

GEORGIA UPDATE

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President Saakashvili traveled to Brussels this week to meet with a series of EU leaders, including foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton (above). On Monday, in Tbilisi, he reaffirmed Georgia’s commitment to free and fair elections, and warned against threats to Georgia’s democracy and electoral integrity. “The upcoming elections will be the next decisive, historical moment. It will be that very milestone which will mark Georgia’s Rubicon after which nobody will be able to turn [Georgia] back,” the President said in a televised address. “These elections oblige each of us—at all levels of the government, from the President to each of you—to ensure an unconditional commitment to democracy and legal principles, and to guarantee that this electoral process is really exemplary.” The president warned against “disproportionate” attempts to buy Georgia’s democracy by illegally influencing the vote: “Attempts to trample the law will be countered...by strict law enforcement efforts based on zero tolerance,” he said, adding that the Georgian state will “protect and secure the right of each of our citizen to make a democratic and free choice.”

INTERNATIONAL MEDIA ON GEORGIA

LE FIGARO: Ivanishvili, the billionaire who wants to buy Georgia for himself

NEW YORK TIMES: A backlash in Georgia

MOSCOW TIMES: Putin’s Eurasian illusion will lead to isolation

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QUOTES OF THE WEEK

“We believe the implementation of the initiative proposed by the Speaker of Parliament will contribute positively to the creation of a fair electoral environment and healthy political competition. We welcome the readiness of the government to take certain steps and ensure access to information and a level media playing field during the pre-election period.”

♦ Statement by “This Affects You Too,” an umbrella civil society campaign uniting election watchdog, legal advocacy organizations, and media outlets including Transparency International Georgia, the Georgian Young Lawyers Association, and the International Society for Fair Elections & Democracy

“I will personally ensure that any attempt of ballot rigging will be punished with the full force of law.”

“These elections oblige each of us—at all levels of the government, from the President to each of you—to ensure an unconditional commitment to democracy and legal principles, and to guarantee that this electoral process is really exemplary.”

“The Georgian state will respond to the attacks against our democracy—and undoubtedly what is happening is an attack against our democracy—by further strengthening democracy, instead of imposing restrictions. Attempts to trample the law will be countered, on the one hand, by strict law enforcement efforts based on zero tolerance, and, on the other hand, by exemplary work of the state system to ensure a democratic electoral process.”

♦ President Saakashvili speaking Monday to governors and municipal leaders in Georgia

UPCOMING MILESTONES

Jun. 27: FM Vashadze begins visit to Indonesia and Malaysia

Jun. 28-29: NATO Deputy Secretary General Vershbow visits Georgia

Aug. 7: 4th anniversary of Russian invasion

Oct.: Parliamentary elections

TOP STORIES

Parliament Takes Unprecedented Step to Ensure Level Media Playing Field Ahead of October Vote

Parliament this week is advancing legislation that will create unprecedented access to news broadcasts for Georgians. The new rules will compel all cable operators to carry all news-based TV channels in Georgia, while compelling all news-based TV channels to offer their signal to all cable operators. "The legislation represents another step towards making sure that this year's parliamentary elections are free and fair, and that the campaign will take place in the most transparent and open environment," Parliament Chairman David Bakradze said. "Access to a variety of media and to diverse opinions is a core principle of democracy. All Georgian voters should have access to a wide range of views in order to make an informed choice. It will be a huge step that will help the population to receive more information."

The proposed amendments were hailed by election watchdog and legal advocacy groups. "We believe that the implementation of the initiative proposed by the Speaker of Parliament will contribute positively to the creation of a fair electoral environment and healthy political competition," declared "This Affects You Too," an umbrella civil society campaign uniting election watchdog and legal advocacy organizations, including Transparency International Georgia, the Georgian Young Lawyers Association, and the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy. "We welcome the readiness of the government to take certain steps and ensure access to information and a level media playing field during the pre-election period."

The new rules would only apply during the official election campaign period. "With this new legislation—in addition to the existing one and in tandem with the current EU/UNDP project to assess the contents of all Georgian media outlets and evaluate the balance and tone of their political coverage—the media environment during the upcoming campaign will be freer and more open than ever," Bakradze said.

[PARLIAMENT OF GEORGIA: Statement from Speaker on Media Law](#)

President Pledges "Disproportionately Clean Election" to Confront "Disproportionate Threat to Democracy"

President Saakashvili on Monday vowed to host "disproportionately clean elections" to confront ongoing threats against its democracy. "When certain forces are excessively trying to buy our democracy, our response to them will be in two ways: on the one hand these attempts will be countered by proportional force of law enforcement system and, on the other hand, their attempts will be countered by our excessive, disproportional will to make the upcoming elections maximally open, transparent, and democratic," said Saakashvili in a live, televised meeting with governors and municipal leaders. Saakashvili emphasized a no-tolerance policy toward electoral violations and illegal attempts to influence the election's outcome.

