

GEORGIA UPDATE

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Leading Dutch architecture firm UNStudio last week presented President Saakashvili with an eye-catching design for the new airport in Kutaisi, Georgia's second largest city. "The design focuses first and foremost on the experience of the traveler by creating an inviting, safe, transparent, and user-friendly airport," said firm co-founder Ben van Berkel. "The desire is to provide for and communicate equally with both international visitors and the local community is paramount." The airport will provide an economic boost to Georgia's industrial hub and its new seat of Parliament. The state-of-the-art design includes eco-friendly features including solar power panels to lower energy consumption, cantilevered roofs to provide shade from the sun, and a hybrid low-pressure ventilation system. A key feature is a sculptural 55-meter-high air traffic control tower, clad with a transparent skin that changes color. Construction on the airport launches this month and is expected to finish by September 2012.

www.constructionweekonline.com

INTERNATIONAL MEDIA ON GEORGIA

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DER TAGESSPIEL: Pianist Khatia Buniatishvili

QUOTES OF THE WEEK

"I noticed that yesterday's communiqué, which was adopted by the NATO foreign ministers, contains a term 'aspirant countries' and among them was named Georgia too. I openly warned our colleagues not to again push, wittingly or unwittingly, the current regime in Georgia towards repeating an adventure similar to the one of August, 2008... it was shortly after the [April, 2008 NATO] Bucharest summit, during which [NATO] imperatively stated, that Georgia will join NATO."

♦ Russian FM Lavrov commenting on a NATO statement released today

"In recent years, the Government of Georgia has actively sought to put children at the centre of its reform efforts.... Child mortality has reduced significantly. Almost all primary school age children are attending school. More families and their children have gained access to improved water sources. Young children have a better start in life and are receiving more opportunities that were previously only available to well-off families."

♦ UNICEF Georgia Director Roeland Monasch

"Our assessment is that Georgia has made remarkable progress in its modernization and reform efforts. New and more efficient institutions have been built and services for the citizens of Georgia are improving. The EU will continue to support these efforts."

♦ Polish FM Radoslaw Sikorski, whose country currently holds the EU Presidency

UPCOMING MILESTONES

Jan: EU and Georgia begin talks on a deep and comprehensive free trade agreement

May 15-22: NATO summit in Chicago

May 26: Parliament relocates to Kutaisi

TOP STORIES

Major New City Planned for Georgia's Black Sea Coast

Georgia plans to build a city of half a million people on its Black Sea coast to promote business in the region and attract foreign investment. "It will be the major trade, commercial and economic center in western Georgia and on the Black Sea coast," President Saakashvili said in making the announcement, calling the city Georgia's "new pride." The project, to be located near the Russian-occupied Georgian region of Abkhazia, will include a modern commercial and trade center as well as a port. Initial investment will total \$900 million, with foreign investors and Georgians living abroad to provide further funds. Construction of the city, to be called Lazica, will start in 2012 and may take 10 years. The first buildings may appear as early as 2013. "These kinds of projects have been done from scratch worldwide, like in Brazil and Australia, and there's no reason it won't work here," Michael Saunders, founder of Saunders Group Engineering and Agriculture, who advises on emerging-market engineering and agriculture projects, told Bloomberg. Saakashvili projected that several thousands of people will be employed to construct the new city from the ground up.

[BLOOMBERG: Georgia to Build City of Half a Million on Black Sea](#)

Venice Commission Presents Electoral Recommendations

The Council of Europe's legal advisory arm has released its recommendations on Georgia's electoral reform. The new electoral code draft is "conducive to the conduct of democratic elections and has many positive features," said the Venice Commission, adding that Georgia's mixed electoral system is "in line with international standards." The Commission made a number of recommendations regarding electoral processes, administrative resources, and campaigning. It argues for "equal or similar voting populations" in single-member electoral districts to ensure suffrage equality, underscoring, however, that the choice of an electoral system remains a sovereign decision of the state. Under Georgia's current mix-party system, lawmakers are elected by proportional representation and in single-member constituencies. In order to address the concerns of the opposition parties, the ruling UNM party tabled the draft in September, proposing to divide the 10 largest constituencies with populations exceeding 100,000 into two, and to increase the number of seats in Parliament from 75 to 83 to address the population disparity.

