

Perception of Foreign Threats in Georgia – CRRC-Georgia Presents Findings of New Study

The Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC-Georgia) has presented the results of a new survey that scrutinized the perception of foreign threats in Georgia.

Koba Turmanidze, Director of CRRC-Georgia, said at the press conference: "The foreign threat posed by Russia has been one of the key political issues for Georgia since it gained independence. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has made this topic more important. So, we decided to study public opinion in Georgia regarding the war in Ukraine, Russian military threats in Georgia, and the country's foreign policy prospects."

The survey showed that 42% of the Georgian Dream (GD) supporters believe that compromises, in general, can help prevent a potential war in Georgia. 46% of GD supporters also believe that Ukraine could have avoided the war. In comparison, only 31% of opposition support-



ers think the same way regarding Georgia and 28% regarding Ukraine. At the same time, opinions of opposition sup-

porters are relatively easily influenced by news about the war in Ukraine: Opposition supporters who receive updates

about Ukrainian losses are more likely to support concessions to Russia than those opposition supporters who do not

receive such information. A similar effect is not observed among supporters of the ruling party and among those not supporting any party.

Author of the report Giorgi Babunashvili overviewed the key findings, noting that approximately the same proportion of GD supporters and opposition supporters consider a war in Georgia likely (60%). According to him, the public has mixed views on whether Georgia should make concessions to Russia to ensure national security. Namely, the survey showed that the majority of Georgian citizens do not favor giving up the country's territories (84%), independence (79%) or Western aspirations (60%) in order to prevent Russian aggression.

The survey was conducted by CRRC-Georgia in August and September. Overall, 1,523 adults (18+) people were interviewed throughout Georgia. The study was funded by The National Endowment for Democracy (NED).

Georgian Dream to Support Law on "Foreign Agents" despite Protest from Media, NGOs and Western Partners

Continued from page 1

- Individuals who are not citizens of Georgia;
- Legal entities that are not established based on Georgian legislation;
- Organizations (including a foundation, association, company, union, etc.) or other associations of individuals established under the law of a foreign state and/or under international law.

The ruling party has agreed to support the bill, Mamuka Mdivaradze, Executive Secretary of Georgian Dream, announced this week, adding that discussion on the details will continue.

He claimed that if someone says that the draft law is similar to the Russian legislation, "he is simply lying".

"Of course, the details will continue to be discussed. We should not forget that there were a thousand speculations relating to different countries, including the legislation of the occupying country, and I can say with full responsibility that whoever says that this is similar to Russian legislation is simply lying," Mdivaradze said.

President Salome Zurbishvili responded to the draft law and said that she "cannot support such legislation and the prosecution of new agents".

"This is a time when the initial evaluation of the implementation of the 12 recommendations of the European Commission is being prepared, when February 24 is close, for all three countries of the associated trio, making the question of their European future more and more urgent. And at this time one of Georgia's political groups chooses to initiate a law which in content brings us closer to the vicious model of Russia, not Europe," reads the statement published on the page of the presidential administration on February 20.

The statement also emphasized that the draft law was registered at the parliament's bureau just when "a delegation of American senators had arrived in the

country," referring to the visit of Jean Shaheen and Dick Durbin to Georgia.

"We really cannot blame all this on coincidence. A force has been developed which, instead of strengthening Georgia's European path, considers another path to be in Georgia's interest," the President stated.

US Senator and Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on European and Regional Security Cooperation Jean Shaheen, and Chairman of the Senate Group on Ukraine Dick Durbin, visited Georgia on February 21 to discuss the proposed law on "foreign agents".

At a press conference, Shaheen asserted that the law has nothing to do with its American analogue, but is rather a copy of a similar Russian law. The same law was adopted by Hungary, but it was incompatible with EU standards and human rights, he claimed, adding that the issues of deoligarchization and the EU's 12 points for candidacy were discussed at a meeting with Prime Minister of Georgia Irakli Garibashvili.

Shaheen also noted that it is extremely important for journalists to have the opportunity to work freely in their profession. According to the Senator, media freedom and human rights are among the main recommendations from the European Union, and Georgia must meet the challenge.

