



## FOCUS

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## From a Startup to a Flourishing Business

SilkWay Group is a leading tourism agency in Georgia for people living in the Gulf countries, because it offers services that are authentic to Arab identity. The company won an award in the category a Successful New Brand at the Georgian Brand Day 2022 award ceremony. We got an opportunity to have a discussion with the General Director Amar Faqer and the CEO Mustafa Tarakhan.

They shared their feelings on winning the award. Amar said: "Having won a prize in recognition of our success in such a short time is extremely important for us because it means we have auspiciously passed the first stage of our journey. Considering that the company was founded just about a year and a half ago, this is proof that we are moving in the right direction."

Mustafa also shared his feelings. "It's extremely pleasing to see our success, after all the hard work we did every day in the past year, when we built this company up in Georgia from a startup to a flourishing, established business. I'm incredibly grateful for our team that made it possible for us to achieve this success in such a short time. I truly believe good teamwork is a fundamental part of what we have right now."

Continued on page 7



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CREATING OPPORTUNITIES

As of 26-Dec-2022

BONDS			STOCKS		
	Price	w/w m/m		Price	w/w m/m
GRAIL 07/28	88.22 (YTM 6.60%)	+0.1% +0.8%	Bank of Georgia (BGEOLN)	GBP 25.65	+3.6% +1.0%
GEBGG 07/23	100.09 (YTM 5.83%)	-0.6% -0.5%	Georgia Capital (CGEOLN)	GBP 7.50	+0.8% +0.8%
GECCAP 03/24	95.03 (YTM 10.64%)	-0.6% +0.3%	TBC Bank Group (TBCGLN)	GBP 22.00	+2.3% +0.9%
SILNET 01/27	94.70 (YTM 9.98%)	+0.1% +1.9%			
TBC 06/24	98.35 (YTM 6.94%)	+0.0% +0.2%			
COMMODITIES			CURRENCIES		
	Price	w/w m/m		Price	w/w m/m
Crude Oil, Brent (US\$/bbl)	83.92	+5.2% +0.3%	GEL / USD	2.6992	+1.5% -0.0%
Gold Spot (US\$/oz)	1 798.20	+0.6% +2.5%	GEL / EUR	2.8712	+1.8% +2.3%
			GEL / GBP	3.2559	+0.8% -0.3%
			GEL / CHF	2.8944	+1.0% +1.4%
			GEL / RUB	0.0393	+1.0% -11.9%
			GEL / TRY	0.1444	+1.3% -0.4%
INDICES			GEL / AZN		
	Price	w/w m/m		Price	w/w m/m
FTSE 100	7 473.01	+1.5% -0.2%	GEL / AMD	0.0069	+1.6% +0.3%
FTSE 250	18 830.08	+1.0% -3.7%	GEL / UAH	0.0732	+1.7% +0.3%
DAX	13 940.93	-0.0% -4.1%	EUR / USD	0.9401	-0.3% -2.3%
DOW JONES	33 203.93	+1.4% -3.3%	GBP / USD	0.8290	+0.7% +0.2%
NASDAQ	10 497.86	-0.5% -6.5%	CHF / USD	0.9320	+0.4% -1.5%
MSCI EM	956.48	-0.1% +1.0%	RUB / USD	68.7700	+0.7% +13.7%
SP 500	3 844.82	+0.7% -4.5%	TRY / USD	18.6832	+0.2% +0.4%
MSCI FM	2 095.05	-0.2% -0.2%	AZN / USD	1.6998	-0.0% -0.0%
			AMD / USD	393.6500	-0.1% -0.4%



# Ukraine Latest: Russian Shelling Continues, Zelensky Says War Has Strengthened Europe's Unity



BY ANA DUMBADZE

Russia has continued to shell cities across Ukraine as the war rages on. Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said in his annual address Wednesday to the Ukrainian Parliament

that the war Russia has waged on his country has strengthened Europe's unity, and that "no-one in the West is afraid or will ever be afraid of Russia."

"For the first time in history, some European countries have reconsidered the notion of staying neutral, and are resisting aggression together with us, together with Ukraine," he said. "We helped Europe and most of the world to

feel that being neutral now is simply immoral."

Zelensky also thanked Ukrainian servicemen, calling them "heroes," and said the powerful weapons Ukraine has received have strengthened its advantage.

Russia struck numerous cities, including Kherson and Oleshky in the south and Kharkiv in the east. The shelling in Oleshky killed at least one man, injured

five others, and damaged a high-rise building and kiosks on the town's market, says Mayor Yevhen Ryshchuk.

As fighting near the key Ukrainian city of Kreminna in the eastern Luhansk region continues, Russian civilians who had come to the city have stopped their work and left, according to the head of Luhansk's military administration. If the Ukrainian military is able to dislodge the Russians from Kreminna, the Ukrainian military could then proceed in two directions, Serhiy Hayday, head of the Luhansk region military administration, said Wednesday in a television interview.

Hayday said two of the larger cities in Luhansk region near Kreminna, Severodonetsk and Rubizhne have been "practically destroyed" by Russian forces over four and a half months of occupation and "therefore, these cities cannot serve as big defense bases."

"Accordingly, as soon as the major cities are de-occupied, the next step is the countryside. The Russian forces will not be able to hold out there for long," he said.

Meanwhile, Ukrainian officials have called on residents to evacuate Kherson, as the city was impacted 23 times over the last 24 hours.

A district of the northeastern city of Kharkiv was hit with rockets on Wednesday, injuring one civilian, according to Oleh Syniehubov, the head of the Kharkiv regional military administration.

Russia captured swathes of Kharkiv in the early days of its invasion, before Ukrainian forces retook most of the region in an offensive in the autumn.

Ukraine's power grid electricity deficit grew on Wednesday due to the shelling of gas infrastructure in eastern Ukraine, state power utility Ukrenergo said in an update. Ukraine, which has faced a wide assault on critical infrastructure and power sources since early October, will not experience further power restrictions because of the growing deficit, Ukrenergo said. However, the power utility added that "all regions were informed about consumption limits, the excess of which leads to the need for emergency outages."

In the last three months, the power grid has suffered nine missile and 12 Russian unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) attacks, Ukrenergo noted.



# New Year's Days in Georgia

New Year's Days in Georgia, started on December 23 and will continue until January 13.

New Year's events will be held throughout Georgia in 63 municipalities. Christmas markets, exhibitions and sales, and spaces for children's entertainment will be organized. In the evening, music concerts are scheduled, where local and invited artists from the capital will perform.

In Tbilisi, the events will be held in Orbeliani Square, Dedaena (Mother Tongue), and March 9 Gardens, 9th Of April Park.

Events will be suitable for people of all ages. Children's concerts, theater performances, fairy tale characters, and various entertaining and cultural activities will take place. Marches, performances, concerts of ensembles, bands, pop singers, and live electronic shows

will entertain audiences.

From December 23 to January 13, the New Year Caravan will be present on Orbeliani Square, where one can taste street food, browse unique products and listen to live music.

One can enjoy an exhibition and sale "Christmas market" there, as well as a festival of gastronomy and sweets.

On December 31, a gala concert will be held on a decorated stage in Europe Square.

Tbilisi City Hall also announced, the musical program of the event is filled with songs well-known to the public.

Sazamtro - New Year 2023 - organized by eZo Festival will take place on December 31,

On January 1, one of the most popular Georgian bands, Bedford Falls, will perform at MONO HALL.

The GEORGIA TODAY team wishes all its readers a happy, healthy, peaceful and prosperous new year ahead!



22 დღე საახალწლო ქარავანზე



# Melashvili's Letter

## EGI President's Letter Summarizing 2022 in Georgia

BLOG BY GEORGE MELASHVILI,  
PRESIDENT, EUROPE-  
GEORGIA INSTITUTE

**I**f I had to choose a word to end the outgoing year of 2022 and welcome the New Year, there would be only one single word on my mind: Ukraine. Following tectonic changes in world politics caused by Russia's unprovoked and unjustified invasion of Ukraine, the world - as we knew it - has changed. Drastic, personal, and even childish quarrels between the Georgian government and Ukraine was an unfortunate contrast to the will of the Georgian people, demonstrating our support and solidarity to Ukraine on every occasion possible. There are no words to properly describe the contribution of Georgian volunteers fighting and dying together with Ukrainian warriors defending the freedom and liberty of Ukraine, and thus defending Georgia's freedom as well.

