

GEORGIA UPDATE

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Georgian-Azerbaijani Ties Continue to Grow Stronger

Ties between Tbilisi and Baku continue to grow stronger in the wake of another high-level meeting last week between the two countries. Georgian FM Vashadze met with his Azerbaijani counterpart, Elmar Mammadyarov, in Tbilisi to focus on resolving the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as the Russian occupation of Georgia's regions of Abkhazia and S. Ossetia. The ministers also welcomed the EU's engagement in the Caucasus through the framework of the Eastern Partnership and prospective association agreements.

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QUOTES OF THE WEEK

"The Venice Commission is pleased to see that the parliament of Georgia has followed several recommendations. The proposed constitutional amendments provide for several important improvements and significant steps in the right direction, which the Venice Commission welcomes."

—The Council of Europe's Venice Commission reporting on Georgia's new constitution

"I look forward to further progress towards the full implementation of the EU-brokered Six Point Agreement of August 2008 and its Implementing Measures of September 2008."

—EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton on Russia's withdrawal from Georgia's village of Perevi

"The de-occupation of each village is of the utmost importance for Georgia and especially for the population residing in those villages. It should be emphasized that the withdrawal of Russian occupation forces from Perevi is just a miniscule step in comparison with commitments envisaged by the 2008 ceasefire agreement with which Russia has yet to comply."

—Georgian Foreign Ministry statement

UPCOMING MILESTONES

Oct. 28-29: Montenegrin FM visits Georgia

Nov. 3-4: Iranian FM visits Georgia

Nov. 8-13: UN permanent representatives from South/Central America visit Georgia

Nov. 12-13: FM Vashadze visits Morocco

Nov. 17: FM Vashadze visits Tunis

Nov. 19-20: President Saakashvili attends NATO Summit in Lisbon

Nov. 23: 7th anniversary of the Rose Revolution

Nov. 24-25: Ukrainian FM visits Georgia

Dec. 1-2: OSCE summit in Astana

TOP STORIES

Parliament Overwhelmingly Approves Constitutional Amendments, Bringing Georgia Closer to Europe

After a 16-month process led by an independent Constitutional Commission, the Parliament of Georgia on Friday approved an amended constitution by an overwhelming majority. The new constitution creates a more European model of government by introducing a so-called “mixed system—a strong Parliament, a government formed by and directly accountable to the Parliament, and a directly elected President acting as arbiter, but also as the representative of the state. Through a clearly defined system of checks and balances, the different branches of government will better balance each other to avoid the concentration of power in any one branch. The new constitution—which goes into force after the next presidential elections in October 2013—also enhances the protection of private property, strengthens the independence of the judiciary and local governments, and increases the role of political parties in decision-making.

The Council of Europe’s constitutional advisory group, known as the Venice Commission, praised the new Constitution: “The Venice Commission is pleased to see that the parliament of Georgia has followed several recommendations,” the group said in a statement. “The proposed constitutional amendments provide for several important improvements and significant steps in the right direction, which the Venice Commission welcomes.”

Said David Bakradze, Georgia’s speaker of parliament: “In the last 20 years we have had three presidencies and each one of them involved political turmoil, because in the Georgian system the president is the center of gravity. These changes mean there will now be no single person or no single institution that can take decisions without the consent of others, and that’s the key to stability.” An extensive public consultation process led to numerous changes in the initial draft of the constitution; 27 public meetings throughout Georgia, during which local communities discussed the draft with representatives of academia as well as experts, NGOs, opposition political parties, minority organizations, the judiciary, the business community, and the diplomatic corps. The Commission also consulted extensively with international institutions and other governments in developing the draft.

[CIVIL GEORGIA: New Constitution Adopted](#)

[DEUTSCHE PRESSE AGENTUR: Georgia amends constitution, reduces presidential powers](#)

Key Points in Georgia’s New Constitution

The new constitution reshapes the government to balance state institutions by shifting a number of significant powers from the presidency to the Parliament and the government, which will be led by the PM. Among the key points under the proposed new system:

- Parliament forms and dismisses the government. The party with the most MPs in Parliament nominates the PM, who presents the cabinet and program to Parliament for a vote of confidence. This is in contrast to the current model, under which the President selects the Prime Minister and presents the cabinet to the Parliament for approval.
- The government exercises executive powers and is directly accountable solely to the Parliament.
- The President is head of state, arbiter between the legislative and executive branches in case of crises, Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, and represents Georgia internationally.
- A rigorous system of checks and balances will be put in place to avoid the abuse of powers by any branch of government.
- The procedure for overriding a presidential veto has been simplified; to overcome a veto, the support of a majority of listed MPs is necessary (instead of the current three-fifths majority).
- Parliament is entitled to initiate votes of no confidence towards the government at any time on any grounds.

