

GEORGIA UPDATE

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TOP STORIES

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The foreign ministers of Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Latvia, Lithuania, and Romania visited Georgia this week ahead of the Oct. 1 elections. “We are not here to support any political force, but to see Georgia’s progress on its path towards NATO and the European Union,” Lithuanian FM Audronius Azubalis said. “Georgia’s success story surprises and at the same time inspires many people. We strongly support the three important choices made by Georgia: the decision to continue the European and Euro-Atlantic integration process, willingness to further implement necessary reforms, and determination to organize free and fair elections.” He also underscored the need to respect the election results. “We believe that only representatives from the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) rather than political parties themselves or some public relations agency can provide an impartial and objective assessment of the election process.”

INTERNATIONAL MEDIA ON GEORGIA

AFP: Georgia opposition leader threatens million-strong protests

THE HILL: Georgian opposition leader turns to K Street

DPA: US to assist Georgia with air defense, minister says

CENTER FOR AMERICAN PROGRESS: Human rights in Georgia

UPI: Georgia to host key disaster response exercise

EURASIANET: Georgia looks to India for a cash-rich cinema comeback

DEUTSCHE WELLE: The renovation of Bagrati cathedral

CHICAGO TRIBUNE: Georgia makes feasting an art

VARIETY: Review of Tbilisi-based film “Keep Smiling”

THE INDEPENDENT: Batumi—From black hole to Black Sea paradise

QUOTES OF THE WEEK

“We have not overcome years of impunity and lawlessness to allow some people, whether they are from the criminal world or, worse, from the penitentiary system itself, to commit such crimes.”

“I will supervise this because every Georgian has the same right to dignity and fair treatment in the nation we are all building together.”

◆ President Saakashvili

“Any normal person was and we are all shocked, disturbed and outraged by the scenes that we have seen, but no less so with the problem that has been revealed so clearly. We as a government made a grave mistake when we did not properly evaluate the signals coming from the Ombudsman and other civil society groups about the systemic problems in the penitentiary system.”

◆ National Security Advisor Giga Bokeria

“We received a request from Bidzina Ivanishvili for a meeting with [European Commissioner] Stefan Füle in Brussels next week. Mr. Füle is ready to meet him, if Ivanishvili promises that his party Georgian Dream will sign a code of conduct for the upcoming parliamentary elections and that election results will be acceptable for them if authoritative supervisory organizations (first of all the OSCE and ODIHR) believe them legitimate.”

◆ Peter Santo, Füle's spokesperson

“We value the Georgian government's efforts and cooperation with international organizations in ensuring free and fair elections.”

◆ Estonian PM Paet; also see email w/longer quote

ELECTION MILESTONES

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: Media deadline for CEC accreditation

Oct. 1: Election day

Oct. 15: Runoff elections, if necessary

Oct. 20: Deadline for CEC to submit final results

TOP STORIES

Government Takes Swift, Decisive Action in Prison Abuse Scandal; Public Defender Replaces Prisons Minister

Calling it a “horrific affront to human rights and human dignity,” President Saakashvili and the Government took swift, decisive action to address a prisoner-abuse scandal that emerged on Tuesday. Yesterday, the minister of prisons was forced to resign, 11 prison officials were arrested, and the highly trusted patrol police were put in charge of the problem prisons. One suspect is still being pursued by police. The President also assigned PM Merabishvili to oversee prison reforms.

Today, the President made the most dramatic move by appointing one of the Government’s highest-profile critics—Public Defender Giorgi Tugushi—as prisons minister.

“Giorgi Tugushi has been a very strong critic of the (penitentiary) system and I am appointing the system’s most harsh critic as its leader,” the President said in announcing the move on television.

“I can make radical changes to the system and protect prisoners,” said Tugushi, who has been Public Defender since 2009. “One of the major reasons why I have agreed to this proposal is that I will be given an opportunity to introduce radical changes in the system and to secure appropriate protection of the rights of inmates. The President has pledged that I will have full freedom, that I will be able to fully reshuffle the system,” he added, underscoring that he will aim to implement the recommendations he had made as Public Defender.

