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## Bidzina Ivanishvili: I am not so simple, that I can be isolated and I assure you that I control everything



In this exclusive interview with The Georgian Times, Georgian Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili talks about the internal political situation, geopolitical processes, foreign relations and his strategy for state and economic development.

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### Georgian-Russian Shared Interests Counter Western "Values" in Georgia

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### Saakashvili Further Isolated as Close Allies Arrested

Former Georgian Prime Minister and the chairman of the United National Movement party Vano Merabishvili was arrested on corruption charges on May 21 in what the opposition said was a witch-hunt against members of the ousted administration of President Mikheil Saakashvili. Upon the court decision, the former Prime Minister was sentenced to two months preliminary imprisonment. Meanwhile, Zurab Chiaberashvili, former health minister and current governor of Kakheti region in eastern Georgia was released on 20,000 Gel bail.

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### ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE IN GEORGIA

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THE GEORGIAN TIMES GORBI

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# Georgian-Russian Shared Interests Counter Western “Values” in Georgia

By IAN F. CARVER, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF, GT

Tensions continue to simmer in Georgia in the wake of what appears to have been highly organized and directed violence in Tbilisi on May 17 against those marking International Day against Homophobia, with follow-up protests flaring up on May 24 in the Georgian capital. As events continue to unfold, the question remains as to whether such an unforeseen outcome in “pro-Western” Georgia is not a reflection of Russia’s ability to exercise influence in Georgia – and counter Western influence – through one of the few

levers it retains in the country- religion.

Who benefits the most when nearly every Western ambassador and institution in Georgia negatively reacts to the Georgian State’s inability to reconcile its stated Western orientation with domestic realities, and when Georgians themselves are becoming increasingly skeptical of Euro-Atlantic values? Indeed, Western diplomat’s statements have made many Georgians to even believe that the idea of exercising tolerance towards homosexuality is being “violently imposed” on them from abroad.

One must consider the bud-

ding relationship between the Georgian and Russian Orthodox Churches in recent years in light of serious disagreements between the Georgian State and the Church over domestic and foreign policy issues, including various EU expectations for Georgia such as granting religious minorities increased freedoms to officially organize themselves and upgrading the status of regional minority languages.

Whether any degree of tacit cooperation or not between the two Churches (and there most likely wasn’t), the outcome of the May 17 protests demonstrates a “rolling back” of Western influence in Georgia (foreign backed NGOs, including those that support gays). The result is

a reinvigorated sense of fraternity among Georgians with their Orthodox northern neighbor Russia, whose State policies are vehemently opposed to the “the spread of homosexual propaganda”. Georgians are now even calling on their government to pass similar legislation in their own country, in lockstep with Moscow’s own position on the issue.

It came as no surprise that the same protesters, who came out in mass to thwart the anti-homophobic rally, were shouting anti-NATO slogans at the acting US Ambassador who attempted to come to the LGBT rally participants’ rescue (certainly not in line with standard diplomatic protocol). The greatest winners in this showdown are the forces



of Russian foreign policy that so clearly want to demonstrate to the international community that Georgia is unable to abide by the principles of civil soci-

ety and democratic values and therefore totally incapable of being an independent country worthy of increased cooperation and partnership with the West.

## PUBLICITY



### SOCAR CONTINUE TO DEVELOP GASSTATION NETWORK IN GEORGIA

Five new natural gas stations have been added to SOCAR's growing network of gas stations in Georgia.

In May gas stations were opened in Tbilisi (at the end of Bogdan Khmelnitski street); in the village of Dighomi (close to David Aghmashenebeli monument); near the Tbilisi Sea (on 15 Staroselski street), and in Zestaponi (on Mepe Tamar avenue).

Customers fueling up at the Dighomi gas station have access to 24 hour service from the new café-market attached to the station.

There are now 9 SOCAR natural gas stations in the country, which are part of a network totaling 109 fuel stations, including petrol.

SOCAR gas stations are equipped with the Argentinian brand Galileo latest generation gas-compressing machines ensuring the highest pressure at an acceptable rate and gas supply in a safe manner in the client's vehicle.

Drivers will be able to use special service-blocks at SOCAR gas stations that allow them to regulate tire pressure, add water and cleaning and maintenance.

As of May, there are a total of 47 people employed by SOCAR in its network of natural gas stations.

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TOP 25



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# TOP 25 Companies in Georgia

Named by The Georgian Times and GORBI

This list of companies is in alphabetical order

- Bank Constanta
- Bank of Georgia
- Company Aversi
- Company Natakhtari
- FlyGeorgia
- Gas-Energy
- Geocell
- Geoplant
- Georgian Industrial Group
- Georgian American Alloys
- Georgian Beer Company
- Georgian Carriage Building Holding
- Georgian Sugar
- Georgian Water and Power
- Goodwill
- Healthy Water
- PSP Group
- Rustavi Azot
- Rustavi Metallurgical Plant
- Sarajishvili
- Smart Retail
- Socar Energy Georgia
- TBC Bank
- VTB Bank Georgia
- Wissol Group

# I am not so simple, that I can be isolated, I assure you that I control everything

By MALKHAZ GULASHVILI, FOUNDER OF THE GEORGIAN TIMES MEDIA HOLDING, EKA GAZDELIANI, GT JOURNALIST

In this exclusive interview with The Georgian Times, Georgian Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili talks about the internal political situation, geopolitical processes, foreign relations and his strategy for state and economic development.

*Former Prime Minister Vano Merabishvili has been arrested. Is this action part of the restoration of justice the Georgian public has demanded for a long time or is it political persecution, as your opponents claim? Will other members of the previous regime be punished?*

One of the election promises we made was to restore justice. This process has been a bit prolonged, and in fact has taken too long, because we refused to interfere with the work of the Procurator's Office; however, we did ask them to make the process as transparent as possible. Foreigners are also observing this process, as are other stakeholders; the public was anxious, and is still anxious. It is good that we have now learned to be patient. When we made hasty decisions, as we did for the last 20 years, we jumped from one extreme to another, and therefore from one disaster to the next.

I think that with the exception of the UNM, nobody is arguing about the arrests and nobody considers them political persecution or selective justice. Only the 'national movement' are saying this, although when we first came to power many foreign observers, both American and European, had doubts.

During our first six months in office observers' attitudes towards the new government have dramatically changed, as they have seen our real face. My visits to Europe are partially responsible for this. No longer are such questions being raised. You have already seen the negative statements of Ashton and Stefan Fule, with whom I have since talked, and you saw that my responses were quite balanced and temperate. Of course it is not surprising that Europe and the US are anxious; this is normal, especially when an ex-Prime Minister has been detained, as this raises many questions. But I would like to take this opportunity to underline that our team and I will never allow political persecution and selective justice in Georgia.

*Should the United National Movement remain the main*



*opposition party when its members were part of a criminal regime? How do you plan to create a system in which real opposition emerges, not a gang of criminals calling themselves an opposition?*

Whether they remain a political force is their decision, but with their behavior when in power, and today, leaves little room, in my opinion, for them to be called a normal opposition. I would like there to be as many opposition parties in the country as possible; the political spectrum will be enriched, and this will enhance the development of our country. The UNM considers this idea a threat, as if I wish to destroy them by encouraging opposition to my government. I have never said any such thing, and would never allow myself to make such a statement. I think they are destroying themselves. Their leader and his behavior are what will destroy the party. My wish is for the political spectrum to be diverse and many-sided, with various competing parties which can be distinguished from one another. The more political parties we have, the better this is for the development of Georgian democracy.

In Georgia, the politics we have seen for the last 20 years are over; Georgia is now a much more stable and pluralistic country. We have laid a solid foundation, and no force will be able to turn us back from democracy and the European direction. We have said "No" to the façade democracy we had, as what ex-

isting before. We are building a European-type democracy. Nobody will overcome the will of the Georgian people, although there have been many attempts to do so, which are continuing even now.

Many people, among them journalists, are aggravating what is happening here. They include Lasha Natsvlishvili, Khukhashvili, Khvedelidze (this last becoming a victim of his own impatience). He broke the law, but not the way he was accused of doing. Those who are trying to order such disruptions have already been revealed. They have tried but failed. Small groups of agitators will not be able to shake us; they will not be able to destroy us or shake our solid democratic institutions.

We are trying to make the general public more mobilized and ensure their maximal involvement as this will provide the basis for a pluralistic society. Georgian society must totally change, and indeed already has, sometimes for the worse but mostly for the better. We have learned very hard lessons and have made appropriate conclusions.

*Elite corruption, such as misappropriation of property, and violence were the hallmarks of the previous government. How long will it take for justice to be restored? For instance, after October 1, a huge quantity of capital was illegally taken out Georgia, so how do you expect to reclaim it? What mechanism might be established for doing this?*

The process of restoring justice continues. It should take several more months for cases concerning senior public servants to be investigated. In the General Procurator's Office several cases are now pending. I hope they will be concluded as quickly as possible. It is necessary to suppress the impulses which are not good for our society to develop. The restoration of justice is necessary, but the length of time these processes take can be a hindrance to restoring public confidence.

The Procurator's Office will be responsible for locating and returning illegally removed capital. I have suspicions about where some of it has gone, but first an investigation will be held and then the courts must give a verdict. We will all see what happens in this respect. Generally capital cannot be reclaimed by force. An environment should exist in which there is no incentive to remove capital. I am trying my best to create such a business environment, to make the country attractive for investment.

*Will the government prosecute Mikheil Saakashvili and the National Movement for what happened in August 2008 and what do you expect will result from this?*

You are well aware that an investigation into the August 2008 events has begun. The aggression and anxiety which Saakashvili and the National Movement expressed towards the investigation is in my opinion absurd. The public knows what actually happened, but

there are those who are making out that the conclusions of an investigation will embarrass Georgia and we will thus not be able to regain the lost territories; I disagree with this. Everything is already known by everybody, even in Europe, where the Tagliavini report was presented, but some are trying to give the Georgian public different information. I assure the Georgian public that this investigation will in no way damage our country. We will not do anything to harm the reputation of our country, but they have done so by their own behavior and now wish to accuse us of this.

If I start talking about the prosecution of the National Movement and Saakashvili it will seem that I am making a political statement. That's why I am trying not to make our public or Europe suspicious that we might want to conduct any type of political persecution. I will not discuss this question from this angle. The investigation will decide what to do. I have questions I want answered too, but all these questions should be decided by the courts.

*Up to 8,000 cases have been filed at the Procurator's Office by people seeking justice over the last six months. Will you be employing additional staff to deal with these, at least temporarily? Is it so difficult to find 300 good lawyers in Georgia?*

This is a good question, but not an easy one to answer. The Procurator's Office has received many more applications

than it can address, but 100 have been selected for action at this point. The necessary staff is there, but the inflow of applications is huge. The workload should be somehow lightened in order to keep up. A decision about additional staff has not yet been taken; however, we plan to replace some of the existing ones.

