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GEORGIA TODAY

ISSN 1512-4304



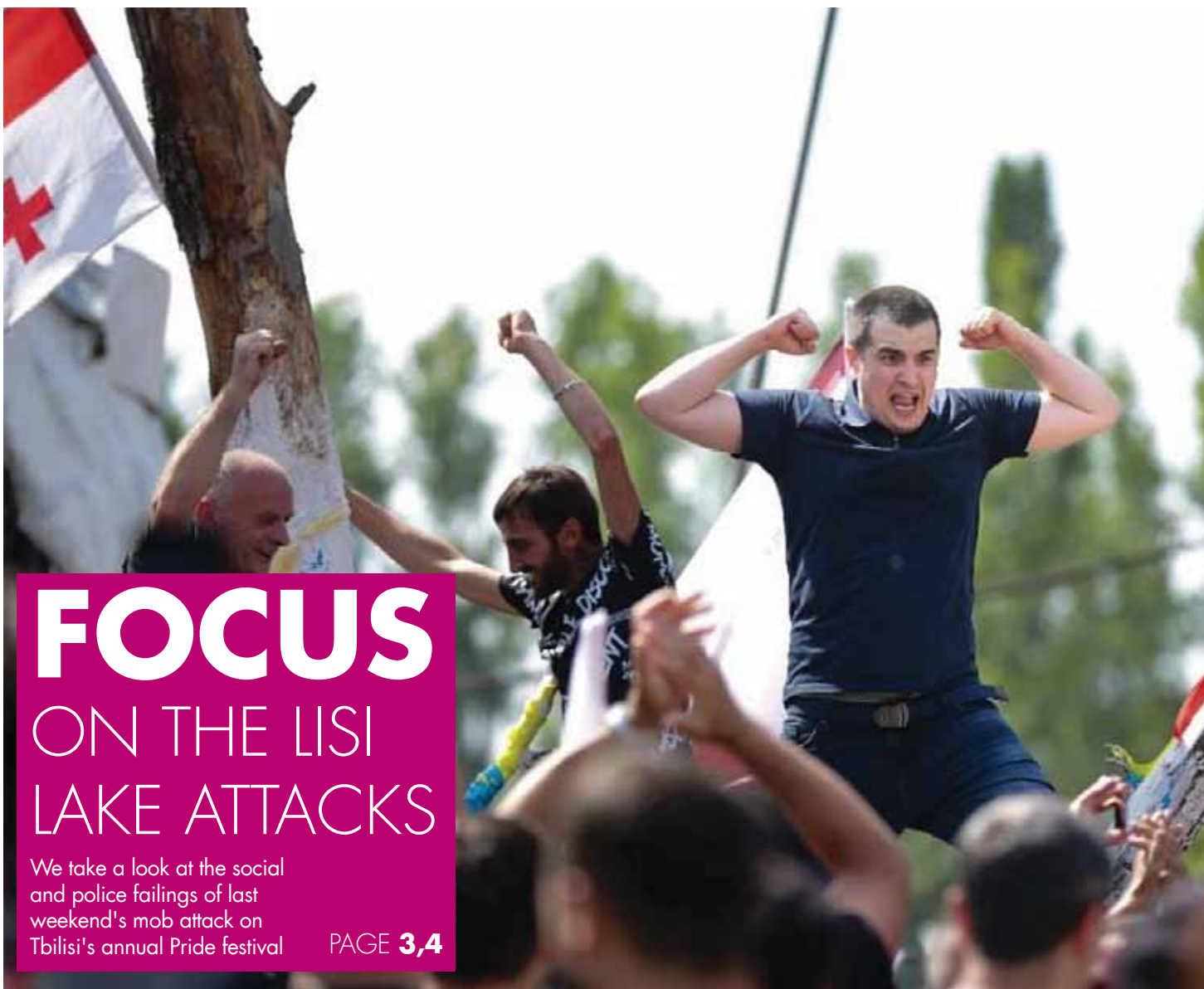
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Issue no: 1407

JULY 14 - 20 , 2023 PUBLISHED WEEKLY

PRICE: GEL 2.50



FOCUS

ON THE LISI LAKE ATTACKS

We take a look at the social and police failings of last weekend's mob attack on Tbilisi's annual Pride festival **PAGE 3,4**

Photo Credit: AP Photo/Zurab Tsertsvadze

NATO Door Remains Open for Ukraine and Georgia, Reform Requirements Need to Be Met

BY TEAM GT

NATO Heads of State and Governments participating in the NATO Summit in Vilnius issued a Communiqué, focusing on the main issues and challenges facing the Alliance.

Concerning Georgia, the Communiqué reiterated the Allies' commitment to the 2008 Bucharest Summit Decision that Georgia will become a member of the Alliance with the Membership Action Plan as an integral part of the process; the Allies reaffirm all elements of that decision.

The Alliance reiterated its support to the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Georgia within its internationally recognized borders and "stands firm" in its support for "Georgia's right to decide its own future and foreign policy course free from outside interference."

They also once again called on Russia to "reverse its recognition of the Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions of Georgia, to end the militarization of these regions and continued attempts to forcibly separate them from the rest of Georgia through



Participants of the NATO Summit in Vilnius, Lithuania. Photo by Andrew Caballero-Reynolds/Pool via REUTERS/File Photo

the construction of border-like obstacles."

NATO also demanded that Russia "cease the human rights violations and abuses, including arbitrary detentions, and harassments of Georgian citizens."

The Allies stated: "We highly appreciate Georgia's substantial contributions to NATO operations, which demonstrate its commitment and capability to contribute to Euro-Atlantic security."

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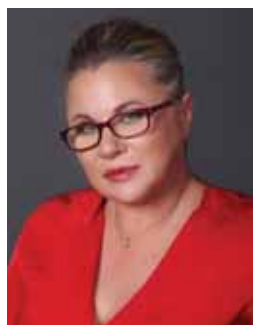
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Georgian Wings Launches Daily Flights from Tbilisi to Batumi

BY MARIAM GORKHELASHVILI

Georgian Wings, the passenger route operated by Geosky Airlines, is set to launch its inaugural passenger flight from Tbilisi International Airport to Batumi on July 28. The airline has designed an aircraft capable of accommodating 70 passengers and plans to offer flights 12 times a week. Commencing today, passengers can purchase air tickets from ticket offices and travel companies. From July 15, tickets

will also be available for purchase through the official website, Georgianwings.com. In response to the strong demand in the tourist market, the airline has decided to prioritize domestic flights as its initial offering, providing daily flights from Tbilisi International Airport to Batumi with a remarkably short flight duration of just 55 minutes. Notably, Georgian Wings is the sole provider of direct regular flights connecting Tbilisi International Airport and Batumi. This new service aims to cater to the needs of travelers seeking a convenient and efficient means of transportation between these two Georgian cities.



Photo source: Sputnik / Stringer

MFA on NATO Summit: Readiness Confirmed by Members is Extremely Important for Georgia

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia issued a statement regarding the NATO Summit in Vilnius.

In the statement, the Foreign Ministry notes that it is extremely important for the Georgian side to participate in the NATO Vilnius Summit.

At the same time, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs believes that the participation of the Georgian delegation in the Vilnius summit under the leadership of the Minister of Foreign Affairs once again indicates the strategic importance of NATO-Georgia cooperation and the irreversibility of Georgia's integration process.

In the statement, the Georgian side welcomes the support expressed in the final document of the summit, both in political and practical dimensions.

"The readiness confirmed by the member states at the summit is extremely important for Georgia in order to continue working towards the implementation of the decision made at the Bucharest summit that Georgia will become a member of NATO.

The Georgian side welcomes NATO's firm and unequivocal position that attempts to limit the foreign and security



policy choices of sovereign countries are not allowed.

Taking into account the created complex and difficult security environment, the unwavering support of the Alliance

for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia, as well as the call for the Russian Federation to withdraw its occupation forces illegally stationed on the territory of Georgia and to take back the

recognition of the so-called independence of Georgian regions, is especially valuable for the Georgian side.

Georgia welcomes NATO's recognition of Georgia's significant contribution to

global security and confirms its readiness to continue its active involvement in NATO missions and operations.

The Georgian side highly appreciates the decisions made by the summit, in terms of strengthening Georgia's defense capabilities and interoperability, and expresses its gratitude for the important assistance provided by the member states within the Substantial NATO-Georgia Package and support measures tailored to Georgia.

Georgia expresses its support for the decisions taken at the summit in terms of strengthening the security of NATO's eastern flank and the Black Sea region, and confirms its readiness to continue its involvement in the strategic dialogue regarding the Black Sea region.