The government will enforce and ensure the legality and fairness of the elections in three key areas: ballot box transparency, bribery eradication, and media reform, he said. "I will personally ensure that any attempt of ballot rigging will be punished with the full force of law," Saakashvili said. "The Georgian state will protect and secure the right of each of our citizens to make a democratic and free choice." He said Parliament's move to oblige cable broadcasters to carry all news channels will help bring parity to the political debate in Georgia. "We want the people to make maximally informed decisions," he said.

Saakashvili underscored that all attacks against Georgia's democracy will be met with a "further strengthening" of democracy, and called on Georgians to help ensure the integrity of October's parliamentary elections. "These elections oblige each of us—at all levels of the government, from the President to each of you—to ensure an unconditional commitment to democracy and legal principles, and to guarantee that this electoral process is really exemplary," he said, underscoring the importance of the vote and its impact on Georgia's domestic and foreign policies, and democratic development. "The upcoming elections will be the next decisive, historical moment."

[CIVIL GEORGIA: Saakashvili Vows Fair Elections](#)



Parliament Chairman Bakradze announcing the new media liberalization laws that will compel Georgian cable operators to carry all news stations.

Georgia Receives Two UN Awards for Public Service Reforms

Georgia has won two awards from the United Nations for its public service delivery system. The Ministry of Justice won second place in the 2012 UN Public Service Awards in the category of "Improving the Delivery of Public Services," while the Georgian Civil Service Bureau won second-place in the category of "Preventing and Combating Corruption in the Public Service." The award ceremony was held Tuesday at UN headquarters in New York. Georgia has so far opened five one-stop public service centers and plans to open seven more this year. The centers gather together such services as the civil registry, the public registry, the national archives, the notary chamber, and the National Enforcement Bureau so that the public does not have to visit multiple governmental institutions to secure documents they need. The five existing public service centers are in Batumi, Kutaisi, Mestia, Ozurgeti, and Rustavi.

[RUSTAVI: Two Georgian Projects Win UN Awards](#)

EU Notes Progress in Human Rights Protection in Georgia

The EU Tuesday applauded Georgia's progress in protecting human rights during its annual dialogue on the subject with the government. Georgia continues to promote human rights reforms, said Philip Dimitrov, the EU's ambassador to Georgia. "After the last round there has been further progress in Georgia in the area of judicial reform, religious freedom, the promotion of IDPs, and in the direction of independent monitoring by the Public Defender," Dimitrov said, referring to the June 2011 round of EU-Georgia human rights talks in Brussels. "The orderly conduct of most demonstrations since May 2011 has also been noted," he added, referring to the opposition protests and response by Georgia's state police. The parties discussed several issues including prisoner and minority rights, law enforcement agency reports, labor laws, and the treatment of civilians living under Russian control in Georgia's occupied territories. The EU encouraged further human rights reform ahead of October's parliamentary elections, as the country fosters a tolerant and pluralist political environment. "In the context of the upcoming parliamentary elections, the EU expects that further progress will be achieved in the way of the formation of a tolerant and pluralistic political environment and timely response to the facts of pressure or persecution on political grounds," the EU read.

[CIVIL GEORGIA: EU, Georgia to Hold Human Rights Dialogue](#)

Georgia Ranks First in World in Terms of Tourism Growth

Georgia had the world's largest year-on-year increase in tourism in 2011, according to a new UN report. The World Tourism Organization ranked Georgia first in the world in terms of tourism development last year. "This fact is very important in terms of attracting the world community to the development of tourism in the country, as the UNWTO report is a powerful and credible source of information," said Maia Sidamonidze, the head of the National Tourism Agency of Georgia.

[TREND DAILY NEWS: Georgia Ranks First in Tourism Growth](#)

INTERNATIONAL MEDIA ON GEORGIA

LE FIGARO: Ivanishvili, the billionaire who wants to buy Georgia for himself

Over several months, the 56-year-old billionaire has destabilised the Georgian political landscape, using his unlimited financial resources and readily breaking with ethical rules. Gifts, televisions, dishwashers and washing machines are raining on the residents of his hometown. On so-called "dream cards" the residents of Kutaisi were asked to write down their wishes, as long as they cost less than 600 Euros. The oligarch is said to be trying to corrupt civil servants by offering them to multiply their salary a hundredfold. Thus far polls predict that he will lose.

www.lefigaro.fr

NEW YORK TIMES: A backlash in Georgia

While neither Georgians nor the Georgian government are anywhere near gay-friendly, the government's policy of cozying up with the EU, the US, and the Council of Europe has led in part to the passage of a handful of laws and protections for ethnic, religious, and social minorities here. While Parliament's moves have been met with praise from the international community, they've also left the government open for attack by both opposition parties and the powerful Georgian Orthodox Church, which regularly accuse the government of abandoning "traditional Georgian values"—an accusation that resonates with a deeply conservative population.