The procurator is a very exceptional profession. Such a person needs a good education and exactly the right diploma. In this respect we are not rich. It is not easy to select good, qualified procurators from the personnel available. We are trying to keep as many of the staff as possible, but I think it is necessary to increase the staff complement and we will discuss this.

*Do you plan to support those people who were victims of repression, such as attacks on their family members, business or property? These now have to start again from scratch. Has the government developed a programme to help them? How are you going to address this problem?*

This is a very difficult question. You mean those who had their property confiscated who were forced to make a donation to the government, etc? There are too many such victims and this is a very difficult issue to sort out. The property of some of these people has often been sold to honest buyers, who also need to be protected. This is not so easy to do.

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The most difficult question is to determine who had what, and we will discuss the question from a political perspective as well. I have held a meeting about this with experts and Kakha Kakhniashvili asked us to discuss it in terms of offering an amnesty. I agreed with this and told him that in the nearest future, whenever they wish, we will discuss this problem further.

Maybe the financial losses can be covered by the government, but this would mean we had to pay out a huge sum of money – over 7 billion GEL. We are trying to find a dignified way to resolve this problem, but as yet we have not made a decision one way or another.

**What is the government's plan for improving the business environment? How can you explain the fact that economic growth has stalled, as your opponents are saying? Investments have decreased, the balance of trade is getting worse, and experts say that this year, unlike in previous years, we may not achieve 6 percent growth. Is this prognosis correct? What is the reason for it?**

To make a good comparison, we have to recall at what cost the previous government achieved 6 percent economic growth. It derived from the loans taken for the construction of various buildings, which the government took for unknown reasons. Some of these buildings the government was required to construct, such as the justice houses, but we have suspended the construction of these as they were very vague projects and three times more expensive than they ought to be. We will construct buildings which are three times cheaper and three times better in quality and do so on an ongoing basis. The only building projects we have suspended are the justice houses. The construction of the Parliament building. The justice houses greatly influenced the GDP growth figure achieved by the previous government. Economic growth was only achieved in this artificial way, and an economy cannot grow artificially.

Even a first year student knows that the previous model of economic management in Georgia contradicts the principles of economic development. We are laying the foundations for real development. The Georgian economy is inert, and this is very difficult to change in a few months. But the economic foundation we are laying is very solid and fundamental. Business is now free from any kind of interference or pressure. If anybody has different information, I am ready to respond to any allegations. Business needs a free and competitive environment, and we have already introduced this. Moreover we have started to refine some economic regulations. Most of these were only nominal, they only existed on pa-



per. For instance, the general tax level is only 16%, a very small figure, the fourth lowest in the world, but none of what the previous government did had any value because business was totally controlled by the government. Now we have the same number of regulations for developing the economy and a free business environment that they have in Europe. At the same time we are establishing 2 more funds, which will be launched only two weeks from now. When I announced that we were establishing the 3-billion fund for co-investment, so many investors wanted to take part in it that it may end up having more than five billion to spend. This will provide a big additional stimulus for Georgia.

This fund was my idea. I am a businessman and I know very well what a country such as ours needs. Georgia needs development because it is not much trusted by other countries, and has neither political, nor economic stability. In such cases, an investor needs to know who his local partner will be. Through this fund we can offer any investor from 25% to 75% of the total investment they need to make. This will help the investor make a positive decision more easily. This idea will work, but it needs time. Rumours are spreading already and we have had good responses. I have been asked why the government is not doing anything for the economy. What role should a government play? It can only establish good conditions and a competitive market. The right conditions are already almost here and what

is left to do we will do.

We will build 2-3 times more infrastructure than the previous government did. They managed to build 100 kms of roads in 9 years. Infrastructure Minister Davit Narimania has told me that this year alone we will construct at least 50 kms of roads, half of what they built in 9 years. In 2 years we will do much more. Those who do not know about economics often ask me – what more are you doing? They think that the government should create the economy. The previous government also thought in such a way, and businessmen were obliged to construct resorts, hotels and the like, they were not free to do what they thought fit.

The previous rulers still think that this is a function of government. No, a government should not interfere in the economy. Today economics is the most difficult and necessary sphere in Georgia. What we need most of all is the restoration of our economy. All the problems we need to resolve are connected to the economy. If we restore our economy, I assure you that these will have a decisive influence even on the restoration of our territorial integrity. I think about this day and night. I think we are doing everything very correctly.

The second partnership fund we are founding will be a sovereign wealth fund. This also will stimulate investment. I am promoting this even privately, with anybody I know. I think Georgia a very attractive country for investment. We have a unique location, good climate and all the conditions

to create an economic boom. This is my dream, but as I said, in our second year the outlines of this should emerge and the third year should bring good results.

Members of the previous government are still trying to create the impression that in Georgia something terrible is happening. Economic growth is possible here. It is lower right now than it was in previous years, but I am assuring you that the economy has started getting healthier. The previous growth was artificial, an illusory growth based on loans. The government was doing things which are not within its area of competence. For instance, City Hall started constructing Gudauri rather than resolving the social problems of the population. Electricity tariffs were increased and the previous ruling party was financed by this increase.

**This year the land has been brought back to life. Long dead Georgian agriculture is now reviving. Will you introduce protection for Georgian agricultural products?**

If I will use the word protection my opponents will not like this, but we have to establish civilized economic rules and enforce them in such way as to give local producers and manufacturers some competitive advantage. We are taking various economic steps: quality control is being increased, and we are trying to restore other economic levers which are acceptable in Europe. We are helping businessmen find additional markets and will continue to assist them. One of the obliga-

tions of government is to lobby for business. When meeting businessmen I constantly remind them that no member of the administration can interfere with business. We have helped the agricultural sector in social terms but this also promotes the economy. I think in time we will see results, and I am keen to see them. The economy is a complex being: economic restoration cannot be achieved only through internal political or economic decisions. Globalisation impacts on the economic situation of our neighbors and other countries, and our decisions on theirs, and vice versa.

**Do you have an agricultural programme? What new commodities can Georgia export?**

You know, at the beginning the main economic problem was attracting investment into Georgia's economy and financial sector. However, I think we have now successfully addressed this, though we will continue working in this direction. It is very difficult to find new projects or to respond to this question. I have assembled an economic team and tasked it with seeing what can be done to attract new types of business.

I have contacted several countries which have successful nanotechnology sectors and manufacture such products. I would like them to undertake some projects in Georgia too. We are lacking in ideas. WPPs (Water Power Plants) are fashionable now, but what other projects can we implement? This is why a free market is necessary – when we have one, business itself will develop new projects.

**At what stage is the investigation into high ranking officials at the Ministry of Agriculture? You have said publicly that Davit Kirvalidze asked you to suspend the investigation. Do you think this was a case of elite corruption or a management problem?**

I will refrain from drawing conclusions at this time. Kirvalidze did not ask me to suspend the investigation, he merely expressed concern that it might hinder the spring planting. I understood that this work should not be hindered because somebody might not be able to do their job, so we decided to appoint Shalva Pipia minister instead. We have agreed with Pipia that if everything turns out alright with Kirvalidze, if the matter is resolved positively, he will write a statement and Kirvalidze will return to his post. However, the Procurator's Office has serious questions. I do not know exactly when the investigation will be completed, but it will not be too drawn out. When I asked the Procurator's Office about this they told me that the suspicions they had had before we came to power were even more serious and based on hard evidence.

**The President of the European People's Party his ex-**

**pressed his concern over the detention of Vano Merabishvili, saying it is a very serious backward step for Georgia. He has called on the international community to establish a monitoring mechanism to oversee the presidential elections. What is your response to this? What do you think about this monitoring mechanism idea?**

I agree with the President of EPP, Wilfrid Martins, that we should allow what he calls the international community to observe the election process here. You know that OSCE observer Mr. Hammarberg, a very well-known law enforcer, already does this. I would welcome Martins broadening the observation mission. If Martins wants to come here and be involved in this, even on his own, we will open all doors for him. As for the declaration that the arrest was a step backwards for Georgia, I think just the contrary. It is a step forward, as the injustice the violence which has been prevalent in Georgia should be abolished. Unfortunately Martins cannot obtain real and unbiased information from Georgia and see the real facts. He has made some sharp and unfair declarations but does not come here and see what is happening. When he was here last time I was willing to meet him, but this was not possible. I do not know why he listens to only one side and does not wish to listen to the other; this is very sad. I would ask Mr. Martins once again to act more responsibly and consider information from all sides, and if he sends a big group of monitors here I will welcome this. We are open to all kinds of communication.

**President Saakashvili has drawn comparisons between Merabishvili's detention and that of former Ukrainian Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko. He has also said that after Tymoshenko's detention Ukraine became internationally isolated and Georgia will suffer the same fate. To what extent are these comparisons fair, and how would you evaluate such a declaration?**

We should demonstrate that we are a democratic country and have European-type institutions. Until we are connected to Europe questions will be asked about what we are doing. But I will try not to criticize or comment on other countries, particularly our neighbors and friends, and not because I am scared of something. The President wishes to compare Tymoshenko's case with Merabishvili's and thinks this is correct. We are now restoring justice in Georgia. What the ex-Prime Minister did has raised many questions in the Procurator's Office. People should wait until a verdict is announced, not make declarations beforehand. Moreover, they know more than me what they did and are still doing now.

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**How would you describe Giorgi Margvelashvili? What do you think about his potential opponents, and what qualities made you decide to adopt him as your presidential candidate? Your opponents say he is a low rating minister.**

I do not agree with these ratings. We have a very good team, a very good government. I would rate them in two categories – good and very good. Even to award first and second places among them would be difficult, as we have many successful ministers. However, I consider that most of the ministers, despite being very successful in their respective ministries, are not on his level and do not have his mentality. Maybe others will be disappointed when I say this, but none of our ministers has the same level of governmental mentality, although they can grow and improve.

Giorgi Margvelashvili has already demonstrated his ability to run a government, manage crises and take decisions with dignity. He is a very creative, friendly and trustworthy person. He is a team player, liked by all members of the team.

Above all I am interested in what qualities a President should have which Giorgi does not have. No one has given me one. I think he has all the necessary qualities in abundance. I do not know a good quality he does not have. As for the competition, I think that unfortunately there is no other serious contender at this time. This is the consequence of Georgia having run around in circles for 20 years, and the 9 years of UNM rule. The political establishment was practically destroyed; there was a one party system. I selected whoever I could from what remained to establish our coalition. There is no strong party outside the coalition because we are an amalgam of all the healthy forces. But I would not cast a shadow on those parties which are outside and are trying their best – let God help them.