A far-reaching contrast between the Government and the will of the people, together with the fragmentation of Georgia's political elites, is probably the best description of this outgoing year in Georgia. The sacrifice of Ukraine has changed the geopolitical situation in the region and opened a window of opportunity both for Georgia and Moldova; but where the Government of Moldova has the political will to implement EU's requests of reforms, the Georgian Government, in its pursuit of power, is not willing to compromise or properly implement the EU's reform agenda.

Reluctance to implement reforms that decrease absolute power is not something new and is very similar to the fiasco with Charles Michel's Agreement, but this time the price is much higher. The actions of the Georgian government have already

cost Georgia a chance to receive EU Candidacy status together with Ukraine and Moldova, and by supporting ridiculous conspiracy theories and empowering anti-western forces in Georgia, the Government risks unleashing powers beyond its comprehension.

However, this strategy seems to be backfiring for the Government itself. Decreasing support among their own base, not willing to sacrifice Georgia's European future even for the sake of the political party, is a clear trend visible in the polls. This situation has resulted in the creation of a new, anti-western conspiracy movement aiming to portray the ruling party as a reasonable political force in contrast to the anti-western conspiracy theorists.

This strategy is also not something new for Georgia; since 2012, different political groups were utilized to capitalize on the votes of the anti-western electorate. These political projects were abandoned and forgotten as soon as their political resources were drained; the dramatic (and in some sense tragic) history of the Georgian March, Alliance of Patriots, Conservative Movement and other ghostly political projects is a good illustration of the vicious cycle of disposable anti-western political projects in Georgian politics, and their predestined defeat.

The appointment of the new Public Defender of Georgia was marred by controversy and served as an example of the ruling party's unwillingness to relinquish any of their power, similar to their previous refusal to allow the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED) to participate in the electoral system reform group. ISFED's case is also an example of a long-lasting attempt to discredit civil society and portray them as "enemies of the state", and introduce new legislation copy-pasted from the Russian "Foreign Agents Law". This legislation - if introduced - will be an unfortunate

attempt to control civil society and will further deteriorate relations between Georgia and its western allies.

The cases of Mikheil Saakashvili and Nika Gvaramia continue to attract attention. The US Embassy has stated that Gvaramia's case raises concerns about Georgia's commitment to the rule of law and the importance of an independent, impartial judiciary in the country. Saakashvili's case, which has political undertones, has become even more complex due to the decline in health of Georgia's third President and the refusal of the GD party to allow him to receive medical treatment outside of Georgia.

However, the will of the people remains unchanged - three-quarters of Georgians see themselves as pro-Western and only a tiny proportion of the population is pro-Russian; a reality that the Government was forced to acknowledge. Following one of the biggest protests in Georgian history on February 25, Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili formally applied for EU membership, resulting in the recognition of Georgia's European perspective. The Zeitenwende, and Olaf Scholz's speech mentioning "we are people of Europe, our voice must resound throughout Europe, from Lisbon to Tbilisi, and beyond" was also an important demonstration of the changing times and an important addition to Ursula von der Leyen's message to the people of the Western Balkans, of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia "You are part of our family, your future is in our Union, and our Union is not complete without you!"

Two tragedies occurred in Georgia this year, causing grief among the population. The first tragedy was the crash of a Georgian Border Police helicopter, Mi-8, near the mountain resort of Gudauri, which resulted in the deaths of four crew members, two rescuers, and two paramedics. The rescue team had been attempting to recover a pilot and his passenger who were

### GEORGIA'S Year in Review Melashvili's Letter 2022

involved in a paraglider crash earlier in the same incident. The second tragedy occurred in Tbilisi, when three teenagers were electrocuted after attempting to retrieve a ball that had fallen into a fountain. One of the teenagers, a 13-year-old girl, died after being taken to the hospital, while her two friends were treated for their injuries and released from the clinic.


The situation in Georgia's occupied territories remains complex. Irakli Bebuia, an ethnic Georgian resident of the occupied Gali district, was arbitrarily arrested by Russian-backed Abkhaz authorities on September 30th for burning an Abkhaz decorative banner. In 2020, he was sentenced to 9 years in prison and remains imprisoned, with his health rapidly deteriorating. Kristine Takalandze, a 24-year-old, has been accused of spying by the security service of Russian-occupied Abkhazia and is also being detained. In an attempt to increase pressure on Georgia, the dictator of Belarus, Aleksandr Lukashenko, visited Abkhazia, causing outrage in Georgian society. The United Transitional Cabinet of Belarus, affiliated with Svetlana Tsikhanouskaya, swiftly declared its support for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Georgia. The situation in the occupied Tskhinvali region remains complicated as well, with continued creeping borderization and occasional kidnappings of Georgian citizens. Two significant developments regarding Georgia's occupied territories were the European Parliament's vote to non-recognize Russian travel documents issued in occupied regions of Georgia and Ukraine, and the decision of the International Criminal Court's prosecutor, Karim A.A. Khan KC, to conclude the investigation phase in the Situation in Georgia, issuing warrants of arrest for representatives of the Russian

occupational regime.

The Agreement on the Black Sea Electricity Cable was an important achievement of 2022 as well. The agreement was signed on December 17 by Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, and Romanian Prime Minister Romănia Nicolae Ciuca. This achievement will bring the European Union closer to the South Caucasus region, and it will facilitate the clean energy transition for both the EU and the Caucasus as well as contributing to the energy security of the EU and Georgia.

Despite all the challenges, 2022 will be forever remembered for generations to come as a cornerstone of Georgia's European integration, just like 1999 - when Zurab Zhvania delivered his speech "I am Georgian, and therefore I am European". The recognition of Georgia's European Perspective is a tremendous achievement of the Georgian people, and generations of politicians and diplomats, finally ensuring that Georgia is welcomed back into the European family and accepting that the future of the Associated Trio countries and their citizens lies within the European Union.

If there is anything that not only I, but all of us should wish for at Christmas and the New Year, it is the victory of Ukraine, an end to this bloodshed, and proper justice for the warmongers who started this war, in memory of their victims. There is a saying by the great Shota Rustaveli that goes, "Having defeated evil, good will prevail in this world indefinitely" - and this is exactly what should happen. To end this letter in a traditional Georgian manner, I propose a toast - to the victory of Ukraine and to the European future of Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova!



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# How the War in Ukraine Empowers Kazakhstan



Astana, Kazakhstan. Source: CNN

ANALYSIS BY EMIL AVDALIANI

The war in Ukraine gives Kazakhstan much-needed breathing space to ramp up the work to limit its increasingly toxic dependence on Russia. Officially allies and linked together through multiple Russia-led multilateral security and economic groupings, for Kazakhstan, Russia's increasingly mili-

tarist approach to the neighboring states has caused a great deal of discomfort. Russian politicians have pestered Kazakhstan with history lessons on how the country was superficially created and that big chunks of it belong to historic Russia.

Preoccupied in Ukraine, Moscow cannot afford troubles elsewhere along its borders. Its level of tolerance of otherwise unacceptable foreign policy moves has significantly increased the widening of scope of Kazakhstan's maneuverability.

That said, when Bolat Akchulakov, the energy minister of Kazakhstan, said that his country will not be joining a gas union, an initiative President Vladimir Putin suggested to set up together with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, Moscow could do little to force a change on Astana.

But Kazakhstan is not only emboldened by Russia's distractions. It has China, which has cash and also serves as a necessary balance to Russia. For Beijing, Kazakhstan is a critical artery within China's sprawling yet struggling Belt

and Road Initiative (BRI), and serves as a gateway in its push to reshape global connectivity.

