

GEORGIA UPDATE

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Prime Minister Gilauri traveled to Brussels this week where he met with Commission President Barroso (above) and the newly appointed European Council leader Herman Von Rompuy. Von Rompuy praised Georgia as “the only South Caucasus country to have successfully negotiated” visa facilitation and readmission agreements. He also said the EU would soon begin negotiations on an Association Agreement with Georgia. “The strengthening of relations between Georgia and the EU is a stimulus for Georgia to deliver on further democratic reforms.”

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QUOTES OF THE WEEK

“While individuals and media in Georgia enjoy full rights to freedom of speech, actions like that of Imedi offend our common understanding of civil and civilized behavior.”

—President Saakashvili

“There is a consensus within NATO that we disagree with Russia when it comes to their aggression against Georgia. We will insist on the continuation of our open-door policy despite Russian objections.”

—NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen

“The EU welcomes the spirit of Georgia’s engagement strategy initiative as a constructive step towards easing tensions, building confidence and reaching out to the residents of the Abkhaz and S. Ossetian regions.”

—EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton

UPCOMING MILESTONES

Mar. 24-25: State Minister Yakobashvili visits Berlin

Mar. 16-18: Slovak FM visits Georgia

Mar. 18-20: State Minister Yakobashvili in Vienna

Mar. 26-29: State Minister Yakobashvili in Brussels

Mar. 29-30: EU parliamentary delegation visits Georgia

Mar. 30: Next round of Geneva talks

Apr. 4: Orthodox & Catholic Easter

Apr.5-9: NATO PA Delegation visits Georgia

Apr.12-13: President of Georgia participates in the Nuclear Summit in Washington, DC

Apr.19-20: Parliament Speaker Bakradze visits Rome

TOP STORIES

President Saakashvili, Political Leaders Denounce Fake Newscast of Imedi Television

President Saakashvili, the Government, and leaders across the political spectrum and society this week unequivocally condemned the decision by private broadcaster Imedi to broadcast a fake TV newscast depicting a Russian invasion. Last Saturday's 20-minute primetime report spread panic among residents of Georgia, whose tragic memories of Russia's August 2008 invasion remain all too fresh. The hoax prompted Georgia's National Communications Commission to censor Imedi, and the station was obliged to read an on-air apology. The Commission also called for the media industry to develop a more stringent code of conduct and the means to enforce such a code.

"The program—as presented in such plot and form—was meaningless and even harmful to our society," President Saakashvili said. He and others criticized Imedi for not displaying an on-screen warning to indicate the report was fictional. "While individuals and media in Georgia enjoy full rights to freedom of speech, actions like that of Imedi offend our common understanding of civil and civilized behavior," the President added. Parliament Chair Bakradze, among many others, also vehemently denounced the hoax: "It is impermissible to produce programs with such a form and content that scare and shock people and that would scare off investors, who are needed to secure jobs for our citizens."

[OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT: The President's Evaluation on the Imitated Program Televised by Television Company Imedi](#)

EU Hails Tbilisi's New Strategy Towards Occupied Territories

The EU last week hailed the Georgian government's new engagement strategy for the country's Russian occupied territories of Abkhazia and S. Ossetia. "The EU welcomes the spirit of the initiative as a constructive step towards easing tensions, building confidence, and reaching out to the residents of the Abkhaz and S. Ossetian regions," EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton said. Georgia's new strategy rejects the pursuit of a military solution and expresses Georgia's intention to consider a "status-neutral" framework for interaction with the occupied regions' de facto authorities. The strategy paper, endorsed in January by the Georgian government, offers to facilitate people-to-people contacts "across the dividing lines" through humanitarian, economic, and "grassroots-level trade" measures, as well as through the restoration of transport links. It also proposes to create dedicated funds with the participation of the state, donor communities, and private investors to support joint business activities. Ashton also singled out the Union's involvement in Georgia since Russia's 2008 invasion as "a benchmark for the future operation" of the EU's diplomatic service. When the conflict erupted, we took the international lead, brokered a truce, and deployed a 300-strong monitoring mission in record time," she said.

