

GEORGIA UPDATE

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Georgia last week opened the Zemo Larsi-Kazbegi border crossing to all Russian citizens in an effort to boost tourism and improve relations. "This is an additional measure of Georgia's visa policy, whose main aim is to facilitate the movement of people for tourism, business, medical, or other humanitarian purposes, and to help every citizen save money and time when travelling," the Georgian Foreign Ministry said. Georgia opened the crossing for visa-free travel for residents of the N. Caucasus last year, and also recently eased air-travel restrictions. Airzena, Georgia's national airline, resumed in June direct flights between Moscow and Batumi. "Georgia wants to show that it is a civilized and free country and we welcome everyone here," said Alex Rondeli, head of the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies.

[CIVIL GEORGIA: Georgia Makes Available Visa for Russian Citizens at Larsi](#)

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QUOTES OF THE WEEK

"The US Embassy welcomes Georgia's decision to adjust the legal status of many religious faiths and confessions. Religious freedom is a fundamental human right and an essential element to any stable, peaceful, thriving society. Tolerance of fellow citizens' beliefs is a cornerstone of all modern democratic societies. We deeply respect and support the right of every citizen of this country to worship freely, without fear of intimidation or retribution, just as we acknowledge the Georgian Orthodox Church's centrality to this society and its citizens—two principles that are both enshrined in Georgia's Constitution."

♦ US Embassy in Georgia

"This is an important and progressive step that will go a long way to ensuring a more open and tolerant approach towards the practice of religious belief in Georgia."

♦ Council of Europe Deputy Secretary General Maud de Boer-Buquicchio

UPCOMING MILESTONES

Jul. 14-15: Ukrainian FM Grishchenko visits Georgia

Jul.18-19: Meeting in Washington of the Defense & Security working group of the US-Georgia Charter on Strategic Partnership

Aug. 12: 3rd Anniversary of Sarkozy-Medvedev ceasefire agreement

Aug. 18-20: FM Vashadze visits Austria

Aug. 25: FM Vashadze visits Brazil

Oct. 4: Next round of Geneva peace talks

TOP STORIES

Official Government Photographers Arrested on Suspicion of Espionage

Two photographers working for the government—including President Saakashvili's personal photographer—were arrested on suspicion of espionage this week, together with a third photographer who was believed to be the main organizer of the spy ring. The three are believed to have maintained contact with officers of the Main Intelligence Division of the Ministry of Defense of Russia (GRU), and to have passed on to Moscow classified and top-secret materials—including blueprints of the Presidential Palace, the itineraries of President Saakashvili and of high-level visitors to Georgia, and details of security plans for their visits, among other materials.

The case was the latest in a series of espionage rings cracked by Georgia's Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA). Said Svante Cornell, research director at the Stockholm-based Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, after this week's arrests: Russia's espionage activities extend broadly "across various sectors of the Georgian state and society." Added Russian military analyst Pavel Felgenhauer: "It's clear that Georgia is a prime target of Russian intelligence. Many people here (in Russia) would be happy if Saakashvili was removed."

The MIA Wednesday presented media with a variety of evidence to back up the charges in the case, including the testimony of the accused, phone records, and files seized from the personal computers of the photographers. "Even one single case that is not backed by serious proof could seriously damage Georgia and the current administration," Interior Minister Vano Merabishvili told reporters. Said President Saakashvili: "Nobody doubts that we are the number one (spying) target for a huge country run by KGB agents. I have many times seen and heard, including from him personally, how Putin plans spying operations, and how he knows the names of the operatives involved."

