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U.S. - funded Biological Research Lab placed under NCDC Control

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U.S. - funded Biological Research Lab placed under NCDC Control

By LIKA MOSHIASHVILI, GT

Amidst growing local and international speculation as to its fate and actual purpose, the Government in Georgia has decided to take full control of the Richard G. Lugar Public Health Research Center in Tbilisi. By government decree, the \$150 million facility has been closed and its assets handed over to the Georgian National Centre for Disease Control and Public Health (NCDC).

The decree, dated May 7, has been published on the official webpage of the Government of Georgia. However Amiran Gamkrelidze, Head of the NCDC, says that it only concerns the centre's legal status. "The research centre was a legal entity of private law, and the NCDC is a legal entity of public law. We had to change its legal status to make it NCDC property," he told the Georgian Times. "This doesn't mean that the laboratory will be sold off or that its profile will be changed. It will keep its old name but will be merged with the NCDC and have a multi-sectoral supervisory board, chaired by the Health Ministry," he added.

The Central Public Health Reference Laboratory, as it was also known, was created by a decision of the previous government on July 25, 2011 and financed by the United States Government. Its operations were overseen by the US Defense Threat Reduction Agency.

"The U.S. Government has contributed \$150 million to the construction and operation of the Lugar Center," stated Jeremy Richart, Press Attache of the U.S. Embassy in Tbilisi. As the most substantial US investment in Georgia in the last ten years, the center has spawned the construction of a network of similar laboratories, run under the authority of both the Georgian Health and Agriculture ministries.



Gamkrelidze says that 10 laboratories report to the Health ministry, three of which are second level laboratories and seven first level, with 11 more under the Ministry of Agriculture.

The Central Reference Laboratory, a first level laboratory, was named after Senator Lugar to honor of his "efforts to safeguard the world from stockpiles of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons." It occupies 8,000 sq. meters of land, of which about 2,500 sq. meters is laboratory space, and is staffed by both Georgian and U.S. personnel.

According to the decree, signed by Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili, representatives of the two ministries and the current Director of the research centre will form a liquidation commission, which will draft proposals on how the laboratory can be brought under the structure of the NCDC while keeping the name Richard G. Lugar. The commission will also prepare a development strategy for the NCDC itself and five-year action plan.

"The Richard G. Lugar Public Health Research Center, with its potential, is unique in the region, although it hasn't actually been functioning for the last two years," commented Gamkrelidze, who emphasized that this was the main reason the Center is being brought under the authority of the NCDC. He explained that it was a joint decision that the

best way to make the laboratory work was to integrate it with the NCDC, which has great experience in combating the most dangerous infections in the country and the best trained personnel. "The Georgian and American parties agreed this, and then the appropriate decree was issued by the government," Gamkrelidze noted.

Jeremy Richart stated that the U.S. supports the continued functioning of the laboratory. "The change in management of the lab was an internal government decision, which will not impact the US and Georgian partnership," he underlined. He added that the centre was designed to undertake work on two safety levels – bio-safety level 2 (BSL2) and bio-safety level 3 (BSL3). The centre's BSL2 work areas are currently operational, and its BSL3 work areas will be following the introduction of NCDC personnel.

Gamkrelidze says that the Richard G. Lugar Public Health Research Center will be fully operational in a few months. In the space of one month, all the laboratories and storage units from the disease control centre will be moved to the Lugar Center. "There is an opportunity to conduct serious scientific research in the Lugar Center, in which Georgia will play the leading role, but space will also be allocated to the US Centers for Disease Control, the Walter Reed Army Insti-

tute of Research and US and European universities, because this will provide us with an opportunity to observe different types of infections, giving unique opportunities for diagnostics, which have never existed in this region," Gamkrelidze told GT.

"The Lugar Center is a state-of-art facility which meets strict international standards

for biosafety. By working closely with the World Health Organization and the World Organization for Animal Health to reduce the impacts of disease outbreaks, the Lugar Center will enable Georgia and the surrounding region to better anticipate and respond to infectious diseases, which have potentially significant consequences for human and

animal health," Jeremy Richart declared, emphasizing that "the Lugar Center is a cooperative effort between the U.S. and Georgian governments."

The Richard G. Lugar Center has been the subject of much speculation in the Russian media. In 2011 the Chief Sanitary Inspector of Russia, Gennadiy Onishchenko, accused Georgia of spreading African swine flu in Russia from a "secret laboratory." In April, Georgian newspaper Kvela Siakhle published an interview with US citizen, Jeffrey Silverman, introduced as "the Georgian President's former advisor," who stated that the laboratory is designed to conduct dangerous experiments with viruses which could lead to the spread of such dangerous illnesses as swine flu and anthrax. These allegations were flatly denied by both the U.S. Ambassador to Georgia and Georgia's Health Minister.

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Giorgi Margvelashvili Nominated as Presidential Candidate of Georgian Dream

Giorgi Margvelashvili, current Minister of Education and Sciences and first Vice-Prime Minister is now the presidential candidate of Georgia's ruling Georgian Dream coalition. The decision was announced by Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili at a press conference on May 11.

"We had one position to fill and all supported Giorgi Margvelashvili," the Prime Minister said.

Ivanishvili spoke about Margvelashvili's positive qualities. He assessed that Margvelashvili is experienced in management and politics, is a good analyst and expert.

Prior to the nomination, consultations of the political council of the coalition were held at Ivanishvili's business center. Parliamentary majority members were then informed about the decision.

Margvelashvili thanked the PM and the Georgian Dream coalition for their trust.

"I want to thank Mr. Ivanishvili for their praises and the coalition for its trust. Of course it is a huge responsibility and honor. I would like to once more thank the team for the trust in supporting this position and I hope I will not disappoint these people, and in the future, the hope of Georgian voters," Margvelashvili said.

As Margvelashvili said, he will try to improve and increase his rating. The Presidential candidate was asked about the Georgia's foreign political course but Margvelashvili said that he is now focused on the election campaign.

"It's early to think about it. Today I'm considering the election campaign, which will start very soon and it will of course be a very intensive process," Margvelashvili said.

Georgia's presidential election will be held in October 2013. An exact date has yet to be set.

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Guram Odisharia: There are no cultural issues which cannot be resolved by negotiations

By EMMA BAIRAMOVA, GT

Guram Odisharia, the Minister of Culture of Georgia, believes that it is possible to resolve all problems in the cultural sphere through dialogue and mutual agreement. His main priority is the development of cultural relations with neighbouring countries and eliminating the existing problems in the sphere of cultural and historical heritage. He expands upon his programme and recent work in this interview with the Georgian Times.

Mr. Odisharia, your Azerbaijani counterpart was recently in Georgia; can you tell us what cultural issues need to be resolved with Azerbaijan?