"For 30 years, the US has supported the aspiration of Georgia and the Georgian people to live in a democratic, prosperous and successful country, and they support the aspiration of Georgia to become a member of the European Union and NATO. And we confirmed this support at today's meetings.

"We also recommended the government continue to support such issues as accountability, transparency, and promote the Georgian people's desire for Euro-Atlantic integration and rapprochement with Europe," Shaheen said.

Earlier, on February 16, the official rep-



resentative of the US State Department, Ned Price, reacted to the initiative and declared that such a law would create a potential threat to the Euro-Atlantic movement of Georgia. According to Price, the law is based not on the American, but on the Russian and Hungarian versions of this legislative act.

According to Price, the proposed law will exclude and silence the independent voice of Georgian citizens who strive to create a better future for their society.

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe also called on the political factions of the Parliament of Georgia not to support the draft law initiated by an anti-western political party.

"We call on all other political factions of Georgia - do not support this draft law. If adopted, it will have a devastating effect," read the PACE statement on Twitter.

Transparency International also noted its alarm.

"If approved, the legislation will have a serious negative impact on the already shrinking space for civil society and independent media in the country. It would also undermine future progress against corruption in Georgia," TI wrote in its statement.

Following the announcement of the initiative, journalists and NGOs immediately protested at the perceived threat

to media freedom in Georgia.

"We, the people of Georgia, strongly oppose the bill initiated by the members of the Parliamentary Majority, also endorsed by the Speaker of Parliament and other MPs. We declare that the attempts to adopt this Russian bill attack not only independent civil society organizations and the critical media, but the people of Georgia themselves," they said in joint a statement.

"This draft legislation acts as a response to the numerous facts of violence, corruption, lawlessness, and arbitrary execution of the laws that we, civil society and the critical media, study and make public," they added.

"This bill aims to leave defenseless the abused children and women; people with disabilities, minorities, scientists, workers, and the youth; to not provide assistance to the socially vulnerable families, farmers, miners, internally displaced, homeless, illegally laid off, detained, and other people fighting for their rights; to mute the voice of the people living in the peripheries of the country that can only communicate their troubles through the independent media.

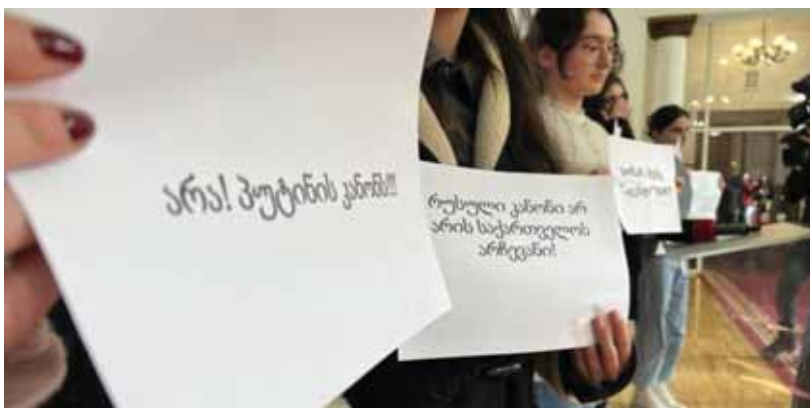
"When Putin adopted a similar law in Russia, many organizations chose to disband rather than comply with its requirements. Those that continued to operate faced increased control, harassment, and repressions. This is not the

type of governance that we have fought for many years to achieve, and Russian law is certainly not the type of governance that Georgian citizens aspire to have in our country.

"Adopting this bill will amount to an attack on the key Georgian values of dignity, independence and solidarity with our communities and fellow people. Adopting this bill will amount to an onslaught not only against civil society and our democracy but will also damage our aspirations of Euro-Atlantic development. This law will obstruct our path to membership of the EU, as this law was found illegal in the EU. Moreover, the execution of this law will be impossible without causing insurmountable harm to hundreds of thousands of citizens of Georgia," reads the statement.