[AFP: Georgia Intensifies Hunt for Russian Spies](#)

[AFP: Georgia Rejects Criticism of "Spy photographers" Case](#)

Parliament Passes Landmark Legislation Creating Greater Freedom for Religious Minorities

Lawmakers approved legislation to create greater freedom for religious minority groups, a move hailed by the Council of Europe, the US, and religious groups. The civil code amendments allow minority religious groups "with historic ties to Georgia" to register as legal public entities—thus, granting longstanding requests by the Armenia Apostolic, Roman Catholic, and Evangelical Baptist Churches, among others. "Georgia is a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional country and every citizen of this country, regardless of what religion he belongs to, must have equal rights," said governing party lawmaker Nugzar Tsiklauri. "This is an important and progressive step that will go a long way to ensuring a more open and tolerant approach towards the practice of religious belief in Georgia," said the Council of Europe's Deputy Secretary General Maud de Boer-Buquicchio. The bill amends a 2002 concordat that limited religious minority groups to registering solely as noncommercial entities under private law and guaranteed the Georgian Orthodox Church special status with the state. The Georgian Orthodox Church opposed the new legislation and has led protests against it.

[CIVIL GEORGIA: Bill on Legal Status of Religious Minorities Passed](#)

President Says Russia's WTO Accession Hinges on Monitoring

President Saakashvili said Russia's WTO accession hinges on allowing international observers to monitor the movement of goods across Georgia's borders in Russian-occupied Abkhazia and S. Ossetia. "We do not want to resolve all of our problems at the expense of [Russia's] WTO [accession]," Saakashvili said. Georgia is simply seeking the presence of international observers to monitor the movement of goods. "I think this is a minimal price for Russia to pay" for joining the WTO. Russia refuses to hold "serious negotiations" with Georgia on the issue, Saakashvili said, expressing hope that Moscow would reverse its position and engage in substantial diplomatic dialogue on the issue.

[CIVIL GEORGIA: Saakashvili on WTO Talks With Russia](#)

Polish General to Lead EU Monitoring Mission in Georgia

Andrzej Tyszkiewicz, a lieutenant general of the Polish army, has succeeded German diplomat Hansjorg Haber as head of the EU's Monitoring Mission in Georgia. "I am sure he will lead this mission to greater achievements for enhancing security and stability in Georgia as well as in the whole region, while building confidence amongst the parties to the 2008 conflict for finding a peaceful and long-lasting solution," said EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton in appointing Tyszkiewicz. A seasoned diplomat and military official, Tyszkiewicz served as Poland's ambassador to Bosnia from 2005-2010, and was commander of the Polish forces in Iraq in 2003. Although EUMM's mandate is set to expire Sep. 14, authorities expect an extension.

[CIVIL GEORGIA: Polish Gen. to Lead EU Monitoring Mission](#)

New Census Shows Country's Population Reaches 4.469 million

Georgia's population grew by nearly 1% in 2010, to a total of nearly 4.5 million, according to the state statistics agency Geostat. Georgia's population in January 2011 increased 0.7% compared to the same month last year. Census data shows that women outnumber men in Georgia by a ratio of 21:23. Data also revealed that a majority of Georgians, 2.4 million, reside in cities, while 2.1 million people live in rural areas. Although 14% of the country's population is at least 65 years old, the proportion of children under the age of four increased "significantly" in recent years and now comprises 6% of the population. Georgia's birth rate, meanwhile, showed little change from previous years, averaging around 48,000 births annually. Georgia's population stood at 4.4 million when the last census was conducted in 2001.

[CIVIL GEORGIA: Georgia's Population 4.469 million](#)

Parliament Launches Communications Center with US Support

US Ambassador to Georgia John Bass and Parliament Chairman Bakradze last week opened a legislative communications center that will allow MPs to work more closely with voters by drawing on regional TV companies and online media. The goal is to improve Parliament's effectiveness by institutionalizing relations with voters, improving transparency, strengthening the supervisory function of parliament, and increasing public confidence in Parliament. Bass and Bakradze signed a memorandum of understanding under which the US government, through the US Agency for International Development and the National Democratic Institute, will assist the center in advancing its goals.

