

GEORGIA UPDATE

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TOP STORIES

- US Senators Shaheen & Graham Propose Bipartisan Resolution in Support of Georgia
- Ruling Party, Opposition Advance Talks on Electoral Reform
- Freedom House Highlights Improvements in Media Freedom
- IMF Offers Upbeat Assessment of Georgian Economy, Reforms
- US Extends Visa Validity for Georgian Citizens
- Qatar Airways to Begin Flights to Georgia in Autumn



The second Tbilisi Photo Festival debuts later this month after the success of last year's inaugural edition. Among the highlights will be a "Night of Photography," a Caucasian version of the Nuit de l'Année of the Arles photography festival. Ten screens will illuminate the streets and squares of Tbilisi's old town, showcasing from dusk to dawn the work of leading international photographic agencies and publications. Meanwhile, four exhibitions will shed light on the Caucasus as a meeting-point of different worlds that are intertwined with Europe. They include "Georgia at the Crossroads of Modernity," a 19th-century's Ermakov collection; "Changes" illustrates the Arab Spring of 2011 and the colored revolutions; "Kavkaz," by Magnum photographer Thomas Dworzak; and "Georgia—New Generation." The festival will be held from May 25-31 and is being organized by Europe House Georgia and Tbilisi Photography House as part of the "European Week" in Tbilisi. (For more information: <http://www.europeanweek.ge/>)

INTERNATIONAL MEDIA ON GEORGIA

DPA: US criticizes Russian official's visit to Abkhazia, South Ossetia

WASHINGTON POST: Ron Asmus, freedom fighter

EU OBSERVER: Georgia to EU—Don't neglect eastern neighborhood

EURASIANET: South Caucasus reactions to Bin Laden's death

REUTERS: Russia worried by NATO expansion near its border

EURASIA DAILY MONITOR: Regime changers and constitutional parties in the Georgian opposition

BLOOMBERG: Georgia may sell airport for \$1 to spur investment, tourism

REUTERS: Georgia's TBC Bank Q1 profit soars

IRISH TIMES: Newlyweds reunited after battle with law

EURASIANET: Beyond khinkali—The birth of Georgian fusion

AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE: Georgians cherish anarchic rugby

QUOTES OF THE WEEK

"As we continue to strive to achieve a Europe that is whole, free, and at peace, it is critical that we recognize the tenuous situation that remains in Georgia today. It's been nearly three years since war broke out in the South Caucasus between Russia and Georgia, yet Russian troops still occupy Georgia's Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions. Long-term peace and stability in this strategically important region is vital to American economic, security, and diplomatic interests. This means strengthening US-Georgia relations and sending a clear message to the Russian Federation that the continued presence of Russian troops in Georgia is not part of the solution."

♦ US Senator Jeanne Shaheen, Democrat of New Hampshire, in introducing a Senate resolution with Republican counterpart Lyndsey Graham

"I am proud to introduce this resolution with Senator Shaheen. Russia's invasion of Georgian land in 2008 was an act of aggression not only to Georgia, but to all new democracies. I will continue to stand by Georgia to make sure this young democracy moves forward and becomes a shining example of what can happen after the fall of the Soviet Union."

♦ US Senator Lindsey Graham, Republican of South Carolina

UPCOMING MILESTONES

May 12-13: Czech Foreign Minister Karel Schwarzenberg visits Georgia

May 15-16: FM Vashadze visits Rome

May 24: "Portrait of Georgia" reception at the Smithsonian Portrait Gallery in Washington