The draft law on "agents of foreign influence" is often compared by critics to the law adopted in Russia in 2012, when Putin's government created a "foreign agents" base for non-governmental organizations, and then targeted virtually anyone who did not follow the Kremlin's rhetoric.

Despite such criticism and protest from both local media, NGOs and the western partners, the Georgian Dream party is still expected to support the bill and therefore increase the state's control and pressure on the opposition-minded media and non-governmental sector.



Ukraine Updates: Moscow Unrepentant after Suspending Nuclear Arms Treaty with US; Putin Looks to Deepen Ties with China

COMPILED BY ANA DUMBADZE

The war in Ukraine continues to dominate global geopolitics this week, with the one-year anniversary of Russia's invasion already here.

BIDEN MAKES SURPRISE VISIT TO UKRAINE FOR FIRST TIME SINCE FULL-SCALE WAR BEGAN

President Joe Biden slipped into Kyiv on Monday for the first time since Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine almost a year ago, demonstrating in dramatic personal fashion his commitment to the country and its struggle as the war enters an uncertain new phase.

The highly secretive visit – which took place as air raid sirens could be heard ringing out around Kyiv while Biden walked alongside President Volodymyr Zelensky around the gold-domed St. Michael's Cathedral – came at a critical moment in the 12-month conflict, with Russia preparing for an expected spring offensive and Ukraine hoping to soon retake territory.

Biden announced a half-billion dollars in new assistance, saying the package would include more military equipment, such as artillery ammunition, more javelins and Howitzers. And he said new sanctions would be imposed on Moscow later this week.

“One year later, Kyiv stands. And Ukraine stands. Democracy stands,” Biden said.

The United States and other Western nations have been rushing arms, tanks and ammunition to Ukraine in the hopes of changing the trajectory of the war. By visiting in person, Biden is offering a singular image of American support for Zelensky, who has spent the past year

attempting to rally the world behind his nation and appealing for greater levels of assistance.

Biden arrived in Kyiv at 8 a.m. local time after a lengthy journey from Washington and arrived to the Mariinsky Palace half-an-hour later. He departed Kyiv in the early afternoon.

RUSSIA TESTED INTERCONTINENTAL BALLISTIC MISSILE BEFORE BIDEN TRIP, OFFICIALS SAY

Russia notified the US it was going to test an intercontinental ballistic missile before President Joe Biden's trip to Ukraine earlier this week, according to an administration official and a US official.

The administration official said such tests are routine and the Russians used the notification process in the New Start Treaty, a nuclear arms control treaty between Russia and the US, to let the US know, though Russia announced Tuesday that it was suspending its participation in the pact.

This official also said the test did not pose a risk to the United States and that the Biden administration did not view the test as an anomaly or an escalation.

CNN was first to report the test occurred around the time of the president's visit.

KREMLIN SLAMS THE WEST'S REACTION TO NUCLEAR ARMS TREATY SUSPENSION

Russian President Vladimir Putin announced Tuesday that Russia was suspending its participation in the last remaining nuclear arms control pact with the US and threatened to resume nuclear tests as he accused the West of turning the war in Ukraine into a global conflict.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken later dubbed the decision “deeply unfortunate and irresponsible.”

The Kremlin said Wednesday that the West's initial reaction to Russia's sus-



US President Biden on a surprise visit to Kyiv on Monday. Photo by Evan Vucci / AP

pension of the New Start nuclear arms treaty did not bode well for a resumption of talks to re-open the pact.

We see the first reaction. It is quite consolidated among the representatives of the collective West. This reaction, of course, does not give us any reason to hope for any readiness for dialogue or negotiations,” Dmitry Peskov, the Kremlin's press secretary, told reporters Wednesday.

Peskov said, however, that “circumstances are changing, and here it is very important for Russia to do everything to ensure its own security, including in matters of strategic stability and arms control. And to maintain a patient approach while waiting for our opponents to mature for a normal dialogue.”

Asked under what conditions Russia would be ready to return to the implementation of the treaty, Peskov said “everything will depend on the position of the West. President Putin has clearly outlined what concerns us.”