[EUROPOLITICS: Ashton Hails Tbilisi's Strategy Towards Regions](#)
[CIVIL GEORGIA: EU Hails Tbilisi's Abkhaz, S. Ossetia Strategy](#)

Parliament Approves Election Code Changes; Voter List Checking Extended

Georgia's parliament last week approved election code changes and extended the voter list rechecking deadline. Lawmakers eased registration laws for candidates interested in running in Tbilisi's May 30 municipal elections, reducing the local residency requirement from 10 to five years. MPs also approved an amendment that extended the voter list rechecking deadline to April 10, permitting a three-week extension; 12 political parties engaged in the rechecking process will also be required to submit results to the Central Election Commission before Tbilisi's City Council elections commence May 30.

[CIVIL GEORGIA: Deadline for Voter List Rechecking Extended](#)
[RUSTAVI: Amendments to Georgian Election Code Approved by Parliament](#)

US State Department Lauds Direct Election of Tbilisi Mayor as Significant Step for Human Rights; Notes Other Progress, Problems
The US State Department praised Georgia's electoral and judicial reforms as "significant achievements for human rights," adding that more improvements must be made. According to the State Department's newly-released annual report of human rights, Georgia's planned May 30 municipal elections will be the first time that Tbilisi's mayor will be elected directly by city residents.

Georgia also made substantial progress on the judicial front. "Significant human rights achievements included the passage of a reformed criminal procedure code providing for fair trial protections and for the introduction in Tbilisi of a limited jury trial system; and passage of an amended election code, the State Department report said, adding: "The central philosophy of the new criminal procedure code is to establish the legal foundations for adversarial court proceedings: hearings and trials that balance the interests of the state with the rights of the accused, with the judge serving as a neutral and detached magistrate tasked with ensuring fair proceedings." In light of the country's significant democratic advances, the report also said that more reforms must be pursued to ensure media freedom.

The report raised concerns about state censorship in Georgia's Russian occupied territories of Abkhazia and S. Ossetia, saying "media remained tightly restricted by the de facto authorities and Russian occupying forces." US Ambassador to Georgia John Bass commended Georgia's democratic reform progress. "The report reflects a society in transition from a past of occupation and conflict to a future as a full democracy."

[US STATE DEPARTMENT: 2009 Human Rights Report—Georgia](#)
[CIVIL GEORGIA: US Human Rights Report on Georgia](#)



President Saakashvili last week awarded La Scala's Georgian diva, Anita Rachvelishvili, with the Order of Honor. The President lauded the 25-year-old mezzo-soprano's talent and accomplishments: "It is very important to find time to appreciate what is most important," Saakashvili said. "I got great pleasure from seeing Anita Rachvelishvili's triumph at La Scala. This is not only a celebration of everlasting values, but this is what is most important for me—to achieve everything with hard work and talent." The President said Georgia has seen unprecedented progress in the performing arts recently, with Georgian opera singers and ballet dancers receiving recognition worldwide.

INTERNATIONAL MEDIA ON GEORGIA

SUEDDEUTSCHE ZEITUNG: Tragic death of young Georgian

A young Georgian committed suicide last week while being held in a pre-deportation detention center in Germany. David, whose surname has not yet been released, was seeking asylum in Hamburg and went on a hunger strike during his imprisonment. His tragic death immediately ignited debate as hundreds of people demonstrated in Hamburg against Germany's pre-deportation procedures. Hamburg's interior minister expressed deep regret and said changes to pre-deportation procedures were already underway. The young Georgian had also applied for asylum in Switzerland and Poland, claiming he was 25; however, his asylum application in Germany said he was 17. Georgian authorities confirmed he was born in 1984.

sueddeutsche.de

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

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

THE TELEGRAPH: A major French arms sale to Russia will make the world a more dangerous place

The French and the Russians are close to completing the first major Western arms sale to Russia since 1945. Surprisingly, the reaction of NATO nations to a warship sale that will likely make the world much more dangerous has been worryingly muted. If this deal goes through it will signal the virtual approval of the larger Western nations for Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008. It might still be possible to bring pressure on France to shut down the deal — but that would require true strategic vision and leadership on the part of American, British and other Western leaders. So don't hold your breath.