Russia Withdraws from Checkpoint in Perevi, Continues to Violate Ceasefire Agreement

The Kremlin this week made a small step towards the de-occupation of Georgia, withdrawing troops from a small village bordering Georgia’s Russian-occupied territory of S. Ossetia. “The de-occupation of each village is of utmost importance for Georgia and especially for the population residing in those villages,” the Georgian Foreign Ministry said in a statement on Moscow’s retreat from a border checkpoint in Perevi, a village with a large ethnic-Georgian population. Although European and Georgian authorities welcomed the withdrawal, the international community underscored that Russia must completely pull out of the country in order to be in compliance with the EU-mediated 2008 ceasefire agreement: Said EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton: “I look forward to further progress towards the full implementation of the EU-brokered Six Point Agreement of August 2008 and its Implementing Measures of September 2008.” The Georgian government also highlighted Russia’s near-complete failure to honor the 2008 ceasefire agreement. “It should be emphasized that the withdrawal of Russian occupation forces from Perevi is just a minuscule step in comparison with the commitments envisaged by the 2008 ceasefire agreement with which Russia still must comply,” the foreign ministry said. Russia announced its decision to withdraw from Perevi during the 13th round of the Geneva peace talks, saying the move was made as an “act of goodwill.” According to the Georgian interior ministry, a Georgian army unit moved in to secure the village as Russian troops withdrew.

[BBC NEWS: Russian Troops Withdraw from Georgian Town](#)

[EURASIANET: Russians to Withdraw from Village of Perevi... Again](#)

Georgia Says Will Not Block Russian WTO Membership if Border Deal Is Agreed

In a show of goodwill, Georgia last week agreed to support Moscow’s WTO membership accession if the two countries can agree on a border treaty. “Russia must do a deal with Georgia over customs controls on their internationally recognized border if it is to pursue its goal of joining the World Trade Organization,” said Georgia’s First Deputy Foreign Minister Giorgi Bokeria. “One of the fundamental principles of the WTO is transparency of borders. Right now there is no transparency on the Georgia-Russia border,” he added. Bokeria emphasized the Georgian government’s position that Tbilisi does not seek to block Russian WTO membership. “In principle, we are in favor of Russia joining the WTO—anything which would bring Russia closer to a civilized community of the world,” he said. Russian customs posts are located deep in Georgia’s Russian-controlled territory, making it impossible for Georgian custom officials to control trade flows across its northern border.

[REUTERS: Russian WTO Membership Requires Border Deal](#)

Georgia Opens China-Europe Transit Route with New Border Treaty

Georgia last week signed a simplified border agreement with Turkey aimed at increasing its attractiveness as a transit corridor for goods moving between China and Europe and increasing flows of tourists. “Everything is slashed by half, there are no more double checks,” said Finance Minister Baidurashvili. “We estimate it will cut the time spent at checkpoints by 40%. That means that in a 24-hour period at a customs checkpoint there will be an extra six or seven hours of slots,” he added during the official signing ceremony in Istanbul with Turkish State Minister Hayati Yazici. The new arrangement means there will be only one set of customs checks and one set of bilingual documents required at border crossings between the two countries. Until now, two sets of checks and two sets of documents have been required, making the process lengthy and laborious. The simplified system should move Georgia closer to its goal of developing tourism by increasing the number of visitors willing to enter the country during the summer season because they will not need to spend as much time queuing as in the past. Two checkpoints, one at Sarpi, some 20 kilometers from Batumi, and another at Vale are already operational; a third at Kartsakhi will open in 2011.