China's interests in Kazakhstan were underscored in a September visit by Chinese President Xi Jinping, who picked Astana as his first foreign travel spot following the covid pandemic. Xi emphasized Beijing's support for Kazakhstan's independence and vowed to safeguard its territorial integrity. The message was seen as a warning to non-regional actors, but the veiled style and specific timing of the statement might suggest that it was also meant for Russia.

Astana's reliance on China currently appears to be advantageous. Indeed, the two nations are increasing their railway links in order to increase transit and bilateral trade. However, the line between benign dependence and toxic partnership is always perilously thin. Kazakhstan is aware of this, which is why the country chooses to diversify its foreign ties by developing connections with other ambitious Eurasian actors rather than being a part of the Russo-Sino condominium.

Turkey is an important player in these initiatives. Ties with Ankara are strengthening, as seen by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's recent visit to Astana, which in turn was built on Tokayev's much-touted trip to Ankara in May 2022. Both visits emphasized the significance of the expanding commercial and political connections, as well as the Middle Corridor itself, which has now turned into a viable alternative to the Russian route, partially blocked due to sanctions. Indeed, the developing Middle Corridor is a vital component of Kazakhstan's new vision. During the Ukraine conflict, Russia intermittently closed oil exporting pipelines, prompting Tokayev to order the search for alternate routes.

Kazakhstan looks even further west toward the European Union, which,

despite open competition with Russia, has been particularly keen on forging tight connections with Kazakhstan. During his visit to Kazakhstan, Charles Michel stated that bilateral ties are improving and are founded on trust and mutual understanding. Josep Borrell, the EU High Representative for Foreign Policy, also visited Astana on November 16-17, unveiling ambitious EU plans to re-engage Central Asia as a whole and Kazakhstan in particular.

Eastward and southward, Kazakhstan reaches out to Japan, South Korea, and India. These three powers have been less ambitious in Central Asia than Russia and China, but their appetite is growing as they seek ways to deny Russia and China building a condominium over Central Asia.

Yet Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign strategy does not imply that it is rethinking its relations with Russia. Astana just desires more assurances in bilateral relations. More security is provided by the capacity to pit one power against the other. In fact, the Kazakh leadership knows full well that Moscow requires Astana's cooperation too. This explains why Tokayev has worked so hard to maintain stable ties with Moscow. Meetings with Russian leadership are taking place on a regular basis, with Putin and Tokayev meeting in August in Sochi.

Thus, the war in Ukraine has served as perfect timing for what Kazakhstan sought to do for a long time: a new foreign policy, which seeks greater freedom from Russia and engagement with large actors across Eurasia. Russia is not losing only Ukraine; it also depletes the remnants of its erstwhile influence in Central Asia.

Emil Avdaliani is a professor at European University and the Director of Middle East Studies at the Georgian thinktank, Geocase.

## Crisis Economy: Trends, Features And Possible Development. Part 2

BY VICTOR KIPANI,  
CHAIRMAN OF GEOCASE

It is somewhat premature to speak of the firm establishment of the rise of "economic nationalism", but there is a definite trend in this respect. Speaking of the new social contract, we have already noted that in the international economic "puzzle" now taking shape, all the elements are in their interconnection and interaction. It is clear that economic nationalism cannot be seen as a separate phenomenon either. Moreover, it is one of the driving forces of the geopolitical-geoeconomic (dis)order, which is in the mode of renewal.

### EXPERIMENTAL OR WAR ECONOMY?

Perhaps these titles are interchangeable because: (1) contemporary economic relations are characterized by the breaking of old rules and the vague content of new rules, and (2) war and the global competition caused by it define again and again a crisis economy in a state of experimentation.

In this context, we consider it necessary and possible to name several features caused by the confrontation of several different political and economic systems.

### A RENEWED ECONOMIC NETWORKING.

Like the new hub-and-spoke system of global security and international relations, the global economic picture is undergoing fundamental changes. First of all, we are talking about a shift in the vector of global industrial potential from the West to the East. Although this process began relatively early, even before the pandemic and the new confrontation between the great powers as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, today, in fact, the industrial and commercial pull to the East has become more evident. Thus, it is no coincidence that in

the Western world, too, this fundamental process is not only discussed, but that so-called "countermeasures" are given special attention in practical and policy-defining documents. For example, the new U.S. national security strategy considers it insufficient to rely on the most important instruments of U.S. global economic influence - the U.S. dollar and trade agreements. The mentioned document emphasizes the need to neutralize the economic risks coming from the East, primarily from China, by making significant investments in the U.S. national economy and launching various stimulus projects. This course is very close to the stated policy of the Trump presidency and, if we recall the observations made in this article, boils down to a kind of American "economic nationalism" as a counterbalance to the "extreme" global liberal order.

The statement can also be phrased differently: Do these and other examples not point to a new feature of the economic order; a liberal economy, but with a national sign? This tendency (if not a trend) is particularly noteworthy from the perspective of our Georgian economic system and offers us a number of practical recommendations for the future.

### TURNING FUEL INTO A "WEAPON"

The phenomenon we know as "weaponization". Much has been written about its real nature and the consequences associated with it. Therefore, we will try to spare the reader from repeating already familiar assessments and focus only on some practical aspects.

In particular, Western circles are actively discussing measures to neutralize the detrimental consequences of this new form of aggression, the so-called "petrol aggression". This issue has become particularly urgent for European business. Along with the deterioration of the social background, bilateral restrictions on energy resources (both by the EU and by Russia) have put the EU before the real threats: (1) as a result of the voluntary embargo, rising energy

prices have threatened the development of industry at the necessary pace in Europe (in some places this process was even called deindustrialization, which, in our opinion, is excessive); (2) caused the need for significant investments in the infrastructure of transportation of energy resources from alternative sources, which in turn led to a reduction in funding for social programs; (3) the competitiveness of European businesses may decrease: both in relation to the US and in relation to Asia.

At this stage several basic measures are mentioned to counteract the economic pressure that was discussed, namely: (1) "rationalization" of energy consumption - lean consumption of imported energy resources; (2) price control - introduction of a reasonable "ceiling"/maximum limit on income and (3) the so-called Solidarity Contribution - introduction of a tax for social purposes on excess profits of energy companies.

All this once again redirects us to the trends mentioned in this article related to a reasonable return of the state to economic processes and, along with the necessary balance of social justice, an intensification of the state's role in managing internal and external security risks. Any such trend is especially important for our country, for its competitive development. And it is practically impossible without achieving energy self-sufficiency, and for this we must pragmatically agree on the goals of necessary (and sometimes unpopular and disadvantageous for political parties) measures.

The fact is that the world is in the phase of the so-called "war economy," and looking at the large-scale use of developed processes and means of economic pressure (which, along with energy resources, also applies to food, medicines, etc.), we can say that we are practically witnessing the first world economic war.

### THE CONUNDRUM OF "MUCH" OR "LITTLE" CREDIT RESOURCES

During the poly-crisis, on the one hand,

a large infusion of funds into social and other supportive/stimulus programs was required, which, on the other hand, led to an escalation of inflation. As a result, the crux of the conundrum is the following: should generous investments in social needs, including through lending to the real economy, continue, or should greater caution (and in some cases clear limits) be exercised to contain inflation?

In an economy of crisis, the problem of proper management as well as the rational dosage of credit resources has increased the role of sound monetary policy together with the fiscal one; That, in turn, has made both academics and practitioners reassess the importance of the central bank. As a result, over the last few decades, this institution has had a "forced" two-dimensional function: in parallel with managing inflation processes and prices, to avoid stagnation and to supply the necessary 'fuel' for the movement of the real economy, an adequate supply of money. In this extraordinary situation, the task of the state as a "smart regulator" is to strike a rational balance between the insatiable appetite for financial resources and the long-term priorities of equitable and predictable economic development. This is precisely the task faced by developed countries today, and with the acceleration of growth, the developing (Georgian) economy may also face it more tangibly.

