

GEORGIA UPDATE

WEEKLY EDITION • 30 August 2012

A Publication of the Government of Georgia

www.georgiaupdate.gov.ge

TOP STORIES

- Latest Poll Gives Governing Party Strong Lead in Parliamentary Vote; Georgians Expect Fair Elections
- Ruling Party Sanctioned for Illegal Donations; Fine Enforcement Against Georgian Dream Suspended
- Georgia Frees Hostages from Militants on Russian Border; 14 Die
- OSCE Commissioner Warns Against Demolishing Georgian Villages in S. Ossetia
- US Ready to Issue Visas to Holders of Status Neutral Documents; Israel Recognizes Documents



The Old City of Akhaltsikhe—the small capital of the Samtskhe-Javakheti region of Georgia whose founding dates back almost a millennium—re-opened its doors to visitors on Aug. 16 after undergoing large-scale restoration over the past 15 months. The medieval complex, also known as Rabati, features multicultural architecture—with its citadel, castle, mosque, and other facilities—and stretches over seven hectares on a rocky hill overlooking Akhaltsikhe. At the opening ceremony, President Saakashvili said he was expecting 100,000 visitors to see Rabati annually and praised PM Merabishvili, who has been overseeing the restoration works.

INTERNATIONAL MEDIA ON GEORGIA

REUTERS: Georgia says armed raid was in “enemy’s” interests

THE HILL: Georgian opposition tries to draw Obama administration into bitter election dispute

LIBERATION: Putin acknowledges having prepared 2008 Georgia war

NYT: Russia’s veto diplomacy

AFP: Rebel South Ossetia “to demolish Georgian villages”

NEW STATESMAN: What is Vladimir Putin up to?

EURASIANET: Georgian martial arts revival

MOSCOW TIMES: How villages are erased from the Georgian map

THE COMMENTATOR: The Russian-Georgian conflict four years on

HUFFINGTON POST: Rediscovering a “discovered” city in Tbilisi

QUOTES OF THE WEEK

“We have peace and quiet over here. We will not allow this to happen again, to spread on our territory and threaten our people.”

◆ President Saakashvili after 3 Georgian soldiers were killed fighting heavily armed militants who penetrated the border from Russia Wednesday and took five local residents hostage

“In no case will we call upon civil unrest.”

◆ Bidzina Ivanishvili, in an Aug. 28 interview with *The Atlantic*, when asked how Georgian Dream would respond after the Oct. 1 elections

“Such plans, if carried out, would eradicate what little remains of these ethnic-Georgian villages in South Ossetia. The houses still belong to the original inhabitants of these villages and they should not be demolished. Under international law, the displaced people have a right to return to their homes and their property should be respected.”

◆ Knut Vollebaek, OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, speaking on Aug. 22

ELECTION MILESTONES

Sep. 1: Deadline for parties to submit candidate lists to Central Election Commission (CEC)

Sep. 21: Deadline for international observers to apply for CEC accreditation to monitor elections

Sep. 24: Deadline for local observers to apply for CEC accreditation to monitor elections

Sep. 28: Deadline for media to apply for CEC accreditation

Oct. 1: Election day

Oct. 15: Runoff elections, if necessary, for majoritarian seats in Parliament

Oct. 20: Deadline for CEC to submit final election results

TOP STORIES**Latest Poll Gives Governing Party Strong Lead in Parliamentary Vote; Georgians Expect Fair Elections**

The latest poll ahead of the parliamentary elections on October 1st from Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research (GQR) shows the United National Movement (UNM) with a strong 46% to 24% lead among all voters over the leading opposition party, Georgian Dream. Among likely voters, after allocating those who are undecided, don't know, or refuse to answer, the UNM leads by 55-33. The results are broadly consistent with polling by the National Democratic Institute and the International Republican Institute, both of which show the UNM with a double-digit lead.

Over two thirds of Georgians, 69% now expect the October election will be free and fair—an increase of 6 points since July. In advance of the 2008 parliamentary and 2010 local elections, only about half of all voters expected free and fair elections. Georgians appear to be approaching the 2012 vote with a significantly higher expectation of a free and fair election.