[TREND: Communications Center Opened in Georgian Parliament](#)

Azerbaijan Loans \$575 Million for Georgia's Rail Infrastructure

Azerbaijan last week signed off on a final agreement to loan \$575 million towards the development of Georgia's railroad infrastructure, fortifying the region's importance as a strategic energy corridor. According to the credit deal, the Azeri Transport Ministry approved a 25-year loan to Georgian company Kartsakhi-Marabda to finance the construction of the Kars-Tbilisi-Baku railway. Connecting Turkey, Georgia, and Azerbaijan, the railway will create a new corridor to transport goods between Europe and Asia. The project includes initial plans to build a new 29 kilometer-long stretch of railway and renovate an old section spanning 183 kilometers. The loan supplements another \$200 million, 25-year loan between Azerbaijan and Georgia. Authorities expect the project to be completed in 2013.

[BLOOMBERG: Georgian Railway Says Cargo Shipments Will Rise 6%](#)

Danish Firm Takes Control of Poti Port

Danish shipping giant APM Terminals officially gained control of Georgia's Black Sea port of Poti, acquiring the majority of shares from Dubai-based Rakia. "I would like to thank your government for your warm reception in Georgia," said APM Terminals VP Hams-Ole Madsen. "We appreciate the openness with which we were welcomed and the swiftness with which your team negotiated." APM plans to further develop the port so it can reach its full potential as the main gateway to the South Caucasus and Central Asia.

[GOVERNMENT OF GEORGIA: Poti Sea Port Transaction Successfully Completed](#)

INTERNATIONAL MEDIA ON GEORGIA

FOREIGN POLICY: The least free places on Earth, 2011

Despite international criticism of Russia's illegal occupation of Georgia, Moscow recognized S. Ossetia's independence and proceeded with a political and economic takeover, write *Foreign Policy* and Freedom House in their annual ranking of the least-free places on Earth. After the war, S. Ossetia's proxy leader replaced most of his cabinet with officials from Russia, and Russian forces barred ethnic Ossetians from entering Georgia. The conflict caused the displacement of about 26,000 people, most of them ethnic Georgians. Ossetians meanwhile face the challenges of a Russia-funded, highly corrupt elite.

www.foreignpolicy.com

GLOBAL POST: Is the West losing Georgia?

Welcome to Georgia: land of contrasts. "It's a country undergoing radical change and radical change splits society," says Deputy Interior Minister Shota Utiashvili. He's sitting inside the ministry's new headquarters, a long, curvy building outside the city center built entirely of glass—a nod, the government says, to its commitment to transparency. "Georgian society is very pro-Western and very pro-reform," Utiashvili says. "The ruling party represents their interests."

www.globalpost.com

BLOOMBERG: Georgia opens border crossing for all Russians to boost tourism

Georgia opened the Larsi border crossing to travelers from throughout Russia to boost tourism and improve relations between the two countries. "Georgia wants to show that it is a civilized and free country and we welcome everyone here," said Alexander Rondeli, head of the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies. Meanwhile, Georgia's national carrier, Airzena, resumed direct flights between Moscow and Georgia's Black Sea city of Batumi last month.

www.bloomberg.com

AFP: Call our country "Georgia," demand Georgians

The Georgian authorities have appealed to other states to officially refer to their country as "Georgia" rather than using the Russian-favored name "Gruziya." Says the foreign ministry: "We have asked those countries who call Georgia 'Gruziya' to change our country's name in their respective languages to 'Georgia'." Gruziya serves as a reminder of a Moscow-dominated past that ex-Soviet Georgia's pro-Western government is trying to eradicate.

www.afp.org

WASHINGTON JEWISH WEEK: Georgia on his mind

As Georgia's new ambassador in Washington, Temuri Yakobashvili brings a blunt-spoken candor that seems rare in Washington's rigid diplomatic corps. His willingness to speak truth to power, Yakobashvili says, comes from his years of bare-knuckle Jewish activism. A broad-shouldered man with the build of an ex-rugby player, Yakobashvili is the chief advocate for a fledgling democracy that often finds itself at the center of international strife—circumstances the nation shares with Israel, to which Georgia is often compared.

