

GEORGIA UPDATE

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Georgians throughout the country celebrated Independence Day in festive fashion yesterday. In Zugdidi, thousands gathered for a concert by international stars Jane Birken, MS Solar, and Youssou n'Dour in support of the country's nearly 400,000 IDPs. A parade was held in Tbilisi (above) for the first time since Russia's 2008 invasion. Independence, said President Saakashvili in an address, was “especially precious” for a nation that has withstood so many occupations during its history. “Independence means having the right to choose our future, to determine the course of our development, to plan our foreign policy, to choose friends and allies.”

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QUOTES OF THE WEEK

“Georgia is a valued friend and partner of the United States. Today we renew our commitment to Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty and reaffirm the commitment of the United States to working together to broaden and deepen our partnership.”

—US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton

“People and the media have short memories. We've come to sing here against such indifference.”

—English actress and singer Jane Birkin, who headlined a concert in support of Georgian IDPs on May 26 in Zugdidi

“This small country has always been the focus of envy, always. And, you don't know if the phoenix will be reborn from its ashes. My film is about resistance.”

—Georgian filmmaker Otar Iosseliani, whose film “Chantrapas” is featured at Cannes, speaking to the *New York Times*

UPCOMING MILESTONES

May 30: Municipal elections in Tbilisi & nationwide; first direct election of the capital's mayor

Jun. 2-4: President Saakashvili visits Romania

Jun. 6-8: President Saakashvili visits Paris

Jun. 8: Next round of Geneva talks

Jun. 10-12: Speaker Bakradze attends IPU Assembly meeting in Cyprus

TOP STORIES

Latest Survey Projects Mayor Ugulava & United National Movement Winning Local Elections in Tbilisi

A new survey of Tbilisi voters projects the incumbent mayor, Gigi Ugulava, winning an outright first-round majority in the city's first-ever direct mayoral elections. It also shows the United National Movement (UNM) with a strong lead in campaign for the Tbilisi Sakrebulo, or city council. The survey fielded May 14-19, and was conducted by the Washington-based firm Greenberg Rosner Quinlan, on behalf of the UNM. Among all adults, the survey shows Ugulava winning 48 percent of the vote, compared to 10 percent for Alliance for Georgia candidate Irakli Alasania; 7 percent for Christian Democratic Movement (CDM) candidate Gia Chanturia; 6 percent for National Council candidate Zviad Dzidziguri; 4 percent for Industrialist candidate Gogi Topadze; and 1 percent for Tamaz Vashadze of the Solidarity Movement; 18 percent are undecided. The survey shows the other 3 candidates in the mayoral race each getting less than 1 percent of the vote.

Looking only at the 51 percent of voters most likely to turn out to vote on May 30, and after allocating undecided voters to their likely voting preferences (based on a range of other questions in the survey), the survey's best prediction shows Ugulava with 60 percent of the vote, 15 percent for Alasania, 9 percent for Chanturia, 7 percent for Dzidziguri, 6 percent for Topadze, and 1 percent for Vashadze. In the Sakrebulo race, the survey shows the UNM would receive 36 percent of the party list vote over-all, and 49 percent among likely voters, after allocating undecided voters. The latter figure puts the UNM 32 points ahead of the second-place CDM, and almost certainly assures a UNM majority on the city council. Most of the Tbilisi electorate approaches these elections believing they will be conducted in a free and fair manner. Overall, 57 percent of voters expect the elections be free and fair, including 65 percent of likely voters.

Coalition for Justice Debuts With Star-Studded Concert to Advance Cause of IDPs

Jane Birkin, MC Solar, and other stars held a solidarity concert for Georgian refugees from the Russian-occupied provinces of Abkhazia and S. Ossetia on Wednesday, Georgian Independence Day. "People and the media have short memories. We've come to sing here against such indifference," Birkin said. "Mikvarkar (I love you)," she told a cheering crowd of some 10,000 locals and IDPs gathered in Zugdidi's central square. The concert—organized by the newly formed Georgian NGO Coalition for Justice, together with the French NGOs SOS Racism and the Union of Jewish Students of France—was held in support of IDPs displaced by Russian-led ethnic cleansing over the past 20 years. "Today nearly 400,000 refugees from these occupied and 'cleaned' provinces live in Georgia and abroad. These Georgian citizens ask Europe for help. It is the honor of Europe and of the Europeans to answer to their desire," the organizers said. Birkin was joined by MS Solar, Youssoufa, and Grammy-winner Youssou n'Dour as they marched to a bridge at the administrative line between Georgia and Russian-occupied Abkhazia (below, courtesy of www.NouvelObs.com).