A 51-31% majority, meanwhile, feel the country is heading in the right direction. The share of people who expect their own financial situation to be better rather than worse a year from is now at 38% versus 16% who do not believe this will be the case.

Georgians also give high marks to President Saakashvili, whose job approval is at 73%, while new PM Vano Merabishvili's approval is at 72%. A 51-28% majority give the President favorable rather than unfavorable personal ratings. A 44-34 percent plurality give the UNM favorable rather than unfavorable ratings. The poll, conducted by GQR for the UNM, has a margin of error of +/-2.8% on the total sample.

[CIVIL GEORGIA: Ruling Party-Commissioned Poll](#)

Ruling Party Sanctioned for Illegal Donations; Fine Enforcement Against Georgian Dream Suspended

The State Audit Office (SAO) said on Monday that six contributions totaling GEL 315,000 to the ruling United National Movement (UNM) party were illegal and that the funds must be returned. The following day, the UNM said it would return the funds. The GEL 315,000 represents 1.9% of the GEL 16.65 million the UNM received from about 700 individuals between January and August 8, 2012.

According to Georgia's campaign finance laws, the six individuals also could face fines totaling five times the illegally contributed amounts. The SAO referred the case of one of the individuals to the chief prosecutor's office for further investigation on suspicions that the donor tried to cover up the actual source of the contributed funds.

"Official evidence obtained by the SAO confirmed that five contributors who made donations to the UNM did not have savings that would have allowed them to make the donations from their own funds," the state audit agency said in a statement on Monday, adding that a lien had been imposed on the assets of these five donors. The allegations of possible illegal donations to the ruling party first emerged when Channel 9, a TV station owned by Bidzina Ivanishvili's wife, aired an investigative report on August 19 claiming that 27 individuals who have donated a total of GEL 651,440 to the UNM are registered in a database of socially vulnerable individuals.

Meanwhile, the National Bureau of Enforcement (NBE) announced last week that it has postponed collecting a GEL 2.85 million fine imposed on six political parties in the Georgian Dream coalition. "Up to date, only a small portion of the fine, GEL 122,000, has been collected by the NBE, without freezing any account," the Justice Ministry said in statement, responding to false allegations by Georgian Dream that the accounts of its members had been frozen. "Nevertheless, following the recommendation of the Inter-Agency Task Force for Free and Fair Elections and consultations with the State Audit Office of Georgia, who is the creditor in the case, the NBE has decided to postpone the enforcement of the Tbilisi Court Decision."

[CIVIL GEORGIA: Fine Enforcement for Georgian Dream Postponed](#)

[CIVIL GEORGIA: Ruling Party Says to Relinquish Illegal Donation](#)

Georgia Frees Hostages from Militants on Russian Border; 14 Die
Georgian officials said today that heavily armed militants who penetrated the border from Russia and took five local residents hostage were Muslim fighters who wore camouflage uniforms and carried Russian passports. Georgian security forces engaged in a fierce gun battle with the band of about 20 militants on Wednesday, killing 11 of them. Three Georgian soldiers were also killed.

President Saakashvili compared the incident to terrorist activities and kidnappings in the north Caucasus region in the 1990s, when Russian troops fought with the breakaway republic of Chechnya. "We have peace and quiet over here," he underscored. "We will not allow this to happen again, to spread on our territory and threaten our people."

He said the insurgents seemed intent on testing Georgia's military readiness and on creating additional tension between Georgia and Russia. He did not directly blame the Russian government for the episode, nor did officials identify where the fighters had come from other than the North Caucasus, where Russia has long battled violent Muslim separatists. Georgia released video showing the bodies of several militants, along with an arsenal of automatic weapons, grenade launchers, rifles, other equipment, and copies of the Koran.

"They wanted to check our military capability," Mr. Saakashvili said. "I am happy with the result." He said of efforts to create more hostility between Russia and Georgia that they had "failed in this sense, too." He said the slain fighters had been buried in accordance with Muslim tradition in Georgia and that their relatives would be allowed to visit the graves. Officials said the hostages had been freed, and that six more militants had escaped and were believed to be hiding in the woods. The area, on the border of Georgia and the Russian republic of Dagestan, is mountainous. "The backbone of the group is destroyed," said Deputy Interior Minister Nodar Kharshiladze.