May 25-30: European Week in Tbilisi

May 26: Georgian Independence Day

May: Third round of Georgia-Russia WTO talks

Jun. 7: Next round of Geneva peace talks

TOP STORIES

US Senators Shaheen & Graham Propose Bipartisan Resolution in Support of Georgia

Democratic Senator Jeanne Shaheen and Republican Senator Lyndsey Graham introduced a resolution on Tuesday affirming US support for the sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of Georgia and calling upon Russia to remove its occupying forces from Abkhazia and South Ossetia. "As we continue to strive to achieve a Europe that is whole, free, and at peace, it is critical that we recognize the tenuous situation that remains in Georgia today," Shaheen said. "It's been nearly three years since war broke out in the South Caucasus between Russia and Georgia, yet Russian troops still occupy Georgia's Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions. Long-term peace and stability in this strategically important region is vital to American economic, security, and diplomatic interests. This means strengthening US-Georgia relations and sending a clear message to the Russian Federation that the continued presence of Russian troops in Georgia is not part of the solution."

Said Sen. Graham: "I am proud to introduce this resolution with Senator Shaheen. Russia's invasion of Georgian land in 2008 was an act of aggression not only to Georgia, but to all new democracies. I will continue to stand by Georgia to make sure this young democracy moves forward and becomes a shining example of what can happen after the fall of the Soviet Union."

Shaheen and Graham have been leading the effort in the Senate to strengthen the US-Georgia relationship. The two currently co-chair a bipartisan task force on Georgia, sponsored by the Atlantic Council, which was launched on the second anniversary of the Russia-Georgia war and aims to encourage a bipartisan consensus on policy toward Georgia. The resolution will be considered by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee before moving to the Senate floor for a vote.

[OFFICE OF SENATOR SHAHEEN: Shaheen and Graham Introduce Resolution Affirming US Support for Georgian Sovereignty](#)

Ruling Party, Opposition Advance Talks on Electoral Reform

Members of the ruling and opposition parties last week held initial consultations on changes to the electoral system in a collective effort to advance Georgia's reform agenda. "Consultations have been launched individually with separate parties; that's the best way to achieve an agreement," said ruling party MP Akaki Minashvili. In an effort to reach consensus among the politically fractured opposition parties, ruling party members met with an opposition group composed of one representative from each of the eight minority parties to negotiate the terms of reform. The meeting was of a "technical nature," said Mamuka Katsitadze, a New Rights Party member, adding that the parties discussed how to maintain transparency throughout the electoral system overhaul process. "The most important is to resume negotiations—either in the previous format or in a new one," he added, referring to the Election Code Working Group that was suspended in March due to political gridlock. Parliament aims to pass the new election code in fall.

[CIVIL GEORGIA: Ruling Party, Opposition "in Consultations on Electoral Reform"](#)

Freedom House Highlights Improvements in Media Freedom

Georgia made significant strides last year in improving media freedom, according to a newly released survey by independent watchdog Freedom House. In the group's annual index on global press freedom, Georgia jumped eight spots to 118 out of 196 countries and territories analyzed. Freedom House attributed the progress to sustained political stability under the Saakashvili administration. Georgia improved its media freedom ranking due to an "improved political environment that led to a reduction in legal and physical harassment of journalists, fewer instances of official censorship, and more balanced coverage by the public broadcaster," the report said. Freedom House encouraged the further development of independent and opposition media.

[FREEDOM HOUSE: Freedom of the Press 2010](#)



Lithuanian President and OSCE Chair Dalia Grybauskaitė visited Georgia as a part of a South Caucasian tour, meeting with President Saakashvili to discuss bilateral relations and Georgia's regional security issues. Grybauskaitė also discussed measures to enhance economic and cultural cooperation with Georgia.

IMF Offers Upbeat Assessment of Georgian Economy, Reforms

The International Monetary Fund last week offered an upbeat outlook on Georgia's economy, saying the country will be able to independently finance its budgetary needs without IMF assistance. The IMF together with the Georgian government reached an agreement on the tenth and final installment of a September 2008 loan that ends next month. Georgia has proven that it had the capacity to borrow on markets, said the IMF's Georgia mission chief, Edward Gardner. "The issuing of \$500 million of euro-bonds and the repurchase of the April 2011 debt, which were both successes, are the demonstration of the considerable reinforcement of investors' trust," he said. Georgia last month issued \$500 million worth of 10-year Euro bonds, and repurchased \$417 million worth of five-year bonds issued in April 2008 in order to limit the amount of debt needing repayment in 2013. The IMF also welcomed the efforts of the Georgian government to reduce the budgetary deficit, which is projected to fall to 3.6 percent of GDP in 2011, against 6.6 percent in 2010.

[AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE: The IMF is Optimistic for Georgia](#)

US Extends Visa Validity for Georgian Citizens

The US last week extended visa validity for Georgian citizens, relaxing regulations for Georgians seeking to travel, work, study, and live in the US. The US State Department will extend the maximum validity for tourists and business visas (B1/B2) and crewmember/transit visas (C1/D) from 12 to 120 months. The maximum visa validity in other categories will also increase from the current 12 months to 60-120 months. Said the US Embassy in Tbilisi: "Increasing the maximum visa validity for Georgians in the above categories will further facilitate travel, enhance trade and tourism, and increase educational and cultural exchanges between the US and Georgia." The new visa validity increase will allow qualified applicants to travel to the US without having to reapply for new visas every year.

[US Embassy in Georgia: U.S. Embassy Tbilisi Announces Extended Visa Validity for Georgian Citizens](#)

Qatar Airways to Begin Flights to Georgia in Autumn

Qatar Airways announced plans to launch service to Georgia as of November. The Doha-based powerhouse will introduce daily flights to Tbilisi. The new route underscores Georgia's emergence as an important transit route located strategically at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, and its growing prominence as an industrial, social, and cultural hub. The new service also will enable Georgians to access a host of new international routes in Europe and the Middle East. Georgia and Qatar last February signed an air transportation agreement based on the "open skies" principle that allows an unrestricted number of flights between the two countries.

[AP: Qatar Airways CEO in Talks for Share in Cargolux](#)

INTERNATIONAL MEDIA ON GEORGIA

DEUTSCHE PRESSE AGENTUR: US criticizes Russian official's visit to Abkhazia, South Ossetia

The US criticizes Russia's recent efforts to conclude formal state-to-state agreements with the proxy regimes in Abkhazia and S. Ossetia. The visits by Russian FM Lavrov during the week to Georgia's occupied regions are "inconsistent with the principle of territorial integrity and Georgia's internationally recognized borders," the US Department of State said. "The US remains committed to a peaceful resolution to the conflict in Georgia's separatist regions and the restoration of Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders," added the State Department.

en.trend.az

WASHINGTON POST: Ron Asmus, freedom fighter

America and democrats the world over lost a great freedom fighter this weekend. Ron Asmus was a star of the Clinton administration. He probably deserves more credit than any single American for the historic enlargement of NATO to include the nations of Eastern and Central Europe after their liberation from Soviet imperialism. Ron became a great defender of the people of Georgia, brutally and deliberately invaded by the Soviet Union's successor. While both Americans and Europeans, embarrassed by their inaction in the face of that aggression, turned to blaming the victim, Ron, already ill, devoted himself to keeping the record straight.

www.washingtonpost.com

EU OBSERVER: Don't neglect eastern neighborhood

"The EU should move faster on free trade agreements and negotiations for visa-free travel with Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova, which are 'inexpensive' policies that can be pursued in times of austerity as funding priorities shift to the southern neighborhood," said Giorgi Baramidze, Georgia's minister for Euro-Atlantic integration. "Obviously, the African and Mediterranean neighbors are important for the EU," he said. "But we argue that it's in the EU's own interest to make Europe whole and free. And this cannot be without finishing business in the eastern part of Europe."