Georgia welcomes the agreement reached within the framework of the summit regarding the completion of Sweden's accession process, as well as other decisions regarding Ukraine, and as an aspirant country highly appreciates all the steps taken towards the implementation of the open door policy.

Georgia, in accordance with its constitutional norm, will continue to use the existing integration tools effectively," the statement reads.

Another Teen Electrocuted in Park Renovation Incident



BY TEAM GT

A 16-year-old boy died in Tskneti on Tuesday. Locals told journalists that he was killed when he came into contact with exposed electric wiring in the village square, a place where children commonly play, but where repair works are ongoing.

Tbilisi City Hall says that landscaping works are in progress at the site, yet the works did not involve electrics.

An investigation is being conducted under Article 240 of the Criminal Code, which involves a "violation of safety rules during mining, construction, or other work."

On hearing of the boy's death, the administration of Vake district published a statement which claimed that in the square where the incident happened, electrical equipment was installed illegally, in violation of safety norms.

The incident rocks society particularly hard as, in October 2022, three teens were hit by an electric

shock when they were trying to retrieve a ball that fell into the water in the newly renovated Vake Park fountain. The children were taken to hospital by ambulance. One of them, 13-year-old Marita Meparashvili, died. The other two teenagers were discharged. The 9 people arrested were sentenced to prison as a measure of restraint by Tbilisi City Court, among them Lasha Purtsvanidze, the head of Green-service+, and Giorgi Vakhtangashvili, the deputy head of the Environmental Protection Service of Tbilisi City Hall.

"The investigative agency will do everything to establish the objective truth in this case, and where carelessness, indifference or deliberate action on the part of specific persons is revealed, of course, we will react accordingly," Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs, Aleksandre Darakhvelidze, noted Wednesday.

"I share the family's grief. Each of our units is actively working to investigate the responsibility of those involved, to find out whether someone's fault or negligence caused this accident," he added.

That Side of Georgia

OP-ED BY HELENA BEDWELL

I am Georgian, but I cannot recall during my Soviet or post-soviet childhood such a homophobic environment as there is today. I remember how private this subject was and how it was never mentioned openly. I never saw any violence or stoning of gays around me, and I can openly say that the country's secular system was the reason for it.

When the Soviet Union was no more, and Georgia entered the ugly years of the 90s, the Church was quite astute and quick to make use of the situation. They made sure the women who had become too liberal and powerful returned to where they belonged (at home), and that any liberal and multicultural views were demonized. This was not an issue for me, because I left Georgia in the 90s and returned post-Rose Revolution. Nothing prepared me for what I then saw done to the minorities in the beautiful, multicultural, multinational, multi-religious place I had grown up in and cherished.

The first serious shock and despair for me came on May 17, 2013, when an anti-homophobia rally dedicated to the International Day Against Homophobia was met by thousands of protestors who were allowed to break through a police cordon and chase the participants, beating and throwing stones at them. I was in Dubai on holiday when I saw it playing out on TV, and the first question I got from my Emirati friends was: "Hold on, Helena. We thought Georgia was the best place for freedom of sexuality?"

They were just as upset and shocked as I was, but I knew deep down it wouldn't end there. The Church, led by long-time leader Ilia II, declared that same day, May 17, as the day of 'Family Purity', thus deepening the hate and aggression



A dramatic moment during the July 8th clash. Photo by Zurab Tsertsvadze

towards the LGBTQ+ community, which is very small in Georgia and hidden for obvious reasons. My gay friends are married or live abroad, or are simply quiet about it. My lesbian friends are divorced and/or hiding their partnerships. Transsexuals are often beaten and killed. There is little hope for them.

This is happening in a country where the statistics speak for themselves regarding heterosexual marriages, crimes against children, women and youth; where rape, abandonment and forced marriages are common, regardless of the culture or ethnic minority. It's hard to go into the details, but the everyday criminal chronologies on TV show how

difficult it is here for women and children, let alone the homosexual minorities.

The death of cameraman Lekso lashakrava, who was violently attacked while covering the anti-LGBTQ protests in 2021 and died at home the following day was blamed on a drug overdose by the Interior Ministry, despite the beating he received during the protests. Police seized his corpse from his family to conduct an autopsy.

I was hoping that Georgia would learn its lesson on its way toward EU status and joining the North Atlantic Alliance, but on the sunny day of this past July 8th, thousands of anti-LGBTQ protests

broke up another Pride festival in the Georgian capital, Tbilisi, though this time thankfully ending without any casualties - "just" looting, breaking of property and men generally behaving in a manner usually expected of wild animals.

"Nobody was harmed during the incident, and police are now taking measures to stabilize the situation," Alexandre Darakhvelidze, the deputy interior minister was proud to announce later. I witnessed the shocking actions of the rent-a-mob with my own eyes, and there was no need to make this announcement, as the harm had already been done.

"Why are you here?" I asked a small

group of protesting ladies who were shielding themselves from the summer heat on Saturday. "It's against God," said one. "It's not natural to pervert our children's lives," said another.

Those who were very old and could not run were standing by and verbally encouraging the younger element to attack, and they were doing their job aggressively, at one point ripping and burning a rainbow flag.

Not all the aggressors were nasty. One lady gave me a bottle of water. But I felt sorry for them; even if they were branded as a rent-a-mob, they are still very dangerous and had gone too far in their phobias.

These are the people who hate anything foreign and unknown; they blame America for their misfortunes, while family members send them remittances from the US or EU; they hate non-Christians, while their capital is full of multicultural areas where people have coexisted for centuries. Their history is not compatible with their behavior, there is no excuse for their irrational thinking regarding homophobia, which only raised its ugly head recently.

Psychiatrist Natia Panjikidze noted that "Georgians often say that gays and lesbians 'can do whatever they please at home' [as long as they don't take it out in public], which is a clear indication that homes are also controlled by the system," hence, she says, it is nonsense to keep repeating this absurd comment as if it is acceptance.

Georgia aspires to join the EU. In March, our youth made the government drop the Russian-style bill on "Agents of Foreign Influence" and pass laws against discrimination and hate crimes, and yet homophobia and xenophobia still thrive. My good friend said a few days ago how much she hated that side of Georgia. I cannot disagree. I'm not too fond of that side of Georgia either!

Ukraine Latest: G7 Signs on Security Guarantees for Ukraine; Kremlin Warns West It Is Making a 'Dangerous Mistake'

COMPILED BY ANA DUMBADZE

NATO officials and leaders from its partner states continue their summit in Vilnius, Lithuania, focusing on Russia's war in Ukraine and the path forward for aspiring members.

The G7 states signed a declaration outlining long-term security guarantees for Ukraine aimed at deterring future Russian aggression, a day after Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky expressed frustration at NATO for its lack of a timeline giving specific details for his country's desired NATO membership.

The Kremlin warned in a statement that Western security assurances for Ukraine were a "dangerous mistake" that would threaten Russia's national security and make Europe less safe.

NATO leaders stated that Ukraine's future is inside the military alliance, but it failed to give a timetable and said conditions still need to be met, including an end to the war.

Meanwhile, Kyiv and other parts of Ukraine have come under repeated attack, with the capital as well as Odesa and Kherson enduring waves of drone strikes before and during the NATO summit. Ukraine's military says Russian forces have launched more than 350 strikes on the wider country in the last week.

KREMLIN SAYS IT WILL RESPOND 'USING ALL MEANS AND METHODS AT OUR DISPOSAL' TO DEVELOPMENTS AT NATO SUMMIT

The Kremlin slammed developments

from the NATO leader summit held in Lithuania's capital saying the alliance has returned to "Cold War schemes."

"Taking into account the identified challenges and threats to the security and interests of Russia, we will respond in a timely and appropriate manner using all means and methods at our disposal," Russia's Foreign Ministry wrote in a statement.

"In addition to the decisions already taken, we will continue to strengthen the military organization and the country's defense system," the statement added.

BIDEN REAFFIRMS COMMITMENT TO NATO AND UKRAINE

President Joe Biden reaffirmed US commitment to NATO and Ukraine following a two-day summit of the alliance's leaders in Lithuania's capital.

Biden described support for Kyiv's democracy as "the calling of our lifetime."

The US has secured a war chest worth more than \$41 billion for Kyiv since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion last year.

"We did what we always do. The United States stepped up, NATO stepped up, and our partners in the Indo-Pacific stepped up," Biden said in an address in Vilnius. "We will not waver," he said.

ZELENSKY THANKS BIDEN, CONTINUES PUSH TO JOIN NATO MILITARY ALLIANCE

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky signed off a tweet thanking US President Joe Biden with "UkraineNATO33," a reference to Kyiv's ambition to become the 33rd NATO member.