[NEW YORK TIMES: Officials Detail Hostage Siege in Georgia](#)

OSCE Commissioner Warns Against Demolishing Georgian Villages in S. Ossetia

Knut Vollebaek, the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, called on the proxy regime in Russian-occupied S. Ossetia to reverse plans to demolish the remnants of villages formerly populated by ethnic Georgians ethnically cleansed during and after the 2008 Russian invasion of Georgia. According to the Human Rights Watch, Russian-backed militiamen deliberately and systematically destroyed ethnic Georgian villages over a period of weeks after the conflict.

De facto S. Ossetian leader Leonid Tibilov said on Aug. 14 that areas occupied by Georgian villagers before August 2008 that are now ruins will be cleaned up to give way for agriculture and industrial development and never be used as settlements. "Such plans, if carried out, would eradicate what little remains of these ethnic-Georgian villages in South Ossetia," Vollebaek responded on Aug. 22. "The houses still belong to the original inhabitants of these villages and they should not be demolished. Under international law, the displaced people have a right to return to their homes and their property should be respected."

[CIVIL GEORGIA: OSCE Warns Against Demolishing Georgian Villages](#)

US Ready to Issue Visas to Holders of Status Neutral Documents; Israel Recognizes Documents

The US has completed internal technical procedures to allow American embassies and consulates to issue visas to holders of status neutral travel documents, the office of State Minister for Reintegration Eka Tkeshelashvili announced. Meanwhile, Israel said this week that it will recognize status-neutral documents issued by Georgia's government. In addition to the US and Israel, the Czech Republic, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, Bulgaria, and Poland and Israel also recognize the documents. Since the 2008 Russian invasion, residents of the two territories have had to use passports issued by either Russia or its proxy authorities. However, those passports are not recognized by most countries, which view Abkhazia and S. Ossetia as part of Georgia.

[TREND: US Ready to Issue Visas to Residents of S. Ossetia, Abkhazia](#)

INTERNATIONAL MEDIA ON GEORGIA

REUTERS: Georgia says armed raid was in "enemy's" interests

Georgian officials said on Thursday gunmen who took hostages on its territory were Russian nationals and suggested they acted in the interests of the "enemy", while stopping short of blaming Moscow for the raid. "We understand quite well in whose interests it was, it can only be in the interests of our enemy," President Saakashvili was shown on Georgian television as telling residents of Lapankuri village, from where people were taken hostage. Russian security officials denied there had been any illegal border crossings in the area.

www.reuters.com

THE HILL: Georgian opposition tries to draw Obama administration into bitter election dispute

The Georgian government says the Dream coalition is trailing badly in the polls and argues Ivanishvili is preparing the groundwork to protest the vote when his team loses. "In that light, this statement to me looks like part of his international campaign to undermine the institutions," says National Security Advisor Giga Bokeria. "One can speculate that [Ivanishvili] is gearing up to a situation where if and when he will lose in free and fair elections he will claim that votes were stolen and prepare for the street, and claim that there was a lot of criticism and ... also to create an impression in the international media that this won't be a big surprise that the elections were stolen."

<http://thehill.com>

LIBERATION: Putin admits having prepared 2008 Georgia war

Was the 2008 blitzkrieg in Georgia premeditated by the Kremlin? Apparently so, according to Putin. Almost casually, he affirmed it Wednesday on TV: "There was a plan, it's no secret, in my opinion." Thus it seems that the Kremlin stepped in to give a demonstration of power and, above all, to call to order a Georgia that dreamed of joining NATO. Plans which confirm the Georgian theory of a premeditated act of aggression against a sovereign nation.

www.liberation.fr

NEW YORK TIMES: Russia's veto diplomacy

Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008, which President Putin admitted last week was preplanned, and its recognition of the "independence" of the separatist areas of Abkhazia and S. Ossetia, aroused widespread condemnation. By preventing the OSCE from working in the rebellious N. Caucasus, Moscow forgoes a valuable tool to foster reconciliation in a region that presents a rising threat to Russia's territorial integrity.

www.nytimes.com

AFP: Rebel S. Ossetia "to demolish Georgian villages"

The region's leader Leonid Tibilov said houses in previously Georgian-populated villages, torched by militias, would be torn down. He said the villages would also be stripped of their Georgian names. "These names do not need to be conserved because the settlements will not exist," he said. "The destruction of the remaining villages is a continuation of the policy of ethnic cleansing," Deputy Foreign Minister Sergi Kapanadze told Georgian television.

www.afp.org

NEW STATESMAN: What is Vladimir Putin up to?

