

GEORGIA UPDATE

WEEKLY EDITION • 27 January 2011

A Publication of the Government of Georgia

www.georgiaupdate.gov.ge

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For the second year in a row, President Saakashvili answered questions from Georgians throughout the country in a televised broadcast. He tackled issues ranging from inflation and unemployment, to low teacher salaries and how to spur development in remote regions of the country. The President said the government was working to ensure a "serious breakthrough" on unemployment next year, based on the expansion of the tourism, agriculture, and construction sectors.

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QUOTES OF THE WEEK

"The Parliament calls on the Vice President/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy to step up efforts to encourage Russia to comply with the six-point Sarkozy Plan to stabilize and resolve the conflict in Georgia.. [and] points out that human rights violations are a daily occurrence in occupied South Ossetia and Abkhazia."

—The European Parliament's newly adopted resolution on EU strategy for the Black Sea region

"We have experienced an economic embargo, years of provocations, attempts to stoke internal turmoil and a military coup, and we have suffered a large-scale invasion. During the three years that remain of my presidency, I will focus on overcoming the consequences of those problems.... My major interest is not where I will be, but where my country will be in 2013."

—President Saakashvili speaking during Tuesday's live, televised Q&A session with the Georgian public

"According to a recent study, the average age of Georgian bureaucrats is now 28, that of ministers and members of parliament 32, and that "among successful businessmen, managers, university heads, experts and journalists, there are today almost no people older than 40."

—Radio Free Europe

UPCOMING MILESTONES

Feb. 1: Easter Partnership ministerial meeting in Brussels

Feb. 2: FM Vashadze visits Luxembourg

Feb. 4-6: Munich Security Conference

Feb. 25: FM Vashadze visits the Czech Republic

Mar. 3-4: Next round of Geneva peace talks

TOP STORIES

European Parliament Resolution Calls for Action on Georgia's Occupied Territories

The European Parliament last week passed a landmark resolution calling for “more direct engagement” on Georgia’s occupied territories in a move to renew support for Georgia’s territorial integrity. The resolution, which elaborates on an EU strategy for the Black Sea region, calls on the EU to define a “comprehensive approach” toward addressing Russia’s illegal occupation and re-militarization of Georgia, as well as other regional challenges. MEPs urged EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton to “step up efforts to encourage Russia to comply with the six-point Sarkozy Plan to stabilize and resolve the conflict in Georgia.” Underscoring the EU’s role in defending human rights and enhancing democracy and stability in the region, the bloc also called on the EU to actively respond to human rights violations in Georgia’s Russian “occupied” territories of S. Ossetia and Abkhazia, where violations are prolific. Georgia hailed the EU’s renewed calls for action in the region. The resolution has been submitted to the EU Council, the European Commission, senior foreign affairs officials, as well as member states for approval. The resolution came on the heels of reports by Russia’s Interfax news agency on the deployment of Tochka-U short-range ballistic missiles and other offensive weapons to a Russian military base in S. Ossetia. The Tochka-U missile shipment supplements a supply of Smertsch rocket launchers that Russia deployed to the region last month, despite mounting criticism of Russia’s military build-up.

[EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT: The European Parliament Resolution on an EU Strategy for the Black Sea](#)

[CIVIL GEORGIA: Tbilisi Hails MEPs Resolution on Black Sea Region](#)

Answering Questions from Public, President Says Georgia Must “Develop Fast”

President Saakashvili answered questions from Georgian citizens from throughout the country for almost three hours during a televised broadcast on Tuesday. The public focused its concern on the economy and, in particular, on the rise in prices and unemployment. “Inflation is the main economic challenge,” the President said. “Prices are going up throughout the world. The only way out of this situation for Georgia is to develop fast.” With respect to unemployment, which fell in 2010, Saakashvili said developing the country’s agriculture, tourism, and infrastructure sectors was essential. He said that Georgia could at least double its agriculture production in the next few years, and grow the number of foreign visitors to Georgia from 2 million in 2010 to 3 million in 2011. The construction of hydro power plants and roads, he said, is at the heart of the government’s infrastructure strategy. He also touted Georgia’s new initiative to teach English in schools, which is expected to make Georgians more employable in future. The President also was asked about whether he would seek the post of prime minister in 2013 when his term ends, to which he answered: “My major interest is not where I will be, but where my country will be, and I promise that I will always put Georgia’s interests above my interests.” Other questions ranged the gamut: A woman from the Misaktsieli asked the President to reopen a closed kindergarten, while a caller from the same village asked for agriculture equipment. A man from Adjara encouraged the President to develop resorts in the mountainous part of that region. One student, meanwhile, asked the President how the government could help students with the implementation of “innovative ideas.”