I do not think the United National Movement candidate will achieve anything and this party is very peculiar. An ordinary citizen standing as an independent would get more votes. To be the National Movement candidate will be an additional burden on that person. Once again my opponents will be irritated by my words, but I know what the public's opinion of them is. I think they will not present a serious opponent for Giorgi. Such is the reality today, but in the future it will be more interesting to have stiffer competition.

**How could you evaluate the progress of the Georgian-Russian negotiations? Do you think that Zurab Abashidze is doing enough, or that public diplomacy would be more appropriate at this stage, as some experts state?**

I am very cautious. Many people are coming to me saying that Putin is our friend and so on. I question this and will proceed carefully, as the position we are starting from is very difficult, even today. We are trying not to make the same mistakes the previous government did, and therefore I think broadening the negotiations and being more actively involved in them is dangerous. We have to show our true face. After we came to power, the negotiating parties and others saw who we are, what we stand for. The first stage, in my opinion, is to restore what we once had – trade and cultural relations – and this process is ongoing and will very soon be completed, I think. I do not have any illusions about achieving larger-scale things, and I have not made any promises that in 1-2 years we will restore relations with Russia. More time will be needed. We have hardly overcome August 2008, as its physiological as

taria, who I had not met before. She was interested in our legislative policy concerning the occupied territories. She called this a softening, while the National Movement thinks we have handed our territories to the Russian Federation.

We have made communication, started a dialogue, begun to make the movement of people easier. I think that we will start a dialogue about visa simplification at some point, and ultimately they will abolish the visa regime. I think that I assured Mrs. Koshtaria that doing this would not spoil anything. All this is being done to improve relations step-by-step.

**Would it be appropriate to use public diplomacy with Sokhumi and Tskhinvali? Would sending sportsmen, cultural representatives and journalists and holding dialogues and conferences and encouraging the movement of people break this negative wall?**

We are trying; however, conferences and large scale ex-

tive on June 5. Here again being in a hurry may spoil things. Unfortunately nowadays politics plays a greater role than economics in questions such as restoring the railway link.

We will have to consider this carefully. We have a great desire to do so, and this desire is mutual; however, any solution should be well-regulated, so as not to spoil things again. It is clear to all that this step would only bring good to Georgia and not harm us.

**The government has changed its position on the Khars-Akhalkalaki railway several times. According to some experts, it represents a serious danger for Georgian marine ports. Yet we still have free trade with Turkey. Will this not harm the Georgian economy?**

To begin with this project may affect our ports and existing railway. My opponents keep going on about this and tell me even today that I am not consistent as I keep chang-

again get hung up on this question.

**Twenty-two Georgian soldiers have now been killed in ISAF operations in Afghanistan. Is it appropriate for Georgia to have so many troops in Afghanistan and what is their mission, particularly when EU countries have reduced their military contingents there? What negotiations have the Georgian government had with NATO heads over the post-2014 period?**

We will continue to participate in the ISAF mission. After 2014 we will remain in Afghanistan and our soldiers will take part in the restoration of peace there. I appraise the participation of our soldiers there very highly. They represent our country at the highest level. Our soldiers are studying military practice in a war situation, and this is a very good thing. Of course, it is sad that some of our soldiers have died. In the future we have to do the maximum to prevent this. We are

the proper steps. Saakashvili lifted the benchmark irritatingly high by announcing his intentions beforehand and irritating the Russian Federation. I think keeping us out of NATO is not a matter of principle for Russia, as the previous government said. The attitude of the Russian Federation towards NATO countries is changing. Russia may change towards NATO itself, but even if nothing changes, there are many precedents. It became possible for other countries to join NATO and we will do so too.

**Do you plan to visit the Sochi Olympics? Will you meet Russian Federation leaders at this visit? What matters would you discuss?**

I have no such plans as yet. Generally, it is accepted that heads of government accompany their teams to the Olympics, but I have not yet discussed this question seriously. Even today I have no position on the matter, but I cannot exclude anything and there would be noth-



well as human impact has proved difficult to bear ... wounds must be healed.

I am absolutely sure that we will improve relations with Russia step-by-step. But we cannot do this rapidly. We have to do it methodically. The most necessary and urgent thing, in my opinion, is being achieved quite speedily. I am not going to slow down these processes, but I see the reality and know that the restoration of full relations and territorial integrity cannot be hurried. It will inevitably happen over a period of years, but for now we have to be patient.

**When we invited Russian journalists to Georgia to study the situation on the ground in the conflict zones the previous government expelled them from the airport. Would this happen again?**

God save us from this. How could we do such a thing? Journalists, sportsmen, art and culture representatives should deepen our dialogue. Before my meeting with experts I had a big discussion with Elene Khosh-

changes are not possible at present. What is possible, and what is called people's diplomacy, we are trying to do. We are trying to send signals. The first and main signal, the thing I am always talking about, is that we should never even think about restoring relations by force. The other side should be willing to do this. As I have mentioned, economics will be a decisive factor in restoring friendly relations with our Ossetian and Abkhazian brothers and ultimately our territorial integrity. We have to show them a Georgia which will make them see and believe it is a warm country. They should become willing to cohabit with us. We cannot achieve anything by force, let's not think this would become possible by force.

**Will the railway with Russia, and the movement of goods through the Roki tunnel be restored anytime soon?**

As far I know this question will be among those discussed by Zurab Abashidze and the Russian Federation representa-

ing my position on the new cross-border railway link. I have not changed my position. I had a suspicion about the project at the beginning, and I still have it, but this suspicion is not very important. The issues could be resolved very easily in a very short time. Azerbaijan is a very good partner for us and we are deepening our friendly relations with it. You can see these as the best relations two countries can have with each other. The Khars-Akhalkalaki railway project is very interesting both economically and politically. In practice all goods from Central Asia will be transported via this railway. Now they are saying that we are hindering this project, but the contrary is true. We have had meetings concerning it and are pushing to construct this line as quickly as possible. Of course, it is possible that at some stage the existing ports and railway may accrue losses, but these will be unimportant and so easily overcome, that is not worth commenting on this. However our opponents may

continuing our relations with NATO and are proud of this. We have very good soldiers. They are distinguished from the soldiers of other countries by their courage, astuteness and braveness. We cannot do anything about the fact that war and peacekeeping operations sometimes produce victims, and cannot suspend our relations with NATO over this.

**To what extent can integration with NATO be achieved when France and Germany, the Russian Federation's allies, will always veto this?**

I do not think they will always veto us. We will see what happens next year. I do not like to make promises beforehand, but we have a plan, and next year very rapid and important steps will be taken. Everything is possible. Understandably there are problems, and the Russian Federation does not like our attempts to join NATO. But we can cite many examples, for instance the Baltic countries or Poland, of countries Russia was categorically against joining NATO which did so by taking

ing bad in me attending. If this is necessary, and will speed up the improvement of our relations with the Russian Federation, then why not?

**When do you plan to visit the United States, and what questions will you discuss with our strategic partner?**

I will start by saying that we are very actively cooperating with the USA. I would like to remind the US envoy to Georgia that we are very lucky to have such a good envoy here. I would like once again to thank Richard Noland, who I consider my friend. I think that we have resolved all issues with the USA. They have already seen our face and understand who we are; this visit will not have as much importance as the first. It will be of a friendly nature, which is necessary as they should get to know me and become more acquainted. I have no questions about the USA's position towards us. When the FBI representative arrived here, I met him and we had a very friendly conversation.

Continued on p. 7

Continued from p. 6

I would also like to underline that we are not giving too much attention to making visits, unlike the previous government. Saakashvili visited many countries, shaking hands with their dignitaries, and this was widely broadcast here. He tried to rule the country from abroad. We were expected to be impressed by how many times he shook hands abroad, but it was almost as if we were becoming slaves. No doubt diplomacy in international relations is very important, and we are doing everything necessary, but we are not exaggerating things. It is not decisive where we go or which visit we make when. The main thing is how we manage the country internally, what relations we have with the Georgian people, to what extent we are acceptable to the electors, whether we choose the correct strategy for the development of our country.

I do not exclude visiting the USA in June. In November I was invited and could have gone, but refused for one reason – I wanted to show our main partner how good our team is. I still do. Now questions are being asked because Merabishvili was detained. No doubt, the Americans are getting concerned – are bad things happening in Georgia again? I do not wish to visit the country under such circumstances, and I am not in a hurry to go there during a strained situation and prove that we are not bad people. Let them see this matter through to the end, let them see our signature. Then any visits will be more effective and gainful, I assure you.

**What is your policy towards the Caucasus? Are you planning to revive the "Peaceful Caucasus" project which was destroyed by Saakashvili's provocative actions?**

No doubt the Caucasus is a very complex region. Georgia has always played a distinguished role in this region. I think we will be a very good regional player with an important role to play in peacekeeping. Generally, the position of our government is that we have to actually do things, not talk about them. We have to establish genuinely friendly relations with all our neighbours. I am not afraid to say that we have already taken the first rapid steps in this direction and have successful relations with our neighbours. I think these will continue into the future. We have to implement the "Peaceful Caucasus" plan. This will also interest our big neighbour, Russia, as the North Caucasus is within the Russian Federation's borders and they know very well that this is a very difficult region. It is very hard to rule this region. When I talk about the restoration of our territorial integrity with the Russian Federation and the alignment of our interests, I point out that it is not in Russia's interests to have secessionist regions such as Abkhazia and South Ossetia within its own borders. This is

what gives me hope that we will normalise our relations with Abkhazia and South Ossetia and eventually restore our territorial integrity.

**What role should Georgia play in the modern world, in this tough geopolitical situation, if it is not to harm its state interests, as it did in August 2008?**

We are a small country. The previous government pretended we were a global player, equal to the big states, but this is wrong. Maybe this was not a bad thing to pretend, but we have to face reality. We have to

**think there will be more in other countries?**

I know that Prokhorov is attempting to do the same in the Russian Federation. Why not? But there has been nothing like my case before. I only came into politics through force of circumstances, and in principle I am counting days until I can put right everything which has been done wrong, leave the government and go back to being a private citizen. I believe that politics is not in my nature. I took on an obligation to my country and I will fulfil it; I will see this through to the end.

ery situation. Different people are supposed to be controlling me, names have been bandied about, but it is very difficult to control me. I exercise my power as Prime Minister and head of government and I assure you that I control everything very well. I have all the information I need to see that everything is OK.

**What is your daily schedule?**

I tend to mix up Saturday and Sunday. As a rule, for me there is no Sunday. I get up at 5-6 o'clock. In winter I got up at 6, but now it is spring and

tween the lines - journalists sometimes ask questions which already contain the answer they want, then take the material and blow it out of proportion. I have seen many examples of this and try not to give them the opportunity. I try to answer a question to the end. This is normal. Many may not like this, but I am not posing. If I see a journalist asking an incorrect question and leading the conversation in the wrong direction, I try to intervene; if anyone does not like this, that is their problem. I am the way I am. No doubt a journalist

**al minorities. Does this mean that same sex marriage will be allowed in Georgia?**

What will be will be, let's not do fortune telling now. But we have to defend them and we will defend them. We will defend all types of relations, among them those of sexual minorities.