Yes, this was my first meeting with my Azerbaijani colleague Abulfaz Qaraev. He is well respected and highly experienced, well known both in his own country and in Georgia, as he has been Azerbaijan's Minister of Culture for the last 10 years. He was also Minister of Sports for six years. We will discuss specific issues at the end of May when I visit Azerbaijan. We have already undertaken a series of activities connected with the commemoration of former Azeri President Heydar Aliyev's 90th birthday. We jointly opened the Museum of Mirza Fatali Akhundov, a public figure in Azerbaijan, and officially opened Aliev Square in Rustavi. The problematic issue of Azeri museums in Georgia was discussed, as this has remained unresolved for many years. Last year a construction company was building on the site of the former Narimanov Museum, which had been completely removed. We held a meeting with the builders, who promised to take all necessary measures to restore the museum. Together with the Ambassador of Azerbaijan, it has been decided that they will select a new site for a new Narimanov Museum. The privatisation and repair of the Azerbaijani theatre in Maydan Square, Tbilisi was also on our agenda.

The Minister invited all the popular Georgian Ensembles to tour Azerbaijan and a week of Azerbaijani Cinema was recently held in Tbilisi. Baku will in turn be hosting a "Week of Georgian Cinema."

What about Georgia's cultural relations with Armenia?

There are also unresolved issues with Armenia associated with the preservation and ownership of cultural monuments. The Armenian theatre also needs repair work done. We have some Armenian churches in Tbilisi, and although some are of the opinion that they belonged to Georgians before this they are actually Armenian. During the Georgian Prime Minister's visit to Armenia, which I accompanied, it was agreed that these religious sites will be restored. A special commission has been created, consisting of Georgian and Armenian archaeological groups who will jointly study the origins of five churches. I am convinced that there are no problems that cannot be resolved at the negotiating table, and we have thus decided through negotiations to put a stop to the ongoing disputes with Armenia about churches. There are also several Georgian churches in Armenia, and at the same meeting with our Armenian colleagues it was agreed that the certification of these churches will be carried out. Representatives of the Ministry will travel to Armenia in late May to explore the Georgian churches on what is now Armenian territory. As good neighbours, we need to resolve these issues based on mutual agreement, through dialogue.

So you're saying that the hate speech directed against the national minorities of Georgia, provoked by these problems with cultural monuments, will stop?

Unfortunately, in this regard, a very unpleasant situation has developed. Of course, we have to resolve this problem. Our goal is not only to finance theatres and other cultural activities: the Ministry of Culture should set an example of how to conduct cultured dialogue with its neighbours and the community. We must use methods used in conflict resolution and diplomacy, i.e. the Ministry of Culture should resolve all problems in a cultured way!

What about the Georgian churches in Turkey? How is the restoration of Ishkhani, Oshki and others going?

At the Georgian Prime Minister's meeting with his Turkish counterpart it was decided that if the Muslims of Georgia want a place to pray, but do not want to attend the Azizie

Mosque in Batumi City center, we are ready to build a Mosque for them in another location. The Turkish side accepted this offer. We have sent experts to Turkey, who will conduct the restoration of Georgian churches together with their Turkish counterparts, and there are many such sites on Turkish territory. This process is being controlled, and there will be an end to the moaning that there are ruined Georgian historic monuments in Turkey.

It has been reported that much damage was inflicted on Georgia's 11th century Bagrati cathedral in Kutaisi during its recent restoration. Can you comment on this and give any similar examples? Can we expect changes in the way historical sites, including famous ruins, are preserved?

This summer a major meeting will be held on this subject. There is a great danger that the Bagrati Cathedral will be removed from the list of UNESCO world heritage sites. The former Government did everything in a rush and failed to take into account expert and public opinion. We have decided to go in a different direction, and will conduct round table consultations with experts and other stakeholders. It is better to let the restoration of the Cathedral proceed slowly if we can be sure that it is being done in a proper manner and to a high standard.

What is the difference between your priorities and those of the previous government?

We have decided to continue with some projects launched by the previous government, including the financing of theatres and talented individuals. However, we do not agree with inviting famous singers to Tbilisi and Batumi at public expense when this affects the well-being of the population. Of course you can invite Sting and Bocelli, but not at taxpayers' expense. At the last elections the United National Movement received a particularly low vote in the very areas where such concerts were held. I have visited all the Georgian regions and noticed that cultural life has been reduced outside the capital. Naturally we must not only support culture at home but share it widely, promoting Georgian culture internationally and with our neighbours.

Will you use personal contacts to establish cultural rela-

tions with Abkhazia as well?

Definitely. For 17 years, I have been going there under diplomatic auspices, and I am originally from Abkhazia and know the situation there first hand. Like other Abkhazians I have also learned about the entire South Caucasus region. We have published books of literature from the various regional languages. I am convinced that culture is one of the main ways to win over each others' hearts.

What is your attitude to the cultural monuments of Georgia's ethnic minorities? Will the Ministry of Culture preserve them?

We have always been proud that in our country churches, mosques and synagogues exist within the same area. And of course we will continue the tradition of preserving this cultural heritage.

How about the funding of theatres? Will there be any changes here?

The funding of theatres will continue. Financing municipal theatres is also important; we are going to publish a magazine which will discuss the success and popularity of Georgian theatre productions. We also want to create a culture channel, which will show all the cultural achievements of the country.

Recently a new monument to Heydar Aliyev was inaugurated. Considering his past, involvement with the KGB and documented human rights violations, how can Georgia justify such a monument?

Also, the monument to Narimanov, one of the "Commissars from the 26" (a well-known Bolshevik revolutionary group which introduced communism to Azerbaijan), who was executed by the British during the civil war in 1918, is also still standing in front of the house of culture in Marneuli. Why, when tourist attractions like the Stalin statue in Gori have been pulled down?

For more than seventy years we were part of the Soviet Union. Whether we like it or not, this is our history. During that time, the country was ruled by communist leaders. Narimanov was a communist, but at the same time there was a link between Georgia and Azerbaijan. He is respected in his country, which is our partner and friendly neighbour. Also, one of the biggest economic projects in Georgia, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, is connected with the name of



Heydar Aliyev, and people should remember this. It is impossible for us to change history, which includes Lenin, Stalin and other such leaders. All the leaders who linked our two peoples and played an important role in our nation's history were communists, because we lived under communism. As for the idea of restoring the statue of Stalin in Gori, his hometown, we need to study this matter carefully and determine how many people are in favour of this. We must also take into account the opinion of the local authority

The previous government demolished many buildings and monuments which reminded people of the past, such as the massive "Andropov's Ears" arches in Rose Revolution Square. Are there any

plans to do away with monuments erected by the former government?

We have no such plans: we have come as builders, not destroyers. However, we will analyse what went wrong with various projects, as we do not want to make the same mistakes. The former government did everything in a hurry. We think that if proper construction processes are used its mistakes can be corrected. I personally like the new Justice House but it would have been better if it had been constructed in Gldania Tbilisi suburb rather than the historic part of the city. It would be better if beautiful buildings were built on the periphery of the city, not just in the centre. But, in general, we are not going to ruin or tear down anything!