latitude.blogs.nytimes.com

MOSCOW TIMES: Putin's Eurasian illusion will lead to isolation

The strangest part of Putin's new policy is his promotion of the Eurasian Union. It is likely to be costly and unsuccessful. In fact, the Eurasian Union is unlikely to attract anybody beyond its current three members. Russia's promotion of the Eurasian Union does not lead to further political and economic integration but to Russia's isolation with Belarus and Kazakhstan at great cost to the Kremlin.

www.themoscowtimes.com

CHATHAM HOUSE: Waning Russian influence in South Caucasus, Central Asia

Russian influence in the independent states of the South Caucasus and Central Asia is weakening. The drift is inexorable but Russia employs multiple instruments to counter this. Economic pressure, energy dependence, multilateral groupings, diasporas, and the reapplication of a Russian cultural education are all used to sustain the old but recently revived fantasy of a Eurasian Union. Meanwhile, the West's inconsistent and confused engagement with both regions contributes to Russian gains in these areas.

www.chathamhouse.org

RADIO FREE EUROPE: Georgia to provide free education for residents of occupied territories

Georgia's education ministry will provide free university education to all residents of Georgia's two Russian-occupied regions who have obtained "status-neutral" documents. Georgia launched the status-neutral documents for residents of Abkhazia and S. Ossetia earlier this year, in accordance with its strategy on the "occupied territories." US Secretary of State Clinton said in Tbilisi recently that US authorities would recognize the new documents.

www.rferl.org

EURASIA DAILY MONITOR: Circassian activists show appreciation for Georgia's openness to the North Caucasus

Ibragim Yaganov, a highly decorated hero of the 1992 Abkhaz-Georgia war and leader of a Circassian advocacy group, pointed to the inspiring political reforms in Georgia, which are increasingly becoming the envy of the people in the N. Caucasus who live under essentially authoritarian regimes. The contrast is becoming more and more glaring as the N. Caucasians receive more opportunities to travel to neighboring Georgia after it dropped visa requirement first for N. Caucasian residents and then for all Russian citizens.

www.jamestown.org



WORLD ARCHITECTURE NEWS: New life for historic plaza

German architectural firm Zechner & Zechner won first prize in a competition to develop Tbilisi's historic Gudiashvili Square, in the heart of the city's Old Town. "We will transform a classic Georgian element into a pattern that will form part of the facade design, supported by the richly decorated balconies, and take on the intricacy and scale of the historic faces of the existing buildings," Zechner and Zechner declared.

www.worldarchitecturenews.com

BBC: Georgia sees glass parliament as symbol of future

Just over a decade ago, Georgia was almost a failed state, struggling to provide its people with water and electricity. And during the 1990s the country was racked by crime, corruption, and civil war. So for many Georgians, building the shining new Parliament in Kutaisi is a moving symbol of how the country is also building itself.

www.bbc.co.uk

AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE: Georgia's star striker Shengelia dies

Former Georgian football star Ramaz Shengelia, famed for the goals he scored for the Soviet Union and Dinamo Tbilisi, has died aged 55. Shengelia was named the Soviet Union's player of the year in 1978 and 1981, and ended his career at IFK Holmsund in Sweden in 1990.

vancouverdesi.com

DIE TAGESZEITUNG: Between cows & gold leaf

Georgia's beautiful Black Sea resort town of Batumi is an emerging tourist destination. Even the suburbs are beautiful. Again and again, one wants to breathe in the flavor of the city and enjoy the happiness. Ancient markets, little craftsmen's sheds, stone houses in colonial-style, and everywhere really friendly and cheerful people.

www.taz.de

MONOCLE: Tbilisi—Why we love it

Ten years ago electricity was a luxury in Tbilisi, but today the city is unnervingly, extraordinarily attractive. It's unnerving because there's so little evidence of its tumultuous past and fragile present. Life here has been transformed almost overnight thanks to Georgia's ingénue president Mikheil "Misha" Saakashvili. Following the peaceful Rose Revolution in 2003, when Saakashvili replaced Shevardnadze, the mafia was extinguished in a matter of weeks and Tbilisi's crime rate plunged. Now, boutiques, restaurants, and bars are sprouting everywhere, attracting tourists to its gems. It's the Georgian spirit that really lights this city up too.

www.monocle.com

CNN: Georgia's fashion statement

Post-Soviet Georgia was gripped by war, poverty and corruption. It was only after 2003, when President Saakashvili seized power, in what's known as the Rose Revolution, people began to really think about fashion again. "Before that, everyone wore black. Then in 2003, Georgians started to travel more," said one Georgian designer. "Fashion magazines began to come into the country and people began to develop their own tastes." Now even traditional Georgian costume is getting a new lease on life. Opened in 2010, the shop Samoseli Pirveli is the pet project of a business man who wanted to raise awareness to the beauty and variety of the national dress. You won't find these clothes on the catwalk, but you're beginning to see them on the high street.

georgien.blogspot.com