“We see NATO's involvement in the conflict, we see, as the President said, that NATO is trying to turn this local conflict into a global one. And on the

other hand, NATO maintains its openly hostile position towards Russia. Not only in words, but also in deeds, encroaching on our security. We can't not react to this,” he said, adding that “as soon as there is a willingness to take into account our concerns, then the situation will change.”

PUTIN LOOKS TO DEEPEN TIES WITH CHINA AS HE MEETS TOP DIPLOMAT

Russian President Vladimir Putin looked to deepen ties with China Wednesday as he met one of Beijing's top diplomats in Moscow.

China's top diplomat Wang Yi visited the Russian capital and held talks with his Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov as well as Putin himself, signaling the value the Kremlin has placed on Moscow's relationship with Beijing, one of the few powerful allies Russia has left in the global community following its invasion of Ukraine a year ago.

Chinese diplomat Wang Yi said that relations between Beijing and Moscow could not be influenced by other countries and that China wished to deepen

its strategic cooperation with Russia, in remarks broadcast on Russian state TV and reported by Reuters.

Meanwhile, Putin said he was looking forward to a visit to Moscow by Chinese President Xi Jinping and to deepening the partnership between the two countries, Reuters added. President Xi is expected to visit Russia in spring.

RUSSIAN FORCES FIGHTING IN CENTER OF BAKHMUT, OFFICIAL CLAIMS

Fighting between Russian and Ukrainian forces is moving toward the center of Bakhmut, according to a Russian official and advisor to the acting head of the pro-Russian “Donetsk People's Republic” in eastern Ukraine.


Jan Gagin, an advisor to Denis Pushilin, told the Rossiya-1 TV channel on Wednesday that fighting in Bakhmut, a city that Russia calls “Artemovsk” had progressed to the point where Ukraine's surrender was just a matter of time.

“The initiative is now in the hands of our fighters, our troops have long entered from the northern side of Artemovsk. Now they are already fighting almost in the center of the city,” Gagin said in comments reported by news agency Ria Novosti.





Bakhmut has been fought over for months, with military analysts conceding that Russian forces have made gains in and around the area in recent weeks, albeit at a large cost to its forces, with hundreds of Russian soldiers believed to be dying every day.

Ukraine has downplayed Russian advances in Donetsk and said Wednesday that its forces had repelled an attack on a stronghold near Bakhmut.

Russia sees the capture of Bakhmut as a key goal as it looks to cut Ukrainian supply lines and transport hubs, and as it looks to seize Donetsk, Luhansk and the entire Donbas region in eastern Ukraine.



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Giorgi Gakharia Appeals to EU Leaders for Support in Granting Georgia Candidacy



hand, could send Georgia to the path of single party authoritarianism. The granting of candidate status will not only demonstrate the EU's commitment to supporting democratic aspirations of the Georgian people, but will also contribute to the peace and stability of the region as a whole.
I thank you in advance for your atten-

tion to this matter, which is of existential importance to my country.
Please accept, Excellency, assurances of my highest consideration.

Giorgi Gakharia
Former Prime Minister of Georgia
Chairman of Political Party "For Georgia," - reads the address.



Dear leaders of EU member states,

As the former Prime Minister of Georgia, I am writing to request your support for the granting of EU candidate status to my country. The Georgian people have made their choice clear - they chose European Union as their historic destiny and a strategic goal. Today we stand closer than ever to achieving this goal. We owe this opportunity to the courage and determination of the Ukrainian people and we are in need of your support.

Russian aggression against Ukraine marked a turning point in the post-Cold War history and brought our geopolitical interests closer together. We both stand to benefit from Georgia's eventual integration in the EU. There is no more room for grey zones in Europe. There can be no peace and security without the end of empires and their spheres of influence. I firmly believe that granting EU candidate status will help transform Georgia, further strengthen our relationship and deepen cooperation to tackle the challenges we face.

The decision to be made in the coming months will largely determine Georgia's future development and the fate of our democracy. Many of you are probably concerned with the state of democracy and the rule of law in my country. The process of European integration can change it; the lack of it, on the other hand, could send Georgia to the path of single party authoritarianism. The granting of candidate status will not only demonstrate the EU's commitment to supporting democratic aspirations of the Georgian people, but will also contribute to the peace and stability of the region as a whole.