Finally, the processes of adjustment to post-financial capitalism in financial and other, especially technology-related, critical industries have actualized the postponed problems of the post-Cold War period mentioned in this article: (a) adjusting regulations while maintaining a commensurate pace of development; (b) transition from financial corporatization (i.e., with a focus on super-profits) to corporatization in a broad sense (the imperative of an inclusive public and social agenda for the development of the country); (c) the introduction of new, exclusively meritocratic criteria for measuring success in economic activity, etc.

### CONCLUSION TO CONTINUE

Any recession or crisis leads to a new equilibrium. This is a kind of axiom: also in economics. The future equilibrium will be unique in that it will be characterized not only by the confrontation of geopolitical centers, but also by the struggle between the economic global North and the global South. This "multilayered" (r)evolution of the process requires constant observation and proper analysis on the Georgian side.

Regardless of the pace and quality of replacing old rules with new ones, we would suggest the following characteristics of the next stage equilibrium: (1) the elimination of unacceptable inequalities between different social strata to manage external threats and internal extremist risks; Which, among other things, can be achieved by (2) the state's attempt to intervene in the economy in proportion to the political-intellectual and material resources available to it; And that, under a large assumption, leads to - (3) the end of the stage of the so-called "small government" and closer to the Keynesianism of national economic model (the state as an active client and determinant of economic growth), naturally, in accordance with modern realities and requirements.

Obviously, no discussion these days suffers from a lack of assumptions. Some are relatively more convincing, others less so. In times like these, it is important to remember that the road to "new normals" of economic system is full of many surprises. The American macroeconomist Ben Bernanke rightly noted about his professional career that "one of the lessons of my life is that nobody knows what will happen."

Given the challenges of our time, this observation is critical not only for the economy, but also for other areas. Therefore, Georgia, represented by its society, academic and research communities, as well as its political leadership, must prepare itself to overcome the bumpy road caused by the unpredictability of the modern world. It is a path that requires a combination of strategic persistence and the art of tactical improvisation.



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# Importance of the Development of Highland Areas with Maximum Protection of Local Traditions



**T**he growth of highland regions is part of Georgia's regional development policy. However, it requires a specific approach since the mountainous places, contrary to other regions of the country, are more at risk of natural disasters, which often leads to the deterioration of living conditions and also reduces the opportunity for agricultural activities.

"The most acute problem of the population of high mountain settlements is low income and unemployment, which limits the opportunity to improve the well-being or socio-economic status of the population. This, evidently, promotes the migration of the population from the highland settlements," Ekaterine Meskhrikadze, Deputy Head of Mission of Caritas Czech Republic in Georgia, tells us. She notes that the mountainous regions of Georgia are remarkably rich in biodiversity and architectural monuments, and are distinguished by an abundance of cultural heritage monuments which all needs protection. The state adopted a particular approach to the mountainous regions to encourage the connection of the local population to the mountain and to create equal conditions for them corresponding to other regions of the country in order to ensure socioeconomic development.

"Georgia has a great vision in this direction and quite important steps have been taken in recent years," Meskhrikadze says. "However, the development of mountainous regions is associated with

quite large costs, given the risks caused by natural disasters. The local budget is not enough to solve all the problems, and therefore donor support becomes crucial."

Caritas Czech Republic has been involved in rural development since 2015. From the very beginning, their interest lay in the highland regions. Caritas aims to support traditional farming, and projects initiated by the organization are shaped by the development needs of the highland regions.

GEORGIA TODAY sat down with Ms Meskhrikadze to find out more.

## WHAT IS THE OVERALL VISION OF THE ORGANIZATION AND WHAT ARE YOU WORKING ON AT THE MOMENT?

By supporting agriculture, tourism, and alternative economic activities, we are trying to promote the strengthening of the countryside, the promotion of our target regions (Tusheti, Pshav-Khevsureti, Khulo, Racha) and the involvement of women in economic activities. Women of the highland regions are active and have shown their strength in doing business. This especially applies to the field of tourism and services.

Czech Caritas works in several directions, among which is the health and social care sector. Since 2017, we have been actively involved in environmental protection. In the rural development sector, unlike other fields, we have implemented relatively fewer projects, but in terms of their importance, all these pro-

jects are very large and have resulted in significant changes.

We executed the first project in Tusheti with the financial support of the Czech Development Agency and in close cooperation with the Tusheti Protected Landscape Administration. The goal of the project was to promote the sustainable development of the Tusheti region and increase the incomes of farmers by diversifying traditional farming and offering alternative economic activities.

Within 4 years of its implementation, the project introduced modern practices for the production of vegetable crops, in particular, potatoes and other vegetables. Add to this the development of wool production and additional economic activities of farmers through small grants and educational activities.

The activities of the project were aimed both at the restoration and strengthening of the traditional agricultural system, as well as at the integration of modern approaches. As a result, the quality of products has improved, the income of farmers and entrepreneurs has increased, and cooperation between local farmers and entrepreneurs has been strengthened.

## TELL US ABOUT THE ENPARD PROGRAM IN KHULO MUNICIPALITY, WHICH YOU IMPLEMENTED IN COOPERATION WITH THE PMC RESEARCH CENTER.

Within the framework of the project, a local development group was created

where they used the experience of the Croatian leadership, to develop a Khulo development strategy. Special attention was paid to the tourism development potential, and, in accordance with strategic priorities, 75 projects were financed, of which 35 were startups which contributed to the improvement of living conditions in the Khulo municipality, increased tourism potential, created around 300 new jobs, and resulted in an overall increase in the well-being of the local population.

The support of the rural development sector continued through the project implemented with the financial support of SlovakAid in Racha, namely in the municipalities of Ambrolauri and Oni, which was executed during the pandemic and was a very important support mechanism for the population of the region, since the project helped small and medium businesses to maintain jobs. A total of 26 projects were financed and as a result, 40 jobs were maintained. In addition, 152 socially vulnerable families were assisted with the creation of a means of livelihood.

"Right now, Caritas Czech Republic has an ongoing project in the direction of animal husbandry, again with the financial support of the Czech Development Agency, which is implemented in the geographical area of Khulo municipality, Pshav-Khevsureti and Tusheti protected landscape," Meskhrikadze says.



"The project aims to develop the livestock sector, which in turn involves supporting project beneficiaries by promoting the introduction of sustainable grazing practices, artificial insemination practices, and veterinary practices, and developing the necessary linkages. In this project, we cooperate with the Georgian Farmers' Association and the American company Land O'Lakes, which implements agricultural development projects all over the world, including in Georgia."

Next, we spoke to Lado Kakhoidze, Head of the Tusheti Protected Landscape Administration.

## IS IT IMPORTANT TO DEVELOP VILLAGES BY PROTECTING THEIR TRADITIONS AS FAR AS POSSIBLE, AND IS IT CRUCIAL TO PRESERVE AN AUTHENTIC ENVIRONMENT?

Tusheti has one of the largest protected areas in Georgia - Tusheti State Reserve, National Park, and Protected Landscape - and is very rich in traditions. Here, the traditional way of life is preserved and continues - nomadic sheep herding and cattle breeding with endemic breeds - the Tushuri horse (*Equus ferus caballus*) and the Tushuri sheep (*Ovis Aries*); we have a vertical zoning system of land use and grazing; the tradition of sustainable consumption of natural resources (timber consumption, Khata forests); a special style of accommodation - village-Bosloba (winter and summer residences), which is an authentic characteristic of Tusheti, with settlements built of slate stones, fortifications and cult buildings," he tells us.

"17 villages of Georgia are important

cultural heritage monuments, and two of them - Keselo Castle Complex and village Dartlo are included in the UNESCO World Heritage Tentative List. In Tusheti there is traditional folklore, orally transmitted folklore, and special cuisine, traditions formed as a result of the harmonious coexistence of man and nature in the depths of centuries.

"During the Soviet Union, these traditions began to disappear. The priority of the Communist Party for the development of livestock and sheep breeding was to increase the number of cattle as much as possible. As a result, the entire Tusheti area, with its villages and surrounding arable area, was turned into pasture. This led to the disruption of the traditional land use system, which was based on the principles of vertical zoning, damaging the ecosystem of the meadow, where it was traditionally plowed and sown. Erosion and landslides began to be seen in these places. During the communist period, the population actively began to change the settlement, which destroyed the unique tradition of the village, the villages were destroyed and deserted," says Kakhoidze.