euobserver.com

EURASIANET: South Caucasus reactions to Bin Laden's death

Tbilisi, which contributes troops to the US-led campaign in Afghanistan and is a diehard Washington ally, called the news of the killing of Osama bin Laden a shared success for everyone involved in the fight against terrorism. "We believe that terrorism is the biggest problem faced by the world," Deputy FM Nino Kalandadze said. "We hope this success will lead to other successes by the anti-terrorism movement."

www.eurasianet.org

REUTERS: Russia worried by NATO expansion near its border

Putin expressed worries again last month about the expansion of NATO, which has already taken in former Soviet states as members. "The expansion of NATO infrastructure towards our borders is causing us concern," he said. "NATO is not simply a political bloc, it is a military bloc. No one cancelled the agreements on how the bloc reacts to external threats. It is a defense structure."

af.reuters.com

EURASIA DAILY MONITOR: Regime changers and constitutional parties in the Georgian opposition

There are at least four fundamental reasons why the Arab pattern of unrest is non-transferable to Georgia: 1. Georgia has a legitimate constitutional order, with no ascertainable popular support for breaking that order through unlawful mass actions; 2. Young generations are the main beneficiaries of Georgia's rapid modernization, whereas protest leaders are past-oriented; 3. Georgia's law-enforcement agencies are reformed, non-corrupt, and professionally effective; 4. Georgia's governing elite and most of society share aspirations for Euro-Atlantic integration. Such buttresses of stability never operated in the Arab countries where unrest broke out.

www.jamestown.org

BLOOMBERG: Georgia may sell airport for \$1 to spur investment

Georgia may sell the airport in Kutaisi, the country's second-largest city, for \$1 as it tries to attract foreign investment and boost tourism. "We're in talks on the airport with possible investors from Germany, India, and elsewhere," said Economy Minister Kobalia last month. "One dollar is a symbolic price. We expect \$20 million to be invested in the facility."

www.bloomberg.com

REUTERS: Georgia's TBC Bank Q1 profit soars

Georgia's second-largest lender, TBC, reported a more than five-fold increase in Q1 net profit to \$14.7 million. The bank did not comment on its quarterly results, which marked a strong improvement on a profit of \$2.59 million the same period last year. Georgia's economy is recovering after the global financial crisis hit local lenders at a time when they were particularly vulnerable following the Russia's invasion in August 2008.

www.reuters.com

IRISH TIMES: Newlyweds reunited after battle with law

Dublin Airport played host last week to a love story with a happy ending for newlyweds Lasha Sabashvili and Gloria Walker last night. The couple were finally reunited after a six-month legal battle with immigration authorities following Sabashvili's deportation to Georgia last November. After getting married in Tbilisi, Sabashvili was able to apply to the state to revoke the deportation order and arrange a visa to enable him to come to Ireland and live with Walker.

www.irishtimes.com

EURASIANET: Beyond khinkali—The birth of Georgian fusion

Tekuna Gachechiladze, an ambitious Tbilisi chef, is opening up a restaurant called Georgian Fusion that, as the name implies, will serve up Georgian fusion cuisine. "I still want to use typical Georgian ingredients, such as tarragon or *tkemali* (a cherry plum sauce), but mix them with new ingredients such as shrimps, or combine eggplants, very popular in many traditional Georgian dishes, with foie gras," Gachechiladze said. "Look at Spanish cuisine: Just 20 years ago it was still very traditional. Look at it now, it has some of the most radical and innovative chefs of our times."

www.eurasianet.org



AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE: Georgians cherish anarchic rugby

With no rules and no holds barred, the game—known as Lelo—is only played once a year and only in this rural hamlet, where the local men hurl themselves into the churning melee of bodies with little regard for their own safety. "Lelo is our national heritage and we must cherish it," said one player. Teams representing the upper and lower halves of the village grapple violently with each other as they try to force a heavy leather ball into a river on the opposing side's half. Lelo was first played to commemorate victory in a nearby battle more than 150 years ago, when a small Georgian force managed to rout a much stronger army of Ottoman Turkish invaders, one Georgian said.

www.afp.org