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Former Prime Minister of Georgia
Chairman of Political Party "For Georgia"



Giorgi Gakharia, the Chairman of the "For Georgia" party, has addressed the leaders of the EU member states with an open letter, asking for their support in granting Georgia EU candidacy status.

As he claims in the address, the Georgian people have made their choice - they chose the European Union as their historical and strategic goal.

"Today, we stand closer than ever to achieving this goal," reads the letter.

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Georgia and the End of the Post-Soviet Era. Part 2

ANALYSIS BY EMIL AVDALIANI

The steps taken by Iran in the South Caucasus in the last two years can be seen as a significant development. Until 2020, Tehran played if not a passive, then certainly not a critical role in the South Caucasus. This can be explained by the fact that the South Caucasus was not a particularly important region for the Islamic Republic, as, for example, the Iraq-Lebanon-Syria area, the Persian Gulf or even Yemen. However, the results of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War forced Tehran to change its attitude and become more active in the South Caucasus, particularly in regards to Azerbaijan-Armenia.

The second reason for Iran's activation in the region is Russia, its war against Ukraine and the relative weakening of Moscow's positions in the South Caucasus. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has never needed Iran as much as it does today. This is well understood in Tehran, which shares with Russia intricacies and methods of living under sanctions, buys expensive military technologies from it, and sells what it produces itself, for example, deadly drones.

Yet Iran's use of Russia's weaknesses does not mean a complete revision of relations between Moscow and Tehran in the direction of the South Caucasus. Both forces are in favor of radical changes to the liberal order. Both often advocate the principle of regionalism, according to which non-regional powers should not be represented in the South Caucasus. That is why it is not surprising that Russia and its military bases are much more acceptable to Tehran than the military influence of the West (NATO)

or even Turkey.

Another important country in our neighborhood for which 2023 may turn out to be a turning point is Turkey. The planned presidential and parliamentary elections, regardless of who the winners are, will be decisive for Turkey's internal development. Whether this will be the case or not in foreign policy is a completely different matter. Some changes are inevitable. Efforts to reduce tensions with the US or Greece are expected, as are those with the NATO alliance. However, we should not expect radical foreign political changes. It is unlikely that the new government will deviate from expanding Turkey's role in the region. For instance, in the South Caucasus, Turkey will continue to promote the development of East-West infrastructure, which in turn will be a great support for the Middle Corridor idea.

An active foreign policy is also expected due to Turkey's geographical location. The country borders five geopolitically important regions: the Black Sea, the South Caucasus, Syria-Iraq, the Balkans, and the Mediterranean Sea. All these areas represent a separate independent geographical space, but are, at the same time, interconnected with each other. Those are the regions where geopolitical tensions of varying intensity prevail. Turkey will have to continue to conduct an active policy in several directions simultaneously, as it has been doing.

Moreover, since Ankara, like Tehran, is well aware of Russia's weaknesses, it will be trying to take advantage of Moscow's preoccupation in Ukraine. In previous articles, I have drawn attention to the instability of Russia's position in the South Caucasus. Declining prestige, economic weaknesses, deepening mistrust with allies and, most importantly, the severe military defeats experienced in Ukraine. These trends did not appear recently, but rather are a culmination of



Image source: AFP

many years. Russia will need significant military and economic effort and, most importantly, a correct (changed) foreign policy to maintain its influence in the South Caucasus.

The South Caucasus has become even more important for Turkey in terms of relations with Central Asia. There, as well as in the South Caucasus, it is increasingly difficult for Russia to maintain its positions. The countries of Central Asia do not want to fall under a kind of Russian-Chinese condominium, and to avoid

it they tend to attract other non-regional forces such as Turkey, a weighty economic and political force.

Thus, a multipolar period begins in the history of the Black Sea region and the South Caucasus, in particular. At the same time, several big players (Turkey, Iran, Russia, the US, the European Union, and China) are trying to spread their influence over the region, which is qualitatively different from the 1990s. This is the end of the post-Soviet period in the South Caucasus: Russia is now not

the major player, but increasingly only one of several main players. Iran, Turkey, and the EU now possess more tools to influence the region than they had in the 1990s-2000s. This allows the small countries of the South Caucasus to maneuver in foreign policy and potentially significantly strengthen their geopolitical positions.