"I want to thank, too, all Americans who understand that it is more than \$43 billion for today, it's a big support. And I understand that this is your money, but they have to know that you spend this money not just on fighting, you spend this money for our lives," Zelensky said during the bilateral meeting in Vilnius.

"I think that we save lives for Europe, for all the world," Zelensky added.

Biden thanked Zelensky for acknowledging the commitment of the American people.

"It's about innocent people around the world and the absolute brutality with which [Russian President Vladimir] Putin is acting and the Russians are moving on," Biden said.

"Ukraine, the whole world has seen your courage," the US leader said.

NO SHIPS SAIL UNDER BLACK SEA GRAIN DEAL FOR A FOURTH DAY AS THE LANDMARK AGRICULTURAL DEAL FACES EXPIRY

No ships have left Ukrainian ports under the Black Sea Grain Initiative in the last four days, according to the UN-backed organization tracking export data.

The deal is set to expire in 5 days. The last ship to sail was over the weekend and carried 27,000 metric tons of corn to Tunisia.

The Black Sea Grain Initiative, which was brokered between Russia, Ukraine, Turkey and the United Nations, created a humanitarian sea corridor for agricultural goods. Since its inception last July, more than 32 million metric tons of foodstuffs and agricultural products have left three key Ukrainian ports.



Photo by Yves Herman | Reuters

ZELENSKY THANKS G7 LEADERS FOR SECURITY GUARANTEES, SAYS THEY WILL AID UKRAINE'S CHILDREN

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky expressed gratitude for the G7's declaration of security guarantees for his country, standing onstage alongside leaders of those countries and the EU at the NATO summit in Vilnius.

He thanked each leader by name, and said that the guarantees would create new opportunities for Ukraine and help provide more security to Ukraine's children, thousands of whom have been killed, injured, forcefully deported or made to become refugees since the start of Russia's invasion.

STOLTENBERG - THE BIGGEST RISK IS IF PUTIN WINS

The greatest risk of the war in Ukraine

is if Russian President Vladimir Putin wins, NATO's Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg told an audience at a summit of the alliance in Vilnius alongside Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.

Asked about the threat of potential Russian reprisal over NATO expansion, Stoltenberg replied: "There is war going on in Europe and there is no risk-free option. No risk-free option for NATO allies either."

"But the biggest risk is if president Putin wins," he said. "Because then the message is that when he uses military force, when he violates international law, when he invades a neighbor, then he gets what he wants. So that is exactly why it is important for NATO allies to support Ukraine. Because it will be a tragedy for Ukraine if President Putin wins, but it will be dangerous for us. It will make us more vulnerable."

Why Can't We Interact a Little Smarter?



Image source: yourstory

OP-ED BY NUGZAR B. RUHADZE

It wouldn't be an overstatement to say that Georgia's progress in the last thirty odd years has been hampered by the destructive interaction between the ruling political force and the opposition to it. This may well be a long-term incurable disease that the Georgian post-soviet political tissue is afflicted with. The question now is if this nation has enough political acu-

men and intellectual potential to find the cure. The current most descriptive term used, one that fairly well reflects the situation, is 'polarization,' but if we dig deeper, we will find the word is only a perfunctory attempt to define the true character of the long-standing vitriolic political interface in this society.

To productively elucidate on the phenomenon in question, one might need to do some profound ethnic, psychological, anthropological, epistemological and ethical research, which is practically impossible to do in a brief newspaper

article on an unassuming readable level. And still, one could make at least an amateurish go of the subject to express a couple of soothing and optimistic thoughts, which is a good thing to do because all of us here in this unending futile clash between the opposed political forces of Sakartvelo feel that something is really wrong with us: we have not learnt in the post-soviet decades how to be agreeably logical when we interact in an attempt to solve our social, political and economic problems.

The best clue I could provide towards

making a practicable conclusion is to have a close look at the way regular Georgians talk to each other on social media. It is utterly symptomatic. For instance, the indigenous Facebook population in Sakartvelo, consisting of males and females of various ages and natures, often talk to each other in a strained, venomous manner. There is an abundance of hearts and smileys too, but compared to the habitual spiteful interactions, the number of benevolent messages is negligible. It is in our character to be hurtful and vindictive if we don't like somebody else's opinion crossing our paths; we usually attack our virtual adversary vehemently, with bitter lexical weaponry, pleasurably anticipating the imaginable fatal termination of the opposite side. Cuttingly cruel and maliciously sharp vocabulary is in our blood. We enjoy being nasty and mean towards those who oppose us. And our national political arena is a carbon copy of what we look like on the internet. Our political behavior is a direct moral and behavioral reflection of our internet social life, within which we would rather be harsh than kind, acerbic than sweet, upsetting than soothing, cruel than compassionate.

Where does this viciousness and brutality come from? No clue! On the whole, we are kind and well-meaning people, but as soon as we find ourselves in the thickly mined field of political interaction, our tongues (not hearts!) momentarily turn into a lethally poisonous tool of discourse. Normally, we are considered to be pleasant, friendly and caring peo-

ple, and we typically go through a weird metamorphosis when we hit the political battleground, becoming noxious, unkind and rancorous human beings, poisonously contaminating the entire socio-political environment. Why? There must be some serious reason for this, and as I have suggested before, deep psychoanalytical research into the situation could help the complicated political process in Georgia, which has always been full of absolutely pointless and harmful acrimony and hostility.

What we don't need in this country is this much unbridled malevolence in the political arena, nor on social media. This type of disagreeable and ruthless interaction among those who do politics and thus determine this nation's future is not only disappointing to our educated electorate, but also distressing and upsetting, which reflects badly on our political morale and goodwill-toxic and corrosive effect which might be conducive to a deadly consequence.

Isn't it awfully regrettable that talented people like ours should be forced into interminably listening to these caustic, hateful and pitiless verbal escapades that the majority of our politicians and social media residents offer each other on an everyday basis? This is just painful, saying nothing about the horrible image we are creating in the eyes of our foreign partners and helpers. If I were our political folks, I would learn how to get rid of the foul language and learn how to win those political bouts without being verbally so horrid, piercing and so fiercely backbiting.

Tacit Support by Way of Inaction?

BY MICHAEL GODWIN

Predictably, Georgia's minority elements have again had to face the predations of violent anti-social groups in another high-profile incident. Mobs of people aligned with either anti-LGBT or pro-Russian, depending on who is asked, advanced on a festival that took place removed from the center of Tbilisi. Gathered at Lisi Lake and beset upon by these groups, organizers have not only lambasted them but also the authorities for their alleged support.

The LGBT community in Georgia has historically faced significant challenges. While progress has been made in legislative efforts for legal protection and recognition, practical application of protection by law enforcement and public safety elements remains a significant hurdle. Last weekend's violence near Lisi Lake highlights the community's ongoing struggle not simply for societal acceptance, but also for basic protection by security services.

While Georgia is largely a traditional country, with an overwhelming majority following the Georgian Orthodox Church, many of the younger generations have taken non-confrontational stances to the LGBT community. At best, they support their efforts, taking part in festivals and displaying solidarity with them. However, even at worst, they are indifferent and share no hostility with the community, leaving them to their activities and largely minding their own matters.

Despite this, there remain elements of resistance. While resistance to any ideology is expected and in many instances can spark healthy debate, the inclusion of violent radical groups poisons any potential for social development. Using any opportunity to engage physically with not only members of the LGBT community but anyone merely adjacent to them presents a serious threat to national stability, Western aspirations, and the rule of law in Georgia.

While not all of these violent groups can be confirmed to be associated with Russia or pro-Russian instigators, some



Photo Credit: AP Photo/Zurab Tsertsvadze

have. Many have been linked to the Russian-linked political party Alt-Info, a group that has received money and support from nefarious elements to the north of the country. The opportunity to sour Georgia's European progress is all too sweet of a prospect for these fringe groups.

Despite all this, the Lisi Lake attacks also show an interesting dichotomy in police and security forces response. According to the organizers of the Pride festival, "The police did not block the access road to the festival site in order to prevent the aggressive group [from approaching]. The police did not use

proportional force against the attackers." Law enforcement sources have said they were outnumbered and overwhelmed by the violent mobs, making it impossible to counter their raid.

Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs Aleksandre Darakhvelidze claimed that the mobs were able to outmaneuver police and find "ways to enter the area of the event, but we were able to evacuate the Pride participants and organizers." In video circulating on social media, violent groups can be seen scuffling with police before breaking through, clawing their way towards the Pride festival.

While it is likely true, based on photo

and video evidence, that the police efforts were in vain from an early point in the events leading up to the attack, questions as to why their response is so light linger. Georgian security forces have more recently not been shy in deploying significant resources to counter opposition. From armored vehicles, water cannons, and massed battalions of riot police, the nation has shown it has means of suppressing large groups of people.