[AFP: French singers hold solidarity concert in Georgia](#)



European Parliament, Decrying Russian "Occupation" of Georgia, Calls for Greater EU Role in Region

The European Parliament has called for greater EU involvement in the S. Caucasus, including in efforts to resolve the region's conflicts. The call came in a nonbinding report adopted by Parliament, which underscores the EU's vast potential to advance stability and prosperity—as well as its own interests—in Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. "The South Caucasus is not only a region in the immediate neighborhood of the EU—Romania and Bulgaria have a sea border with it," said Evgeni Kirilov, Parliament's rapporteur on the S. Caucasus, "but a region of great strategic importance for the Union in the political, economic, and security aspects." The report underscores the Parliament's strong support for Georgia, as both the center-right European People's Party and the center-left Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats—the two largest political groups—backed a description of the situation in the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and S. Ossetia as a de facto Russian "occupation."

[RFE/RL: European Parliament Calls For Greater EU Role In S. Caucasus](#)

ELECTION UPDATE

As Landmark Election Approaches, Assurances in Place for Free & Fair Process

Over the past two years—guided by consultations with the Council of Europe, the OSCE, and other domestic and international institutions—Georgia has made sweeping changes to its electoral code, its constitution, and campaign processes. For the first time, the Tbilisi mayor will be directly elected, while the city council has been restructured to consist of 25 single-mandate majoritarian seats and 25 seats distributed proportionally among parties that pass a 4% threshold. The campaign also marked another first: a televised debate among the leading candidates. Meanwhile, the chair of the Central Election Commission—selected through a consensus process that brought together political parties across the spectrum, as well as NGOs—has been widely praised for promoting a fair process. And when voters go to the polls on Sunday, new guarantees are in place to ensure that violations are quickly investigated. Among other measures, all Precinct Electoral Commission secretaries are now opposition representatives; PEC secretaries are responsible for reviewing complaints and appeals at the precinct level.

[CIVIL GEORGIA: Local Election Guide](#)

Media Monitoring Underscores Pluralism, Access to Airwaves

The latest report by the OSCE/ODIHR observation mission underscored the diversity of media coverage of Sunday's election, with the Georgian Public Broadcaster's First Channel offering viewers "a more balanced picture of the campaign in its prime-time news programs," while other outlets split their support among the governing and opposition parties. According to ODIHR, the First Channel devoted 19% of its political and election news to the ruling party and 13% to the Alliance for Georgia; the Christian-Democratic Movement and the National Council each received 12% of coverage. Meanwhile, two stations, Rustavi 2 and Imedi TV, favored incumbent Gigi Ugulava, while two others, Kavkazia TV and TV Maestro, "by contrast, have so far served as a platform for the opposition, in particular the Alliance for Georgia." The candidates are extensively using free ad airtime allocated by broadcasters. According to the law qualified political parties (those that won at least 4% of the vote in the last parliamentary vote and at least 3% of the vote in the last local elections) must be granted 30 seconds of free airtime for every hour by private TV stations and 60 seconds by the public broadcaster.

[CIVIL GEORGIA: Int'l Observers Release Second Interim Election Report](#)

Political Leaders Warn on Use of Administrative Resources

In a concerted effort by the entire government to speak with one voice, the President yet again underscored the need for "exemplary" election procedures, citing "the great internal and external political importance in terms of our security." The President first made such a call on February 26, warning civil servants to obey electoral legislation. Similar statements have been made by, among others, Parliament Speaker Bakradze, PM Gilauri, the ministers of education and of internal affairs, and Mayor Ugulava. They have sent a very strong public signal to all authorities and other stakeholders to minimize abuses and election-related problems.

[CIVIL GEORGIA: Saakashvili—"Elections should be Exemplary"](#)

INTERNATIONAL MEDIA ON GEORGIA

CNN: Interview with President Saakashvili—Is Russia a reliable partner?

In a CNN interview with Fareed Zakaria, President Saakashvili offered insights into Georgia's relationship with the US, as well as on today's Russia. In commenting on the Obama Administration, he said: "I've seen no signs of compromising on the main principle...that this area should be kept democratic, that democratic leadership is supported. President Obama, personally, has been very strong on that... I think the U.S., the U.S. president has got it all right." On Russian PM Putin: "He still thinks that, you know, the West cheated overall Russia, and Russia needs to regain this sphere of influence," adding: "But, you know, ultimately Russia cannot survive without real modernization, real opening up, real democracy. These are people who travel. They are well aware of what's going on in the world."

NEWSWEEK: Russian payback

Target No. 1 is Georgia and its fervently pro-NATO president, Mikheil Saakashvili. Pro-Kremlin Duma deputy Sergei Markov promises that Moscow is planning "a second Bishkek" to oust Saakashvili—a reference to the rioting last month that forced the Kyrgyz president to flee. That's a piece of bluster—but one that has a hard grain of truth to it. The opposition's publicly palling with Moscow may be a dangerous strategy. A recent poll by the International Republican Institute shows that 38 percent of respondents said they disapproved of Alasania's meetings with Russian officials, with only 22 percent in favor. Nogaidei's own support hovers around 4 percent.