blogs.telegraph.co.uk

WEEKLY STANDARD: Medvedev, Putin, and the Mistral

President Medvedev's state visit to France was billed as an historic event. The theme of the dialogue Moscow was trying to promote was, "Who needs Washington? Europe and Russia can manage their own problems without NATO expansion or other US involvement." If Europe is now only for Europeans—and NATO is a threat rather than a guarantor of peace—then the US needs to rethink how it handles its own military sales arrangements with European nations who express these sentiments either by words or deeds. If this deal goes through, it might be time to reset the US military relationship with France.

www.weeklystandard.com

EU OBSERVER: Georgia flags problems with new EU structures

"There is a change of administration in Washington, a reset policy towards Russia, and a new EU with new structures which have not yet matured," Temur Yakobashvili, Georgia's minister for re-integration said in Brussels last week while promoting the country's new engagement strategy. "Although there are some other priorities on the international arena, this conflict didn't disappear," he added. "It's still here." Georgia cannot put itself on hold until new EU arrangements start working, but needs to flag up the persisting problems with the country's Russian occupied territories of S. Ossetia and Abkhazia.

euobserver.com

WALL STREET JOURNAL: A Franco-Russian rapprochement...again

The new Franco-Russian embrace is marked by major arms sales, a space deal, lucrative energy contracts, and greater market access—all under the banner of a blossoming personal relationship between Russian President Medvedev and French President Sarkozy. One can only hope that Sarkozy will use his apparent leverage to get Moscow on board with tough sanctions on Iran, to counter the dismemberment of Georgia, and to promote Russian rule of law. Paris would also be wise to remember that its gains from Franco-Russian business ties should not come at the expense of European security. That includes the security of France's newest EU brethren, the formerly communist democracies in the East whose adoption of Western ways continues to rankle Moscow. But judging from Paris' warm embrace of Moscow, the future of Russia's expanded clout in Europe has never looked better.

online.wsj.com

JAMESTOWN FOUNDATION: Liberal development—Georgian response to Putin's agenda

Georgia's best achievements under President Saakashvili so far have been institution-building and liberal economic reforms. Its police, security forces, and army are not only modeled after the West but seem to be the only ones in the post-Soviet space (with the exception of the Baltic nations) to be enjoying full autonomy from the Russian security apparatus. Georgia's liberal economic policy, embedded in the Economic Liberty Act, has found recognition internationally and further upgraded the nation's index of economic freedom to the 26th position this year—a remarkable achievement for a non-EU, non-Anglo-Saxon country and a powerful reason for foreign investors to bring their capital into Georgia.

jamestownfoundation.blogspot.com

RADIO FREE EUROPE/RADIO LIBERTY: EU foreign policy chief puts focus on neighborhood, showcases Georgia

The EU's new foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton showcased the Union's involvement in Georgia since Russia's 2008 invasion of the country. "The EU has demonstrated what we can do when we fully mobilize the resources we have," Ashton said, highlighting the EU's immediate response to the conflict, the truce it brokered, the 300 monitors deployed, and the Geneva talks where the EU is one of the mediators. The focus now, Ashton said, is on building stability and security in Georgia and the region. "We work on trade, on visa liberalization, and we support measures to rebuild the ties with Georgia's Russian-occupied territories," she said.

www.rferl.org

AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE: Georgia offers prisoners to swap jail for monastery

Georgian criminals could be swapping prison uniforms for cassocks under a new scheme to allow offenders to serve out their sentences in monasteries. The project, unveiled by penal and church officials last week, will allow "convicts to have the possibility of serving sentences in monasteries instead of prisons." The scheme is in line with the government's policy of "liberalizing penal prosecution" and "defining new methods of re-socialization" of convicts.

www.google.com

CANADIAN BROADCASTING CORPORATION: Will the next Winter Games be in a war zone?

The violence in the Russian Caucasus, the region hosting the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, has been under-reported by the Western media, but truck bombings, suicide attacks, assassinations, beheadings and gun battles are now a daily occurrence. Does the International Olympic Committee know this? With the Caucasus looking more and more like a war zone, IOC President Jacques Rogge might be wise to take a second look now that the Vancouver Games are over.

www.cbc.ca