What happened on May 17 was unfortunately the product of the nine years rule of the National Movement. Those in opposition were not able to do anything more than demonstrate. But I think the ideal decision was taken. I spoke to the Interior Minister every 5 minutes. The Interior Minister took the decisions himself, but I had continual consultation with him. We managed to resolve the situation before it worsened. The majority of those who violated the law will not be held to account. Two holy fathers have been questioned and they are liable under criminal law. There will also be others prosecuted. Spiritual or civil persons all are equally accountable before the law. Here we will demonstrate our statehood. Maybe political coquetry with the majority is very gainful (and some politicians are doing this). I believe that we are a very cultured society, and neither our culture nor our religion will permit us to assault any person for having a different opinion. We will not suppress the freedom of assembly of any minority.

**The family, children, is the main value for you. What should be done in Georgia to make the family the cornerstone of the state? What would be the correct economic climate in which to do this?**

The economy should obviously be good. If a family does not have a dignified income and no possibility of its members being employed it is very difficult to talk about such things. The biggest injustice in our country is the mass unemployment. The fact that we cannot find employment in our own country is very sad. But we have very good traditions. We have to try and keep our unique traditions as far as we can, including our attitude to the family. We should not blindly take everything from Europe and abroad. We should take what is new, good and progressive, and not resist progressive innovations, but society should be healthy, and a healthy society is based on healthy families. Georgians have a very rich history, rich traditions and religion plays an essential role in our culture. All this is complex, but I think that Georgia will be healthy with the tradition of family as the basis on which to adopt the appropriate innovations. I do not foresee there being any special problems with this. The main problems we have nowadays are poverty and unemployment. These should be overcome, and families will be economically strengthened in the process.

Unluckily Georgian journalism is not distinguished. Our society needs many things, and among these is development in this respect. But I have maximal communication; I do not miss a chance if they have a question. I do not leaving them with questions either. It is normal for me to correct them or ask them questions. I will not change, I will continue in this way.

**In response to the May 17 events you declared that you will defend the rights of sexu-**



be a strong regional player. What we can do at the world level, to increase interest in us, is strengthen our democracy, establish truly democratic institutions and restore the economy. This will arouse and strengthen the support of the international community.

**At what stage are the negotiations on an association agreement with the EU and what can we expect from the Vilnius summit?**

Mr. Fule stated in November that it is easy to cooperate with the new Georgian government. No country has such a record as we have of fulfilling the demands of a membership action plan. Before November we have much time in which to show Europe our true face once more. Today's situation – the relations between the new and old government – may cast a shadow over these processes, but we are doing everything required of us very well and at the highest level. We will continue to do so until we return to our ancestral home. We are Europeans and will become a member country of Europe.

**You are the first legal ruler of a post-Soviet country who is also a billionaire. Do you**

**When are you planning to leave politics and what are you planning to do next?**

I will be an active ordinary citizen. Our main problem is that we are always waiting for a good President to come along. We have to develop society. The establishing and strengthening of civil society are important. This is not a matter of stringing random slogans together - many things need to be done to make this happen. These processes are the most important and most difficult of all those which need to be undertaken in Georgia. I will accomplish my mission and go. I will go where I will be most needed and where I can help my country most effectively.

**Georgia is the sort of country where people will not tell the king bad news because they will be beheaded. Could you find yourself in an information vacuum as Prime Minister?**

This is a good question. The press has said that I am in isolation and not informed about what is happening. Only people who do not know me well say this however. I am not so simple, that I can be isolated. I am absolutely in control of ev-

dawn breaks at 5. I do yoga for about one and a half hours and then receive reports on everything which happened the previous day which I did not have time to think about then. Often I have very busy days and am unable to read anything. Sometimes our journalist comes and whispers to me, sometimes I read the news at dinner. It is difficult but necessary to receive so much information and learn it. This is a quite a big job for me and problematic sometimes. I think that I work a lot, but do so to restore my energy, this is my lifestyle. In practice I work every weekend. Since coming into politics I have had a rest for 2 or 3 days in a row only at Easter, when I was in the village.

**You often criticise journalists. What is a good journalist in your opinion?**

First of all a journalist should be professional. Journalism is a hard profession, as politics is. But politics is harder, and it is not true that only people who are frustrated because they cannot do anything in other areas come into politics. I am not afraid to say that a journalist is not a God, we are all human beings. I can read be-

# NEW RESEARCH: ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE IN GEORGIA

Last month the European Union and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine published a series of public health papers based in part on research conducted by Georgian Opinion Research Business International. These papers include a brief discussion of the things we discovered, as well as policy recommendations for improving Georgians' health.

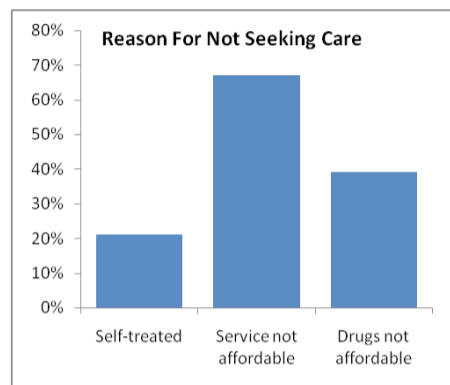
Proper access to health care has a great many benefits for a society beyond simple improvements to health. Low cost health care discourages self-treatment, preventative medicine brings health care costs down for the whole system, and stable household health is key to economic success. Georgia is suffering from a dangerous lack of health care access due in part to poorly organized privatization, as well as a lack of effective public insurance options. Below are the results of our HITT study and policy recommendations generated by international experts.

The latest reforms to the health care system in Georgia were characterised by directing public funds to priority groups rather than insuring the entire population with universal health coverage. New research of 2011 highlights that many citizens of Georgia cannot access health services and face high payments at the point of use.

Health is a vital national investment: a healthy population is essential for economic security, and inequalities in health are estimated to result in a 1.4% loss of GDP<sup>1</sup>, or 332 million lari every year in the case of Georgia. The situation

requires urgent action.

This policy brief provides results from nationally-representative household surveys of 2,200 randomly selected people in 2010 for the Health in Times of Transition study (<http://www.hitt-cis.net>). Data were compared with that from a related study in 2001. Further details on the research can be found in the source listed below.



## KEY FINDINGS

### People do not access care when needed

A majority (61%) of respondents did not access health care when they experienced a problem serious enough to require medical

attention in the past four weeks.

The most common reasons for not seeking care were affordability of services and drugs.

	Respondents that accessed care	
	Made a payment	Average cost of payment
Outpatient Care	59%	30 GEL
Inpatient Care	12%	200 GEL
Drugs	88%	50 GEL

Additionally, 1 in 5 respondents self treated instead of seeking care, which may be because home-based treatment is a cheaper substitute for health services.

### People who access care face high payments

Ninety-seven percent of respondents who had used health care in the past 4 weeks had made a payment for drugs or services. Considering that the average monthly salary in Georgia is 636 lari, these payments for health care are likely to place a significant burden on household resources.

Additional data on the issues of access and pricing of services are available from the Georgian Health Expenditure and Utilisation Surveys (HUES)<sup>2</sup>. HUES data support our findings on out-of-pocket costs for medical drugs, and have slightly lower estimates for inpatient costs and access to care.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

*Expand state-sponsored health insurance to cover more of the general population*

Georgia must further increase the proportion of its population covered by government subsidised or funded insurance. As people do not know when they will need health care, and the costs of care are so high, risk pooling is vital to ensure people access services. Further expanding the coverage of state-sponsored health insurance will help to

protect people from catastrophic spending on health care.

### Access to pharmaceuticals

Improve access to essential outpatient pharmaceuticals by including their coverage for low income groups in state-sponsored health insurance schemes.

Contain costs by encouraging rational prescribing and generic substitution.

We at GORBI would like to thank the EU and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine for the opportunity to implement this important social research, as well as the Georgian Times for agreeing to publish these papers as a civil service.

### Source:

BALABANOVA, D., ROBERTS, B., RICHARDSON, E., HAERPFER, C. & MCKEE, M. 2011. Health Care Reform in the Former Soviet Union: Beyond the Transition. *Health Services Research*. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22092004>

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### (Footnotes)

<sup>1</sup> Marc Suhrcke, Rachel A. Nugent, David Stuckler and Lorenzo Rocco. (2006) "Chronic Disease: An Economic Perspective". London: Oxford Health Alliance.

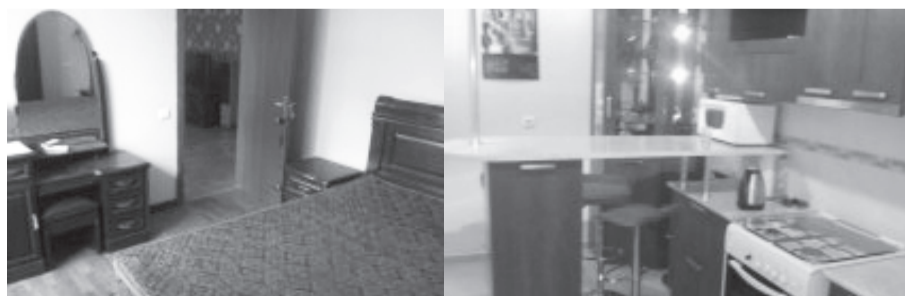
## NEWS

### Malkhaz Gulashvili: "The Georgian Times" Business Award has been returned to the service of the State Economy

"Georgian Times" Business Award has been returned to the service of the State economy - declared the President of media holding, Malkhaz Gulashvili during a press conference on May 23. According to Gulashvili, despite the pressure of 2 years held on his family and media holding, the traditional event has been restored, and it will present the business rating of 25 best companies. "We have been stopped for 2 and half years, as there was pressure of my family and the media holding and we were sued by Saakashvili's regime, though we were able to return this event in the service of the Georgian economy very quickly," declared Gulashvili. "This year the award ceremony will be distinguished first of all because Georgian businesses have been released from pressure exerted by the Saakashvili regime. In addition, the Ministry of Finance is interested in businesses being successful. For the first time, 25 companies were selected out of 50 as the best. Next year we will select 50 top companies," declared Gulashvili. The traditional 16<sup>th</sup> Business Awarding Ceremony of the best companies and businesspersons of Georgia 2012 will be held in the Marriot Courtyard Hotel on May 30. The event's brainchild is the media holding **The Georgian Times**, and the public survey was conducted by Georgian Opinion Research Business International. The event is sponsored by SOCAR, Fly Georgia and Gas Energy Partners include the Ministry of Finance of Georgia, International Chamber of Commerce, Georgian Business Association, US Chamber of Commerce and Georgian Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Media Supporters: Channel 1, Maestro, radio Fortuna, Fortuna+, Auto radio, Tbilisebi, Prime time, Comersant.ge, The Leader Today, Caucasian Business Week.