“Our government’s response to radical challenges is more radical than what any government in any other country would have done,” Saakashvili said after Tugushi spoke. “We will never shy away from difficult challenges. We are glad that [Tugushi], who is not a politician and not a member of any political party, has not shied away from this difficult challenge, either. We now need brave and bold people, who will change everything in the system that needs to be changed.”

The scandal broke on Tuesday with the release of clandestinely made videos of guards beating prisoners at the Gldani prison outside of Tbilisi, including an instance of sodomy. The videos outraged the public and triggered short-lived protests in Tbilisi. The speed of the government’s response—both its words and actions—helped to quell the outrage.

“What happened in the Gldani number 8 penitentiary facility is a horrific affront to human rights and human dignity,” President Saakashvili said yesterday. “Those who organized, committed, and allowed these crimes to happen will be severely punished. I will supervise this because every Georgian has the same right to dignity and fair treatment in the nation we are all building together. I will personally ensure that the dignity of our prisoners is safeguarded in our system against the abuses of the members of the criminal world and of those corrupt rotten members of the penitentiary who behave like mafia members.”

He continued: “Tonight, I tell all the victims of these inhuman actions and the whole nation that the Georgia we have built and we are all building together shall not and will not tolerate such behavior—in its prisons or anywhere else. The whole idea of our new Georgia stands against this violence, which is a reminiscence of our past that shall be and will be eradicated.”

Said National Security Advisor Giga Bokeria: “Any normal person was and we are all shocked, disturbed, and outraged by the scenes that we have seen, but no less so with the problem that has been revealed so clearly. We as a government made a grave mistake when we did not properly evaluate the signals coming from the Ombudsman and other civil society groups about the systemic problems in the penitentiary system.”

In addition to the steps taken by the Government, Parliament Speaker Bakradze announced the creation of a parliamentary commission to oversee prison reform.

[AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE: Georgia appoints activist as minister](#)

[AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE: Georgia deploys police in prisons](#)

[PRESIDENT OF GEORGIA: Statement on Prisoner Abuse](#)

Georgian Dream Far Outpaces All Other Parties in Campaign Fundraising, Spending

The State Audit Office (SAO) has released its latest report on campaign donations and expenditures submitted by political parties and coalitions through August 21. Georgian Dream raised 50,725,534 GEL, more than double the amount of the United National Movement (21,402,789 GEL) and far ahead of the Christian Democratic Movement (1,361,136 GEL). Georgian Dream also was easily the most prolific spender, having invested 34,725,275 GEL in its campaign thus far, versus 14,637,598 GEL by the UNM and 786,317 GEL by the CDM. Campaign finance laws set no limits on contributions for parties, but they do establish a spending cap of 0.2 percent of the previous year’s GDP. This year’s spending cap is 48,458,298 GEL (roughly \$29 million or €23 million) and is calculated from Jan. 1, 2012. The spending totals include both the legal expenditures submitted by the campaigns and illegal expenditures that have been documented by the courts.

[STATE AUDIT OFFICE: Report on Political Party Finances](#)

EU-Funded Monitoring Finds Highly Competitive Media Landscape

The European Union’s monitoring of television outlets—undertaken ahead of the coming elections—has found that the Georgian media environment, while polarized, offers viewers exposure to a wide range of views on all political subjects and parties. The latest report, covering May 11-Aug. 15, found that the Georgian Public Broadcaster provided the most equitable distribution of coverage, including news that was generally neutral/descriptive and journalists who provided fact-based reporting. Rustavi 2 and Imedi tended to cover the government and the opposition Christian-Democratic Movement positively, and the opposition coalition Georgian Dream negatively. Ivanishvili-owned TV9 and Maestro covered the government negatively and their reporting was not always fact-based. TV9’s journalists presented the government and the ruling United National Movement negatively. They offered favorable coverage of Georgian Dream.