[BUSINESS NEW EUROPE: Georgia Opens up China-Europe Transit Route with Turkey Border Treaty](#)

INTERNATIONAL MEDIA ON GEORGIA

NEW YORK TIMES: Georgia amends constitution

The Georgian Parliament gave final approval last week to constitutional amendments reducing the powers of the president and strengthening the role of the prime minister after presidential elections in 2013. Those elections are expected to produce the first peaceful transfer of power since Georgia gained its independence from the Soviet Union nearly two decades ago. Mikheil Saakashvili, Georgia's young, pro-Western president who came to power in a bloodless coup in 2003, has vowed to abide by term limits and step aside, and his supporters have said the new amendments will strengthen Georgia's democratic credentials. "If I wanted to cling to power, there are other ways—a referendum for a third presidential term or transfer of all the powers to the prime minister," Saakashvili said, referring to critics who question the president's motives.

www.nytimes.com

WALL STREET JOURNAL: NATO committed to Georgia inclusion

Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen said NATO remains committed to admitting Georgia, the pro-Western country suffered its greatest losses yet in Afghanistan. "I would expect the NATO summit in Lisbon to reaffirm our position, which we took already in Bucharest in 2008, that Georgia will become a member of NATO once Georgia fulfills the necessary criteria," he said. "Georgian soldiers are serving in Helmand province—one of the most difficult areas in our mission in Afghanistan. I highly appreciate your dedication to our common security, testimony to strong partnership between Georgia and NATO."

online.wsj.com

THE TELEGRAPH: "Serious differences" still exist between London and Moscow, Hague admits

"We have serious differences which we do not shy away from discussing," British Foreign Secretary William Hague said about the divide between the UK and Russia. "We are not saying today that we have abolished all the differences between the governments of the UK and Russia," he added. Britain suspended co-operation with Russia's FSB security service after the killing of Alexander Litvinenko, and brought in more onerous visa requirements for Russian officials. The two sides also continue to differ over enforcement of the peace deal that ended the Russia's 2008 invasion of Georgia.

www.telegraph.co.uk

DEFENSE NEWS: Russia strengthens grip on vital East-West trade corridor

The installation of an S-300 air defense system in Russian-occupied Abkhazia, though described by Russia as necessary for territorial defense, is actually aimed at cementing Russian dominance over a vital resources trade corridor through Eurasia. "This is directed not so much against Georgia as against NATO and the US," Georgian Deputy PM Temur Yakobashvili said. Unchecked, the Kremlin's geopolitical pretensions will transform the Black Sea into a strategic cul-de-sac for the West. If Russia becomes gatekeeper of the east-west corridor, every contingency will be met with complications, bargaining, delays or maybe outright blockage. Although the West has convinced itself that Moscow shares many of its interests, Russia's approach is and will remain a zero-sum game.

www.defensenews.com

EURASIANET: Battle for the Caucasus—Georgia scraps visas for residents of Russia's North Caucasus

In the struggle for the Caucasus, Russia may have gotten an initial upper hand by setting up shop in Georgia's two territories bordering the Caucasus mountains, but Tbilisi is hoping to prevail over Moscow on its own home turf. Tbilisi has announced plans to allow residents from Russia's N. Caucasus republics to make 90-day trips to Georgia visa-free. Tbilisi hopes the Caucasus will coalesce around Georgia, as the region's lab for "economic and social transformation," in the President's words.

www.eurasianet.org

**EURASIANET: Tbilisi tries to make a Switzerland out of Svaneti**

The government is trying to implement a bold plan to transform the remote mountain regions of Svaneti, in the country's northeast, and Tusheti, in eastern Georgia, into world-class recreational playgrounds. Tourism officials say they see diversity as Georgia's regional competitive advantage. "In a very small area, you have both seaside resorts and mountain resorts, as well as a plethora of historical sites and a winemaking region," explains an official.

www.eurasianet.org

ATLANTA JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION: 2 Georgias toast each other

Friendship Force, the international exchange program founded in Atlanta in 1977, started the connection between the two Georgias. That relationship was cemented in 1990 when 300 people from Atlanta and other nearby cities traveled to the Georgian capital of Tbilisi in a well-publicized exchange. A range of groups, such as Georgia-to-Georgia, have nurtured the relationship. People and ideas continue to flow over the 6,000 miles between the Georgias. The state of Georgia sends national guardsmen to train the nation's military, and doctors from Emory and Grady Hospital bolster the country's public health program.

www.ajc.com

BOSTON GLOBE: Making a leap, from around the world

It is the end of August, and new principal dancer, Lasha Khozashvili, has been at Boston Ballet less than a week. But already he dances like he owns the place, filling the studio during a rehearsal of "La Bayadere" with lofty jumps and bold turns, his long strides rocketing him through space. With curly dark locks and flashing eyes, this native of Tbilisi, Georgia, is destined to be a company heartthrob.

www.boston.com