[CIVIL GEORGIA: Saakashvili’s Televised Phone-in](#)

Georgia Condemns Bombing at Moscow Airport

The Government immediately condemned the terror attack that took place Monday at Moscow’s main international airport, killing dozens, including numerous foreigners. “Georgia has always and continues to strongly condemn any form of terrorism,” Georgia’s Foreign Ministry said in a statement. “The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia conveys its condolences to the families of those who have lost their lives.”

[CIVIL GEORGIA: Tbilisi Condemns Moscow Airport Blast](#)

European Council Concludes Visa, Readmission Agreements with Georgia; Enter Into Force March 1

The European Council last week formally approved visa and readmission agreements with Georgia, enabling Georgian citizens to obtain EU entry visas more easily. Ratified by the European Parliament last year, the visa accord, as well as a complementary agreement on the readmission of irregular immigrants, will enter into force on March 1. “The visa facilitation agreement makes it easier and cheaper for Georgian citizens, in particular those who travel most, to acquire short stay visas for travels to and throughout the EU,” the Council said. Under the agreement, application procedures are simplified and the EU entry visa fee waived for particular categories of Georgians: scientists, exemplary students, journalists, pensioners, children 12 or below, the disabled, and close relatives of Georgian citizens legally residing in the EU. Under the agreements, Georgia must also readmit ethnic Georgians residing in EU member states without legal documents.

[CIVIL GEORGIA: EU-Georgia Visa Easing, Readmission Treaties to Enter into Force in March](#)

Georgia's Beaches, Ski Resorts & Business Opportunities Drive Jump in Foreign Visitors

Drawn by Georgia’s Black Sea beaches, rich culinary traditions, business opportunities, and famed ski resorts, over 2 million visitors flocked to the country last year. Tourism to Georgia jumped 36 percent compared to 2009. The majority of visitors to Georgia, over 1.2 million, were from the Commonwealth of Independent States, representing a 35 percent increase year over year. Meanwhile the number of tourists from non-CIS European countries rose 33 percent, totaling nearly 700,000. Georgia also saw a 60 percent increase in the number of visitors to Georgia from Asian countries, totaling nearly 50,000; an 18 percent increase in the number of American visitors, to about 23,000; and a 15 percent jump in the number of visitors from Africa. The government over the past year has pursued a range of economic reforms to foster foreign investment and tourism, helping to create local jobs and promote economic development.

[GEORGIA TIMES: Georgia Visited by more than Two Million Foreigners](#)

President, Government Seek to Boost Agriculture to Offset Inflation

The government last week called for an increase in the nation’s agricultural production to blunt the impact of rising costs on Georgians and promote economic growth. “Under the current conditions, when prices have gone mad worldwide—the price of fuel is increasing, the price of food is increasing, the prices of staples are increasing—the only way out of the situation is to increase agricultural production,” President Saakashvili said.

[BLOOMBERG: Saakashvili Urges More Food Production](#)

Conference in Washington to Advance Georgian Health Care Reform

Health care experts from Georgia and the US will meet with Georgian government officials, including First Lady Sandra Elisabeth Roelofs, to tackle the critical challenges facing the Georgia health care system at the first-ever Georgia-US health conference in Washington, DC, on Feb. 1-2. US Secretary of Health Kathleen Sebelius will deliver opening remarks. The conference, “Georgian Health Care 2020: MEDEA 2011,” will bring together Georgian officials, representatives of US and international organizations, non-governmental and private sector stakeholders in Georgia’s health sector, and Georgian medical and public health professionals who live and work in the US. “Improving health care is intrinsically tied to the progress of a nation,” said Mrs. Roelofs, who organized the conference. “Georgia has come a long way in improving its health care system, but we still have far to go in improving the quality of care the Georgian people receive.” She added: “We hope that, through brainstorming with the brightest minds in the US and Georgian health care communities, we can assess where we’ve made progress and where we can continue to make the greatest strides toward achieving our humanitarian goals.” Over the last decade, the Georgian medical community in the US has expanded immensely and emerged as an important resource for Georgia.

INTERNATIONAL MEDIA ON GEORGIA

BBC NEWS: Interview with President Saakashvili

"Georgia still matters," President Saakashvili said last week in an interview with the BBC following his meeting with President Obama in Washington. "Georgia is very important strategically and what is important is to stay on the road, to stay focused," he said. The president also highlighted the country's democratic and economic reform achievements: "Georgia has managed to lead in terms of economic growth in the region, in terms of really setting standards for combating corruption. The World Bank proclaimed us the world's number one reformer and we wield considerable soft power all over the region because we are the alternative to an authoritarian bullying model."

www.president.gov.ge

AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE: Obama meets with Georgian president in US

President Obama thanked President Saakashvili for attending the memorial service for diplomat Richard Holbrooke as the two leaders sat down together in Washington earlier this month. Obama met with Saakashvili after the service. "The leaders discussed Georgia's efforts to advance its economic development and increase trade," the White House said. "They also discussed security challenges in the Caucasus and the work of ISAF in Afghanistan, where brave Georgians stand shoulder to shoulder with American forces."

news.yahoo.com

RADIO FREE EUROPE: As corruption rises worldwide, Georgia proves the exception

In its 2010 Global Corruption Barometer, Transparency International says a remarkable transformation has taken place over the past several years in Georgia, as the government has pursued aggressive anticorruption reforms in the public sector. "There is no other country at the moment where more people see a decrease in corruption in their country, and where more people say the government is effective in fighting corruption," a senior TI analyst says. "I think this is an indication that the Georgian government's efforts to fight petty corruption have been very successful."

www.rferl.org

WASHINGTON POST: How's that "reset" working out?