Immediate examples only require one to go back to early March, when two nights of clashes between security forces and rioters shook the city center. Law enforcement deployed one of its most

significant responses in years to combat protestors and rioters who opposed the now defunct "foreign agents" law. After hours of water cannons, tear gas, and rubber bullets, both nights ended in a complete dispersal of the remaining violent elements. Law and order was eventually restored, despite everything.

However, with a known history of there being combative actions against LGBT, or any pro-European group for that matter, Tbilisi's law enforcement clearly displayed a weak response in Lisi Lake. Despite a storied history of groups using violence, deadly weapons, and boasting a willingness to do significant harm or even commit murder, the police failed to bring any of their aforementioned resources to bear. The threat was not only visible before the clash began, but the terrain offered police the ability to deploy their full defensive force across an area broader than the tight city streets around Parliament.

Thus, any commander in the security forces elements should have been able to calculate an appropriate response that would halt any possible violence. Indeed, had the decision been made early enough during the initial rallies of the violent groups, visually deterrent resources could have been brought up. Units such as armored cars and water cannon trucks may have been positioned so as to dissuade or if needed halt even the most fanatical of the group's members.

Not only would this have made the Ministry of Internal Affairs look like the nation's finest and a truly reliable element of peace and security, but the political implications abroad would have been beneficial. However, news outlets and official statements about the fragility of Georgia and its inability to conform to Western standards. Sadly, people were injured and property was damaged or destroyed as a result.

While another sad and regrettable chapter in Georgia's social development passes, hope springs eternal. It is unlikely the last we will see of these violent groups - because the nation's security elements have not shown that such aggression and violence will not be tolerated, the country will doubtless have another unfortunate opportunity to try again.



German Government Supports Georgian Municipalities to Improve Public Finance Management System

On July 11, the German Government funded project “Good Financial Governance in Georgia” implemented by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH, held its official launch meeting at Rooms Hotel Tbilisi. In a strategic partnership with the Ministry of Finance of Georgia (MoF) and eight Georgian municipalities (Akhaltikhe, Dusheti, Telavi, Ozurgeti, Rustavi, Keda, Khashuri, Kharagauli) the goal of the project is to support the public finance management system in Georgia, especially at the local level, while including local and national framework conditions. Repre-

sentatives of central and local governments, as well as various international donor organizations attended the meeting. “For many years, the German Government has ensured strategic support to Georgia in public finance management reform processes. Within the German-Georgian Development Cooperation through the Georgian Ministry of Finance, a number of important reforms have been implemented, including the introduction of a financial motivation system for municipalities and a VAT tax sharing formula between central and local budgets, that aims at handing over more financial resources to municipalities. In the framework of the Good Financial

Governance project it is planned to support the ongoing reforms, as well as to implement new initiatives. In the end this will contribute to more results-oriented, accountable and participatory spending of local finances in the country,” Giorgi Kakauridze, Deputy Minister of Finance of Georgia stated during the launch event. “Georgia has made significant progress in the field of public finance management. Especially noteworthy is the country’s achievement in the Open Budget Survey, where Georgia was ranked 1st among 120 countries in terms of budget transparency and oversight,” said Lidjia Christmann, Head of Development Cooperation at the

German Embassy to Georgia. “However, we all recognize that there remain challenges to be addressed, especially at the local level. I am strongly convinced that GIZ’s Good Financial Governance Project financed by the German Government will – in close cooperation with Georgia’s Ministry of Finance, Georgia’s Ministry of Regional Development and Infrastructure, municipalities and other development partners – significantly contribute to the reforming process towards a more results-oriented, gender-sensitive and participatory public financial management system in Georgia.” Since 1992, commissioned and funded by the German Federal Ministry for Eco-

nomical Cooperation and Development (BMZ), GIZ has been actively supporting Georgia in the areas of good governance and democracy, sustainable economic development as well as environment and climate change, among others. In line with this, GIZ started the above-mentioned new bilateral technical assistance project “Good Financial Governance in Georgia” on April 1, 2023. In cooperation with the Ministry of Finance of Georgia and the already named eight Georgian municipalities GIZ this way continues its assistance to foster results-oriented, gender-sensitive and participatory budgetary processes at the local level.

NATO Door Remains Open for Ukraine and Georgia, Reform Requirements Need to Be Met

Continued from page 1

They noted they also remain committed “to making full use of the NATO-Georgia Commission and the Annual National Program (ANP) in deepening political dialogue and practical cooperation with Georgia.” The Communiqué welcomed the progress made in implementing the enhanced Substantial NATO-Georgia Package and noted that to advance its Euro-Atlantic aspirations, Georgia must progress on reforms, including key democratic reforms, and make the best use of the ANP. “Georgia is a steadfast NATO Enhanced Opportunities partner. It’s a category reserved for NATO’s closest partners,” said Matthew Miller, Spokesperson for the US Department of State.

“On the United States’ behalf, we continue to support Georgia’s NATO aspirations,” he added. Miller was asked about the reason for the absence of Prime Minister of Georgia, Irakli Gharibashvili, at the Vilnius Summit. In particular, he was asked: “There are reports that the Georgian prime minister was told not to show up in Vilnius due to his criticism of NATO over Ukrainian war. Is that true?” “I’m just not aware of that,” Miller replied. On Thursday, US Ambassador to Georgia Kelly Degnan noted: “The message of the Vilnius summit was clear. The door of NATO is open for Georgia and Ukraine. It is up to Georgia to fulfill the recommendations and implement reforms which are needed for EU membership too.”

Kakha Kaladze Announces Extensive Modernization Project for Tbilisi Subway Stations

BY MARIAM GORKHELASHVILI

Tbilisi’s Mayor, Kakha Kaladze, has announced an extensive modernization project for 12 subway stations in the city. The project is scheduled to be implemented from 2023 to 2029, with support from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). A consultant has been selected to aid the Tbilisi transport company in procuring the necessary services. The modernization efforts encompass a range of improvements. At the “Station Square” exit, three escalators will be replaced, and the electric motors of 36 escalators will undergo modernization to enhance energy efficiency. Control panels and electromechanical devices will be upgraded, while the passenger information system will receive an update. The project also focuses on improving physical accessibility by installing inclined elevators at multiple stations. Notably, two elevators will be placed at the junction of “Station Square” to facilitate access between the first and second lines. The anticipated outcome of these



works is a significant enhancement of the metro’s operations, greatly influencing Tbilisi’s transport policy implementation. The project extends beyond the stations themselves, including the rehabilitation of central drainage pumping systems, administrative telephone systems, uninterruptible power supply units, and automatic control points. Furthermore, the ventilation system outside the stations, comprising 18 fans and control systems, will be rehabilitated. The United Metro Workshops will undergo complete retooling, and the buildings will be renovated. A revamp

of the metro training center is also planned, along with the update of technical tools and equipment. Mayor Kakha Kaladze expressed gratitude to the international financial organizations involved in the project, particularly highlighting the close collaboration with the EBRD. The EBRD has allocated 50.6 million euros as a loan and an additional 5 million euros as a grant for the project. The preliminary technical-economic study of the metro stations has been prepared by the international consulting company EGIS, further contributing to the project’s progress.

Analysis Reveals Growth and Challenges in Georgia's Light Industry Sector

BY MARIAM GORKHELASHVILI

A collaborative report by the USAID Economic Security Project, the PMC Research Center, and the ISET Research Institute delves into the analysis of various sectors in the economy, shedding light on development trends and challenges they face.

The findings reveal significant growth within the light industry sector. In 2022, the furniture sector experienced a notable increase in turnover, soaring by 17.7% and reaching 293 million GEL. Similarly, the packaging industry witnessed a robust upswing, with turnover surging by 18.8% to a total of 824 million GEL. The construction materials sector also demonstrated impressive growth, as its turnover spiked by 21.6% to reach 1.7 billion GEL.

Despite the sector's progress, its development is not without obstacles. The construction materials industry encounters challenges related to workforce



Source: revenuesandprofits

availability and compliance with export standards. The scarcity of appropriate laboratory infrastructure within the country necessitates sending materials abroad for certification, posing an inconvenience to businesses.

Moreover, the export direction and certification pose significant hurdles. The absence of requisite standards in the local market hinders entry into the EU market, impeding competitiveness. Local laboratories are ill-equipped to issue certifications to companies, leading to reliance on foreign countries for certification. Consequently, local businesses face higher costs and prolonged certification processes, impacting their price competitiveness.

This situation creates an imbalance between local companies and importers, as imported products are not subjected to the same level of scrutiny. Consequently, the country remains heavily dependent on imports, while local companies face challenges and disadvantages in meeting international standards and market demands.