## WHAT IS BEING DONE WITH CARITAS IN THIS DIRECTION?

"Caritas Czech Republic is actively involved in the development of agriculture in Tusheti, in particular, cattle breeding, and in this way, supporting the

population living in rural areas. As a result, in Tusheti, the development of beef cattle breeding and the creation of a key marketing chain of meat, the improvement of food production, through introduction of the correct management of selected pastures, and the improvement of the quality of on-site veterinary services, will be promoted," he answers.

"Also, educational training and practical lessons are being conducted for local farmers. In this activity, Czech Caritas is actively supported by the administration of the protected landscape of Tusheti and the Akhmeta Municipality.

"Czech Caritas had another project supporting traditional agricultural sectors in Tusheti in 2016-2017."

Irakli Javakhishvili, a business development expert, explained to us the importance of development of the economic chain.

"The development of economic chains at the village level brings money to the place, which subsequently employs and distributes this to the local residents, increasing prosperity. Otherwise, economic development in the village is difficult. Due to a lack of sources of income, many people leave the village, and there is a great danger the village will be left empty. The creation of jobs depends on the development of economic chains. This issue is a matter of survival," Javakhishvili notes.





# Mastercard's New Country Manager: Sum-Up of the Year 2022, and the Brand "Priceless"

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW BY  
EREKLE POLADISHVILI

**T**he ever-growing Georgian market of cash-free payments demands a proper tech supporter, which will guarantee our citizens and tourists pay only digitally. That provider is world famous tech giant, Mastercard, which has led the Georgian market for years. Among the 210 countries the company operates in, Georgia is one of the most developed in public use of digital payments, surpassing most European countries as well as its Caucasian neighbors. Speaking about neighbors, on the regional level, Georgia and Armenia are in the same basket for obvious reasons, and David Zgudadze is the country manager for both.

"I joined the Mastercard team two years ago. My previous post was as account manager, where I was responsible for communicating with the financial sector. But when the position of country manager became vacant, I applied for it. Since August, I have represented Mastercard on the regional level in Georgia and Armenia."

David Zgudadze has 15 years of experience in the banking sector, but his path to the country manager position was much longer. After graduating from the Georgian Technical University, he decided to complete a master's degree in Business Administration as well. That's how he received a double diploma from the Grenoble and Caucasian Business Schools. The young Zgudadze started working as a web developer at the Internet provider company "Saneti". Still, his



actual career began when Cartu Bank offered him his first serious job as an IT specialist.

"I started my career at Cartu Bank in 2006, and my initiatives began to significantly develop the digital commercialization sector. The bank became the first ever Georgian company to receive an internet payment licence. Then I decided to join the TBC Bank team, where I worked for 10 years. Through that time, we achieved a lot in the digital commercialization sector. While at TBC, I had a close partnership with the Mastercard team, which helped me get closer to the company. Now I'm here, speaking as a country manager of Mastercard, and I feel proud that I managed it."

Mastercard opened its local office back in 2018. For four years, the number of team members was low, but as the demand for paying digitally increased, in the summer of 2022, they decided to recruit more people and appoint a new country manager.

"Only three people were working here when the office was opened, but this year we decided to add more jobs, and now we have three new specialists from the banking sector. I'm proud to say that the team, uniting six members, deals with issues not just on the local but Armenian level as well."

2022 was full of exciting changes. While Georgians paid their final farewell to Covid-19, Google Pay arrived on the market, and Mastercard had a leading role in the negotiations with Google.

"These days, more Georgians use local internet payment systems than ever before, meaning internet sales are growing in popularity in Georgia. The only issue we had was that, unlike Apple users, Android smartphone owners

didn't have a chance to pay digitally. Digital transactions are way safer than paying by cash or card. Modern technologies slightly reduce fraud risks, as every operation is conducted virtually via copies of transactions. I'm proud to say that it is possible thanks to Mastercard MDES technology, which converts our cards into digital tokens. For Google to enter the Georgian market took a lot of work to decide, as such tech giants prioritize bigger markets first. Google Pay is only available in 45 countries, including Georgia. The negotiation process was easy as the country is well-enough developed technology-wise to meet the demands of actors like Google. The only issue was the legal aspect, which took time, but when we'd dealt with it, Google Pay entered the Georgian market. Such changes accelerate the country's transformation, and we're proud to be part of it. Indeed, the fact that such world-famous brands are represented in this country is very important."

The year 2023 is ahead of us, and one of the priorities the company is to promote "Priceless", a world-renowned 25-year-old brand.

"Next year will be a different one! We will provide financial and non-financial services with more of our various services. Besides that, we will promote our brand, "Priceless". The brand itself will be available exclusively to Mastercard cardholders. It will provide them unforgettable experiences and valuable everyday discounts in the cities where they live and travel. It's clear that Georgia has an opportunity to become an excellent spot for developing priceless experiences, and we don't want to miss this chance," Zgudadze says.

## From a Startup to a Flourishing Business

Continued from page 1

The company prides itself on providing comfortable and authentic Arabic culture services in Georgia, so travelers from Gulf countries will not only be impressed by the services but will also feel at ease in Georgia.

"SilkWay Group" works in two directions, one is eco-tourism and the other one is medical tourism. Amar Faqer explained this direction: "We have been working in the Jordanian market for a long time and the Jordanian market is famous for medical tourism. We also worked on the Turkish market in this direction, so we gained a lot of experience. After discovering that Georgia has not only great medical services but also nature that helps develop eco-tourism, we knew this was the right direction for us. We know for a fact that medical tourism can and will be very important in the economic development of the country."

Mustafa added that, "Medical tourism is something special for us, because we are the first company initiating this in the Arabic market. A lot of people still don't know anything about Georgia as a medical tourism destination. That's why we are actively participating in international tourism events, because we see huge opportunities here. This is why we keep spreading information about Georgia at every opportunity we get. Eco-tourism is also extremely important, it creates an environment that draws people for not only clinical treatment but



overall health improvement activities."

While discussing the company's goals both of them outlined their two main directions, which are providing opportunities for the younger generation of Georgia, and implementing technological progress to their business practice.

"We have two main goals, which we always follow in this order," Amar said. "First is working with youth and providing them with job opportunities and the second is something we are already actively working on by having an agreement with a big IT company on the creation of an app that will provide the Arabic community with a full tourist

experience in Georgia as well as all the information they need in terms of medical and eco-tourism."

Mustafa talked about working with youth in more detail. "We are very focused on working with youth because in Georgia, people in general are active, smart and looking for the opportunities to succeed, so we create an environment that gives them chance to flourish in this field and achieve a lot. Helping Georgian youth in this development, to gain more knowledge and experience in the long run, will help us as well. Youth is constantly generating new ideas. To lead the market, the new generation's involve-



ment is a must, especially when we focus on technological innovations so much."

In regards to what attracted them to Georgia, they shared their opinions, experiences. Amar explained: "Georgia's interesting diversity in climate and nature, as well as opportunities for eco and medical tourism, drew us in immediately. Plus, it's only a 4 hour flight from Arab countries and they get an opportunity to enjoy different seasonal activities in one country."

Mustafa also shared his experience. "First of all, the location of Georgia is incredible, it's near Arab, GULF countries but it's also part of Europe. Second

of all, Georgia has truly magnificent nature. Whoever comes, always enjoys their stay. We've had cases of people visiting Georgia 2-3 times a year. Georgia itself works on indirect marketing, people that go back can't stop praising their stay here, and word of mouth keeps growing."

They summed up their existing success. Amar said: "We are one of the companies that brought the most tourists from the Middle East, and we are truly proud of it. Our teamwork, existing experience as well as all the cooperation we have in Georgia, helped us immensely. We are grateful for local hospitality, that's why we want to do more for the country. We plan to make Georgia a center for business tourism and an accessible hub for conferences, forums, etc. We are also constantly thinking about ways to make the people of the Middle East countries more interested in Georgia in order to contribute to the development of the country."