NEWS

Mikheil Saakashvili: I call on the Parliament not to block draft law on increased protection of privacy

Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili commented on the dissemination of private life records on May 10. "This is the second time in the last few months when citizens are blackmailed through the publication of their private lives has openly occurred. The first case referred to the assistant of Tbilisi City Court Judge, but despite this vivid violation, no one was punished, and the same happened with a journalist. I am far from the pointing to my government, as I know that no matter what is said, the fact remain the same. During the 9 years of my presidency, there was not a single case when similar information on the private life of citizens, especially on very private things, was spread by all forms of media, including the Internet.

Such things took place during the presidency of Shevardnaze, orchestrated by the special services of Putin in Russia and during other criminal regimes. I am very concerned about this trend, as several times the Prime Minister has publicly mentioned that hidden recordings had been conducted. I am calling on the Parliament to not block the draft law specially initiated by me, which would protect privacy of a person more," reads the President's statement on his official Facebook page.

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- 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 Metalurgical Plant
- Sarajishvili
- Smart Retail
- Socar Energy Georgia
- TBC Bank
- VTB Bank Georgia
- Wissol Group

Should Georgia outlaw Abortions in dealing with its Demographic Crisis?

By LIKA MOSHIASHVILI, GT

Patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church, Ilia II, has called on the Georgian authorities during his Easter Epistle to adopt anti-abortion legislation, claiming that it would contribute to resolving Georgia's "grave demographic situation."

"Abortion is a heinous murder of an innocent creature intentionally committed by its parents. A doctor is a direct accomplice to this crime; the merciless murder of infants still continues unhindered, and there is no one to protect them – neither the state nor society," the Georgian Patriarch openly declared.

Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili quickly responded to the Patriarch's call by saying that baby-boosting legislation is in order. He explained that it was first necessary to improve the country's bleak demographic situation and that the main focus should be based on economic incentives rather than restricting or outlawing abortions. "This [baby boosting legislation proposal] alone cannot solve the problem. Revival of the economy is essential in solving the demographic crisis. Families should be given greater opportunities and the government should take care of it," stated Ivanishvili.

According to Georgian Demographic Revival Fund (GDRF) Georgia has one of the highest abortion rates in the world, with 300 aborted fetuses occurring each day. There are approxi-

mately 36,000 registered and more than 100,000 unregistered abortions in Georgia each year.

Among top officials, only Tea Tsulukiani, Georgia's female Justice Minister ventured to express outright skepticism, saying that the ban could transform abortion into an underground business. "Prohibiting parents from being informed about the sex of a future child is as far as she is personally willing to go in preventing selective abortions, which favor boys," she commented.

In October, 2011 the Parliamentary Assembly of Council of Europe adopted a non-binding resolution condemning the practice of prenatal sex selection. Sex selection is commonly practiced in China where there has been a one child policy to deal with overpopulation.

"In recent years, a departure from the natural sex ratio at birth has been observed in a number of Council of Europe member states and has reached worrying proportions in Albania, Armenia and Azerbaijan, where the sex ratio at birth is 112 boys for 100 girls and in Georgia where it is 111 boys for 100 girls," the resolution reads.

The resolution calls on Council of Europe member states to "introduce legislation with a view to prohibit sex selection within the context of assisted reproduction technologies and legal abortion; the only exception is when it is used to justify a serious hereditary disease from being passed on."

The resolution calls on Georgia in particular to study causes

and reasons behind "skewed sex ratios" at birth and to ensure the collection of "reliable data" on sex ratios at birth; it also calls on the Georgian authorities to step up efforts to raise the status of women in society and ensure effective implementation of laws and policies that deal with gender equality and non-discrimination (labor rights).

Dimitri Khundadze, Head of the GDRF and a lawmaker with the ruling Georgian Dream party, who chairs the parliamentary committee for healthcare and social issues, is also against an "outright ban" of abortion. However, he is in favor of banning sex-selective abortions.

"This is an issue that requires a cautious approach. I think that selective abortions should be banned, which accounts for 30% share of all abortions in Georgia," MP Khundadze explained. "But I think that an outright ban of abortion is unacceptable because it may lead to an increase in unregistered abortions, and an increase in newborn mortality rates," Khundadze said, adding that his committee will immediately start working on this issue and experts will be invited to take part in the process.

The United Nations predicts that by 2050, Georgia will approach a demographic catastrophe, as the population will decrease by 1,160,000 people, that is, nearly one third (28 percent) of country's current population. Georgia stands out as the exception in the region, as the populations of neighboring countries, Azerbaijan and Armenia, are steadily increasing.

The Patriarch of Georgia, Ilia II encouraged Georgians to have



more babies when he offered to baptize every third child as an incentive. The church has since been holding mass baptism ceremonies several times a year. He now proposes that cash-strapped parents hand over children to the Orthodox Church rather than aborting any unwanted pregnancies.

As Khundadze told the Georgian Times, the government has already made several steps to increase the country's childbirth rate. "From July 1 birth control will be provided free and state assistance for vulnerable people will double," noted the MP. He also emphasized that the GDRF has been working on a 10 year program to deal with demographic problems in Georgia and it will share it with the government in the nearest future.

The issue of abortions is debated of the international level. Although abortion is legal in most developed countries, in some parts of Europe it is illegal or very controversial. Georgia is not alone with having a wide range of views, often totally contradictory on this heated and highly emotional topic.

Sergo Chikhladze, Board Chairman of Informational Medical-Psychological Centre "Tanadgoma" thinks that the main reason for such a high abortion rate in Georgia is based on social pressure and an overall lack of sexual education. It is necessary to provide sex education and make contraception more available in order to reduce the high abortion rate. Both Georgian women and men should be educated in family planning methods, and that includes abortion as a final option," Chikhladze declared.

Protesters and supporters of anti-abortion legislation

Protesters and supporters of abortion confronted each other in front of the State Chancellery after the Patriarch's statements. Some demonstrators demanded the criminalization of abortion and others called on the government to introduce enabling legislation to address the root of this problem.

"Abortion is brutal murder and it should be punished by law. We believe that an abortion is similar to a murder of an adult," commented Evgeni Miqueladze,

one of the protesters.

As for supporters of abortion, they said "criminalization was wrong as women were forced to make their own choices and an embryo is not a person."

"A woman should be in control of her reproductive abilities herself. Abortion is a woman's fundamental right," stated Mariam Gagoshashvili, representative of Women's Fund in Georgia.

Natia Gvianishvili from *Iden-toba* (Association for Gender Equality and LGBT Human Rights) says that the only way out of these problems is popularization of contraception and increasing awareness among the population. "I'm sure that many women, especially in the regions do not know how to effectively protect themselves. Government should work in this direction. I think this is the only way to fight against abortions," Gvianishvili told GT.

Chikhladze thinks that an anti-abortion law will not positively impact on our country. "Now when abortion is not banned, the numbers of registered ones are more than unregistered abortions," he declared. "If abortions are illegal many women will undergo dangerous abortions in back rooms or travel outside of Georgia in obtaining abortion services. Such a trend will lead to added health problems, infertility and increased mortality rates for women," he continued.

Chikhladze said that although the patriarch's words carry great power among the population, Georgian society should not think about an anti-abortion law only from a religious perspective.