[CIVIL GEORGIA: Venice Commission's Electoral Recommendations](#)

UNICEF Lauds Georgia for "Impressive Strides" Made in Children's Welfare

The United Nations Children's Fund has lauded Georgia's "impressive strides" and commitment in improving children's welfare. According to a new UNICEF report on children in Georgia, the government has made "enormous gains" for its children: "In recent years, the Government of Georgia has actively sought to put children at the centre of its reform efforts," said UNICEF Georgia Director Roeland Monasch at a special event attend by First Lady Sandra Elisabeth Roelofs, Parliament Speaker Bakradze, and ministers. "Child mortality has reduced significantly. Almost all primary school age children are attending school more families and their children have gained access to improved water sources," Monasch said, commending the government's success in implementing its Child Welfare Action Plan and other state-funded initiatives. The government has allocated greater financial resources to education, health, and social protection, said UNICEF. As a result, the share of social expenditure within overall public spending has increased, the report reads. The organization encouraged Georgia to continue implementing reforms to address poverty, youth employment, and other social issues in order to meet the UN's Millennium Development Goals and other international targets.

[UNICEF: An update on the situation of children in Georgia](#)



Georgian youth group CANDY took home the grand prize in last week's 9th Junior Eurovision Song Contest, securing first place for the second time. Singing in Yerevan, the five-member girl group beat out the Netherlands, Russia, and Belarus with their song "Candy Music." The contest is held for children aged between 10-15 years old.

After Georgia Cooperation Council Meeting, EU Announces Launch of Free Trade Talks

The European Union Monday confirmed plans to launch free trade talks with Georgia in January, saying the country had made "remarkable progress" in its modernization and reform efforts. "We want to establish a stable and solid framework for closer economic ties with Georgia," said EU Trade Commissioner Karel De Gucht. "A deep and comprehensive free trade area will help Georgia and Moldova to become more competitive and enjoy the benefits of the EU single market," he said. His remarks came one day after EU officials called for "further intensification" of relations at an EU-Georgia Cooperation Council meeting in Brussels. Said Polish FM Sikorski: "New and more efficient institutions have been built and services to the citizens of Georgia are improving. The EU will continue to support these efforts."

[REUTERS: EU Launches Trade Talks with Georgia](#)

President Saakashvili Grants Humanitarian Pardon to Israelis Jailed for Bribery

President Saakashvili last week pardoned on humanitarian grounds two Israeli businessmen convicted last year for bribery trying to bribe Georgia's deputy finance minister. "Upon the request from the Israeli government and personally from the Israeli President, taking into consideration the convicts' age and their conditions, the Georgian President decided to pardon them," said a government spokesperson. Israel welcomed the pardon of Ron Fuchs and Zeev Frenkel, inviting Georgia's foreign minister and its Parliament speaker to Israel in the coming weeks. "I am confident that your visit here will help foster the good relations already existing between our two countries and our two nations," said Knesset Speaker Reuven Rivlin in extending the invitation to his counterpart.

[REUTERS: Georgia Pardons two Israelis Jailed for Bribery](#)

As S. Ossetia Chaos Continues, Russian Influence Seen to Wane

The impasse in S. Ossetia continued this week, when the region's high court ruled the recent putative elections to be invalid—a decision that triggered street protests and violence. Speaking yesterday in Marseille at a congress of the European People's Party, President Saakashvili said that the chaos in S. Ossetia—as well as last week's parliamentary vote in Russia, which saw the ruling party rebuked and also was condemned by international observers—"have shown to us that the methods and the language of the past simply do not work anymore." Speaking of Moscow's plans to create a "Eurasian Union," Saakashvili added: "I travel a lot to post-Soviet countries and I can tell you: there is no way they will accept the new Soviet Union in any form, under any name or any pretext."

[AFP: Grenade Attack Escalates South Ossetia Crisis](#)

INTERNATIONAL MEDIA ON GEORGIA

THE ECONOMIST: Misha challenged

President Saakashvili does not yet show any sign of following the example of Putin in Russia, knowing it would destroy his reputation and legacy. "It is more important for him what kind of Georgia he leaves behind than what he personally does," says Giga Bokeria, his national security adviser. Saakashvili has transformed a failed state into a modern country with a liberal economy and a strong credit rating. He affects to be relaxed about his challenger, saying "Ivanishvili is good for us, he will keep us in good shape." Observers agree that Georgia needs more political competition, but not a new upheaval.

www.economist.com

TIME: Russian bungling in South Ossetia

The whole operation of the so-called elections in S. Ossetia, from the use of armed goons this summer to the bumbling reaction when it all went awry, has revealed such clumsiness, such a total lack of tact, that even Russia's loyal media have been unable to hold their tongues. Russian daily *Moskovsky Komsomolets* ran an editorial last week titled "Stop the Morons," which railed that "the vote in S. Ossetia has revealed the truth: The people who answer for our strategic external policies are not just bastards but morons. This is getting scary."