Block Energy Reports Impressive Increase in Production and Plans for Further Expansion

BY MARIAM GORKHELASHVILI

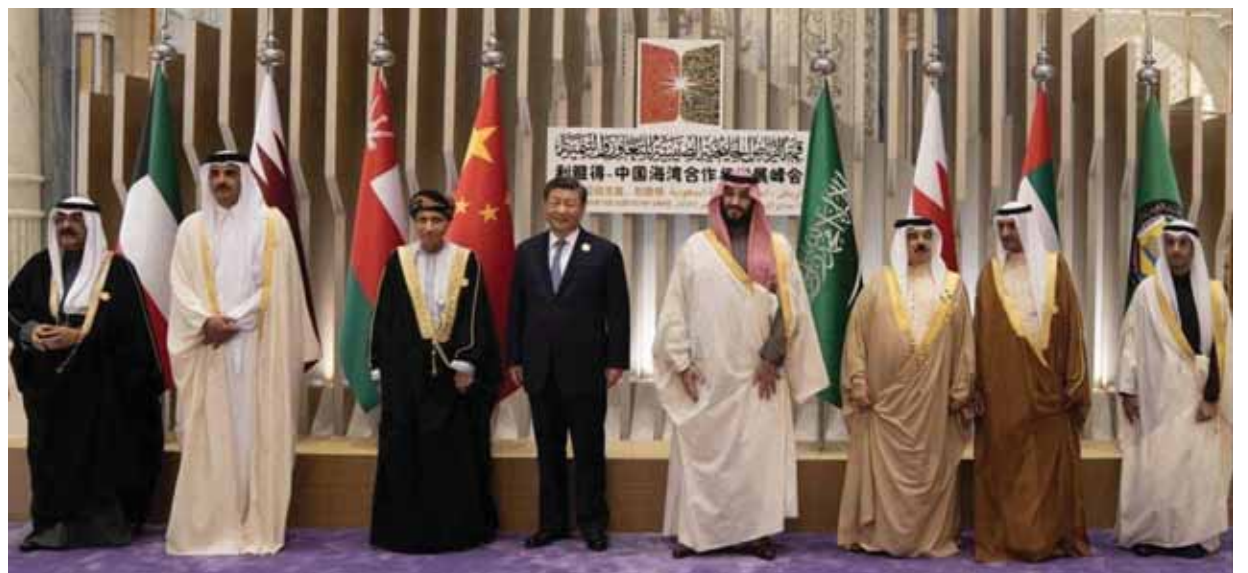
Block Energy, the company engaged in oil and gas exploration and extraction in Georgia, has recently announced a significant boost in production. According to their report to investors on the London Stock Exchange, they achieved a remarkable output of 60,400 thousand barrels of oil equivalent (Mboe) during the April-June period. This included 48,500 barrels of oil and 11,900

barrels of oil-equivalent gas. Notably, their production has increased by 1.6 times compared to the first quarter.

In terms of sales, Block Energy sold 36,000 barrels of oil, amounting to \$2.56 million, as well as 50.3 million cubic meters of gas, valued at \$266,000 during the second quarter. The company is also planning to further enhance its operations by drilling additional wells. It's worth mentioning that Block Energy announced in December of the previous year the discovery of new oil reserves near Patardzeuli, located in the southwest region of Georgia.



New Order in the Middle East



The 43rd Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Summit in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, December, 2022.
Source: Amiri Diwan of the State of Qatar/Anadolu Agency via Getty Image

ANALYSIS BY EMIL AVDALIANI

The unfolding process of improving relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia is proceeding fast. The two countries have already restored diplomatic relations, pledged to minimize tensions in Yemen and elsewhere across the Middle East, and there are active discussions on the development of closer economic ties. At the moment, the normalization of relations has not been fully completed, and the two countries will need to solve many outstanding security issues (for example, in the Persian Gulf). However, current trends indicate that, contrary to many contrary expectations, Riyadh and Tehran will achieve a significant improvement in bilateral ties.

In general, it should be said that the process of reconciliation fits into the overall trend across most of the Middle East. In 2023, a certain period in the history of this region ended, which for the last twenty years was characterized by wars and rivalries within the Arab world. What started with the US war on Iraq in 2003 ended with the settlement of relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and simultaneous multiple normalization processes between the Arab states. All countries of the Persian Gulf are thinking about restoring the severed diplomatic relations with their respective neighbors, and the Arab countries of North Africa are pursuing the same strategy. Even diplomatically and politically isolated Syria has been brought

back into the Arab League.

Part of this normalization dynamic can be seen in the negotiations between Israel and Saudi Arabia to improve relations. However, if Israel was trying to isolate Iran with this move, thus thinking of forming a kind of anti-Iranian Israeli-Arab alliance, today it is clear the plan did not work. The reason is simple: Iran and several Arab countries have taken significant steps towards normalizing relations.

In a way, a new, multipolar period has begun in the history of the Middle East. If since the 1990s the US played a central role, in recent years and especially months, we see China, before that Russia, and to a certain extent India trying to use regional countries' dissatisfaction with Washington to spread their own geopolitical influence.

Moreover, we can look at these ongoing processes from a longer-term perspective. Since the nineteenth century, when the role of Western countries in the Middle East increased dramatically, there is hardly any other historical period in which such a diversity of great powers was represented in the region.

Consider China's positioning. Seeing that dissatisfaction with US policies is growing among the Persian Gulf countries, Beijing is successfully consolidating its position, both economically and politically. In a way, China, albeit indirectly, is carefully trying to present itself as a certain geopolitical alternative to the US. This is well understood by the countries of the Middle East, traditionally closely connected with America. For them, deepening relations with China represents a chance to form a more

diversified foreign policy, which will not be focused on any single big player.

For Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and other crucial Arab countries, US foreign policy in the Middle East is no longer associated with the security guarantees they hoped for. For them, Washington is allegedly shifting all its attention to Ukraine and the Indo-Pacific to focus more on China. Therefore, the only alternative for Saudi Arabia was to resolve relations with Iran, as well as to use the growing role of China to build a more balanced foreign policy.

This does not mean that Saudi Arabia or other Arab countries no longer want to enjoy close ties with the US. On the contrary, they push for more expansive geopolitical ties. For example, Saudi Arabia wants from Washington clearer security guarantees and more extensive cooperation in the military sphere. The same could be argued about other Gulf States for whom the US military presence remains an irreplaceable factor.

Nor do they look at China as a country which they want to play a dominating role across the Middle East. Those times are gone. No single power will be able to exclusively dominate the Middle East the way the US and generally the West was able to do. In other words, today, in the Middle East, a multi-vector foreign policy is considered a more efficient tactic, which enables small and so-called middle powers to act more boldly while increasing their own regional status.

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How the Joint Project of TBC and Sweden Helped Georgian Startups



THE JOINT PROJECT OF TBC AND SWEDEN

Success stories of Georgian Startups

TBC actively continues supporting programs for startups, micro, small and medium-sized businesses, which is a prerequisite for the development of Georgia's startup ecosystem. The bank is focused on creating a sustainable environment for business development, and for this reason, it is strengthening cooperation with various international financial agencies. Sida - the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, acts as a financial guarantor of entrepreneurs' business activities. TBC provided the crossing point between the latter and Georgian entrepreneurs. More specifically, a guarantee program agreement was signed between Sida and TBC to support the development of startups and micro, small and medium businesses, including women entrepreneurs, in Georgia. TBC has been working with the Sida since 2018, for whom it is the first cooperation project with a commercial bank

in Georgia. Since, according to the guarantee program, Sida shares the credit risk of the borrower, it has significantly helped startups, micro, small and medium businesses in the fields of agriculture, trade, production and services to expand their activities. A guarantee by Sida is a sovereign guarantee, backed by the Swedish Government. The guarantee is intended to serve as a catalyst for development purposes by incentivizing the financing institution to lend to clients that are often regarded as higher risk. Since the beginning of the guarantee program, more than 1500 beneficiaries have been financed, of which more than half were representatives of different regions, while more than 20% were female entrepreneurs and startups. This guarantee is in line with the common interests of TBC and Sweden to promote women's economic empowerment and increase access to finance for local entrepreneurs. Under the guarantee program TBC and