Mustafa also shared his opinion: "Cooperation truly helped us out a lot, they created more opportunities, which is very important. We are always working on extending our network, and currently, we are working with the Georgian Tourism Association, business associations, medical associations as well as hotels and resorts. Our main market from which we bring tourists is Saudi Arabia, where we are working with very large tourism companies. We already have significant success and that's why we believe it will keep growing."



# CENN Contributing to Economic Empowerment of Rural Women for More Sustainable Economy



BY ANA DUMBADZE

**W**omen's economic empowerment, including for those women living in rural communities, is crucial for Georgia's sustainable development. Access to education, employment, and entrepreneurship opportunities allows women to earn better livelihoods for themselves and their families.

Economically empowered women are more likely to participate in civic activities and democratic processes.

By helping Georgia's women in rural areas reach their professional potential, CENN is helping Georgia reach its potential as a resilient, democratic, and prosperous country.

Over the years, through various projects, the organization has provided grants for many locals, thus helping them to implement their business ideas and letting their dreams come true, while socioeconomic integration of vulnerable households is improved by empowering women and youth.

## MEANING OF ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN LIVING IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

Empowerment is the process by which people expand their capacity to make strategic life decisions, especially in contexts where this capacity was previously denied to them.

The combination of family responsibilities and insufficient access to critical services, information and technologies, affects women's work burden and their potential for income generation. For example, fewer rights over land make it more difficult for women to access subsidies, finance or mechanization.

Globally, and with only a few exceptions, rural and indigenous women fare worse than rural men and urban women and men on every indicator for which data are available. Although they share challenges in the form of rural location and gender-based discrimination, rural women and girls are not a homogeneous

group. The opportunities and constraints they face differ across their lifetimes, contexts and circumstances: They are influenced by location and socio-economic status and social identities associated with other forms of marginalization, such as indigenous origin and ethnicity, age, disability and migrant or refugee status.

There is evidence that when rural women have equal access to education, skills development, services, productive inputs and employment opportunities, they are more protected from discrimination and gender-based violence (GBV) and the yields on their farms increase, contributing significantly to economic growth, food security and nutrition. In an enabling environment, they are leaders in their communities and businesses, providing sustainable and innovative solutions to local as well as global challenges.

Rural women continue to have less access to and control over productive resources, technologies, services and opportunities than men. They also tend to lack self-esteem, confidence, negotiation and leadership skills and often have lower education levels than their male counterparts. Many rural and indigenous girls and young women face massive barriers in agricultural labor markets and are restricted to low-status, poorly paid jobs, without legal or social protection or access to essential services and adequate health care. Many continue to face GBV in their homes, communities and workplaces. Gender-discriminatory behaviors and practices are commonly shaped by sociocultural norms regarding the roles played by women and girls, men and boys.

## IMPORTANCE OF ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT OF RURAL WOMEN

As farmers and farm workers, horticulturists and market sellers, businesswomen, entrepreneurs and community leaders, they fulfil important roles throughout agrifood value chains, as well as in the management of natural resources such as land and water.

When rural women have access to

resources, services and opportunities, they become a driving force against hunger, malnutrition and rural poverty.

Studies show the link between women's education and the increase in their social status and the reduction of poverty and hunger.

With the right support of rural women, they can be agents of change that can help improve the lives of their families and their communities.

Women are major contributors to agriculture and rural economies, but they face numerous challenges that men do not. They have less access to resources and services, including land, finances, training, and equipment. In addition to their agricultural work, they are overburdened with domestic chores and care tasks.

Despite being productive members of their families, organizations, and communities, rural women are not always able to raise their voices and contribute to the decisions about their household and community issues, money or business, including how their own incomes are spent.

When women are empowered, families, communities and countries benefit.

## LINKS BETWEEN POVERTY & GENDER INEQUALITY IN HOUSEHOLDS

Research shows that there is a link between poverty and gender inequality in the family. Improving the status of women contributes to increasing agricultural productivity and fair division of labor, improving child nutrition, since women are more inclined than men to spend their income on food and education.

Improving the status of women has led to greater agricultural productivity and the fairer distribution of labor. There have been other game-changing development outcomes, such as improved child nutrition, since women are more likely than men to spend their income on food and education.

Empowered women are able to participate more fully in their communities and encourage inclusive local policies that further drive rural development.

Women are actively involved in food systems in a range of roles, from production and processing to retailing and consumption. Women grow and manage crops, tend livestock, work in agribusinesses and food retail, prepare food for their families, and much more. But women's contributions to food systems are often not formally recognized, and women often face constraints that prevent them from engaging on terms that are equitable and fair. In many countries, women have less schooling than men, control fewer resources, have less decision-making power over household incomes, and face time constraints because of their triple burden of productive, domestic and community responsibilities.

## CENN'S CONTRIBUTION TO EMPOWER RURAL WOMEN

Empowering rural women is one of the

fundamental elements of CENN's work to reduce rural poverty and improve food security.

CENN, with the financial support of HEKS-EPER, has been implementing the project "Climate Resilient Agriculture - PRAISE Marneuli" since 2021. The overall objective of the project is to support income generation opportunities of vulnerable populations in Marneuli Municipality through the development and promotion of environmentally friendly and climate-resilient agricultural (CRA) practices.

One of the main target groups of the project is women living in rural areas (more than 60% of the direct beneficiaries of the project are women).

By sharing knowledge, technology and experience on climate-resilient agriculture, CENN's intervention helps rural women produce high-quality food, connect to markets, increase their incomes, become more informed and acquire the necessary skills.

In particular, within the framework of the project, capacity building activities are carried out, such as thematic trainings, field days and study visits. In addition, with the help of the project, a women's agricultural cooperative "Green Maradisi" was established in Maradisi village of Marneuli municipality, uniting 10 farmers living there, on the basis of which a demonstration greenhouse was



organized according to modern standards.

In the greenhouse, cooperative members produce high-quality vegetable crop seedlings using climate-resilient agricultural practices. CENN provides cooperative capacity building: sharing knowledge and technologies on greenhouse management and maintenance, seedling production, facilitating the introduction of profitable services, facilitating linkages with market actors.

To get acquainted with real examples and success stories of the project participants, GEORGIA TODAY spoke to one of its beneficiaries, Naira Bolkvadze, a member of the women's agricultural cooperative created within the framework of the CENN project. Naira, along with up to 10 more locals, the majority of whom are women, runs a greenhouse in Marneuli municipality, which was equipped with the latest technology irrigation system thanks to CENN.

"Climate Resilient Agriculture - PRAISE Marneuli' significantly helped us to expand production and increase our incomes," she tells us. "As part of the project, we established a women's cooperative, the only one in Marneuli. The project helped us to create greenhouse with automatic irrigation systems using modern technologies, and this itself significantly saves resources and the energy of employees. Before that, we had to do everything with our bare hands, which required hard work and time. Now we irrigate greenhouses automatically and are able to grow tens of thousands of seedlings, and our incomes increased almost ten times. Where, before we could grow up to 10,000 seedlings as a result of our physical work, now we grow over 100,000 thanks to the modern irrigation system and well-equipped greenhouse, for which we're very thankful to CENN. Previously, we could only dream about all this."

The number of project beneficiaries is expected to increase in the near future, as CENN has recently announced a grant competition for small-scale farmers.

"We're so satisfied and happy with our

cooperation with CENN that we've disseminated information about the new grants program to the whole village, to let others also enjoy its benefits and help local women obtain the skills they need for their economic empowerment and social and career advancement," Naira says.

Sopiko Babalashvili, CENN project representative, notes that the reason why Marneuli was chosen as a target location for the implementation of the project was that it is one of the leading municipalities in terms of production of agricultural products, especially vegetable crops.

