

GEORGIA UPDATE

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Polish FM Radosław Sikorski (above left) arrived yesterday in Tbilisi together with Swedish FM Carl Bildt to meet with their Georgian counterpart, Grigol Vashadze (above right), President Saakashvili, and other Georgian leaders. Bildt praised Georgia's progress in holding free and fair elections, adding that there was still room for improvement. He also underscored that it would be up to international observers, not parties in the election, to judge the conduct of the vote. "They [political parties] should concentrate on the issues of substance and then will come the judgment of the large number of observers on the quality of election."

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QUOTES OF THE WEEK

"Our message to the opposition is that it has to accept the election results even if [the results] are not in its favor."

♦ Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt writing on his blog during his visit to Tbilisi this week; he also noted that "strange signals are coming from" the Georgian Dream leader, who "occasionally sounds like" it is the post-election street protests rather than ballot on the election day that has to decide who will govern

"They [political parties] should concentrate on the issues of substance and then will come the judgment of the large number of observers on the quality of election and our firm hope and expectation is that there will be further significant improvement in the electoral standards of Georgia."

♦ Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt speaking yesterday in Tbilisi

ELECTION MILESTONES

Sep. 5: US Senators John McCain and Joseph Lieberman arrive in Georgia

Sep. 6: NATO Secretary General Fogh Rasmussen visits Georgia

Sep. 6: ODIHR election observers release first interim report on election environment

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

Sep. 21: Deadline for international 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

Large Majority of Georgians Support New Prime Minister, Believe Election Will Be Conducted; Oppose Protests

A new survey by the National Democratic Institute, which is one of the two major independent organizations conducting polling in Georgia, found healthy majorities of Georgians supporting new Prime Minister Merabishvili and his program, while saying by a margin of over two-to-one—54% to 21%—that Georgia is headed in the right direction. Asked if the Government is making changes that matter to them, 61% agreed and just 30% dissented.

Sixty percent of Georgians, meanwhile, said they believe the coming Parliamentary elections will be "well conducted"—an increase of 5% since NDI's June survey—while only 20% said they believe the elections will be "somewhat" or "totally" falsified. The survey also find a growing number of Georgians, 62%, opposed to calls by the leader of Georgian Dream, Bidzina Ivanishvili, for post-electoral street protests; just 16% would support street protests, down sharply from 27% in the June survey.

The results were especially heartening for Prime Minister Merabishvili, who was appointed in early July. Fully 63% of Georgians approved of his appointment, and just 16% disapproved; they also expressed strong backing for his government's program which emphasizes job creation and healthcare. The PM also received high marks for his government's response to the summer floods in eastern Georgia, with 65% of those surveyed saying the response was adequate, and just 17% dissenting.

Asked about their views of Georgia's foreign relations, 68% supported the government's aim of bringing the country closer to the European Union, and 62% backed membership in NATO, with only 9% opposed.

[CIVIL GEORGIA: NDI-Commissioned Public Opinion Survey](#)

Election Monitors Praise Election Institutions, Warn of Polarization

The National Democratic Institute—the first major international election observation mission to issue an interim assessment this fall—had both words of praise and caution in a report released on Monday.

NDI offered a largely positive assessment of Georgia's electoral institutions. "The majority of interlocutors have expressed a general sense of trust in the CEC's ability to administer the 2012 parliamentary elections in a timely and efficient manner," the report said of the Central Election Commission. "Civil society representatives have commended election officials on their openness and transparency."

The report also noted that the government's Inter-Agency Task Force on Free and Fair Elections (IATF) "has made an effort to respond quickly" to allegations. "Reaction to the IATF has generally been positive among both civil society and political parties," the report said. While noting problems with the State Audit Office (SAO), NDI also underscored that the SAO's task is "complicated by Georgian Dream's approach to compliance with campaign finance law, reflected in repeated statements that its leaders are unwilling to pay fines they characterize as 'illegal'."

NDI, however, also highlighted the risks inherent in the country's polarized campaign environment. "The polarization between the ruling United National Movement (UNM) and the Georgian Dream bloc, the two largest electoral subjects, is escalating as a result of rhetoric characterizing each other as a fundamental threat to either a sovereign or a democratic Georgia." The report added: "Rumors and unfounded allegations appear to be used as campaign tools to undermine candidates, parties and the electoral process. A video provided by the Georgian Dream in an effort to substantiate allegations of violence targeting their supporters showed violence taking place in previously reported incidents (such as those in Karaleti and Mereti), but it did not demonstrate who initiated the conflicts."