While representatives of the Georgian Church say that "the main purpose under religious practice is for women to give birth to a child". Save-the-Children, an international NGO, published its 2013 rating entitled "Best and Worst Place to be a Mother". Georgia ranked 94th out of 176 countries in this report.

A G - T A L K

Indians in Georgia: Victims of Trafficking or Cheap Land Seekers?

By LISA TONAKANYAN, GT

The increasing number of Indians now residing in Georgian cities and villages is no longer a surprise to locals. The presence of these foreigners, who are eyeing Georgian property with a view to turning a profit, concerns some Georgians. However, not all Indians are satisfied with what they have found in Georgia, especially when it comes to the quality and potential of its much touted agricultural land.

It was recently revealed that an Indian farmer who had purchased a rather large plot of land in Georgia in autumn 2012 had discovered that the soil was not nearly as fertile as had been presented back home in Punjab, India. Realising he had been cheated into buying unusable land, the man committed suicide. This was reported on Indian TV, but the Georgian press and Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) remained silent until recently. Not much about the case is clear: the MIA says that it remembers the case

but can't say anything about it as all the evidence was either destroyed or hidden before last year's parliamentary elections and it could take a long time to find it, if it is there at all, as no one is sure whether this information is still in the MIA's archive.

Indians living and working in Georgia allege that the Punjabi farmer was a victim of international traffickers. An entrepreneur conducting business in Georgia who did not wish to reveal his name has accused Crown Immigration Consultancy Services (CICS) Ltd of misleading poor Indian farmers, bringing them to Georgia fraudulently and leaving them without any further support such as food and shelter.

"These people – one operates from the Karvasla trade centre, another is in Rustavi – keep uploading bogus videos onto YouTube and shamelessly lying on TV about land in Georgia. We are surprised they continue to conduct such a business without fear. In 2012, before the parliamentary election, I made a verbal complaint to one of your

ministries asking them to do something about it – to toughen the visa regime, at least, to prevent these people bringing these villagers who don't speak English to Georgia. They don't know anything about Georgia and think they will enjoy Schengen Agreement protection. They pay 5,000-7,000 USD to Crown Immigration, which is usually their life savings, and rush to Georgia in search of a better life, but 95 percent go home empty-handed due to the language barrier and high living costs in Georgia," the businessmen told the Georgian Times.

Our source continues to complain to different institutions but so far no steps have been taken. "The Police are inactive, but Crown's representatives are opening small companies, buying land on power of attorney for Indian farmers who have never been to Georgia and then sell these companies whole to Indians who are still in their home country. As they are then both company owners and landowners, these farmers face no problems getting Georgian visas. These people in Tbilisi and Rustavi are nothing more than

professional traffickers, who search for countries with open doors whose systems they can manipulate. They know the rules of the game, but one day you might find they have disappeared overnight," the entrepreneur continued, adding that CICS was once bringing 400 to 700 people here a month, though this number has recently reduced.

Executive Director of CICS in Georgia Dharmjit Saini admits that his client numbers have dropped but says the reason for this is visa restrictions and the cropping season in India. "Besides, there are some false companies around who do the same business as us but in a bad way: they don't provide their clients with proper information about Georgia, lack experience in this sphere, don't take care about their investors, don't meet them at the airport, and don't accommodate them. This provokes mistrust," he told GT.

Satish Kumar, a CICS director at its head office in Jalandhar, India, told us that Georgia is not the only destination the company promotes. There is a long list of countries they offer their cli-

ents, though these are mainly CIS states and those in the developing world. "We suggest a great number of possible countries and sectors to invest in. Everything depends on the clients' interests and opportunities. Our team familiarises them with a country's profile, market, business environment, advantages and shortcomings – the choice is theirs. It's true many people who come to us do not know about Georgia, but we give them all the necessary information, warn them that it is not the American state Georgia and direct them to government website www.investingorgia.ge so they can make sure our information is correct and reliable," Kumar told GT.

Nevertheless, some Indians here blame Crown Immigration for their woes. Balraj Kumar (name changed on request) alleges he was cheated by Crown Immigration. "They promised to find me cheap and fertile land in Georgia for 2,000 USD, but when I arrived I found the land was barren and very expensive and I had spent my money in vain. So I am going back [home] soon," he told GT.

Dharmjit Saini maintains that such allegations are false and those who make them are talking about some other company. "No single client of ours would give you a negative evaluation of our services. The allegation that we bring poor people from Indian villages doesn't correspond to the truth. We choose only real investors. Our company started operating in Georgia in 2010 and no one has made a single complaint about our services. Even those farmers who didn't start a business here and returned to India after paying all their fees to our company are satisfied with our service," he said, adding that he had heard about the Indian who committed suicide last year but didn't know the man as he was not a client of CICS.

Satish Kumar believes some people blame Crown Immigration for any problems simply because it is one of the most successful firms in its field. "If anyone is not satisfied with our work he's welcome to come to our offices in Tbilisi and Jalandhar. Do you think we would sit here if we cheat?" he said.

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AMAZING SOCAR-MCDONALDS ON THE BLACK SEA COAST IN BATUMI

NEW RESEARCH: GROWING OBESITY EPIDEMIC 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, a social and market research company located in Tbilisi, Georgia. These papers include a brief discussion of the things we discovered as well as policy recommendations for improving Georgians' health.

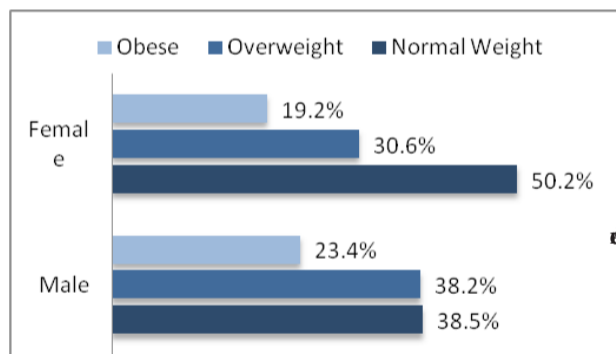
There has long been an assumption that Georgians are more obese than their peers on average, which now finds strong support in the data below. In fact, the HITT-CIS studies discovered that Georgians are now facing an obesity problem that may constitute an epidemic. Luckily, the study generated a series of policy recommendations that the Georgian government as well as international donors can use to address this problem.

The epidemic of obesity that has consumed high income countries of North America and Western Europe is now spreading to Georgia. The impact of this epidemic is alarming: besides increased mortality and impaired quality of life, conservative estimates of the national economic burden from obesity range from 0.09 to 0.61% of a country's GDP¹ – between 21 and 145 million GEL (12.7 – 87.8 million USD) in the case of Georgia. This is due to both direct costs of increased healthcare expenditure and indirect costs resulting from reduced productivity, sick leave, disability, and early retirement.

This policy brief provides new evidence on the obesity epidemic and poor/limited uptake of nutrition in Georgia, from the European Commission funded 'Health in Times of Transition' project (<http://www.hitt-cis.net>) which studies nine countries of the former Soviet Union. The research involved 2200 nationally representative household surveys with randomly selected people in 2010. Further details of the study are presented below.

