interfere in the affairs of its neighbors, to topple their governments, or to deny them their own foreign-policy aspirations.

www.project-syndicate.org

RADIO FREE EUROPE/RADIO LIBERTY: New disagreements emerge within Georgian opposition

Intensive consultations between Georgian opposition parties last week failed to bridge disagreements on two key issues: how to select a single mayoral candidate, and whether or not to include the "For a Fair Georgia" party, headed by former PM Noghaideli, in the consultation process. The two main opposition parties swiftly rejected the argument to include Moscow-backed Noghaideli.

www.rferl.org

NPR: France plan to sell warship to Russia fuels concern

The US stance on the potential sale of Mistral ships by France to Russia was evident after a meeting in Paris earlier this month of Defense Secretary Gates and French officials. Gates' tone and terse statement about the deal reflected Washington's displeasure. Officials say French President Sarkozy's approval in principle to sell Moscow ships is only one part of a much broader French charm offensive toward Russia.

www.npr.org

RFE/RL: Holbrooke hails Georgian troops

US special envoy Richard Holbrooke praised Georgia last week for its contribution of nearly 1,000 troops to Afghanistan, adding that Washington is considering Tbilisi's offer to use it as part of an armaments supply route. "This is a very complicated logistical issue which involves many considerations and they are studying it very carefully, and we are all very appreciative of President Saakashvili's offer to assist further." Holbrooke said Georgian troops would play "a vital role in the effort to combat terrorism around the world," adding that Washington was particularly grateful that Tbilisi—unlike some European NATO members—is not barring its troops from combat operations in Afghanistan.

www.rferl.org

NEW YORK TIMES: In Georgian village, plans to honor luge athlete

President Saakashvili said plans were under way in Nodar Kumaritashvili's hometown of Bakuriani to build a luge track in honor of the luge athlete who died during a training run at the Vancouver Olympic Games. Saakashvili said Bakuriani is at the center of the country's efforts to revive a winter sports tradition, and plans are under way to build new ice-skating rinks, ski lifts, and other facilities. Three of the eight members of Georgia's Olympic team come from Bakuriani and all attended the same school.

vancouver2010.blogs.nytimes.com

BLOOMBERG: Qatar plans to grow corn in Georgia, import 70,000 sheep a year

Qatar plans to buy land in Georgia for corn cultivation and to begin this year importing as many as 70,000 sheep a year. "They're interested in buying land in Georgia for agriculture and are also interested in importing our vegetables and sheep," Georgian Agriculture Minister Kvezereli said. Kvezereli accompanied Georgian PM Gilauri to Doha this week for talks with government officials and business leaders, following President Saakashvili's trip to the country last November. Qatari Diar Real Estate Investment Co., part of the country's sovereign wealth fund, plans to complete plans for investments in Georgia following a fact-finding trip in April, Deputy Chief Executive Officer Hassan Alfadala said last week.

www.bloomberg.com

LE MONDE: Georges Charachidzé, linguist and historian, specialist of the Caucasus

Renowned linguist, historian, and Caucasus specialist Georges Charachidzé died last week at the age of 80 in France. The accomplished Georgian dedicated his life to the study of the Caucasus. He spoke multiple Caucasian languages, many of which are not written, deciphered a profusion of ancient myths, researched regional religious traditions, and avidly collected written and oral literature native to the region. While passionately archiving the deep history of the Caucasus, Charachidzé never stopped advocating for the recognition of threatened cultures and demanded support for the Chechens against the Russian oppressor.

www.lemonde.fr

THINK TANKS/NGOS**UNHCR: Displaced in Georgia get access to computer and information technology**

The UN refugee agency has expanded its Community Technology Access (CTA) program to Georgia, giving thousands of displaced people access to computers for education and livelihood purposes. "Knowledge is a key, and this program is giving that key to internally displaced people here," Peter Nicolaus, UNHCR's representative in Georgia, said at the recent opening of Georgia's first CTA center in the Shida Kartli region. The Shida Kartli region—near Georgia's Russian-occupied territory of S. Ossetia—shelters about 30,000 people who fled their homes during Russia's 2008 invasion of Georgia; some 4,200 of the IDPs live in the nine settlements.

www.unhcr.org