[MEDIA MONITOR GEORGIA: Monitoring Reports](#)

European Commissioner Calls on Georgian Dream to Abide by Election Code, Respect Results

Štefan Füle, European Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighborhood Policy, urged Bidzina Ivanishvili, the leader of the Georgian Dream coalition, to sign the proposed Code of Conduct for the Parliamentary Elections—a document initially proposed by the United National Movement and then largely designed by Georgian NGOs to ensure that all parties play by the same set of rules and respect the will of voters. “We received a request from Bidzina Ivanishvili for a meeting with Stefan Füle in Brussels next week,” said Peter Santo, Füle’s spokesperson. “Mr. Füle is ready to meet him, if Ivanishvili promises that his party Georgian Dream will sign a code of conduct for the upcoming parliamentary elections and that election results will be acceptable for them if authoritative supervisory organizations (first of all the OSCE and the OSCE for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights Office) believe them legitimate.”

[RUSTAVI: Stefan Fule Voices Conditions for Meeting Ivanishvili](#)

Overseas Voters Benefit from New Polling Stations, Extension

The Central Election Commission (CEC) increased from 32 to 36 the number of countries in which Georgian expatriates can vote in the Oct. 1 elections. Earlier this week, the CEC also extended the registration deadline for overseas voters. Both measures are part of the government’s efforts to encourage Georgia’s 42,613 eligible overseas voters to cast their ballots. By adding five overseas polling stations to the existing 40, the CEC has expanded voting to 43 cities in 36 countries. The five new electoral precincts are Barcelona, Budapest, Dublin, Lisbon, and Ottawa. Polling stations also will be opened in Amman and Tehran once bureaucratic hurdles there are cleared; that will bring to 47 the total number of polling stations outside Georgia.

[CIVIL GEORGIA: CEC Sets Up Five Additional Overseas Polling Stations](#)

INTERNATIONAL MEDIA ON GEORGIA

AFP: Georgia opposition leader threatens million-strong protests

Georgia's billionaire opposition leader called President Mikheil Saakashvili a "son of a dog." He warned that he was prepared to launch mass protests if there were "grave violations" at the polls. "We can make one million people take to the streets," he said. The tycoon refused to criticize Russian President Putin. "I do not want to criticize him because I do not want to imitate Saakashvili and start criticizing a big country. We will have to talk to (Russia) and to normalize our relationship, and I do not want to hamper this." But although he insists he will become prime minister after the October vote, Ivanishvili says has no long-term political ambitions and will quit after two years, leaving the government in the hands of his allies.

www.afp.org

THE HILL: Georgian opposition leader turns to K Street

Georgia's opposition party leader is pulling no punches in his campaign to win backing from the United States and has hired close to a half-dozen firms in Washington to plead his case to Obama administration officials. Yet all of the lobbying effort on behalf of Ivanishvili seems to have had little impact in Washington so far. Meanwhile, Georgia's embassy said: "Our efforts have focused on communicating the election reforms passed and implemented by the Georgian government that will ensure free, fair and transparent elections, and we're heartened by reports from non-partisan international observers, including today's statement by the U.S. delegation, that say Georgia's on the right track."

<http://thehill.com>

DEUTSCHE PRESSE AGENTUR: US to assist Georgia with air defense, minister says

Georgia on Thursday said it would receive support from the United States to help bring its military in line with NATO standards. Defence Minister Shashkin confirmed that a team of US military experts was visiting, in the first step in a six-phase assistance program. The team would evaluate Georgia's air defenses and recommend improvements, he said.

www.dpa.de

CENTER FOR AMERICAN PROGRESS: Human rights in Georgia

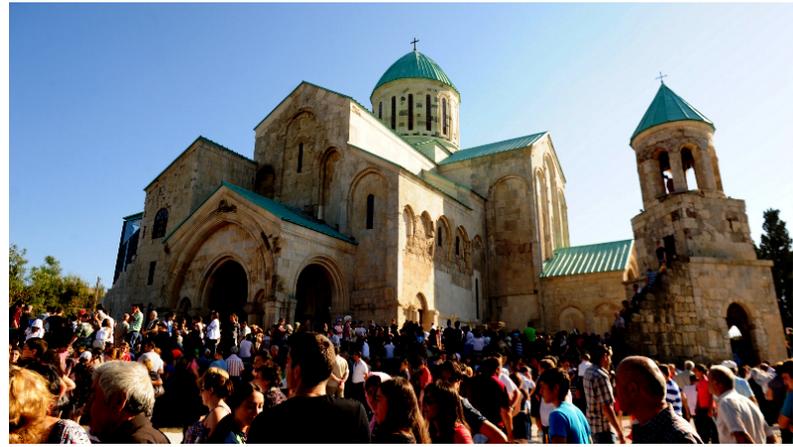
Last year the Georgian parliament passed legislation granting religious communities, both historic communities and legally recognized religious groups throughout Europe, the right to register as legal entities of public law, something long denied them as the Georgian Orthodox Church retained pride of place. At last, religious minorities—often representing ethnic minorities—can say that their state has formally recognized and embraced them, providing a boost to freedom of religious practice and communal security.