KEY FINDINGS

Prevalence of Obesity is Very High



half of female respondents, and almost two thirds of male respondents were above normal weight (using standard BMI measurement). Nineteen percent of females and 23% of males were obese, and therefore at very high risk for conditions such as diabetes and heart disease. Additionally, the proportion of respondents above normal weight increased dramatically among older age groups.

Characteristics of Obesity

Regional results indicate that obese women were more likely to be poor, with lower levels of education. It may be that they are less aware of the importance of healthy diets or unable to afford healthier foods. Men with obesity were more likely to have poor understanding of the importance of physical activity. Obese men were also more likely to drink alcohol frequently. Considering the high levels of alcohol use in Georgia, this relationship between alcohol and obesity is a serious concern.

Poor Nutrition

Intake of fruit and vegetables, a vital component of a healthy diet, is very low in Georgia. Almost half ate fruit and a third consumed vegetables just once a week or less. The World Health Organisation recommends a minimum of 400g of fruit and vegetables per day (excluding potatoes) for the prevention of obesity and other chronic diseases. Low intake of fruit and vegetables was more common in those with less education and poor understanding of healthy diets, lower income groups, heavier alcohol drinkers and smokers.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Public Education

Addressing the obesity epidemic requires promotion of both healthier diets and increased physical activity. Obesity is more prevalent among those with lower education and limited awareness of risk factors. Public campaigns are vital for raising awareness, which is an important first step to behavioural change. Additional specific campaigns should target high-risk groups.

Promotion of healthy diets

Market incentives can alter the production and marketing of food products. Public policy should limit salt content in processed foods, the use of hydrogenated oils, and the sugar content of beverages and snacks. Prices should also be influenced through taxation, subsidies or direct pricing to reduce access to unhealthy foods and increase availability of healthier foods.

Active transport

Promotion of a physically active lifestyle involves making the healthy choice the easy choice. One way of increasing physical

activity is through active transport schemes. Walking and cycling can be promoted through behaviour change campaigns, but also through structural changes such as the introduction of cycle lanes and ensuring adequate walkways and street lighting.

Encourage healthy workplace schemes

Companies face high costs from obesity due to ensuing sick leave, loss of productivity and early retirement. Healthy workplace schemes result in savings of \$3 for every \$1 invested on average. Health promotion in the workplace is therefore a good investment for companies, which also positively impacts the health and quality of life of employees. Examples include provision of fitness facilities for workers, providing healthy food choices, and health education programmes.

Address multiple risk factors

People are more likely to be obese and have poor nutrition if they are drinkers and smokers. To be more cost-effective, programmes should therefore tackle these risk factors simultaneously to address their clustering in certain population groups.

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. In the coming weeks, we will publish similar policy recommendations on topics such as alcohol abuse and access to health care.

Sources:

Watson, K., Roberts, B., Chow, C., Goryakin, Y., Rotman, D., et al. (2012). Micro-and meso-level influences on obesity in the former Soviet Union: a multi-level analysis. *The European Journal of Public Health*.

Further Information:

Diet and Physical Activity: Implementation Toolbox
<http://www.who.int/dietphysicalactivity/implementation/toolbox/en/index.html>

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“The path to EU is not paved with flowers” - Georgia Celebrates European Week

By LISA TONAKANYAN, GT

From May 7-11, meetings, exhibitions, marathons and different contests were held in frames of European Week in Georgia. The events were dedicated to foundation of the EU and took place in the capital city of Tbilisi, as well as different Georgian regions.

European Week is traditionally held on the 9th of May, on the eve of Europe Day. This year's event started on May 7 at the National Library of the Parliament with an exhibition of schoolchil-

dren's paintings on “Georgia-EU” integration theme. Those students having the best photos and paintings were presented with awards by Philip Dimitrov, Head of the EU Representation in Georgia Alex Petriashvili, State Minister for Euro-Atlantic Integration and Davit Zurabishvili, Deputy Minister of Education and Science.

“Georgia strives to EU integration and from this perspective it is very important to increase our society's level of awareness of the European Union and its functions. The event organized by the Infor-

mation center on NATO and EU started from the most important group – the next generation,” Petriashvili declared during the opening of European Week.

Dimitrov in his turn said “the path to EU is not paved with flowers”; it's a rather difficult route. However, he mentioned that when his colleagues visit Tbilisi, they say that it is a European city, and even “more European than some cities of EU member states”, Dimitrov emphasized.

As he said, children have shown in their works that there are complicated issues, which Georgia needs to solve but the country on the whole is on the

correct path, which will sooner or later bring it to European Union.

Alex Petriashvili and Latvia's Ambassador to Georgia Elita Gavele held a meeting at the Georgian Institute of Public Affairs (GIPA) the next day. They talked with students about the perspectives of Georgia in joining the EU and shared the Latvian experience in this direction.

Alex Petriashvili, State Minister for Euro-Atlantic Integration, once again urged that Georgia's number one priority is to bring about NATO and EU integration.

Continued on p. 9

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Agriculture Minister Dismissed in First Major Staff Change for Government

By LIKA MOSHIAHVILI, GT

Georgian Agriculture Minister Davit Kirvalidze has temporarily stepped down from his post after several of his ministry's top officials were detained on corruption charges. Agriculture Ministry officials were accused of financial fraud, negligence, and the embezzlement of 2 million GEL (1.2 million USD) from the state budget. Tbilisi City Court handed down prison sentences to all accused, apart from one female employee who was released on a 3000 GEL bail.

Employees of the Anti-Corruption Agency under the country's Interior Ministry detained several senior officials of the Agriculture Ministry in Georgia on May 1.

As the Interior Ministry explained after the arrests the public funds were misspent while procuring tractors and other agriculture equipment as part of the state-funded program to assist farmers in cultivating their agriculture lands.

According to the Ministry, the Head of one of the units within the Agriculture Ministry; director of a state research center Agriculture Mechanization Institute; director of the state-owned Mechanizator company, which was in charge of procuring tractors, and two of his deputies were among those arrested. The Interior Ministry also accused several of the arrested persons of "pressuring" members of a group of experts, which was in

charge of verifying procurement issues, in an attempt to cover up misspending of funds.

"I have requested to suspend me from office, so I will



resign before the truth is established," Kirvalidze stated, adding that he takes full responsibility for what happens in his ministry and expressed his hope that the investigation will be objective and unbiased.

Most of the ministers welcomed Kirvalidze's "responsible step", although Prime Minister Bidzila Ivanishvili expressed his frustration towards the Agriculture Minister.

"In general, we are controlling the situation. Processes could have been organized in a better way. I will not make any preliminary conclusions, but I have questions with regard to vouchers. The process was de-

veloping quickly and could not have been perfect, but it might have been carried out in a better way and I have some complaints," commented Ivanishvili. "At this stage I do not want to encourage or criticize anybody because the investi-

in general, much is being done and a lot has already been done. We'll eventually uproot the gaps," the PM declared.

Vano Merabishvili, Secretary General of the opposition United National Movement political party, quickly made a

30-40% higher than in other places. "This means that state officials lined their pockets with 80 million GEL from the project worth 260 million GEL."