www.newsweek.com

WASHINGTON POST: US abandoning Russia's neighbors

It would be one thing to resubmit the 123 treaty noting that the United States still has serious disagreements with Russia over Georgia. Instead, by stating so baldly that the situation in Georgia is no longer an obstacle to advancing Russian-American relations, the administration is essentially abandoning the Georgians and giving Russia a green light to continue to engage in provocative behavior along its borders. In the interest of removing irritating issues from its agenda with Moscow, will the Obama administration sell out Georgia and Moldova by dropping insistence on Russian withdrawal from those two countries? Or will it do the right thing, treat "host-country consent" as a sacrosanct principle and use efforts to revive the CFE Treaty as a mechanism to facilitate eventual Russian withdrawal from Georgia and Moldova?

www.washingtonpost.com

NEW YORK TIMES: NATO urged to look beyond borders

As a gesture of nonaggression aimed at Russia, NATO has done little planning on how it might defend newer member states like Poland and the Baltic countries from a Russian attack, whether military, naval or through the Internet. Some eastern European officials fear a Georgia-like local or regional conflict, where existing antagonisms could be manipulated. "Some of the allies worry that NATO would not be able to come to their defense in a crisis," said Tomas Valasek, one of the authors of the London report, who also was a civilian adviser to Ms. Albright.

www.nytimes.com

JAMESTOWN: Georgia supports Turkey's bigger regional role

Turkey has been Georgia's number one trade partner ever since Moscow imposed harsh economic sanctions on Tbilisi some four years ago. To Russia's great disappointment, the full-scale embargo has failed to compel Georgia to change its liberal domestic policy and pro-Western orientation. What it produced instead was Georgia's even more rigorous political and economic liberalization and faster reorientation of its markets to seek trade partners and investors in Europe, the US, the Middle East, and elsewhere around the globe.

<http://jamestownfoundation.blogspot.com/>

EURASIA DAILY MONITOR: Zurab Noghaideli's National Council bandwagons with Russia

On May 13 in Tbilisi, the political bloc "National Council" announced its intention to open representative offices in Moscow and St. Petersburg. The declared goals are to liaise with Russia's executive and legislative authorities and also with the Georgian diaspora in Russia. The move is timed to the May 30 local elections in Georgia. The opening of National Council offices in Russia, if allowed, could be construed as quasi-recognition of alternative Georgian authorities-in-waiting. It would also confirm that Russia is positioning its supporters for a regime-change effort. The National Council's electoral prospects are rated as low by other contestants and observers alike. Its chances can only improve if backed by massive Russian resources, and if Brussels and Washington are seen to consign Georgia to a grey zone between the West and Russia.

www.jamestown.org

EURASIANET: Can Georgia find the backdoor for exports into Russia?

A pending customs union involving Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan could open a way for Georgian food products to get around a Moscow-imposed trade embargo. The union, approved by the Russian government on May 14 and scheduled to take effect on July 1, would remove all customs checkpoints among the three countries; any product that enters Belarus or Kazakhstan would, in theory, be able to circulate freely within the troika's market. Details have not been made public about how the union would treat member-states' existing import agreements.

www.eurasianet.org

REUTERS: Georgia PM sees 2010 deficit at 6.8 pct

Georgia's budget deficit should ease to 6.8 percent of GDP this year, from 9.4 percent in 2009, PM Nika Gilauri said. He also said Georgia should see economic growth of 4.5 percent this year—in line with his earlier forecast of 3-5 percent. "We're hoping to go back to growth of 8-9 percent we had before (the crisis) within one to two years." He added that Georgia Railway, fully owned by the government, is mulling a Eurobond worth between 50-150 million euros within the next few months.

www.reuters.com

BLOOMBERG: Georgia banks on musical star's success at Eurovision in Oslo

Georgia is banking on the success of 24-year-old Sofia Nizharadze, who made her name in Moscow musicals, at this year's Eurovision Song Contest in Oslo. "If I win, and the next contest is held in Georgia, it would be great for investment in the country," Nizharadze said. "Loads of sponsors would come to help organize the event. It would show Georgia in a positive light, and after what happened, we need it." Nizharadze said she left Russia, where she had starred in musicals such as Romeo and Juliet and Notre Dame de Paris, after Russian August 2008 invasion of Georgia and returned to find that her country had "changed and improved." The former Soviet republic "needs support," she said.

www.bloomberg.com

NEW YORK TIMES: Recounting a life of disobedience

The filmmaker Otar Iosseliani is the Cannes Film Festival's man from Georgia, known for his absurdist humor and for making his own kinds of films in France. The director describes Georgia's history as one long drama. "This small country has always been the focus of envy, always. And, you don't know if the phoenix will be reborn from its ashes. My film is about resistance," he says, referring to "Chantrapas." "Recent Russian invasion has been devastating in the Baltic states and especially dramatic for Georgia," he continues. "The Russians never behaved in a civilized fashion—never. Look how the English left India, but the Russians won't leave. They are, well, something else, the whole lot: Putin, Medvedev, and before, Brezhnev, Khrushchev, and Stalin and, the rotter of the lot, Lenin. Before, there was that idiot Czar Nicolas. Not to mention Catherine the Great and Ivan the Terrible—it's hard to live with neighbors like that, it's a nightmare. But we don't hate them, we just hold them in contempt."

www.nytimes.com