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

Geopolitical Analyst Peter Zeihan on Russia's "War to the End"

INTERVIEW BY VAZHA TAVBERIDZE

One year into the Ukraine war – what has transpired, what have we learned and where are we at? RFE/RL's Georgian service put its questions to American geopolitical analyst and best-selling author Peter Zeihan, who served as an analyst and later vice president at the Austin-based geopolitical intelligence firm Stratfor.

"What we've learned is that geography is not dead as a determining factor in international relations. Never has that been more true for the Russians," he tells us. "The Russian territory just isn't rich – the farmland is poor; the population is spread out. And because of that, they've never been able to build a road. Everything that has to be moved by rail. And in that sort of environment, the military is woefully slow, because after you get to the rail depot, everything has to be moved laboriously to an area the train can't get into."

"The Russian strategy has been to expand outward until they reach a zone where there are some natural barriers that separate them from the rest of the world, things like the Carpathian Mountains and Baltic Sea. And then, between those barriers, they put very slow moving, undercapitalized low tech forces in big clusters, as a static footprint to plug the gaps. During the Soviet period, the Russians controlled all of the access points to their interior space, the most secure they've ever been. And with the Soviet collapse, they only controlled one. So what Putin has been doing for the last 23 years is rebuilding those four positions. And Ukraine, unfortunately, is on the wrong side of some of those positions from the Russian point of view – not only do they need to conquer every scrap of Ukraine, they then need to take the war northwest. It is wrong to think of this as a miscalculation; it's wrong to think that Putin is doing this just because he can: This is about the survival of Russian ethnicity. And it really is a 'them or us' situation."

YOU PREDICTED THE UKRAINE INVASION IN 2014. WHAT WAS YOUR LOGIC?

The Russian Federation has no territorial integrity protection. Their borders are completely indefensible, unable to resist any meaningful assault, be it military, strategic, economic or cultural. Between the World Wars, Soviet mismanagement and the post-Cold War collapse, the Russian demography has inverted. They've got more people 40+ than younger. They've had up to 200,000 fatalities in this war so far. They've realized they only had 8 million men in their 20s and a million of them fled. This is a precious resource; there are not enough Russians to continue the ethnicity long-term. It's entirely possible that we'll have nearly a million dead Russians by the end of the year. The demographic hit of that would be catastrophic. This was always going to be the last major conventional campaign the Russians fought because they just aren't going to have enough men on the other side of this.

AND RUSSIA'S FAVORITE TACTIC OF THROWING NUMBERS AT PROBLEMS ONLY EXACERBATES THAT CATASTROPHE.

In the past, it has always worked because the Russians have been the more technically advanced of the peoples in their space; they've had the advantage of industrial technologies, including things that expand lifespan and lower child mortality. But since the collapse of the Soviet system, they have regressed significantly in terms of public health in all age groups. And that's in addition to the

problems they're having with heroin, multidrug resistant tuberculosis, HIV and alcoholism. So the Russian population, while still physically larger than anyone else's in the former Soviet empire, is declining fast. Child mortality is creeping back up, and the birth rate is down significantly. So this time, there is no longer a backup generation. They can't do such a war again. When I say this, I'm not talking about just the Ukraine war, because from the Russian point of view, there's going to be another phase to this that goes into Poland, Romania, Moldova, as well as the Baltics. The Western goal here is to equip the Ukrainians with sufficient armaments so they can destroy this last military effort, and end Russia as a strategic power. The country will not have enough people aged 30 and under to even theoretically launch a significant war in the future. And that's a different environment in Europe. But that's the goal. That doesn't mean that's how it's going to go, though.

REALPOLITIK-WISE, WHAT DOES THAT TRANSLATE INTO? IS A PROLONGED WAR IN THE WEST'S INTEREST?