According to Economic Expert Irakli Leqvinidze there were many problems in the Agriculture Ministry and the lack of communication was the most serious among them. "There should have been TV commercials to explain to people what the state offered them. Many people do not even know where to go, whom to apply, if they can receive credit or not..." explained Leqvinidze.

Paata Koguashvili, Professor of Agriculture Sciences at the Georgian Academy of Science thinks that Davit Kirvalidze "is just a victim". He thinks the former government was fully involved in corruptive practices and they left behind many problems, as demonstrated in the agriculture sector and its related legislation.

Shalva Pipia, Deputy Agriculture Minister, will temporarily fulfill the duties of the Minister of Agriculture. It is not yet known whether Kirvalidze will return to his post.

"If the employees of the Ministry of Agriculture are acquitted, the Minister Davit Kirvalidze will return to his post," stated Kakha Kaladze, Minister of Energy and Natural Resources. He also added that "an investigation is under way and

it's difficult to make assessments now. Everyone must wait for the results of the investigation to find out who is in fact guilty."

Maia Panjikidze, Georgia's Minister of Foreign Affairs welcomes the quick resolution of irregularities in a Ministry. "This means that the government won't tolerate such types of violations," Panjikidze said.

Experts rule out political motives of Kirvalidze's dismissal and think this is not related to the fact that he is a relative of Vakhtang Khmaladze, who only a few months ago was considered PM by Bidzina Ivanishvili as a best presidential candidate.

"These are incompatible things. Davit Kirvalidze took a moral step and proved his high sense of civic responsibility. This is not surprising for this family," stated political expert Soso Tsiskarishvili. "Consequently, it is hard for me to imagine that Vakhtang Khmaladze's participation in the presidential election is connected to the processes under way in the Agriculture Ministry," he continued.

According to another political expert Ramaz Sakvarelidze, Kirvalidze resigned on his own initiative. Although in his opinion changes in the government are unacceptable during the so-called "cohabitation" process between PM Ivanishvili and President Saakashvili, whose term ends in October, 2013.

comment about the resignation of Minister of Agriculture.

"Everyone probably knew and the government was forced to take certain measures regarding the corruption in the agriculture program. Everyone knows that cashing the agriculture cards has a 30% discount," noted Merabishvili. He also added that the prices if the materials the peasants buy in special shops with this voucher are

comment about the resignation of Minister of Agriculture.

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"The path to EU is not paved with flowers" - Georgia Celebrates European Week

Continued from p. 8

He paid special attention to the upcoming Vilnius Summit, saying it is important for the country in terms of concluding an Association Agreement, as this will then open up Europe's market to Georgian products. At the same time Petriashvili hastened to assure that in spite of the new government's wish to restore relations with Russia, it will never be done at the expense of Georgia's national interests.

The Latvian Ambassador mentioned that her country has been always supporting Georgia's aspirations to join the Euro-Atlantic space. She said that EU membership with its strict regulations can cause a country like Georgia economic problems; however, its posi-

tion influence still offsets possible negative effects and addresses ambiguous agreements.

The same day Alex Petriashvili attended another meeting - with teachers and school directors. They talked about Georgia's perspectives for EU cooperation. The event was held at the National Centre for Teacher Professional Development. The parties discussed joint projects with the Ministry of Education and the EU. Teachers were introduced to the Council of Europe's training and capacity building program for education professionals entitled *Pestalozzi*.

A discussion on Georgia's perspective to join the EU took place in western city of Zugdidi. Under the framework of European Week, members of the NATO and the EU Infor-

mation Center told students about history of the European Union and the potential benefits of membership in both organizations for Georgia.

Day four of European Week started out at Telavi State University, where Alex Petriashvili and Priit Turki, Ambassador of Estonia talked to students. The film "Estonia's road towards EU" was shown in wrapping up the meeting. The day ended at Tbilisi's Radisson Blu Iveria where a reception dedicated to Europe Day on behalf of the Alex Petriashvili, State Minister for Euro-Atlantic Integration, was held.

The last day of the week was dedicated to sports and environmental preserving events. Khatuna Gogoladze, Minister of Environment Protection and Natural Resources of Georgia togeth-

er with workers of the NATO and EU Information Center cleaned up the territory of Europe Square and planted trees.

A marathon from Gorgasali Square to Europe Square in Tbilisi closed the Europe Week in Georgia. Representatives of different sport federations participated in the race. The winners received medals and cups as prizes.

Many of the events of European Week were supported by the NATO and the EU Information Center, as well as the office of State Minister for Euro-Atlantic Integration. Representatives of government and non-government sectors, diplomatic corps, schoolchildren, students and public members and other stakeholders participated in the many interesting and educational events.

NEWS

Mikheil Saakashvili vetoes two bills

President Mikheil Saakashvili vetoed two bills on May 5. According to Andro Barnov, Head of the President's Administration, the President used his veto power regarding amendments to the Civil Code, which called for the legal status of the non-entrepreneurial legal entities to be transformed into legal entities of public law. Saakashvili also vetoed the amendments to the Law on Constitutional Court. This is the draft bill accepted by the parliament, according to which, if the constitutional court will stop the disputable acts and legislative norms, the final decision should be made within 30 calendar days, otherwise, the termination norms will start operating from May 31. This change is directly connected to the amendments to the Law on Common Courts as it is expected that the opposing side will appeal it in the constitutional court, while the court will make the law invalid.

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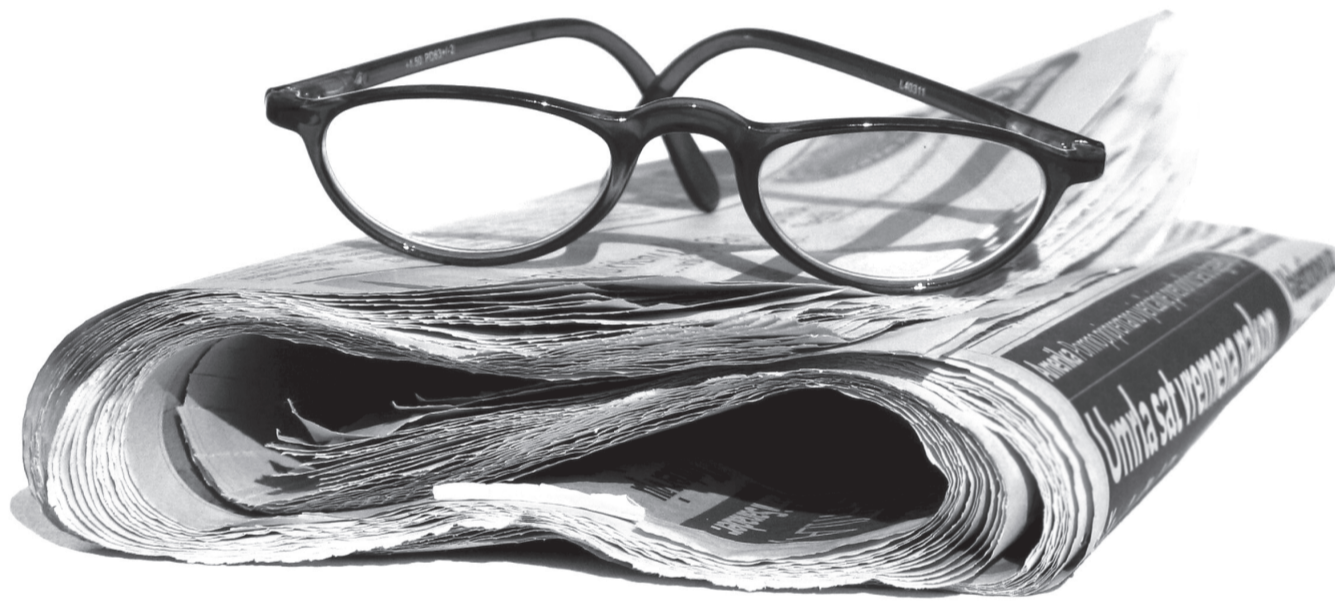
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Proud and Pioneering French Film Producer Feels the Magic on the Set of 'NEST'