Notice the mild response by the Georgian government regarding the arrest earlier this month of six Georgians accused of multiple bombings in co-ordination with a Russian military officer, Evgeni Borisov. President Saakashvili, in his statement on the day the arrests were announced, did not make any link to Russia: "All evidence currently gathered by our law enforcement agencies suggests that these individuals were acting on orders from the occupied territories," the President said, emphasizing that "the allegations have yet to be established by due process of law."

www.washingtonpost.com

THE GUARDIAN: David Cameron should strike repressive Russia off his itinerary

So far, Britain has kept quiet about the latest disturbing manifestation of Putin's ever more menacing police state. "Putin is gambling that western politicians are too weak and western investors too greedy to stand up to him. They should prove him wrong," the *Economist* commented last week. "The West should recognize this marks a new, more repressive phase of Putin's rule.... If Russia continues to act in this way, it should be chucked out of the G8." Likewise, Cameron should cancel his visit to Moscow.

www.guardian.co.uk

WINDOW ON EURASIA: Georgia now dominated by "golden youth" of Brezhnev era

According to a recent study, Georgian analyst Georgy Kalatozishvili says, the average age of Georgian bureaucrats is now 28, that of ministers and members of parliament 32, and that "among successful businessmen, managers, university heads, experts and journalists there are today almost no people older than 40." Said Kalatozishvili: "As often happens" in such circumstances, the Tbilisi analyst says, the results have been mixed. The youthful leaders "increased the budget by eight times ... and implemented the most complex reforms in all directions."

windowoneurasia.blogspot.com

RADIO FREE EUROPE: Activists question suicides at South Ossetian prison

Some rights activists are blaming authorities in S. Ossetia for a string of prison deaths in Georgia's Russian-occupied territory. Andrei Kabulov, a former police officer serving an 18-year prison term, committed suicide in a Tskhinvali prison on November 29, and two other deaths officially were ruled as suicides in the same prison in the past year. Human rights activist Ruslan Magkaev blamed S. Ossetian authorities for the deaths, saying Russia should intervene to put an end to "chaos and despotism" that exists in S. Ossetia.

www.rferl.org

BLOOMBERG: Saakashvili urges more food production to slow price increases

President Saakashvili last week urged the agricultural industry to boost production to tackle accelerating inflation. "Worldwide prices have gone mad, Georgia will be subjected to global inflation badly, and this is why we need to act," Saakashvili said while in Kakheti. "More people should work in agriculture and grow more products—our soil has the potential." Inflation rose to annual rate of 11.2 percent in December, led by increased food and transportation costs.

www.bloomberg.com

BLOOMBERG: Azerbaijan and Georgia in talks over privatization of pipeline

Azerbaijan is in talks with Georgia over the privatization of a pipeline that supplies natural gas to Armenia via Georgia. Azerbaijan would like to use the pipeline, owned by the Georgian Oil & Gas Corporation, for the so-called AGR1 liquefied natural gas project that will connect Azerbaijan, Georgia and Romania, Nizameddin Guliyev. There is no timeline for the talks.

www.bloomberg.com

INSIDE THE GAMES: Georgia awarded 2015 European Youth Olympic Festival

Georgia last month was awarded the 2015 European Youth Olympic Festival. Tbilisi was chosen to host the biennial event ahead of Brno in the Czech Republic after President Saakashvili addressed the delegates at the European Olympic Committees Assembly. "Let us enjoy this great victory and celebrate," Tbilisi Mayor Ugulava said after learning of Georgia's win in a 26–21 vote.

www.insidethegames.biz

NEW YORK TIMES: Addicted and adrift in post-Soviet world

Levan Koguashvili's promising new feature, "Street Days," opens today at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. Released in the Georgian language with English subtitles, the film is a reference to the difficult period in the director's native Georgia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Yet the film isn't characterized by the dread, paranoia, and ruthless violence we've come to expect in dramas from the former Soviet bloc, rather the bleak tale takes one absurdly comic turn after another. Guga Kotetishvili is marvelous as Checkie, permanently stunned that history has abandoned him, and Irakli Ramishvili provides able support as the young man. Meanwhile Koguashvili and his director of photography use the narrow streets and weathered buildings of Tbilisi to great pictorial effect.

movies.nytimes.com