"Therefore, we decided to develop an intervention plan that would help farmers living in Marneuli to adapt to the changed climatic conditions and production systems (increased droughts, reduced annual water resources, soil degradation, spread of pests and diseases, reduced rainfall). In addition, Marneuli is a multi-ethnic municipality and through the project we wanted to deepen the cooperation between the Georgian, Azerbaijani and Armenian communities living there.

"Regarding women's economic empowerment, CENN's activities are based on the theory that economically strong women contribute not only to strengthening their families and increasing their incomes, but also to improving the socio-

economic status of the entire community and, in general, to overcoming poverty in rural areas. That is why CENN ensures women's involvement in all project activities to facilitate women's access to information, technology and finance, ultimately helping women increase their agricultural productivity and incomes," she explains.

Sopiko notes that at this stage, the project has more than 120 direct beneficiaries. The project does not only involve the empowerment of farmers, but also the joint work and cooperation of local stakeholders in the implementation of climate-resilient agriculture. Accordingly, the group of beneficiaries includes both farmers and representatives of community institutions (local authorities, community centers, activists), young people, and media representatives.

As a result of the project, she adds, first of all, the beneficiaries have improved access to information on what climate-resilient agriculture means, what practices and technologies climate-resilient agriculture includes, and what steps need to be taken to adapt to climate change. In addition, beneficiaries have access to knowledge that helps improve their agricultural productivity. Also, the project includes a grant component, through which the beneficiaries will have the opportunity to receive a clear financial support for the adaptation of their farming to climate change.

The project will last until 2024. In 2023, one of the main directions will be the financing of such initiatives and projects within the grant component, which will contribute to the introduction of climate resilient agriculture in the Marneuli municipality and thereby improve the quality of life of the local population. In addition, CENN will continue capacity building activities for farmers and local stakeholders (thematic trainings, field days, study visits).

"We have high hopes that the project will create many success stories, which will give us the opportunity to continue our work in other municipalities," CENN project representative explains.





# Becoming Parents with Clinic BIRTH

**W**hen it comes to infertility, there are diverse means of treatment, however, accurate diagnosis and quality medical services are extremely important, and the clinic BIRTH is exceptional in this direction.

Located in Batumi, Israeli in-vitro fertilization center BIRTH makes parenthood real for childless couples. This is the first clinic in Georgia to have official accreditation from the Israeli Ministry of Health and the Georgian Ministry of Healthcare. The clinic is prominent in the international medical community and has helped both Georgian and Israeli citizens to become parents.

To learn more about the subject, GEORGIA TODAY spoke with the founder of the clinic, Lev Adirovich, who is also a Doctor of Medical Cybernetics and a holder of international medical patents.

"Our team celebrates each and every pregnancy received with the professionalism of our doctors. We provide consultation and treatment all through the process until healthy babies are born. We consistently measure the quality of our work, and grow it on a daily basis," Adirovich tells us.

BIRTH has been operating in Georgia for three years, and during this time was able to establish a good reputation among reproductive clinics, being named the Number One Golden Brand in-vitro clinic in Georgia. BIRTH is a partner with medical companies from Israel and other countries. The clinic provides medication infertility treatment, in vitro fertilization, donation and surrogacy programs, accurate diagnostic lab tests, and ultrasound examinations. Introducing a high-quality genetic lab, which is in high demand, is among the clinic's future plans.

"We practice innovative approaches customized to individual patients. We

come up with various algorithms on how to make parenthood possible in different cases, so that patients save both time and expenses," Adirovich explains.

The results of the clinic's work are impressive, seeing 90% success in the

case of surrogacy, 65% with donor eggs, and 45% with the patients' own eggs. The age of patients is wide and varies, and the BIRTH the team has made it possible to help ladies at the ages of 52 and 54 become mothers.

"I am proud of the competence and professionalism of our Georgian and Israeli doctors and embryologists. They are trustworthy and outcome-focused. I am sure that they can make any couple a parent," says the founder of the BIRTH.

The clinic BIRTH is distinguished by high social responsibility and provides co-financing to Georgian couples who are in financial need. The team of professionals plans to expand so as to be able to make more people happy with the birth of a child.



# "Georgian Brand Day" Turns 20!



**O**ne of the outstanding events of the year "Georgian Brand Day 2022" was, as per tradition, a brilliant success. The event was held on December 28 and some 30 individuals and companies were awarded

in various nominations according to their merits. The award ceremony was held in Pullman Tbilisi Axis Towers and was attended by 200 invited guests. As a number of representatives of the companies mentioned, they wait for this event with great enthusiasm every

year. According to them, "Georgian Brand Day" has a special value in the field of business development, because it encourages them to be more active and present themselves in the best way. In addition to companies and individuals, the brand-personality title, which

this time was awarded to Zura Kipshidze, is especially noteworthy.

In the event held on December 28, the winning companies were named in five nominations - "Leader", "Reputation and Trust", "Successful New Brand", and "Successful TV Project," among the win-

ners of which were PSP Group, Telavi Wine Cellar, and Media Holding "Fortuna."

The Natalia Kvantalian Blood Bank, insurance company "Ardi", travel company "SilkWay Group", furniture manufacturing company "Grandi", brand "K GROUP", chain of dental clinics "Dance", clinic "Total Charm", Shavit jewelry salon, and "Zuzumbo Resort and Spa" and many others also won awards.

Four programs were awarded in the "Successful TV Project" nomination - TV show "Autograph", music project "Ranina", program "Women's Narrative" and talk show "Night Prime Time".

In the nomination "Reputation and Trust," Manana Mania was named Fashion Designer of the Year, whose collection was presented at the event by the most fashionable ladies Ani Amilakhvari, Tako Chanukvadze, Eka Chkheidze, Anka Vasadze, Cisana Sefiashvili, Lelo Tchkeruli, Nino Tarkhan-Mouravi and Marina Kakhiani.

In the same nomination, the "Reputation and Trust" award was given to the direction of Zviad Bolkvadze of the Guram Kurashvili State Choir Capella, who enticed the audience with a performance of "Lale". Author-performer Nato Gelashvili, who also won in the same nomination, together with his children, entertained the audience with his hit "December".

2022 was special for the Georgian Brand Day project as it now counts 20 years of existence and celebrates its anniversary date.

Last year, the Georgian chess legend Nona Gaprindashvili was awarded with the Brand-Person title. This year, she was also present, and her appearance led the hall to great applause.

The event lasted two hours and with it, another successful chapter was written in the history of "Georgian Brand Day."



# Festival of Lights

BLOG BY TONY HANMER

That, as I have discovered in some cursory research, is another modern name for the 8-day Hebrew commemoration of Hannukah. I wanted to brush up a bit because some new friends in Tbilisi had just invited me to their home for one of the evenings of this event, a few days before Christmas, as it falls this year as one of the events the date of which can swing around a bit. Hannukah commemorates occurrences from about the 2nd century BC: The recovery of the city of Jerusalem and the rededication of the 2nd Jewish

Temple during the Maccabean Revolt against the occupying Seleucid (Greek) empire of the day.

Abshalom, meaning “father of peace” (“Shalva” to his Georgian friends), Georgian born, and his wife, Israeli born, have lived in Georgia for some years, and used to own and run the vegetarian Hummus Bar Tbilisi. It overlooked the courtyard at 3 Merab Kostava St., between Rustaveli metro station and the former Andropov’s Ears.

Covid-19 put an end to such worthwhile endeavors, however, the café closed, and now the couple are hoping to find new staff in order to reopen.

We arrived gradually over an hour or so, friends from the UK, Georgia, Central Asia, Israel and more, about 15 or 20 of

us in all. I knew hardly anyone there, so it was a good time to meet new people. My wife was away in Kakheti at the time visiting her widowed mother, who now lives alone, so a follow-up visit to Shalva and his family is required, I am told.

The home cooking which emerged from the well-equipped kitchen is an indication that this establishment should be sorely missed. Hummus on toast; two delicious soups, mulled wine; a beetroot salad; little fried potato and cabbage cakes (oil being an important Hanukah ingredient); muffins with rose-water syrup poured on and a dollop of sweet whipped cream added; wonderful herbal teas and fresh coffee; and a final, multi-layer frozen dessert. All delectable. More, please!