It's not that I think the Europeans are attempting to prolong the war, but there's a recognition that the scale of destruction of Russian forces has to be complete, or we're going to be doing this again in Poland very soon. What we want is for the Ukrainians to trigger a mass fatality event that so overwhelmingly defeats the Russians forces, they lose the capacity to carry out offensive operations before they can get more troops in. There are two ways that might happen. The first is tanks-in-a-war-of-numbers, Ukraine will never win. They have to be more mobile. But the muddy season in Ukraine has extended into the depths of winter, it just hasn't gotten cold enough for the Ukrainians to maneuver. Even if they're inflicting three to one casualty ratios, that's not enough, they need to get at least eight to one, and if they can't use their armor, they can't achieve that. The second is the Crimea canal. It's the only source of water for 80% of the food production in Crimea, and the Ukrainians now control the sluice gate in Kherson. They're not going to turn it on this spring, which means that 80% of the food production in Crimea this year is not going to happen. You combine that with another couple of hits on the Kerch Strait bridge, and the Russians will not be able to supply the population of Crimea. And that is where the best Russian troops are at the moment. So if you can trigger it a humanitarian catastrophe in Crimea, that would generate the sort of numbers and the sort of impact that might actually force the Russians to break off. Keep in mind that in no war have the Russians ever sought peace terms, or accepted them when they could still fight.

The Russian troops are badly led, have low morale, poor equipment; they're supported with poor logistics, this is normal for them. What's not normal is how few Russians are involved in the conflict at this point. And that is changing very rapidly.

They started the war with roughly 100 - 150,000 troops. They're going to have up to 800,000 come May, pushing out of Donbas along multiple lines of access to make the Ukrainians divide their forces. We'll also see approaches from Belarus. That probably won't be nearly as strategically significant, but designed to force the Ukrainians to disperse their forces. That's the Russian plan. The Ukrainian plan is to concentrate their armor and artillery into a single mailed fist and drive down from Zaporizhzhya directly to the Sea of Azov, because if they can sever the logistical truck connection that is coming in from the Donbas along the Sea of Azov into the southern front, then Crimea goes from being a potential



Geopolitical analyst Peter Zeihan. Photo by Paul Cheney

launching point for the Russians to being a complete strategic vulnerability. If the Ukrainians can reach Azov, they can blow up what's left of the Crimean bridge. And if they can cut the line north of the Sea in places like Melitopol or Mariupol, then these territories will be completely cut off and you can have a mass fatality event among the best Russian forces and then swing east and deal with Donbas.

There was hope the Ukrainian assault was going to happen over the winter, that, once the ground froze, they would be able to use their heavy equipment in an assault. But the ground has been churned up and so they've been stuck in a slugging match out east. Time is definitely on the Russian side here. Ukraine needs either cold weather or a very dry spring, because if they wait for May when the muddy season ends, the Russians will be in a position to move at the same time. They'll have at least another 400,000 troops in play, adding to the 250,000 in play at the moment.

HAS UKRAINE GOT WHAT IT NEEDS FOR ITS OFFENSIVE TO BE SUCCESSFUL?

We will have battle tanks in place, longer range artillery and rockets, small diameter bombs – critical for disrupting Russian logistics. But, we're talking about a mass of relatively untrained troops that can be forced to just run across an open field and absorb ammo. You throw enough bodies at it and, even if you break their logistics, they're going to do really well. For the Ukrainians to win this, they have to break up the Russian formations. And that requires speed. Luckily, for the Ukrainians, they do have a significant amount of strategic depth. And the Russians are slow moving forces. So, if nothing can happen until May, I would guess Ukraine will abandon the entirety of the Eastern Front and try to make a lightning run towards Mariupol or Melitopol and cut off Crimea as the Russians continue to creep westward. It would look a lot like World War Two, because that's exactly how the German-Russian front went back then.

LET'S TALK ABOUT THE IMPACT OF THIS WAR ON RUSSIA'S NEIGHBORHOOD, STARTING WITH MOLDOVA, GIVEN THAT LAVROV JUST SAID THAT THE WEST IS TRYING TO TURN IT INTO THE NEXT UKRAINE.