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### Guest Review:

Hoetel Sharden Villa has the best location in Tbilisi's Old Town, right near pedestrian streets with restaurants/bars. Our rooms and the 360-degree rooftop terrace offered incredible views of the fortress and restored section of the Old Town on the hillside. The hotel's staff members were as friendly and welcoming as I could imagine. We left at 4.30 AM and they brought coffee and cakes to our room since we did not have time for breakfast. Sharden Villia is new; it opened in late Summer 2012.

Brian

Young couple

Atlanta, United States of America



# Saakashvili Further Isolated as Close Allies Arrested

By LIKA MOSHIASHVILI, GT

**Former Georgian Prime Minister and the chairman of the United National Movement party Vano Merabishvili was arrested on corruption charges on May 21 in what the opposition said was a witch-hunt against members of the ousted administration of President Mikheil Saakashvili. Upon the court decision, the former Prime Minister was sentenced to two months preliminary imprisonment. Meanwhile, Zurab Chiaberashvili, former health minister and current governor of Kakheti region in eastern Georgia was released on 20,000 Gel bail.**

Dozens of former officials, including the former defense minister Bacho Akhalaia, have been arrested after October 1, 2012 when billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili led the opposition coalition Georgian Dream (GD) to election victory over Saakashvili's long-ruling party.

The new government has released hundreds of people from prisons in recent months to redress alleged overzealous prosecution, and has opened criminal cases against government officials that include charges of abuse of power, corruption, illegal confinement or illegally obtaining personal information.

Western countries have aired concerns that the new government has used selective justice and political persecution against political opponents in Georgia.

Merabishvili, who as Georgia's long-serving Interior Minister, was once considered the most powerful man in the country, has been charged into two separate cases – one involving allegations of funneling over 5.2 million GEL in public funds to the UNM's election campaign in 2012 when he was the Prime Minister.

Tchiaberashvili, who was healthcare minister in 2012, has also been charged with abuse of office, vote-buying and embezzlement of public funds.

"They were registered as non-staff workers. In fact, they have not performed any work and received money for voting in favor of the UNM and conducting election agitation for that party," Ilija Jalaghonja, a regional prosecutor, said at a briefing after the arrest of Merabishvili.

In addition Merabishvili faces abuse of power and embezzlement charges into a separate case, involving allegations that he misappropriated a "luxurious villa" from its private owner through "intimidation" and used GEL 158,000 of the Interior Ministry's funds to refurbish it in 2009, when he served as the Interior Minister.

"Upon Merabishvili's order, the ministry's budget covered the salaries of people assisting the maintenance of the villa, as a result of which, the state lost 158,000 GEL," Jalaghonja explained.

Merabishvili and Tchiaberashvili deny the charges as "absurd" and part of the government's politically-motivated persecutions of political opponents.



The Prosecutor's Office also said that Merabishvili was likely to face charges in connection with the high-profile murder case of Sandro Girgvliani in 2006 and the dispersal of an opposition rally in Tbilisi on May 26, 2011. However, currently there are only two charges against the former Prime Minister.

Merabishvili served as President Saakashvili's prime minister for just four months, in the run-up to the October parliamentary election. Prior to that, he held the post of interior minister for eight years, when he oversaw a crackdown on organized crime but was also accused of using excessive force against political protesters.

Saakashvili likened the case to the arrest and jailing in Ukraine of ex-Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko on abuse-of-power charges that was denounced as selective persecution by the West.

"No one should have an illusion that it was not a political decision," Saakashvili said in response to the arrests of Merabishvili and Chiaberashvili. "It can have much more deplorable consequences for Georgia than

for Ukraine," he added. Saakashvili warned the government against taking steps that might lead to Georgia's international isolation.

"Georgia is a small country and the West needs us less than it needs Ukraine... But Russia needs us more that it needs Ukraine and it is in Russia's vital interests to achieve Georgia's international isolation," Saakashvili declared.

Georgia's Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili rejected political motives behind Merabishvili's arrest. "It's a pity that we lost [a chance] to have such a president," he stated in a sarcastic reference to the former prime minister's apparent plans to run for president this year.

As EU and U.S. officials commented, they are actively involved in the process of monitoring Merabishvili's case as well as similar cases.

"The European Union will closely follow the legal proceedings, which it expects to be fair, transparent and independent, in full accordance with international standards," reads a statement by spokesperson of EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton and Commissioner for Enlarge-

ment and European Neighbourhood Policy Štefan Füle.

Patrick Ventrell, acting deputy spokesperson of the Department of State stressed to the Georgian government the importance of "avoiding the perception or reality of political retri-



bution."

"What we're reminding the Georgian authorities is that if you're going after former officials, whether there's misconduct or misappropriation of funds or whatever the facts of the case may be, that the proceedings have to be done in a way that generates confidence that there is a free, fair judicial process and that they're done in a way that the public has confidence that there's due process for everybody, fairly. So that's the message that we're delivering," Ventrell outlined.

Alexander Rondeli, a political expert, explained that the new prime minister is taking some political risks by prosecuting former government officials. "The government is trying to show that it is interested in the matter of dispensing justice," Rondeli commented. "But just how far to take it is a delicate matter because these cases are all against political opponents," he continued.

According to Nika Chitadze, an expert in social sciences, the reason for these detentions is to divert attention from the event that took place on May 17 on Tbilisi's central Freedom

Square. "I mean the clash between the participants of action against homophobia with the clerics when the government failed to provide reliable security," stated Chitadze, adding that "the arrest of Merabishvili, once again proves that

Georgia is moving away from democracy and Europe and getting closer to Russia, both geographically and ideologically,"

Last week a throng of thousands led by Georgian Orthodox priests broke through police cordons in the Georgian capital and attacked a small gay rights march, sending more than a dozen people to the hospital.

Mr. Ivanishvili, who came to power with support of the church, condemned the violence. No one was arrested during the demonstrations, although four men were fined Tuesday after brief court appearances.

Giorgi Gabashvili, a senior UNM lawmaker and former Minister of Culture, accused Ivanishvili of himself being behind the detentions. "The decision by Ivanishvili to detain Merabishvili and Chiaberashvili is a purely political one but they will fail to destroy the United National Movement," he said, adding that "the current government has made a very bad mistake."

A preliminary hearing on the merits of the criminal case against Merabishvili and Tchiaberashvili is scheduled for July 15.

## Georgia Scraps Annual Military Parade

By DR. VAKHTANG MAISAIA, GT

**In a major break with tradition, the Georgian government has decided not to hold its annual military parade on the Georgian capital's Rustaveli Avenue to mark the country's Independence Day on May 26.**

Since Georgia declared independence from the Soviet Union on April 9, 1991, the country's leaders have continued what was largely viewed as a Soviet legacy of displaying the authority's military might. With the exception of Georgia's new government under Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili, the annual parade has been held by all three of Georgia's presidents, starting with Georgia's first democratically elected

president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, who was ousted by militias that ushered in President Edward Shevardnadze up until current President Mikhail Saakashvili, whose authority has been curtailed following last year's parliamentary elections.

The decision was met with favor by much of Georgian society, especially in light of the previous government's deadly dispersal of peaceful protesters who had gathered at the same location exactly three years ago on the day before the military parade was scheduled to take place. The peaceful rally, organized by former Parliamentary Speaker Nino Burjanadze's "People's Union" resulted in at least four deaths and hundreds more injured. Scores of politically motivated arrests

and long-prison terms for party members and rally participants followed the violent and punitive crackdown. Despite the bloodshed, the military parade went ahead as scheduled all the while, as it was later discovered, two dead protesters' bodies were lying on nearby rooftops after allegedly being electrocuted in their attempts to flee the government onslaught. Those tragic events are still fresh in the memory of many, and until recently, many were afraid to even question how their rights had been violated.

Moreover, the way in which the military parades were organized and held over the last several years had little to do with increasing patriotism in the country and rather reflected the twisted aspirations of the person who sought to be remembered as the "godfather of the

Georgian democracy".

Tinorn dictator  
Some go as far as to compare his tenure Mikhail Saakashvili's government to "Nero style" leadership characterized by tinorn dictators. The former ruling government was determined to promote ultra-nationalism and ultra-militarization sentiments as a confirmation of its authority. During the previous parades, the government even presented the Georgian-made combat fighting vehicles "Didgori" and "Lazika" which incidentally, along with other Georgian military hardware, had been put on display and paraded by Ossetian separatist authorities after being captured from Georgia in the 2008 war.

Such military displays were not consistent or even coherent with the Georgian reality, especially in light of pseudo-declara-

tions on peaceful conflict resolution with Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and in South Ossetia. The failed invasion of South Ossetia in August 2008, which was repelled after Russia intervened militarily in support of locals, further decreased the meaning to continue the Soviet-style victory parade tradition. In April 2009, just a year after the war, the issue of holding a military parade of Independence Day met severe negative reaction and resulted in large-scale protests.

The military parade has transformed from a pure social program into a political agenda. Hence, the decision to cancel this year's military parade by the incumbent government of Georgia was perceived by most as totally logical and in line with recent historic processes and today's reality. By doing so, the

government pays tribute to those people who lost their lives for democracy and freedom in Georgia on May 26, 2011 while it openly demonstrates that Georgia rejects such military rhetoric at the expense of human rights.

The message goes further, never again will force and political posturing be used to deal with ethno-political conflicts, as in Abkhazia and in South Ossetia. Most importantly perhaps is that the decision demonstrates that Georgian society is moving away from the Soviet legacy and deeply ingrained prejudices. Having said so, a small demonstration of military equipment for the Georgian audience was enough to promote a 'real' sense of patriotism among the population, as they look forward a new era in a renewed country with hope.

# Why is Georgia's Economy Growing so Slow?

By LIKA MOSHIASHVILI, GT

**Both the National Bank of Georgia and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development have lowered the country's economic growth forecast for 2013. The Ministry of Finance of Georgia confirms the slow growth of GDP, claiming that this reduction is not a problem for the country and that 2013 will be a "really successful year". The Georgian Times discussed this issue with economic expert Irakli Lekvinadze.**

*The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development EBRD lowered its 2013 economic growth forecast for Georgia. EBRD predicts Georgia's economy will grow 3% in 2013, instead of the 5% it had forecasted in January, and this is well below of the Georgian government's official forecast of 6%. What are the reasons of Georgia's lowered economic growth forecasts? How did the current government get it wrong?*

The main reason of Georgia's slowing economic growth is lack of investment that had an impact on economic activity rate, as the country's economy greatly depends on investments. The economic activity rate slowed down in the fourth and the first quarter of 2013. There is a transition period in Georgia, political changes and the business remains still in a wait-and-see mode. In addition, some governmental projects have been stopped, and that also had an effect on the growth of the country's economy.