NDI undertakes all its observation missions in accordance with the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation and its accompanying Code of Conduct for International Election Observers.

[CIVIL GEORGIA: NDI's Pre-Election Observations](#)

**EU: Georgia Making Good Progress on Association Agreement, Free Trade, Visa Dialogue**

During the first official visit by Prime Minister Vano Merabishvili (above left) to Brussels, the European Union on Monday said Georgia was making "good progress" in discussions with the EU on an Association Agreement, including a deep and comprehensive free trade agreement, as well as on a visa accord. The PM met with European Council President Herman Van Rompuy, as well as with Enlargement Commissioner Štefan Füle (above right).

Van Rompuy noted "the impressive recent developments in Georgia where more efficient institutions have been built and improved services to citizens have been delivered with the help of the EU." He also spoke in support of Georgia's efforts to reunify the country. "The EU and Georgia share the interest to open these isolated societies to modernization and development," he said, referring to Georgia's Russian-occupied territories. "The benefits from getting closer to the EU—higher standards, free trade, investment, and visa liberalization—should reach the whole population, including those divided by conflict." Added EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton, together with Füle, in a joint statement: "Georgia is an important partner for the European Union and we are committed to further deepening our very dynamic relations. We confirm our commitment to sustain the pace with a view to completing the negotiations on the Association Agreement next year. Regarding mobility, our aim is to table a Visa Liberalisation Action Plan by the end of this year."

[CIVIL GEORGIA: EU, Georgia Making "Good Progress"](#)

New US Ambassador, Richard Norland, Arrives in Tbilisi

Richard Norland, who was confirmed by the Senate as new the US ambassador to Georgia in March, arrived in Tbilisi yesterday. A 32-year foreign service veteran, Ambassador Norland briefly served in Georgia in the early 1990s as the U.S. representative to, and acting head of, the OSCE mission. He also has served as US ambassador in Uzbekistan from 2007-2010 and as deputy chief of mission at the US embassy in Kabul for two years. Before being nominated by President Obama as ambassador to Georgia, Norland was international affairs advisor and deputy commandant at the National War College in Washington.

[US EMBASSY: Richard Norland's Swearing-in Remarks](#)

Turkish Group to Invest \$56 Million in Tbilisi Airport Extension

Turkey's TAV Holding has signed a \$56 million deal to revamp an unused runway at the Tbilisi International Airport. TAV already has a 76% stake in TAV Urban Georgia, which runs the airport. TAV said the re-construction of the runway would begin this September, and will take two years. TAV Urban Georgia, which is currently managing the airport until February 2027, will receive an extension until 2037 as part of the build-operate-transfer agreement with this new investment. Tbilisi Airport served 1.1 million passengers in 2011, offering flights to 28 destinations, 26 of which were local and two of which were domestic.

[HURRIYET: TAV to invest \\$56 mln in Tbilisi airport](#)

INTERNATIONAL MEDIA ON GEORGIA

BLOOMBERG: Georgian ruling party leads billionaire before vote

President Saakashvili's ruling party has a lead of more than 20% over billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili's opposition movement. Fifty-five percent of likely voters back the United National Movement compared with 33% for Georgian Dream, according to the poll by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner, seen by Bloomberg News. The survey also showed that 69% of Georgians expect the October election will be "free and fair." The poll of 1,500 people was conducted between Aug. 1 and Aug. 6.

www.bloomberg.com

NEW YORK TIMES: Officials detail hostage siege in Georgia

President Saakashvili said the insurgents seemed intent on testing Georgia's military readiness and on creating additional tension between Georgia and Russia. "They wanted to check our military capability," he said. "I am happy with the result." He added that efforts to create more hostility between Russia and Georgia had "failed in this sense, too."

www.nytimes.com

LIBÉRATION: Four years after the war

More than the West's anti-missile systems, the Kremlin fears a democratic contagion on its borders and within its borders. In this light the invasion of 2008 did not fully achieve its initial goal. Now, Russia is planning military exercises that will take place along the Russia-Georgia borders and within the occupied territories, a mere 50 kilometers from Tbilisi. An opportunity could arise if one of the competing forces in the elections refuses to recognize the results and chooses to challenge the authorities in the streets, despite the presence of electoral observers sent by the EU and democratic organizations. Such a scenario is possible. Some political forces are already emitting doubts regarding the impartiality of observers, and have been attacking the credibility of the electoral process for months. Far from crying wolf, the situation is sufficiently alarming as it is. But what if the surprising frankness of Mr. Putin over the last days is a calculated slap to test the West? Will the West react, or will it not?