Sida will share the risk equally, however, depending on the borrower and the loan category, Sida will share the higher portion of the risk, particularly, when providing financing to women entrepreneurs, startups or when loans are taken for the environmentally friendly investments. The partnership between TBC and Sweden has created development opportunities for local startups, including companies with outstanding concepts and innovations operating in different parts of Georgia. Startup in all businesses involves a lot of risk, so it is difficult for credit organizations to finance the startup stage. Therefore, such projects are vital for supporting the start-up ecosystem. There are already many companies and startups in Georgia which were directly affected by the partnership between TBC and SIDA and found new ways and opportunities for development through the joint project. The program of TBC and Sweden is mainly focused on the development and

strengthening of businesses operating in the regions. One example is NutWorld LTD, a nut processing factory in the city of Zugdidi, which has been operating on the market since 2019. The company's goal is to purchase nuts from farmers and residents on the local market, and to process and sell them in different countries of Europe and Asia. Nutworld, headed and co-owned by Rusiko Ninua, employed only 20 workers before joining the SIDA project. Since July last year, the project allowed them to draw an additional \$250,000 credit line. In turn, this increased the ability to purchase and process more raw materials (nuts) from suppliers. As a result, the enterprise exported a much larger amount of products, and the increase in capital resulted into expanding the staff to 35-40 people. The cooperation between TBC and Sida also significantly helped another Georgian LTD - 'Agrobade', founded and headed by Avtandil Maisuradze, the team of which is specialized in the develop-

ment of various branches of agriculture, irrigation system, nursery farming and also bringing and installing anti-hail nets. 'Agrobade' LLC, located in the village of Ruisi, Kareli district, is among the outstanding participants of the program. The team behind 'Agrobade' knew that such products were not produced in the country, and decided to be the first on the market. From April 2021, they were involved in the joint project of TBC and Sida, within which a 230,000 GEL loan was approved. The mentioned amount significantly helped the enterprise to develop. Yet another Georgian startup, the success of which was greatly contributed to through the joint project of TBC and Sida, was LTD Clean House, headed by Nino Japaridze, founded in 2022, which operates in the Imereti region and offers various facilities, including washing, drying and ironing services for various types of fabrics, using the latest technologies. After a successful kick-off at the start-up stage, the enterprise team realized that it was necessary to expand the business. The main challenge facing them was the cost of the equipment, which they would have been able to purchase only after 5 years with their income of the time. TBC and Sida guarantee program helped them in this, through which they raised 220,000 GEL and purchased the needed equipment. After receiving funding from the project, their production capacity was strengthened, business and its operational capabilities were expanded, they doubled the labor force and had to pay half the utility costs thanks to the eco-technologies they were able to use. From 2019-2021, TBC Bank disbursed 1,719 guaranteed MSME loans for a total amount of close to \$72 million. TBC and Sweden continue to cooperate and plan to increase the limit of the existing guarantee line, which will allow TBC to continue financing micro, small and medium businesses. Improving access to finance will strengthen their competitiveness and contribute to the sustainable development of this segment, which, in turn, is a prerequisite for the creation of new jobs and economic growth of the country.

Presentation of EU and German Government Funded Municipal-Led Investment Projects



With the support of the EU, within the "EU4ITD - Catalyzing of Economic and Social Life" project, the presentation of the selected municipal-led investment projects for financing was held by Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) with the patronage of the Ministry of Regional

Development and Infrastructure of Georgia (MRDI). Mzia Giorgobiani, Deputy Minister of MRDI; Nikolas Cendrowicz, Head of Cooperation at the European Union Delegation in Tbilisi; Lidija Christmann, Head of Development Cooperation South Caucasus at the German embassy; Sandra Schenke, GIZ Country Director, and Howard Harding, CESL Team Leader

delivered the welcome speech and opened the event. The event's primary aim was to give space to mayors from 14 municipalities to present the investments selected for financing under the CESL project. Examples include developing a southern entrance to Kolkheti National Park in Lanchkhuti, establishing a wine laboratory in Baghdati, and rehabilitating the local museum in Dedoplistskaro. In addition, goods produced by CESL private sector beneficiaries was presented. The event brought organizations, primarily municipalities from four focal Georgian regions (Guria, Imereti, Kakheti, Racha-Lechkhumi and Kvemo Svaneti), together with state bodies, donors, and their implementing organizations and associations, including CSOs, as well as MRDI, the EU Delegation and the German embassy; up to 100 participants attended the event. With EUR 6.5 million in funding from the European Union and EUR 1 million from the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, GIZ implements the four year EU4ITD "Catalyzing Economic and Social Life" program to identify untapped economic and social potential in its focal regions- Guria, Imereti, Kakheti and

Racha-Lechkhumi/Kvemo Svaneti, and supply investment financing so that such potential is realized. The project aims to "catalyze" existing but untapped potential in the four focal regions to achieve positive economic and social outcomes. Life opportunities for local inhabitants should therefore be improved, thus contributing to more balanced territorial development across Georgia, including a reduction in migration from the target regions and an increase in

people relocating there. The project addresses municipalities and the private sector and runs for almost 4 years (until September 2025). Initiatives financed (e.g. infrastructure, equipment) should bring together local self-government, the private sector and civil society. Please find Information about the program at the following link: <https://eu4georgia.eu/ka/projects/eu-project-page/?id=1729>



Legal Insights with Klein Law: Dangers of Disguising Employees as Contractors; The Blackmailer. Part 2

INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY



Image source: befler

This is the second article relating to Disguising Employees as Contractors from the desk of our Legal Columnist, American Intellectual Property expert, Daniel Klein, who is based in Tbilisi and Armenia. It is a follow-up to our recent article relating to tax rates. (See The Dangers of Disguising Employees as Contractors. Part 1).

EMPLOYEE OR CONTRACTOR

As with most countries, it is very tempting for both employer and contractor (employee) to disguise an employment relationship as something else.

For IT companies that are relying on work-for-hire contracts with the creators of Intellectual Property (IP), it is mission critical that the contract in question is air tight and duly and legally transfers from contractor to the company any potential source code, software development, or other IP created. However, if the contractor is in fact

an employee, such a contract could be deemed invalid by a Georgian Court, null and void, meaning that its as if the parties were working without any documentation of the relationship.

SEE YOU IN COURT

As per our Part 1 article, these contracts are created by the company and for the company. Courts in general have little sympathy for large corporations when it comes to employee law suits. In that regard, if the employer is trying to save on taxes and in case of a foreign counter agent, save on legalizing the immigration status of a worker (See our eye opening discussion on that in Part 3 next week), courts rarely blame the employee for tax evasion or possible immigration violations if they are foreign workers.

According to Managing Counsel to America's Align Technologies, Eugene Vlasov, "a work-for-hire contract is a rather straightforward agreement with a contractor, whereas if the contractor

is actually an employee, a whole ecosystem of documents and procedures are required in order to secure the valid transfer of IP to the company." Mr Vlasov further insists that "appropriate documentation of IP transfers, Internal Working Rules, Royalty payments, and air-tight detailed employment agreements are just of few of the elements for a valid and sometimes sophisticated ecosystem."

In that regard, international IT companies that rely on templates or procedures that are used in the West may fail in the secure IP transfer to the extent they are not localized for Georgia, Armenia or other relevant jurisdictions.

What makes matters potentially worse is that if the IT workers are digital nomads in other jurisdictions, and actually are really a company worker, the jurisdiction of the country where the nomad resides in certain circumstances could be the jurisdiction in terms of applicable employment law.

This is too complicated for a legal column, so we won't elaborate further.

THE BLACKMAILER

A disgruntled contractor/employee (ex or otherwise) may approach a company with their/their lawyer's claims (correctly or not) and ask for:

- Past royalties due for part of the software created;
- A possible injunction, depending on the jurisdiction that the software is used; in other words, a court order for the company to discontinue using said software or other IP.

Of course, especially in Georgia, to get such a judgement could take a very long time, and the company might find it better both from a publicity/internal reputational issues/economic perspective to just settle with the blackmailer. Blackmailers can set dangerous precedents for potential other disgruntled employees.

We have had of several Georgian subsidiaries seeking assistance in that

regard, especially since late last year.

SILICON VALLEY DUE DILIGENCE

VC funds, Private Equity funds, banks and other financiers of US or European companies often require detailed due diligence of the companies' HQ, as well as its worldwide subsidiaries. That means at the granular level they might review all contractor contracts as well as the employee ecosystem just mentioned. For many IT companies, the main (and in some cases the only significant) asset is the employee/contractor-created IP. If it is flawed, it can and often does impact evaluations and the decision to provide the next round of funding or the like.

MISSION CRITICAL

In conclusion, it is Mission Critical to have in place effective, valid and user friendly systems and documents in order for IT companies to survive and thrive.

Shangri La Wins Golden Brand Again

Entertainment center Shangri La has been a market leader for six years, according to the Golden Brand Awards, often referred to as Georgia's business Oscars.

Organized by Global Idea and The Financial, Golden Brand is the main award for successful business projects in Georgia, chosen by experts and consumers openly. The Award Ceremony always gains the worthy attention of media and business society.

The journalists of different media channels had the chance to meet with leading businessmen, the representatives of diplomatic corps, government

officials, ministers and their deputies.