Government's official forecast of having 6% growth was quite optimistic; it considers one billion GEL investments in the agricultural sector, a one billion GEL investment fund, open relations with the Russian market, increased exports and inflow of tourists. There are still problems in some of these directions and that's why big businesses are not active enough. The most important thing is that after the elections in October of 2012, there is no political pressure on businesses and competition has increased in many sectors.

*Is this forecast alarming for the country? What will be the consequences? What adjustments will have to be made/should be made to the budget? How would you assess the Georgian government's actions? What should the government change/do to improve these results?*

I don't see this forecast alarming for the country, but it's noteworthy. Real GDP grew 2.9% y/y in January, slowing down to 2.1% in Feb-

ruary and 0.2% in March. The dynamic of these reductions is important; it should not become a trend or turn into a recession. If we compare Georgia to neighboring countries (EBRD lowered its forecast for economic growth in neighboring countries too) 3 – 3.5% reflects normal economic growth. However, we are a poor country (GDP per capita is \$3,500) and it's very important to achieve a high economic growth rate to speed up development.

In my opinion it's necessary to act and make decisions faster; the government needs to increase coordination and communication with foreign investors; its investment fund project should start functioning; there must be less regulations for businesses, and government should cut energy rates (electricity, gas, water) for local companies. Georgian companies face a lot of problems when attempting to enter the international market, which needs to be addressed. It's essential to maintain anticorruption politics and a liberal business environment, and to continue infrastructure projects.

As for the budget, I think it's more targeted towards various projects and most of them are social programs; this is burden for business and I hope it will be reduced.

*What are the main problems in Georgia's economy today and how can they be resolved?*

I think the main problem is lack of education and low competitive domestic production. It's important to invest in education, which should form the elite; it will create know-how and technologies in all sectors, but it's a long-term prospect. Dependence on imports is large - about 75% of the entire market. It's important to implement local projects that will cover regions, for instance in energy, transportation and logistics, heavy and light industry, and financial and agricultural sectors.

*Farmers from India, South Africa and elsewhere are buying up Georgia's agricultural land. There have been mixed results, and in some cases this "land grab" has created anger and frustration among villagers, some of whom are completely left out of the process (left in the dark), yet at the same time many locals are unable or simply unwilling to work the land. How can Georgia reconcile the need for foreign investment, (especially in efforts to develop its agricultural sector), with the need to preserve its national heritage and interests?*

I don't have anything against foreign investors. I think it's good for the country's agri-

culture if they will create households on Georgian lands. We have investors from China, Iran, Arab countries, India and Europe. They are bringing capital, knowledge and experience that are very useful for Georgian agriculture. Another issue is whether we should sell the land or give it for just a long-term lease to foreign investors. Outcries from local residents who have conflict with foreign investors are unacceptable and unfair for me. Locals cannot cultivate these lands and they do not want to let others to do this. In most cases investors are buying land from locals and not from the state. There should not be any prohibitions as for Georgians, as well as for foreign farmers. Moreover, if we do not want to lose potential in this sector the government should impose a fee for farmers who own land and don't work it. Less than 50% of agricultural lands are cultivated in Georgia and restrictions will cause even worse results.

*What are the conditions for businesses in Georgia nowadays?*

There are good conditions to do business in Georgia. That's why Georgia had reached the top ten places in the "Doing Business" index. We have low taxes, low corruption and a low level of crime; open trade relations, simplified documentation needed for import and export, free economic zones, cheap labor, strategic geographic location, and a stable currency. However, we also have weak sides: a small market, low access to regional markets, lack of education and unqualified labor, low solvency, expected complications in business regulations, unresolved conflict regions and high energy rates.

*B-line won a contract to provide communications services for the Georgian Army. Given how this is a Russian company, is this not alarming? Is this an isolated case? Do you think there was more to the 6-point peace plan that ended the Russian-Georgian war, perhaps privileged treatment for Russian investors in strategic areas, or is this just the free-hand of capitalism at work?*

I do not think that Russian companies can pose a threat to Georgia's economy. We have Russian capital in communication, energy, bank, oil and heavy industry sectors that did not cause any problem even during the war. Although this case might be noteworthy in terms of security, at the same time I do not think that secret conversations are observed via mobile operators; if it is so than we should block all the mobile communication companies as Magti has American investments and Geocell - European. I think we should be more care-

ful of Russian and foreign capital inflows in some other sectors such as ports, railways and strategic pipelines. I do not see any danger from Russian capital at this stage. Georgia's economy greatly depends on investments; the main thing is that they are diversified.

*What do you think could be done to increase the economic growth in the country in general?*

It's not easy, but if the investments from abroad will grow and international companies will become interested in Georgia, economic growth in the country will follow. The essential factor for economic growth is to create an open, competitive and liberal market; also educated people/human capital is necessary to achieve growth.

*What are your expectations for 2013 in Georgia in terms of the country's economy? Do economists in Georgia generally think about how the country's foreign policy orientation affects the economy, and if so, is there bias in their views? Georgia is officially oriented towards the EU and its economic model, but do Georgian economists think about the future of the EU and its accompanying Euro zone and do they consider how dependence and actual integration into this system might not be in Georgia's economic interests, given the block's treatment of banks and savers in Cyprus? From an economic perspective, does remaining outside the block pose any advantages (we all know the benefits, at least in theory, such as cohesion funds, etc.)?*

I am very optimistic about 2013, in spite of lowered economic growth. The country has lots of resources to increase activity rate. Georgia is oriented towards European values; it has many obligations for integration into the EU. Experience of Europe in self-government institutions, social programs, food safety, and Agricultural enterprises is very interesting. The European market, which is the most solvent in the world, is also very important for Georgia. However, I think that at this stage businesses in Georgia are not ready for strict European



regulations and it will only impede the development of this sector. The EU unites many countries. Management and coordination is a complex process: there are different living standards and opportunities in these countries, with their financial and taxation system and obligations. The crisis of recent years has cleared out some disadvantages of the integration process. Only those countries won who were not dependent on the Euro and had strong domestic production. So it's very important not to forget your own country's interests on the way to the EU.

*The BTC oil pipeline is seen as the symbol of Georgia's importance for the West, along with the on-going construction of another high-profile East-West infrastructure project, the Baku-Kars railway. However, the current government has expressed interest in a North-South project - reestablishing the Georgian-Russian railway link via Abkhazia. Meanwhile, on May 7, Minister of Energy announced that Georgia could resume gas imports from Russia. Is it now time for Georgia to also exploit its position as a north-south transit country for the sake of its economic development? How will these projects impact the economy? We have heard that that the Baku-Kars railway will actually result in decreased revenue for the state.*

All these projects are very important for our country and its economy; they increase Georgia's importance on the world map. The highways will help our country to have a higher level economic sustainability. Oil pipelines and railway projects must be implemented and as I know there is not any problem in these directions. I think the Georgian-Russian railway link via Abkhazia is a long-term project. Together with other projects it will also have a great economic importance, but there are many political and technical problems with this project that first need to be worked out.

As I understood in his announcement, Kalakdz'e expressed his wish for diversification; that we should not be dependent only on Azerbaijan for gas supply. But today I think it's impossible to replace Azerbaijan with other sources; there is no political or economic basis for it. If Russia offers gas at the lower rate it will require concessions from us and it's not acceptable for Georgia.

The Baku-Kars railway might initially result in decreased cargo revenue in ports like Poti and Batumi but this project has a huge potential. In the long-term prospective it can bring more benefit; and it's very important for the country as cargo revenue from the transportation sector is growing every year.

## NEWS

### Georgian Patriarch: Unfortunate Developments took place on May 17

The ideas, which they want to introduce in Georgia, are absolutely unacceptable, but it is very unfortunate that the Georgian clergymen acted impolite, Catholicos-Patriarch Ilia II said at the Trinity Cathedral on May 22. The Patriarch touched upon the events of May 17 and urged everyone to remain calm. "We are concerned when ordeal approaches us, but we should be glad when God sends us ordeal. Holy fathers were crying when they did not have ordeals. Unfortunate developments took place on May 17. The ideas, which they want to introduce in Georgia, are absolutely unacceptable, but it is very unfortunate that the Georgian clergymen acted impolite. I call everybody for peace. We should not insult others. Evil can be cured just by goodness and love," said His Holiness. The Catholicos-Patriarch also spoke about his visit to Istanbul and said he had a meeting with the World Patriarch and members of the Holy Synod.

# Zestafoni Plant Workers Continue to Strike

By LISA TONAKANYAN, GT

**Hundreds of workers of Georgia's largest ferroalloy plant in the western Georgian town of Zestafoni staged a walkout with the demand that their salaries be doubled. Meanwhile, the management of the factory doesn't plan to cave into the strikers' demands and threatens to begin hiring new employees if the strikers do not return to work.**

Initially the workers of Zestafoni ferroalloys factory held a symbolic strike on May 16 demanding a 50 percent increase in their salaries, 20 percent pay raise for nightshift work, improved social conditions and possibility to sign group contracts. The rally was held during non-working hours and didn't impede the factory's operations. However, the workers threatened a larger strike if their demands would not be met.

"Last year the administration of the plant increased our

wages by 35 percent promising to do the same after the New Year, though the deadline for fulfilling the promise is being delayed again and again," a representative of the factory told the Georgian Times.

Maka Kvaratskhelia, Public Relations Director of Georgian-American Alloys (GAA), which owns Georgian Manganese's Zestafoni Ferroalloy Plant and Chiatura Manganese Mine, confirms that the wages were increased eight months ago. As she explained, the company's new leadership will not dance to the strikers' piping.

She alleges their employees have perfect working conditions: the average salary totals 800 GEL, and medical insurance covering all family members regardless of their number or age is provided. "We have around 2,200 workers and the company pays insurance costs for about 15,000 people. Also, we cover our workers' transportation and food expenses," she told GT.

Nevertheless, on May 20,

around 800 hundred employees of the ferroalloy factory launched a large-scale strike again, paralyzing the entire plant. In response the administration of the factory declared that ultimatums will not bring any results. Kvaratskhelia believes the rally was provoked by the Irakli Petriashvili Association of Trade Unions.

"An agreement between the workers and the company was on the verge of being reached but trade unions refused to sign it at the last moment," she said, adding that the salaries for those striking during working hours will be cut. Kvaratskhelia warned that the factory's management will start hiring new recruits and will stop rendering medical service if strikers do not get back to work.

After five days of protests, the strikers declared they will not get back to their worksites until their demands are met. Head of Imereti's Metallurgists and Mining Industry Workers' Trade Union Goga Bregvadze told GT that the situation has

not changed since May 20 and the plant's administration still refuses to satisfy their requirements.