www.liberation.fr

FOREIGN POLICY: Security & conflict in the Caucasus, not frozen

Georgia has participated in ISAF since 2005 and has provided a caveat-free battalion under US command since 2010. This contribution is set to double in October. The Georgian military leadership is now requesting US support to train a brigade-sized command-and-control element for their increasingly capable and dramatically more professional force. The infusion of values and the concept of a "profession of arms" are taking hold in the younger elements of the Georgian officer corps, who are often trained in the west through the Individual Military Education and Training program. The differences between these younger leaders—many of whom have already taken command in key positions—and the older Soviet-trained generals are palpable. In Georgia, the Chief of the Army is exceedingly young, but in two years of engagement I have watched him grow into a mature and dedicated leader of his relatively small Army.

ricks.foreignpolicy.com

PROJECT SYNDICATE: Putin's bad-neighbor policy

Russia has resumed its aggressive anti-American policy of 2007-2008, which culminated in war with Georgia in August 2008. Ironically, this bellicosity harms Russia the most, because it alienates all but international pariahs, such as Syria, Venezuela, and Belarus. Kremlin policy in the post-Soviet space makes little sense, because Russia gains nothing. Presumably, Putin hopes to whip up nationalist sentiment to strengthen his weakened hold on power at home. The problem for him is that, increasingly, Russians are not fooled.

www.project-syndicate.org

**THE PLAYLIST: First trailer for "Tbilisi, My City"**

The first trailer for the feature "Tbilisi, My City," which tells a variety of stories set in the Georgian capital, was released yesterday. Starring Malcolm McDowell, Ron Perlman, George Finn, Ed O'Ross, Sarah Dumont, and more, the handful of shorts blend fiction and documentary, and were written and directed entirely by Georgian talent, with each filmmaker telling their own personal story with heartbreak, friendship, and escape. David Agiashvili (who also created the project) produces alongside Ketevan Galdavadze and Nika Agiashvili.

blogs.indiewire.com

RADIO FREE EUROPE: Vanuatu's non-recognition of Abkhazia

In an interview, Johnny George Koanapo, who heads the UN division of Vanuatu's foreign ministry, said the country has definitely not recognized Abkhazia. "I think what's confused a lot of people in the past was the fact that the government, the head of the government, had expressed the intention to maintain dialogue with Abkhazia," Koanapo said. "And that's different from having an official position in terms of the approval by the Council of Ministers to establish diplomatic relations with Abkhazia. That's not happened."

www.rferl.org

HERITAGE: N. Caucasus suicide bombing highlights Russia's Islamist terrorism problem

Destabilization in the N. Caucasus threatens U.S. and allied interests. The dangers of further destabilization of the N. Caucasus are threefold. First, the presence of such an ungovernable enclave in southeastern Europe compromises the border stability of US friends and allies such as Georgia and Azerbaijan. There are several things the US can do to help. The US should encourage cooperation between Georgia and Azerbaijan and help train their enforcement agents and border guards. Washington can encourage Middle Eastern governments to stop their nationals from financing international terrorism, and, finally, the US should engage European states in anti-terrorist cooperation and improve NATO-based anti-terrorist cooperation.

blog.heritage.org

IRISH TIMES: Georgia on my mind

Georgia's charms have not been tarnished by time, nor by the enthusiastic development of a tourist industry that has made it more accessible than ever to foreign visitors. Tbilisi, notorious for crime and power-cuts during the post-Soviet chaos of the 1990s, now pulses with light and an infectious energy long after night has covered the deep valley in which it lies. A few years ago, Old Tbilisi seemed ready to collapse in a heap of dust and stray cats, but it now hosts eclectic bars, restaurants, and galleries amid a renovation that has not destroyed its charm. Stylish clubs sit beside sellers of carpets from across the Caucasus and central Asia, and visitors tired from touring the old town's historic Georgian and Armenian churches, mosque, and synagogue can revive themselves in the sulphurous waters of the grand, blue-tiled Orbeliani baths.

www.irishtimes.com