By TAKO AGARASHVILI, GT

Sébastien Aubert a French film distributor and a producer from Cannes (France) visited Tbilisi for his new project. He is young and handsome, a true gentleman, and very French. His accent is a killer, yet sweet. You can understand that he is a very busy man from the moment you begin talking to him; he is basically a workaholic. His approach to work is something that deserves admiration. He is friendly, warm, kind and giving.

I heard a lot of stories about his warm family and a cute house in Cannes. He had a couple of Georgian friends over (actress Tamri Bziava and a director/actor Tornike Bziava) for the International Cannes Film Festival in 2011. His sense of humor knocks you out immediately. When I offered to chip in after we were done with the interview at the café, he got 'offended' and asked me: "Do you know any French guy who lets you pay for coffee?" We laughed it off, had a little walk, 'made fun' of our mutual friend Tornike Bziava and I said goodbye giving him a big hug. The good news is that Sébastien will most probably be here in October for the International Festival of Arts in Honour of Michael Tumanishvili – GIFT.

I wrote about his persona, since you can't possibly see who he is while speaking about the job. Sébastien is strict when it comes to work. So, here he is, talking about his career, projects and plans. I insist you at least try to read the article with a French accent so you catch his charisma.

What came first? Producing or distributing?

I was a producer at first. I produced a short film 'The Danaïdes' Barrel' and hired two distributors. They did a very bad job. You need to have a right approach to distributing. There are like ten major TV channels in the world, therefore there are ten contacts to make. I couldn't

manage to find money to produce my next short film, so I figured I had to do distributing on my own. I decided to make my own network. I had made some contacts with the buyers I met at the festivals already. I did that for the next two years. It was hard for me to raise the money as a producer, but as a distributor it was easier to sell. I discovered I was a good salesman. I raised money from TV channels; they could pre-buy my films, allowing me to produce.

Distributing is how I meet talents. If I approach talented people in India, or New York or elsewhere and say that I am a producer they can say – well, I don't know you. But if I say that I want to sell their films they will be happy.

What countries have you worked in so far?

Georgia, India, the United States, Pakistan, Russia, Morocco and others. I tried to do it in Mexico, but it didn't work out.

Which was your favorite/most successful project?

It was a film I produced in 2010 titled 'Strange Ones'. I had only three weeks to raise the money; otherwise I would lose the director. I managed to find the money in one day – 10,000 Euros. It was very challenging for me. We shot the film and it was selected by UniFrance as one of five best French short films of all times. It was a French/American movie; the director is a young girl from New York. We did another short film together called 'Social Butterfly' and it was in the Sundance festival. It wasn't the last project, and we have worked together ever since.

What was your most unsuccessful project?

The main goal is to sell the film to a TV channel. My less successful project was my very first short film. I sent it to 400 festivals worldwide but it went to only 50 B-list festivals. I couldn't sell it.

Tell me about working with Georgian directors?

The first Georgian director I worked with is Tina Katchrishvili. It was a good experience. Tornike Bziava as well – what I like about him is that he is very passionate. I need a lot of energy to control him, but in the end I am very happy with the outcome.

Who is your favorite director to work with?

I can't name one director, it would be unprofessional. I have to approach directors with the same attitude; that's how I keep my job going on at a certain level.

How do you choose the film you want to work on?

I'll tell you how I picked 'April Chill' by Tornike Bziava. When I saw the opening of the film I was shaken to my core with the genius vision of directing. I could never forget the moment. It's something that grabs you in a heartbeat. I was hooked. I also love to discover a new culture on the background of the film. Exotic culture is very alluring for me. When you work with the director from a small and ancient country you would want to see the original culture, the soul of the country. I wouldn't be interested in film unless it is extremely brilliant. If it's something that could have been shot in France as well; then why work with these foreign countries. These places grab me with the authentic story and directing. 'April Chill' opens the door of the country to see what is really inside it. It shows a lot about the nation, traditions; you can see the Georgian soul wide open on your screen.

How about other Georgian films?

'Nest' by Tornike Bziava is still playing in the festivals. It went to 15 festivals already, among which 3-4 were A-list festivals. The film has travelled the world, was in Hong Kong and many other countries. France 3 bought it. It is a very interesting film but hard to sell. It is very Georgian, black and white and a bit slow. I love the film, I am proud of it. When I attended the shooting I could feel the soul. There is this scene

with a father and his son when he fixes the tie and there was some magic happening on the set, we all got very emotional. It was in the air. Somehow it touched whoever was on the set. It is one of those moments you simply can never erase. There is other movie by Tina Katchrishvili called 'Black Mulberry' it was bought by France 3 as well. It is on the festivals and it is still running.

Do you always attend the shooting?

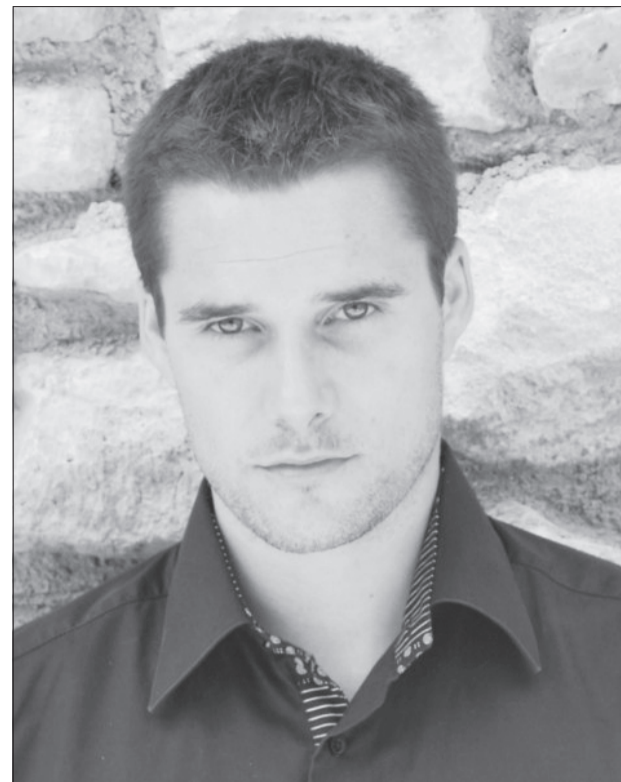
No, I'm useless on the set.