"On May 22, three workers of the factory launched a hunger strike, though after consultations with the head of Georgia's Association of Trade Unions they decided to end it, hoping that the management would make concessions. However, all our efforts were in vain so four workers recommenced their hunger strike on May 24," Bregvadze informed, adding that their turnout was supported by students and other trade unions.

Meanwhile, the workers of Chiatura Manganese Mine also came out in solidarity with Ferroalloys Plant's strikers. As the Association of Trade Unions informed GT, the strike will start in Shukhreti and "Stalin's mines".

However, head of GAA's press service assures the workers are not receiving any support from anyone and the number of strikers thinned out by



the end of the week. "There were around one hundred of them by Friday and only 20-30 in the evening time. Many of our employees are not participating in the strike, but they also do not come to work; they sit at home despite expressing their solidarity with the workers," Kvaratskhelia explained, emphasizing that despite these events, the management of the plant has established normal operations in one department of the factory using a group of technical engineers.

The parties continue accusing each other of making ill-founded decisions and not wishing to come to an agreement. As Tamaz Dolaberidze, President of Metallurgists, Mining and Chemical Industry Workers' Trade Union says, the administration of the Ferroalloys Plant started calling up the

strikers and threatening them in order to force them to abandon the rally; simultaneously they bring new workers to different departments instead of trying to resolve the standoff.

Founded in 1933 by famous Georgian scientist Giorgi Nikoladze, Georgian Manganese's Zestafoni Ferroalloy Plant has grown to become Georgia's largest silicomanganese processing plant. In 2012 the company produced over 187,000 metric tons of silicomanganese, generating 261 million USD in revenue from its exports, which reach the United States, Canada, Great Britain, Japan and France. Owned by Florida-based Georgian American Alloys Inc, the Zestafoni Plant is situated on the banks of the Kvirila River in Georgia's Imereti region and occupies more than 130 hectares.

# Recognition of Circassian Genocide: Unwarranted but Unchangeable Decision

By LISA TONAKANYAN, GT

**Georgia should not reverse its decision to recognize the 19th century Circassian genocide by Tsarist Russia, despite the invalidity of the reasons given for doing so, the new government and analysts have stated.**

May 21 is a tragic day for Circassian (Adyghe) people, as by that date 149 years ago nearly all the native inhabitants of the Northwest Caucasus region of Russia were expelled to the Ottoman Empire and the Middle East after the Russian Tsar's victory in what is widely known as the Caucasian War. This war with the mountain dwellers began in 1763, although Russia considers it to have begun in 1817.

In 1763 the first armed conflict between Circassians and the Russian Imperial Army broke out, resulting in the capture of the Mozdok Fortress and the conquest of Eastern Kabarda. Lasting for 101 years, the war officially ended on May 21, 1864, with the result that Circassia lost 90 percent of its territory and 95 percent of its population, who were either deported or killed.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Circassians all over the world demanded that the new Russian leadership recognize the genocide committed by

Imperial Russia. Two of Russia's federal districts – Kabardino-Balkaria and Adyghe – recognized the waves of ethnic cleansing which took place over the 18-19th centuries as genocide in 1992. Two years later Boris Yeltsin, the then-president of the Russian Federation, admitted in a speech that the Adyghe's resistance to the Tsarist army had been legitimate but he did not use the term "genocide". The issue resurfaced again recently, when the International Olympic Committee (IOC) accepted Russia's bid to host the 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi – a city on Russia's Black Sea Coast where in 1864 about 20 percent of the Adyghe population was killed and the vast majority of the remaining population forced to lay down their arms and leave.

Despite the Circassians' efforts to obtain wide recognition of the genocide, no state has wanted to contradict Russia and risk ruining bilateral relations over a sensitive historical issue. However, on May 20, 2011 – on the eve of the Circassian Genocide Victims' Memorial Day – Georgia became the first and so far only country to officially recognize Tsarist Russia's massive slaughter of ethnic Circassians as a genocide.

Representatives of the new Georgian government which



came to power after the October 2012 parliamentary elections believe the previous authorities made a huge mistake by officially accepting the term "genocide".

"From the very outset we were against this, as we have Armenians who address us every year with a request to recognize their genocide at the hands of the Ottoman Empire in 1915. Back then we could argue that both Turkey and Armenia are our neighbors and we don't want to worsen relations with them. They accepted our explanations favorably. Now we can't use this argument anymore, as we have called the events which occurred during a conflict between our northern neighbors the Russians and Adyghe genocide," Chairman of the Georgian Parliament's Committee on Diaspora and Caucasus Issues Gubaz Sanikidze told the Georgian Times.

However, Sanikidze emphasizes that reversing the decision would do further harm Georgia's international image. "What's done is done. We can't change anything now, otherwise we will gain the reputation of being an unstable state, which changes its word at every time the government changes," he stresses.

Mamuka Areshidze, an analyst on Caucasian issues, says that the resolution adopted by parliament in May 2011 was political in nature and not related to any question of historical justice. "I had long been attracting Georgian MP's attention to the Circassian problem but many of them had showed total indifference to it. However, after the August 2008 war and the strained relations with Russia everyone all of a sudden remembered the Circassians. The decision itself was directed against Moscow, not in favor of the Circassians," he told GT, add-

ing that there were a few reasons, which persuaded the Georgian government that it would be good to recognize the ethnic cleansing in Northwest Caucasus. Primarily, the decision was the Georgian President's revenge on Russia for recognizing Georgia's breakaway territories of Abkhazia and the Tskinali Region as independent states. The IOC's decision to grant Sochi the right to hold the Olympic Games deepened Mikheil Saakashvili's irritation.

"We should not forget that there are many small nations, which have lived through similar tragedies in the past which we don't recognize as genocide. The best example is Armenia. The most interesting thing is that the Armenian genocide has been recognized by many large, civilized countries, such as France, Germany, Canada, but none has done the same for the Adyghe.

"Genocide" is not in fact the exact word to describe those events, though of course they were a great tragedy for the Circassians," Areshidze added, saying that there are about seven Circassian tribes and the degree to which they suffered varied: some were totally annihilated, while others suffered to a lesser degree, so it was not a genocide of the entire Circassian people. "If we are talking about the Ubykhs or Shapsugs – then, yes, they were almost completely destroyed. Only 0.01 percent of the Shapsugs remain and the last Ubykh died in the 1990's in Istanbul, Turkey. Besides, in the last battle that took place on Krasnaya Polyana (near to what is now Sochi) in 1864 some Circassians fought in the Russian army against their own people," Areshidze stated, adding however that he agreed that Georgia should not change its position on this issue now, as this could lead to unpredictable and negative outcomes emerging.

Georgia's Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili isn't excluding attending the upcoming Sochi Olympics and has confirmed that Georgian sportsmen will participate. Circassians, who met Georgia's decision to recognize their genocide with applause, have not yet reacted to the new Georgian government's ambiguous policy on this issue.

## President's Spokesman condemns the hindering of journalists' work

By Public Radio of Armenia

The Armenian President's Spokesman Arman Saghatlyan condemns the recent hindering of the work of journalists. Below is an excerpt from news.am's interview with him.



As the relatives of a soldier, who was killed in a military unit, were attempting to transfer his body to Yerevan as a sign of protest, on May 18 on the Sevan-Yerevan highway, the work of the journalists was hampered.

"I definitely assess it negatively; I condemn it. Upon the instruction of the President, I contacted with the heads of several television companies

and other media on the same day, and expressed our assistance and support. The proper study of what happened is at the focus of our attention," the Spokesman said in comments to news.am.

"We are confident that the competent authorities will find

out all the circumstances of what happened. It is time for the officials to review their conduct once and for all and to understand the imperative of a practice that is in line with the level of our country's democratic development," he said.

## Azerbaijani Scholar, Her Driver Released From Iran Custody

By RFE/RL's Azerbaijani Service

Azerbaijani scholar Khalida Khalid\* and her driver have been released following nearly three weeks in Iranian custody after their detention at the home of an ethnic Azeri activist.

Azerbaijani lawmaker Eldar Ibrahimov, who is currently in Iran, told RFE/RL that the two

Azerbaijani nationals were freed on May 19.

Iran's ambassador in Baku also confirmed that information.

Azerbaijan's consulate in Tabriz has been demanding the release of Khalid and her driver since their April 30 arrest in that city, along with four Iranian activists of Azerbaijani origin.

Relations between Baku and Tehran have been strained in

recent months, and Iranian authorities are wary of ethnically charged grievances in the region.

Last year, two Azerbaijani citizens were arrested in Tabriz and held for several months for allegedly promoting separatism in the Iranian province of East Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan arrested 22 people last year and accused them of spying for Iran.

## Azerbaijani Parliament Passes Controversial Internet Libel Law

By RFE/RL's Azerbaijani Service

Azerbaijan's parliament has legalized tighter Internet controls in a move the country's opposition groups fear could be used to curb online dissent.

The parliament on voted on May 14 to make online libel and "abuse" criminal offenses.

The new law allows for cases of slander deemed to be par-

ticularly serious to be punishable by up to three years in jail.

Parliament also agreed on increasing to three months the maximum sentence for so-called "administrative" arrests, under which detained opposition activists have often been held. The previous maximum sentence was 15 days.

Opposition activists typically use social media websites to coordinate their activities.

The international media

rights group Committee to Protect Journalists said the new bill, if signed into law, would "rob the public of online news" and urged President Ilham Aliyev to veto it.

Earlier this month, Stefan Fuele, the European Union's Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighborhood Policy, expressed concern about proposed moves to curb access to the Internet in the oil-rich nation.



## Sargsyan extends condolences to Obama

By Public Radio of Armenia

President Serzh Sargsyan sent a letter of condolences to the President of the United States of America Barack Obama on the devastation wreaked by a tornado in Oklahoma.

"Your Excellency,

I learned with deep sorrow the news on the devastation wreaked by a tornado in Oklahoma which caused tragic death of dozens of people. The loss is particularly painful since there were many children among those killed.

I express my deepest condolences and support to you, families of the victims and the friendly people of the United States, wish endurance and tenacity and a speedy recovery to the injured," the letter of condolences of the President of Armenia reads.

## Azeri Activist Charged With Hooliganism Over Internet Video



By RFE/RL's Azerbaijani Service

A court in Baku has charged a young Facebook activist with hooliganism over a controversial "Harlem Shake" video.

The court also ruled that Ilkin Rustamzade must be kept in pretrial detention for up to two months during the investigation.

Rustamzade's lawyer, Nemat Karimov, told RFE/RL that his client is accused of filming the "Harlem Shake" video in Baku's metro and placing it on the Internet.

The lawyer added that Rustamzade had nothing to do with the video in question.

Rustamzade, an activist

with the Azad Ganclik (Free Youth) group, was released from jail on May 15 after serving a 15-day prison term for participation in an unsanctioned "No to Terror" demonstration on April 30.

He was also an organizer of protests against the suspicious deaths of army conscripts earlier this year.