www.time.com

THE GUARDIAN: Putin prepares Russian empire to strike back

Recent remarks by Medvedev about the lack of wisdom, in the context of the 2008 Georgia conflict, of unchecked NATO enlargement illustrated Russia's visceral opposition to any interference in what used to be called its "near abroad"—and Putin's desire to roll back Western encroachments of the past 20 years. Russia's determination to defend wider spheres of influence in the non-aligned and developing world can be seen in its obdurate refusal to penalize Syria, in the face of almost universal outrage over the crackdown there; and in its de facto defense of Iran's nuclear program.

www.guardian.co.uk

CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR: S. Ossetia embarrasses Moscow

In a move that some Russian analysts say Moscow will come to regret, Russia's Foreign Ministry issued a statement endorsing the annulment of the S. Ossetia elections, saying Russia favors a "calm and stable situation." Supporters of Alla Dzhioyeva, the region's former education minister and winner of last week's "elections," took to the streets in Tskhinvali to protest, bringing a tough response from riot police who fired shots into the air and physically prevented protesters from approaching government buildings.

www.csmonitor.com

EURACTIV: Georgia tells EU to "open its eyes" on Russia

Western politicians need to open their eyes to what is going on around Russia, where PM Putin is building a modernized USSR through his "Eurasian Union" plan, says Georgia's Deputy PM Baramidze. "The West should not be silent. What is happening before the eyes of the West is threatening the West's interests," he warns. "Russia has always wanted to punish Georgia for its desire to be independent and to be part of the West and recently, Medvedev said openly that what he did in 2008 was important in order to stop Georgia and other countries entering NATO."

www.euractiv.com

RADIO FREE EUROPE: Medvedev gets caught telling the truth

"We have simply calmed some of our neighbors down by showing them that they should behave correctly in respect of Russia and in respect of neighboring small states," said President Medvedev at a Russian military base in Vladikavkaz, referring to its motive behind invading Georgia. "And for some of our partners, including for the North Atlantic Alliance, it was a signal that before taking a decision about expansion of the Alliance, one should at first think about the geopolitical stability."

www.rferl.org

**DIE ZEIT: Breathtaking, untouched Svaneti**

Tucked away in the majestic Caucasus Mountains, Georgia's region of Svaneti boasts breathtaking nature and architecture, and is one of the world's most authentic and untouched places. The region's landscape is painted with green, gray, and white folded mountains, stone cottages, over 200 towers, and churches with faded frescos of saints that date back to the Middle Ages. While Svaneti has been rather undiscovered by foreigners for the past 2,000 years, tourism has increased recently. UNESCO members were so deeply impressed that upon visiting they immediately added the region to its list of world heritage sites.

www.zeit.de

LA CROIX: Europe still serves as a border guard in Georgia

For Russia, the S. Ossetia and Abkhaz borders are true borders to supervise. For the Georgians, they are illegal obstacles that must disappear. Maintaining peace around Georgia's Russian-occupied territories has been the role of the EU Monitoring Mission since Russia's August 2008 invasion. "The European mission is essential to the region's stability," said Georgia's National Security Advisor Bokeria.

www.la-croix.com

WALL STREET JOURNAL: A blow to Obama's Russia "reset"

Moscow's reaction to the IAEA's report on Iran serves as a stunning rebuke to Obama's "reset" policy. It's important to recall what Washington sacrificed in holding up its end of the Russian "reset." In 2009, it canceled missile sites planned for Poland and the Czech Republic, two of America's strongest and most reliable European allies. The US has desisted in selling weapons to Georgia, 20% of whose territory Russia continues to occupy three years after a war that left tens of thousands displaced.

online.wsj.com

SUNDAY'S ZAMAN: Georgia—the star of the Caucasus?

Georgia's leadership has also not given up hope that Russia will see the "error of its ways." Tbilisi is ready to be patient believing that Russia, as a pragmatic nation, will eventually see that this occupation gets them nothing and be willing to negotiate. Georgia is putting itself forward as the star of the South Caucasus and a model for other countries in the region. Let us wait and see if the country is able to live up to this claim.

www.todayszaman.com

XINHUA: Georgia improves on global corruption index

Georgia ranked four notches higher than last year in a global corruption awareness ranking, said Transparency International last week.

According to the corruption watchdog's annual corruption perceptions index (CPI), Georgia rose to 64th place, up four from last year, with its CPI score increasing to 4.1 from 3.8 in the 183-nation index.

news.xinhuanet.com

DER TAGESSPIEL: Pianist Khatia Buniatishvili

Georgian pianist Khatia Buniatishvili is a calm and composed artist with an extraordinary talent. When she plays, she is a natural virtuoso and has a seventh sense for music. At the concert at the Kammermusiksaal in Berlin last week, She played Liszt, Bach, Haydn, Brahms and Prokofiev.

www.tagesspiegel.de