www.americanprogress.org

UPI: Georgia to host key disaster response exercise

NATO disaster response exercises dubbed will be held in Georgia from Sep. 22-28. Teams from 11 Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council nations are planning to participate; all together, more than 1,000 members of civilian and military teams from NATO and partner countries will take part in the event. The scenario for the exercise will be a severe earthquake affecting the vicinity of Tbilisi, resulting in high numbers of victims and widespread damage to critical infrastructure, including chemical spills and a radiological incident. The exercise will allow NATO and partner nations to practice procedures and capabilities, in order to improve their ability to respond to a disaster. The exercise will also contribute to strengthening the stricken nation's capability to effectively coordinate consequence management operations.

www.upi.com

**DEUTSCHE WELLE: The renovation of Bagrati cathedral**

The reopening of newly restored Bagrati Cathedral—an 11th-century cathedral church in the city of Kutaisi that is a masterpiece of Georgian architecture—took place on Sep. 16 with the participation of President Saakashvili. Georgia was ranked the world's third-fastest growing tourist destination last year, with a 39 percent increase in arrivals, according to the World Tourism Barometer. Restoring sites such as Bagrati, some argue, can help encourage even more people to visit by proving the country is united and stable.

www.dw.de

CHICAGO TRIBUNE: Georgia makes feasting an art

When it comes to hospitality, Georgians are stern taskmasters. Their feasts, called supras, are dictated by protocol. The official toastmaster grants permission to toast and signals the kitchen to refresh plates and uncork more bottles. At my first supra I lost count at the dizzying parade of plates, which I later learned was 42. Nature blessed Georgia with three climate ranges: subtropical Black Sea, wet (high Caucasus), and arid (eastern Georgia). But even before the newcomer learns geography, she learns Georgian hospitality. For example, any compliment to a host on his homemade wine results in a jug or two to take home. The slightest attempt to split a restaurant check gets a gentle scolding.

<http://articles.chicagotribune.com>

EURASIANET: Georgia looks to India for cinema comeback

Big on mountains and romantic vistas, Georgia this year has a starring role in two Indian films, an international prominence that many Georgian film professionals hope could advance the fortunes of their long-struggling industry. Meanwhile, some Georgian film professionals are returning home from abroad. Los-Angeles-based filmmaker Nika Agiashvili and his father, producer Davit Agiashvili, used their Hollywood ties to bring actors Ron Perlman and Malcolm McDowell to the Georgian capital for their "Tbilisi, My City" feature film, slated for a worldwide opening this month.

www.eurasianet.org

VARIETY: Review of Tbilisi-based film "Keep Smiling"

Georgian writer Rusudan Chkonia's feature debut tracks 10 disparate femmes, most of them in dire financial straits, competing in a beauty contest for moms to win a substantial prize. Chkonia coaxes gutsy performances from her cast and explores a side of war-torn, contemporary Georgia not often seen offshore.

www.variety.com

THE INDEPENDENT: Batumi—From black hole to Black Sea paradise

"It really has been a miracle," says Levan Varshalomidze, the governor of Adjara, the wider region that includes Batumi, and the numbers are indeed impressive. In 2004, just 75,000 tourists visited Batumi, but dramatic increase has culminated in 1.3 million visiting last year, with 1.6 million expected this year. "For any city trying to be a tourist destination, it's normal to have this level of progress in 15 to 20 years," says Omer Subasi, the Turkish general manager of the Sheraton Batumi. "Here it has happened in four years. I find it incredible, and it's all thanks to the government's progressive policies. What they have done here in a few years, the Turks haven't been able to do in 30 years."

www.independent.co.uk