Don't you want to be a part of the magical moments on the set?

It's rare, I usually get bored. Even now, I'm here just to show some attention, to say that I am here.

What movie brings you to Georgia this time?

It is a film by Tina Katchrishvili entitled 'Brides'. It's about a woman whose husband who is in prison. It tells the story of her, how this is de-structuring her life, her family status and friendships. All the troubles she has to face. How she has to stand alone and fight against the society she lives in,



against temptations, how hard it is for her to handle this stage of her life.

Prisoners' wives are quite common nowadays in Georgia.

I know and the director is kind of telling her own story.

What can you predict for Georgian shorts?

The first time I came here was three years ago. It was the beginning of a new Georgian wave. Before then there were no Georgian films in Venice or Berlin festivals; now they screen Georgian movies. You can see them more and more often. Thanks to the Georgian Film Center, the film industry became aware of Georgian art.

Do we make you proud?

Absolutely! I like to be a pioneer. And I feel that I am. A few years ago not too many people were interested in working with Georgians. It has changed. It was promoted in the industry. This does make me proud.

Eurimages – the Council of Europe Fund for the Co-Production, Distribution, Exhibition and Digitisation of European Cinematographic Works - accepted Georgia as a part of it. A lot of people want to co-produce with Georgians and get money from Europe. I love that, and I was here before this, I saw the potential and I went for it.

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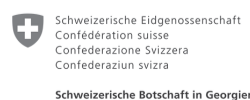
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NEWS

Giorgi Vashadze: We will offer an interesting and Comprehensive Election Campaign

MP Giorgi Vashadze of the Parliamentary Minority says that 5 people will participate in the United National Movement's primary for presidential candidate. As Vashadze mentioned in the press club of the First Radio, their candidates will be experienced and professional people who will work to solve the problems currently existing in Georgia. According to Vashadze, there is unemployment in the country and people live in financial difficulties. The UNM's candidates will try to overcome non-professionalism and inability, which

persists in Georgia. In addition, Vashadze did not exclude that David Bakradze, Giorgi Vashadze and Vano Merabishvili could participate in the Primary. As for his candidacy, Vashadze mentioned that he cannot participate due to the simple reason, as he is under-aged. According to Giorgi Vashadze, the exact date of Primary will be known at the end of the month and it will be held throughout all of Georgia. "We will offer Georgian citizens an interesting and comprehensive election campaign" the MP stated.



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SUNDAY BRUNCH

Gather around with your friends and family on Sundays for brunch at Tbilisi Marriott where we will cater to every family member! Sunday Brunch at Parnas captures the essence of Marriott's glamorous culinary tradition where Chef Pedro Gonzalez offers a variety of delights on the buffet with comfort cuisine combined with modern flavor. Everyone will find Sunday Brunch exciting with unlimited complimentary wines from Telavi Wine Cellar, mimosas for the ladies and kids' game room equipped with Xbox KINECT for your little one to enjoy!

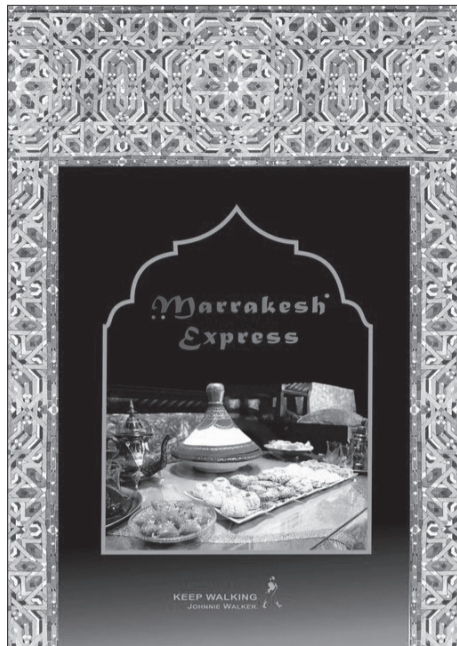
Every Sunday, 12-3 PM
 Buffet - 47 GEL+VAT
 Buffet, unlimited white and red wine - 59 GEL+ VAT
 Children under 9 free of charge. Ages 9 to 13 - 25 Gel +VAT
 Special discounts for the parties 10 and more
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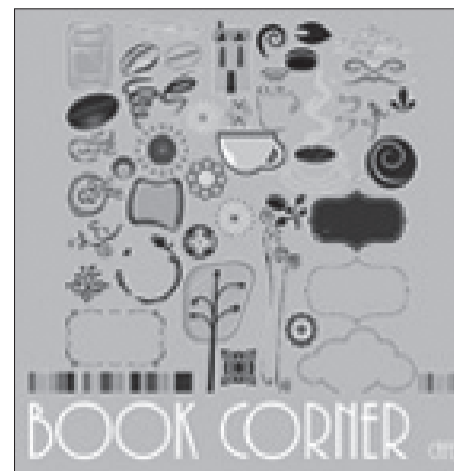
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Wheels - Irish Pub
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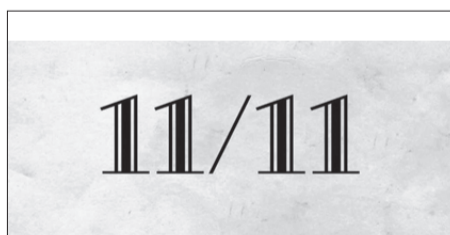
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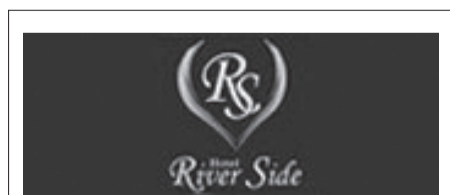
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Open House



QSI International School of Tbilisi



All interested community members are invited to our Open House!

Come meet teachers, tour the school and learn about our admissions process, curriculum and graduation requirements

Tuesday May 21, 2013
5-7 p.m.

Website: www.qsi.ge



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“Averssi” Dove Card Lottery has begun!

The cumulative “Averssi” Dove card is 5 years already. Besides the fact that with the accumulated amount on the card a customer is able to choose a particular prize from a catalogue, he/she is given the opportunity to take part in the lottery.

This time, “Averssi” offers you the forth grand lottery.

- 💰 Every owner of the “Dove Card” will receive 1 lottery ticket by paying 20 GEL for the product at any “Averssi” drug store and 10% of the amount paid will be returned on the card.
- 💰 For every 50 “Doves” 3 lottery tickets will be given as a present.
- 💰 For 10 “Doves” you will receive 1 lottery ticket.

The prizes are:

The main prize 5000 GEL to 5 winners
20 000 GEL 10 000 GEL to 5 winners



“Averssi”- Health and Peace of Mind
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