[washingtonjewishweek.com](http://www.washingtonjewishweek.com)

EURASIANET: Georgia's citizenship-free IDs

Parliament has voted to issue such "status-neutral" IDs for residents in Russian-occupied Abkhazia and S. Ossetia. ID holders are "entitled to the same civil rights and social benefits" available to all Georgian citizens, and will be able to travel abroad. Most residents of Abkhazia and S. Ossetia now can only travel abroad with Russian passports.

www.eurasianet.org

TIME: Georgian teen sets record for fastest typing on an iPad

Eduard Saakashvili, a 15-year-old kid from Georgia, has set a new Guinness World Record for fastest typing on an iPad. I wonder if he's made his dad proud; I mean, he's none other than the son of Georgian President Saakashvili. Eduard managed to type the alphabet on an iPad in 5.26 seconds, over a full second faster than the previous mark.

techland.time.com



Lia Bakhturidze Sirelson's riveting family drama "Sarke" (The Mirror) will be performed this coming week with an English translation by Dancing Crane, Inc., New York City's only Georgian performing arts company. Sarke, a tale of generational differences and perceptions, features a mother determined to provide for her child and a daughter who wants to follow her heart. The play will be staged on July 19, 22, and 24 at the Main Stage Space as part of the 12th Annual Midtown International Theater Festival. Founded in 1996, Dancing Crane promotes Georgian arts and culture among Georgian-Americans.

THE ECONOMIST: Hollywood's take on the Russia-Georgia war

The dialogue in "5 Days of War," a film on Russia's 2008 invasion of Georgia, explains the politics without patronizing the audience. Although many of the film's posters focus on Andy Garcia, who plays President Saakashvili, he occupies little screen time: this is not a film about Saakashvili. Meanwhile, Georgia looks wonderful: the old part of Tbilisi is stunning, the countryside beautiful, and the traditional Georgian dancing remarkable. If nothing else, it should provide a boost to Georgia's recovering tourism industry.

www.economist.com

MAIL & GUARDIAN: Georgia on South African farmers' minds

Many of the Transvaal Agricultural Union's members are fed up with farming in South Africa, hence the flood of queries to www.boers.ge, a website created to attract South African farmers to Georgia. On the wall behind his laptop, TAU director Van Zyl has pasted a map he uses to conjure up soothing, familiar images. Adjara, the province in western Georgia by the Black Sea, "looks like Tzaneen," he told me, and Kakheti, the wine-growing region in the east, "reminds me of the Franschhoek or Paarl area, or the eastern Free State."

mg.co.za

GLOBE & MAIL: In the Georgian mountains, find a pack horse

Tucked into the obscure recesses of the High Caucasus, Svaneti is considered by Georgians to be both the most beautiful and the most resilient part of their country. While Georgia has been continuously ransacked—Tbilisi has been destroyed by foreign armies 29 times in the past 1,500 years—the defiant Svans have never been tamed. Despite modernization efforts and the Svans' legendary hospitality, an undertone of wildness lingers here. Tomorrow, if fate and our horse, Bonne Cheetah, agree, we will march toward the highlands leading through the heart of Svaneti, and on into the Racha region.

www.theglobeandmail.com

CNN: Rewriting the history of mankind

Tucked away in the rugged hills of Georgia along the Old Silk Road is a place that challenges all we know about the birth of humanity—the Dmanisi archaeological site. "We found the earliest traces of human settlement out of Africa, dating back almost 1.8 million years," said the site's lead archeologist of a discovery that forces us to reconsider the idea that humans left Africa only 1.2 million years ago. "We can say that we have the presence of the earliest humans out of Africa—and, maybe, Eurasia was the origin of homo erectus, not Africa." Dmanisi's discovery might be re-writing history.

edition.cnn.com