Our hosts have preserved the brick interior walls and wood floors of their home and restaurant to lovely rustic effect, and art and furniture from all over decorates it splendidly and eclectically. They were required, however, to get 100% approval, i.e. from every one of their neighbors in the courtyard buildings, before doing any renovation affecting outside structures. This was definitely not easy to obtain.

The candle for the 5th day of Hanukah was lit (by a Muslim guest, which according to Shalva would have sent God rolling in His grave... if He were dead), and a Hebrew song a cappella. Then two sons pulled out guitars and roused us with some most excellent impromptu singing and strumming in several languages.

We continued to mingle, introduce ourselves, get to know one another, determine which languages people spoke. (No-one was restricted to one tongue,

but I think there was also no-one there who spoke all the languages of all present. It was one of those gatherings, never dull).

I came away with a new appreciation of what Hannukah means and how it is celebrated, another moment like Christmas of candles being lit at the darkest time of the year, of friends old and new, and family coming together. Now, as the days get very slowly longer once again, light begins to return, and with it symbolic hope.

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## The Holiday Upsides and Downsides

OP-ED BY NUGZAR B. RUHADZE

Living in downtown Tbilisi might be a privilege, in general, but it is a sheer catastrophe in the days when the city is full of celebratory events like Christmas and the New Year, or at times of political manifestations, when the radical change wannabes take to the streets in crowds who would recognize no other place in town for a demonstration except the famous Rustaveli Avenue.

Metropolitan Tbilisi counts a little under one and a half million people. The conurbation is growing fast, having lately acquired a couple of multi-lane, new, wide and comfy thoroughfares, but its old and romantic downtown remains, with hundreds of small and narrow sinuous streets and quaint little spots, the crowding of which is immediately reflected on the rest of the place: the entire town becomes congested and absolutely impossible either to park or proceed in. This is exactly where the happy holiday mood turns into thousands of angry platitudes and frustrated expressions on a multitude of faces. When the holiday times arrive, and this happens more than once a year, saying nothing about the recurrent pickets and blockades, the city management always tries to find ways out that both delight the citizens’ hearts and minds and keep the traffic within its operational limits. In a happy and peaceful capital like



ours, the holiday mood has to be kept up, and the people should be steered away from gloomy, oppositional comments and somber looks. The kids and youth and grownups want to celebrate in the same hearty and healthy way. The children are especially eager to come downtown and have a look at the lavishly illuminated streets, trees and buildings, decorated with enumerable electri-

fied meaningful configurations in a way that creates the blissful impression that life is really good and worth living. We all need to be fed some sense of pleasure and ecstasy once in an occasional while, and here we go, we have it in ample numbers and forms: Hundreds of colorful small towers with various entertainments, attractive playgrounds and cute little makeshift eateries scattered all over

the place. The penchant for taking part in all those happy episodes is growing fast, with the Merry Christmas already here and the Happy New Year still on its way.

Special is the eventide in Tbilisi when those millions of lights in thousands of colors and shades are flickering and impressively winking at you, as if to say that all is fine and any human worry is

surmountable. That’s why there is bumper-to-bumper traffic on Rustaveli after the twilight: Almost every car in Tbilisi seems to be there to participate in a spontaneous folk parade of vehicles belonging to our finally relaxed citizens and their progeny, the kids flashing their curious smiles on the lights around and on each other.

Surely there couldn’t be anybody in this country against such happy instances of life? Well, it’s not excluded! The permanently raging political opposition, usually operating in convulsive fits of fury, would presumably not allow their family members to glimpse the radiant downtown because, God forbid they are seen sincerely delighted at the eye-catching sight and expressing their glee: They might clash with their political dads and moms for the simple reason that nothing is good that the current government is doing. Good is only what they will do when in power again!

This is one of the absurdities of our social life which seems to be diminuend and defeated at the moment of the celebrations we see in the capital city of Georgia these lovely and enjoyable days and nights. Isn’t it one of our most elevated human rights to pursue the happiness that life offers; to grab and enjoy it when the chance comes by? Nobody wants to lose that occasional God-given physical feeling of festivity, which is as fleeting as anything else in life. So, let this one be one of the Happiest New Years for a nation that has relaxed a little after the many hardships and turbulences it has endured in the last thirty something years!



# Winter Holidays in Proper Georgian Fashion



Christmas lights in downtown Tbilisi. Photo by Katie Ruth Davies

BY MICHAEL GODWIN

Georgia's frigid winter comes alive during the holiday season with the arrival of Christmas. While much of the country observes the religious holiday in January, there are still festivities in December and into New Year's Day. In spite of the cold weather and snow, people celebrate in an almost nonstop parade of holiday cheer.

The Georgian Orthodox Church notes that the Christmas day is on January 7th, according to the Julian calendar. However, due to the immense influence from Western rite practitioners and the presence of an increasing number of tourists, December 25th is still seen as a day of celebration, feasting, and merriment. To the outsider, it can seem as if the Christmas season is extended from early December to mid January.

While this Western influence is highly visible, Georgians still celebrate the holidays in their own traditional way as well. This includes the unique Georgian tree, small parades, and the arrival of their own Father Christmas figure. For locals, these mainstays of the season often bring back childhood memories.

The Georgian Christmas tree is, unlike its Western counterpart, not an actual tree. Walking through almost any part of the country, particularly near the markets, one will find a merchant selling small wooden creations that resemble a tree, albeit with shaved wood. These 'Chichilaki' (ჩიჩილაკი) are made by

shaving hazelnut or walnut branches into a tree shape. The long shavings of wood twilled around a main stick invites the common reference to the beard of Saint Basil.

While these are usually small in size, they can be much larger in some instances. Most often sold bare, they are adorned in a similar fashion as their Western versions, as well as with dried fruit and berries, candy, and homemade ornaments deposited in a small basket at the top. Interestingly, this tree is not packaged away at the end of the season, but rather burned as a way of leaving the past behind on January 19th, the day of the Georgian Orthodox Epiphany.

In small towns and communities, groups of people led by children can be seen parading around in unique costumes and eating sweets. These parades, known as 'Alilo', often involve children dressed in white and being treated to sweets and candies. Additionally, they sing songs, chant, and hand out candles while waving Georgian and Orthodox Church flags. Western visitors may see them vaguely similar to Christmas Carolers, though the Georgians bring more to the equation once again.

Georgia also has its own hefty patriarch to usher in the season of giving and merrymaking. Tovlis Papa (or Tovlis Babua in western Georgia) is a white-bearded counterpart to Santa Claus, with his name literally translating to "Grandfather snow." Like any proper Santa version, he delivers presents to Georgian children on New Year's Eve, clad in sheep's wool that is reportedly as white as the freshly fallen snow. His cape,

known locally as a "nabadi," is notoriously white, while other nabadis worn in traditional Georgian attire are brown, black, or other dark colors.

Along with presents, Tovlis Papa hands out churchkhela. The hearty treat, known for its long shelf life, is a creation of wine juice, flour, and nuts in the shape similar to a sausage. After delivering his presents and sweets, he returns to the mountains he calls home and waits for the next Christmas season.

With so many delicious dishes, the center-piece for the Christmas and New Year's holiday is often a large turkey. The bird is often seen on the dinner tables of Westerners in more autumnal settings, particularly with the American and Canadian Thanksgiving celebrations. However, for Georgians, this makes its appearance in the end-of-year feast, usually in pieces in a walnut sauce, surrounded by other seasonal dishes such as the honey-nut "kozinaki," and the

ubiquitous homemade wine.

For outsiders, Georgia offers a new holiday experience with connections to familiarity. With a mixture of Western and traditional Georgian motifs, the country still has a warm and inviting feeling in spite of the cold Caucasian winter. This holiday season, decorate your own chichilaki tree, enjoy churchkhela from Tovlis Papa, and settle in with the soft tones sung by children on their Alilo procession.



Children dressed in traditional clothing taking part in an Alilo procession in Tbilisi. Photo by Tbilisi City Hall



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