# TEMPEST IN A TEAPOT?

By BRYAN ADRIAN, GT

**The recent LGBT gay parade hostility in Tbilisi, a parade by and large initiated by foreign NGOs, should it really be a reason to question the effectiveness of the new Ivanishvili government, and to portray the entire Christian Orthodox national religion of Georgia as being “backward” and represented by a cave-full of retro-grade priests?**

As reported by Freedom House, an NGO with central offices in Washington DC and New York City, Saakashvili in late 2011 signed into law amendments to the Georgian civil code that enabled religious groups to register as legal entities, against the clearly stated wishes of the national Orthodox Church of Georgia. By July 2012 four new religious groups had been registered already for official legal status in Georgia. <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2012/georgia>

Does this across the board permission for freedom of religions to register their legality in Georgia, religions that may or may not clash with the well established national religion of Georgia, a national religion dating back to the 4<sup>th</sup> century, should this legislation work as an enabler of USAID and American private citizens monies and their missionaries, to assist any and all religious groups, sects, organizations and cults, such as Moonies, Scientologists, Jehovah Witnesses, extremist Hassidic isolationists, Children of God, Pentecostals, Druids, Neopagans, Jews for Jesus, and the new Alien Abductees faith-based movement, in addition to Bahais, and Wiccans too, to provide competitive religions and sects a foothold here in Georgia?

We have two issues here suddenly and complexly intertwined in the camera lenses of the western media and various western NGO spokespersons. Gay rights to parade downtown against the admonitions of the Georgian Church, and the rights of new legal religious entities in Georgia and the rights of minority groups for their non-traditional sexual preferences. Some western news outlets are even suggesting that this less than an hour violent melee during the gay parade, with no deaths and no permanent injuries, was a stealth operation of Russia working along with the new lame Prime Minister, in their assessment he is a lame puppet of Putin—who does not want to make war with

Russia—the country which the former leader of Georgia again and again and over and over, claimed vociferously to be the single most cause of all evils in this Georgian nation, until he lost his leadership last October 2012 during the proven and widely acknowledged democratic national elections.

Don't forget, there was a huge anti-gay backlash last May 2012 in front of the Philharmonic during the LGBT parade, in which quite a ruckus took place, during the government of Saakashvili. Now all of a sudden, Ivanishvili's team is somehow suspect because of a repeat performance of a cluster of foreign NGO agitators, promoting gay rights as if they are in bohemian San Francisco, clashing with a few well known extremist Georgian Orthodox priests. Out of the blue, this year even more homophobes from the provinces were alerted and present at Ground Zero to make the headlines doing their uncivil deeds against the foreign brigade of LGBT activists, with a few of their Georgian gay representatives alongside them.

Is there something i am missing here? I know more than a few Georgian gays here and none of them would have gone near the western organized protest to parade for their rights. I think these people here in Georgia given a little more time can iron out a fistful of homophobic priests, doesn't everyone, without alien NGOs sending press releases to BBC and CNN, not so reliable news sources? Or do we need to interfere here like in Syria and Libya and I guess what the hell—why not in Lebanon and Egypt and Tunisia too—or why not everywhere, worldwide then? OCCUPY WALL STREET and We Are the 99 Percent civil and financial rights movements have already been nearly completely silenced in USA by police strategies and surveillance techniques. Shouldn't we put our vehemence for reform back onto our own soil, where we understand the culture and traditions somewhat better? The Czech Republic has a balanced relationship with the USA, the EU, and with Russia. Would the same NGOs and western spokespersons here in Georgia—who use the English language in most of their activities—recommend to an Eastern European nation, supposing that if a group of provincial extremist Czechs suddenly descended on Prague and clashed with a very small but well publicized homosexual parade for gay rights, along with some miscreant self hating priests who were throwing



stones also, would the western agencies and spokespersons recommendations be to fatuously suggest that the Czech government was in collusion with the Russians and their mutual Christian church movements, against minority rights in the Czech Republic, just because the Czech government does not denounce Russia as a Great Satan? Are political prisoners' rights so mundane in Georgia now that they become inconsequential by comparison? Last year during the anti-gay parade here, the violence was much more vastly underplayed than this year, and there was no voice then, not even a peep, defending the tens of thousands of prisoners who were still wrongly imprisoned and staving off TB and rape on the inside of Georgian prison cells.

Don't you think it is time for NGOs here to set their priorities into some kind of order of importance? Let the local gays do it on their own, their own style of seeking attention, and let the majority of good priests here apply corrective measures to their own bad apples. I give the Georgian people and intelligentsia and Church, more credit than only this trust I am recommending strongly here. The question here in Georgia maybe should be, “Couldn't the new government request the Church to put into their priesthood, ONLY university trained graduates of approved Orthodox seminaries?” What do your readers of Georgian Times think about this?? Should we all get equally alarmed because in Israel we are not seeing huge protests, of Shias and Sunnis, and of course Palestinians and Gazans, begging for religious rights in their old homeland, which is now the

media endorsed lighthouse symbolizing near perfect democracy in the region, the infallible Israel? Are the bulk of NGOs in Israel getting really worked up over the bulldozing down of homes of non-Jews, as much as the NGOs are getting worked up over LGBT injuries during an inflammatory Tbilisi parade, given the very widely known traditions of Georgia and other related ancient Orthodox Christian cultures?

One should first ask, what are the numbers of battered and abused gays here in Georgia? Are their numbers more, or less, than battered wives statistics? Should we have a foreign NGO backed public parade of Battered Wives demanding justice against their Georgian husband beaters?? Are the numbers of bashed gays here, more or less, than the proportionate number in Saudi Arabia and Qatar and Turkey and Dubai? In which land[s] should our

western NGOs and democracy-building spokespersons endeavor to achieve sexual rights for more and more and more of the silent minorities of LGBTs? Should one condemn Israel for their bashings against their minority religions, as much as the Ivanishvili government and the Orthodox Church are taking heat for not protecting their minorities and minority religions? Let's hear this out immediately instead of making a huge mistake in over-publicizing an unclear foreign-imposed agenda that does not represent the majority of gays in Georgia. And if you disagree, show us all a survey and poll, of tens of thousands of gays here in Georgia, who incontrovertibly agree that they need access to larger gay parades, more frequently organized, along with some proof that such activities increases their standard of living and civil security.

In the last week I have read in the local and national media,

and seen on YouTube numerous NGO and western self appointed spokespersons of democracy-validation entities, alleging that Russia is an evil shadow behind this recent outburst of a number of imported busloads of homophobic late teens aged boys, joined by an ideological cluster bomb of extremist homophobic priests, with no mention much at all about the legions of priests who were there in their black frocks standing around only to register their protest against too liberal and exhibitionist a gay rights parade, for their parishes. If such a sinister strategy is afoot by Russia, it is time to let us hear from the thousands of Georgian gays here that this suspicious idea holds true and is as palpable a reality as the taste of large red ripe Georgian tomatoes in one's mouth in mid summer. Is this recent tempest created out of the web of information networks, more bluster than fact, and more convenient than reformatory?

## NEWS

### U.S. Statement on Arrest and Detention of Former Senior Georgian Officials

The United States Government is closely following the cases of arrest and detention of former senior Georgian officials, including former Prime Minister Merabishvili. We have stressed to the Georgian government the importance we attach to ensuring that such investigations and prosecutions are conducted with full respect for due process and the rule of law - including the presumption of innocence - and avoiding the perception or reality of political retribution. This is particularly true with respect to a politically-sensitive case such as the arrest of a former prime minister. We note the open access to pre-trial court hearings, including detention hearings, and to trial proceedings to both Georgian and international observers, and we encourage continued transparency. We believe that pre-trial detention should be imposed in accordance with Georgian law where there is a clear justification, and in accordance with relevant international and European guidelines and commitments.

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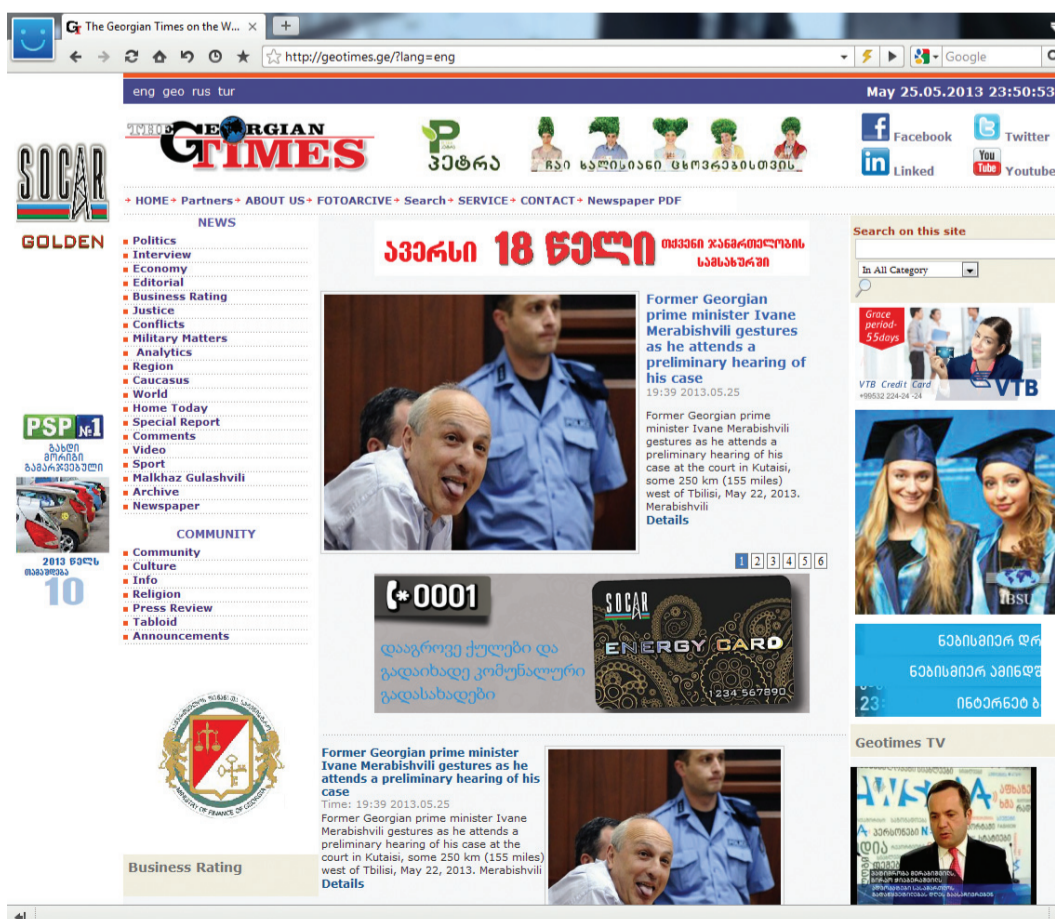
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