At a stroke the Kremlin line that the Georgian war was wholly the responsibility of Mikheil Saakashvili was discarded. Until now Russia has always denied taking offensive action. So why has Putin suddenly revealed the truth? Putin's remarks were also aimed at Tbilisi. Political tension is rising in Georgia in the run up to elections where Saakashvili's ruling party faces a challenge. A Georgian oligarch whose fortunes come from business in Russia and whose net worth is about one third of Georgian GDP is backing a recently created party, Georgian Dream. In two years' time the keen skier President Putin hopes the Sochi winter Olympics will boost Russia. Putin's revelation that the invasion of Georgia was premeditated are not a good augur for a tension-free Winter Olympics in 2014.

www.newstatesman.com



EURASIANET: Georgian martial arts revival

Georgia has long been associated with the traditions of winemaking, song and dance. But it can also lay claim to a rich legacy in martial arts. Traditional Georgian martial arts are a combination of boxing, wrestling, and fencing. They have been steadily regaining popularity since 1991. Demonstrations by the martial arts group The Black Shields, complete with daggers, swords, axes and more, have been a runaway hit. Constantly overrun by invaders, the country developed over the centuries a clearly defined set of martial art techniques. Many moves resemble those of karate, jujutsu, or other martial arts. Strong differences, however, exist. In some highland regions, fighters preferred short daggers for the narrow mountain trails on which they fought. In other regions, like Svaneti, locals devised stiff hats made of pressed wool to ward off dagger stabs.

www.eurasianet.org

MOSCOW TIMES: How villages are erased from the Georgian map

Kokoity conceded that his people and Russian forces had forced ethnic Georgians out and would not allow them to return. Using force to remove people of another ethnic group is ethnic cleansing, according to the UN definition, while the ICC says forcible deportation of a population is a crime against humanity. Before the 2008 war ended, Georgia filed suit against Russia for 20 years of ethnic cleansing. The ICC ruled it had no jurisdiction and tossed out the claim. Now, with Russia's blessing, South Ossetia is finishing its job of erasing Georgian traces from the map.

www.themoscowtimes.com

THE COMMENTATOR: The Russian-Georgian conflict four years on

Considered by Moscow as part of Russia's "sphere of privileged interest," Georgia's Rose Revolution of 2003 and subsequent democratization raised serious concerns within the Kremlin over Tbilisi's future direction. If Georgia's democratic experiment were proved successful, many in Moscow feared its momentum would carry across the Caucasus and threaten Russia's own carefully-nurtured kleptocracy. Key international institutions failed to respond, and Russia appeared to have been handed a de facto veto over future NATO expansion.

www.thecommentator.com

HUFFINGTON POST: Rediscovering a "discovered" city in Tbilisi

Ten years ago, of course, the streets of Tbilisi were off-limits after dark to all but Glock-sporting oligarchs and the odd intrepid journalist. Transport to and from Batumi, a sticky and insalubrious port city on the Black Sea, necessitated a subtle ferrying of bribes to a series of dissolute mercenaries. That was then. Today, Tbilisi's various new "art-cafes" and "gallery-bars" stay open well past midnight, peopled not by minor warlords and sometime prostitutes but by twenty-something members of Georgia's vibrant intelligentsia. Batumi, inundated with investments, has been restored to its former fin de siècle grandeur. Mestia, Svaneti's capital, now boasts an airport and a ski resort. Tourism has boomed. And Tbilisi's real beauty lies not in its public gentrification but in what is yet hidden.

www.huffingtonpost.com