This year, the general manager of the Shangri La Tbilisi entertainment center, Helen Keane, attended the ceremony to receive the award - "Shangri La Tbilisi is part of an international company with venues represented in different countries, keeping high standards of quality and service within the Shangri La entertainment center network. It is an honor to win the prestigious Golden Brand award for the sixth year running in Georgia. For the Shangri La brand, it is a testament to our approach to business and how we keep adapting to meet and exceed market demands," she said.



ROPES Summit in Tbilisi: Fostering Peace and Coexistence in the Middle East

The Regional Organization for Peace, Economics, and Security (ROPES) is gearing up for its highly anticipated annual summit, set to take place in the charming city of Tbilisi in Summer. Bringing together participants from across the Middle East, including Israel, the Palestinian Authority, Morocco, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, and other countries, this event aims to promote peace in the region through activism. The summit will feature a range of engaging activities, including workshops, dialogues, lectures by experienced peace activists and experts, and the opportunity to explore the rich history and traditions of Georgia, with a special visit to the thriving Jewish center, Israeli House NET, founded and run by Mr. Itsik Moshe.

Promoting Peace through Activism: ROPES has long been committed to creating a platform for constructive dialogue and collaboration among nations in the Middle East and promoting a vision of post-conflict, peaceful and integrated Middle East. By gathering representatives from diverse backgrounds, the summit aims to foster understanding, exchange ideas, and explore actionable strategies to promote peace and stability

in the region. The workshops will provide participants with valuable tools to engage in effective peace-building initiatives and develop sustainable solutions to the challenges faced in the Middle East.

One of the highlights of the ROPES summit will be the lectures delivered by experienced peace activists and experts in the Middle East. These esteemed individuals will share their knowledge, experiences, and success stories, providing valuable insights and inspiration to the participants. By learning from these influential figures, attendees will be better equipped to drive positive change in their respective countries and contribute to the broader goal of peace in the region.

Exploring Tbilisi's Beauty: Beyond the summit sessions, participants will have the opportunity to immerse themselves in the beauty of Tbilisi, a city renowned for its historic charm and picturesque landscapes. The guided tours will showcase the city's cultural heritage and allow attendees to witness the coexistence of different traditions and religions within Georgia.

A special stop will be made at Israeli House NET, which works in relations and Jewish heritage, founded and man-

aged by Mr. Itsik Moshe. This visit will offer valuable insights into the activities of Jewish and Israeli community in Tbilisi and their contributions to the country's rich tapestry of diversity.

ROPES' upcoming summit in Tbilisi presents a unique opportunity for participants from various Middle Eastern nations to come together and focus on promoting peace through activism and creating a wide network of emerging leaders who believe in just and peaceful conflict resolution in the Middle East. By engaging in workshops, dialogues, and lectures by experienced peace activists and experts, attendees will gain valuable knowledge and inspiration to further their peace-building efforts.

The head of the ROPES, Miss Ksenia Svetlova is an expert on Middle Eastern affairs, a former member of the Israeli Knesset and an experienced journalist who covered the Middle East extensively. During her time in the Knesset, she used to be a member of Foreign Affairs and Defense committee and a member of a parliamentary friendship group with Georgia. She currently serves as a CEO of ROPES - the Regional Organization for Peace, Economics and Security and as a senior non-resident fellow at the Atlantic Council.



The head of the ROPES, Ksenia Svetlova

Moving Forward in a Wheelchair in Georgia

BLOG BY TEDO IOBIDZE

A few years ago, writing for this newspaper, a high school student from Kutaisi shared his experiences as a person living with disability in Georgia. That high school student was me, back then getting ready for something many believed was impossible.

Having multiple alternatives is one definition of freedom. More freedom and continuous development have always been my and my family's goals. This process is constant and continues today. A special period began in the fall of 2017, when I started studying journalism. The university I chose was located in Tbilisi.

Even today, I get the greatest happiness by remembering the emotions I had when it was decided that I should continue my studies in Tbilisi. Every new place for people with disabilities is associated with new challenges. So it was in my case, and there were interesting but very difficult missions to complete. At that time, Tbilisi was the only city with adapted transport. This, for reasons I probably shouldn't be explaining, was of great importance to me.

Freedom of movement and accessibility are fundamental issues on the path of self-development. It is a great pleasure when you realize your childhood dream and start studying your dream profession. This fact gave me great motivation, I started studying with great enthusiasm, rain, snow and fatigue were all insignificant details I had to overcome.

My first apartment in the Avlabari district of Tbilisi, a studio flat which I shared with my beloved grandma who followed me to the big city to help me anyway she could, was small. So small that sitting in my wheelchair there left barely any room to maneuver. But that wasn't the biggest problem.

Getting out of the traditional Italian courtyard building required special skills. The path in the yard was made of big stones, making wheeling a challenge; the building lacked a ramp, but my father built one, and there came another challenge: The sidewalk was very narrow, allowing for the construction of only a



Tedo Iobidze

steep ramp. In practice, that meant that if I weren't careful, I might go flying down into the busy street where I could easily have been hit by a speeding car. Luckily, that never happened. But there were much more difficult issues to be resolved ahead.

When I came to Tbilisi six years ago, there was very little public transportation available in the city. When I was planning my route, I had to know in detail all the buses that I could get on. The lit-

tle yellow buses were out of the question; I could only get on a new bus with a ramp. I remember the first time I got into the subway on my own, and the police chased me away in fear. Come to think of it, who wouldn't be scared to see a guy in a wheelchair who somehow miraculously holds onto the rails with his hands while making sure his wheelchair doesn't come crashing down the escalator. And then there's the second I

have at the end of the escalator to leave safely, without sliding off my wheelchair. After hearing that story, a friend of mine begged me to promise I would never ever use the subway again.

Transportation challenges aside, I had bills to pay. I was lucky to have received a scholarship from the government to cover my studies at a private university. I was also able to secure financial help for my rent. And yet, as you can imagine, that wasn't enough to support myself (with what?) and my grandmother. Here begins another interesting episode of my Tbilisi life as a differently-abled student: I got a job!

A friend set up a meeting with two representatives of a company, who, upon hearing my story were interested in finding ways to support me. Maybe pay for an English language class? An internship? Things moved quickly, and almost on the spot I became the company's junior social media assistant. Miroslav and Lyubomira Ginovi, the Bulgarian-born executives of the Tbilisi-based Georgian Service Network company, expressed great confidence in me, and gave me the opportunity to develop.

I will never forget the chance and the support I was given. In a country where people with disabilities are not seen very often because they don't have the opportunity to leave their house, Miroslav and Lyubomira made sure I had an office I could go to every day (by taxi, covered by GSN), learn, grow, and contribute. I was very happy when my enthusiasm and hard work were appreciated. Since 2019, I have felt their support every day. I would like to thank them very much and express my sincere respect to them. Their approach and support for an under-represented community should be an example for all employers in Georgia. Thank you for everything!

It is necessary for companies to give more jobs to young people, especially people with various disabilities. Today, the main problem of disabled people is precisely this, employment in a very competitive environment, which in some cases is added to by an un-adapted environment. Without employment, our freedom is significantly reduced. I would like to call on all companies to try their best to support disabled people in this direction. They will find many qualified

personnel who will play a key role in the future. We deserve a chance. I was extremely lucky to have met people willing to help me. A friend of mine, who at the beginning of my journey was based in Tbilisi (he knows what he did, but he will blush if I share his name), helped me with our biggest fear and cost: Renting a small flat in Tbilisi, something my family could have never afforded. He asked his friends for contributions and people whom I never met, from all over the world, made sure I could start my life in Tbilisi. It was through this magical network of well-wishers that I got connected with MAC Georgia, a wonderful organization working tirelessly on supporting people with disabilities in Georgia. For six years, MAC Georgia has been covering six months of my rent, and I can't describe what a burden that took off our shoulders. Thank you to Jeremy Gaskill and Tornike Gogvadze of MAC Georgia, I couldn't have done it without your generous help.

It took a village. Now, as I'm days away from getting my master's degree in Public Administration from the East European University, I hope people with disabilities looking to continue their education will be offered a chance to be supported and grow, the way I was.

And yet, people like us shouldn't rely only on "luck" to be able to study and be part of society. A few years ago, I offered to share my experience with UNICEF Georgia in hopes they could use our voices for their work when talking to decision makers about improving conditions for children with disabilities. I was asked to send a resume and a cover letter, although I wasn't applying for a job. I only wanted to talk, to make sure we're being heard as a community this organization is trying to help. Unfortunately, no one ever contacted me from UNICEF Georgia. It is my hope that despite not being consulted, solutions will eventually be put in place.

Meanwhile, I'm looking to combine my interests in journalism and public administration. I hope to find a place for myself in academia, creating training courses that will help both future journalists and public service specialists.

But I've already entered a new stage of my life. For starters, I'm paying my own rent myself!

AI and the Future in Georgian Education



Photo from Madloba.info

BY MICHAEL GODWIN

For years, many of us were taught that memorizing mathematical functions, multiplication tables, and solving simple equations were a life requirement. Our teachers reiterated the mantra “you won’t always have that calculator in your pocket!” We were even threatened with social embarrassment if we didn’t know how many apples John had devoured if he originally had 23.4 in the beginning.

I was never particularly gifted in mathematics. For much of my time spent behind an immense textbook, basking in the glow of fluorescent rods above, it was the TI-84 Plus calculator that determined my fate. As such, I became a master of its even more advanced functions, solving equations in seconds that may have taken my ancestors minutes or even

hours. Now, not only a calculator but access to the entire internet’s wealth of information rarely leaves an arm’s distance from us.

This mastery developed neural pathways in my brain that were vastly different from the ones my parents and those before them. They were forced to create these vast networks in their brains to solve problems mentally, whereas I developed them to interact with technology. The same is happening again as Artificial Intelligence, AI, changes the way we learn.

Georgia’s youth have the ability to shed the old way of learning and include AI in their education. Just as I was wired to include technology such as the aged TI-84 Plus, children will be wired to use AI in their problem solving processes. While this may seem detrimental to healthy learning to older mindsets, the proliferation of AI in tech industries, professional services, and the sciences make it a requirement.

While many may immediately think of the now infamous ChatGPT, AI goes much farther. Industry leaders and insiders routinely share glimpses into the ongoing projects behind the commercial curtain. These examples shed light on immense changes that may lie on the horizon, signaling the shift at the lower levels such as education.

The ability of AI to condense the vast depths of information into a more manageable dataset already supports student’s projects. Within ChatGPT’s initial 100 million users, 30% of university students stated they had included it in their studies and work. Many reactions online claimed this would harm students’ development, just as the calculator would replace a student’s ability to think.

However, AI is not capable of replacing human thought. It requires input, at least at this stage and for the foreseeable future, from a human, and a minimal to moderate amount of control in order to function properly and return accurate information.

This is the revolution in learning.

Stanford University’s political science Professor Rob Reich questioned AI’s place in a recent report, saying “could outsourcing much of that work to AI harm students’ critical thinking development?” Indeed, overreliance on any technology harms the human ability to learn and develop. This has been repeatedly cited in society and in academia regarding social media’s detrimental effects on youth and their ability to interact with others in public, as well as their mental health and perceptions of reality.

AI should not, and likely will not, totally replace the need for educators, critical thinking, or students to collaborate together on projects. The democratization of information has serious potential of enhancing the learning experience, as well as making the student more adaptable to society and eventually their professional environment. This importance is stressed since it will be, and in some instances already is, required in some of the leading fields of healthcare, law, and information services.

Proper application of AI resources in the classroom leaves the door open for students to not only become the masters of manipulating it, just as I with my calculator. This new tool also enables teachers to broaden their ability to engage with students, including those with learning differences. According to the United States Department of Education, the ability of AI to adapt its responses based on human input and learning level “may provide supports to students with disabilities.”

What happened with the printing press, the computer, and indeed my little calculator, is happening again with AI. Students are developing new neural networks and pathways that are adapting to technologies that are already available on smartphones and computers. In many households, the children have far surpassed their parents in their ability to manipulate data and interact with AI. Including this in the classroom is not only a natural next step but a requirement as this becomes a regularity in business and science.



Photo by Nino Alavidze



Otar Chiladze. Source: nplg

I Could Not Look After You

POEM BY OTAR CHILADZE
TRANSLATED BY KETEVAN
TUKHARELI

I could not look after you,
Could not keep the promise, said.
The happiness turned into the past,
Lame, is weeping the heart.
Both the heart, and the mind,
Even for a moment,
Will forget you not...
This parting for me,
Is equal to remaining,
Face to face with God.

Otar Chiladze (1933-2009) was a Georgian writer who played a prominent role in the resurrection of Georgian prose in the post-Stalin era. His novels fuse Sumerian and Hellenic mythology with the predicaments of a modern Georgian intellectual. [Source: Wikipedia]

The Hollywood Reporter: TV Series to Be Filmed Based on Nino Haratischvili’s book “Eighth Life”

The Ink Factory and Amusement Park will co-produce a TV series adaptation of the international best-seller by Nino Haratischvili, an epic saga of a Georgian family from 1900

to the beginning of the 21st century. Germany’s Amusement Park, producers of the four-time Oscar winner All Quiet on the Western Front and Emmy-award winners The Ink Factory (The Night Manager, The Little Drummer

Girl) are joining forces to adapt Nino Haratischvili’s international best-seller The Eighth Life as a television series. The Eighth Life follows the epic and mythic saga of a Georgian family from 1900 to the beginning of the 21st century,

following the rise and fall of the Soviet Union and the journey of generations from ancient, mountainous cave cities through the turbulent streets of Tbilisi and revolutionary Prague to 1960s Soho and modern-day Berlin.



Bucket List: Headwaters



BLOG BY TONY HANMER

Well, I don't have that bucket list anywhere except in my head: the list from the film of the same name, of things one wants to do before "kicking the bucket" or dying. So my list gets things added to it, and then crossed off, sometimes while they're happening. Such was the case a few days ago.

We were hosting three couples from Korea, and they requested to be driven to Ushguli and guided to the glacier at the base of Mt. Shkhara, Georgia's highest mountain. We set up the driver and I offered to be the guide, having walked towards the mountain several times but never having reached it yet.

We set off at 8:30 am, with only three short photo stops on the way, as Shkhara's competitor for awesomeness, Ushba, was making spectacular appearances in the clear hot summer weather. (When your guide is a photographer who knows the region, you will get some great locations.) Then our driver dropped us off above Lamaria Monastery at the top of Ushguli, and we set off, skin covered or otherwise protected against the sun in the thinner atmosphere of over 2000 m.

The bad road towards Shkhara has been vastly improved since I drove it last year, losing my front license plate in the bumpy process. Much smoother this time, but we were on foot... along with between 50 and 100 other like-minded tourists from all over the world going to and from, fortunately well spread out so there was no crowding. My guests ranged in age from late 40s to early 60s, but they were in pretty good shape considering, as was I.

It was a hot, cloudlessly sunny day, with the mountain was perfectly visible the whole time. While Shkhara is not, in my opinion, as dramatic as pointed-peaked Ushba, nor apparently nearly as hard to climb, its long form spread out above Ushguli is still a dramatic sight, and it does have that undeniable "high-

est in country" status which ensures its popularity. I had warned my guests, though, that it's much further away than it seems from the top of the village, its height and the clear mountain air making you can think you can almost reach out and touch it. Sorry, no. The first signpost told us we had 8 km to go.

I do have some iconic shots of Shkhara from my two winters living in Ushguli, starting in 2007. They include sunset turning it pink and orange; sunrise giving its own colors; and even moonlight. For these, my equipment and I had to cope with temperatures down to -20 C. But these were all taken from within the village, and today was my first time to expect to reach the mountain's foot, a totally different experience and perspective.

We reached the perfectly located Cafe Shkhara Glacier as the vehicle road

petered out to a single-file foot track. This is the place to get rehydrated with water or other cold drinks, use a bathroom, have something to eat and just rest before the last few km to reach the mountain. It has electricity only by generator, and the fuel for this, as well as all the food items and ingredients, have to be brought in all the way from Mestia, now more than 80 km away. Thus the prices. Cellphone contact is gone too, to return closer to Ushguli. But its location is just right. They are also building a small hotel complex in this unique place.

Moving on, I had to exchange my longer lens for a medium-wide one and eventually for the super-wide as the mountain loomed closer, step by step. Only three of my party of seven made it to the end, as the altitude and heat wore the others down. But finally we were there.



A huge wall of ice, dirtied by sand and stones, is what you find, with Shkhara towering over it in the background. The wall has more than 20 little streams pouring down it as it constantly melts, and several roaring torrents too, which are exactly where the Enguri River begins. It replenishes itself every winter with new snowfall and ice compaction, and we hope that given current climatic conditions, this will not stop; because if it does, so, ultimately, will the Enguri itself. I touched the ice; put my shoes in the freezing flow; filmed myself taking two small stones from it, one for a friend who collects rocks. We celebrated our arrival, rested up a bit, then began the 8 km return hike, which is fortunately a gentle downhill. Bucket list: check!

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Reg. # 06/4-309



I am Georgian and therefore I am European

Zurab Zhvania, Council of Europe, 1999