If Ukraine wins, the Russians are going to get kicked out of the entire near abroad, and they're going to lose their global position, because everyone who doesn't like the Russians will move against these dispersed forces that no longer have a central control node. They'll be broken up and ejected. It will be a catastrophic,

screaming retreat of Russian power from everywhere. That will not stop when it reaches Russia's borders, because you will have uprisings and rebellions in places like Tatarstan and Chechnya, and that will be the end of the Russian Federation. It'll take a decade or two, but that will absolutely be the end. If Russia wins, then everyone in the entire near abroad is going to be very circumspect, because the Russians are going to move further west and they're going to double down on their attempts to plug all of those gaps, and there are gaps in Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan and Georgia, and Azerbaijan as well. We'll have a push of Russian power using the tactics designed for Ukraine everywhere, unless countries just acquiesce. If Ukraine wins, Moldova is on track for NATO and EU membership. If Ukraine loses, Moldova is the next country to get conquered. It's that simple.

In the Caucasus, the Russians have a lot less friendly approach to Georgia than they have towards the Ukrainians. And I'd be terrified at the degree of human destruction if Georgia does not welcome in the Russian troops if Ukraine falls, and if it does, Georgia will be invaded very, very quickly, and it will be brutal. Azerbaijan, probably not quite so brutal, but very soon thereafter. But if Ukraine wins, then we're going to have another Ossetian war and another Abkhazian war, where the Georgians eject the Russian forces, and they will get help from other countries to do so.

Russians have the lash of demography behind them; they know this is their last chance. If there is a ceasefire, it will merely give the Russians time to regroup and launch another assault.

IN THE SCENARIO WHERE RUSSIA ACTUALLY LOSES, AT WHAT POINT DOES PUTIN REACH FOR THE RED BUTTON?

I'm not overly concerned about a nuclear exchange. The Americans have made it very clear that they have tapped into Kremlin communications and we know physically where Putin is at all times. He knows that if he launches a nuke at the US, there is no version of history that will record him as anything other than the person who ended the Russian Federation, and that he personally will not live to see the future. So I've never considered that to be on the table. I've never considered nuking Ukraine to be on the table, either, because, ultimately, the Russians want to occupy it and move on.

If the Russians win and get to the Polish frontier, they know that their military, conventionally, is no match for NATO. Then they would call up London and Stockholm and Berlin and Paris, say, "We're going to nuke you unless you

withdraw all political and military support from Poland by noon, in which case, we'll cancel that, conquer Poland and then we can all be friends again." At that point the Westerners would have to make a really hard decision because the Russians know they can't conquer Poland and Romania conventionally. Ukraine proved that. Nukes are all they've got left. And there's no point going halfway in this because they have to get to those geographic gaps, and that means they have to make it to Warsaw.

YOU SAID: "IT'S ROUGH FOR THE UKRAINIANS, BUT FROM THE AMERICAN POINT OF VIEW, IT IS DIFFICULT TO IMAGINE A BETTER, MORE THOROUGH, AND ABOVE ALL SAFER WAY FOR RUSSIA TO COMMIT SUICIDE."

There are only three countries in the history of the US that have ever threatened the mainland. One was our colonial founder, our cultural parent, the United Kingdom. And with the flip into the world wars, Britain basically became a junior ally. So that's done. The second was Mexico. After the Mexican American War, we confiscated half their territory, and Mexico today is our closest demographic cousin and our greatest economic partner. So that's done. And then you've got the Soviet Union / Russia, which has threatened us since 1945. The Americans were never going to back down from a fight here. I had my doubts, but the strategic necessity of ending that threat forever is an opportunity does not present itself very often. The Americans are going to provide the Ukrainians with any system the Ukrainians can prove they can operate competently, and the Abrams are not the end of the conversation. The risk, of course, comes with what happens if the Ukrainians lose.

Russia is not going to die quietly. They're still by far the dominant demographic within the former Russian space. And just because they cannot conquer the rest of the former Soviet Union anymore, does not mean that the war for the future of Russia is over. This is a country where probably about a third of the population is not ethnic Russian, and they have been treated almost as badly as the Ukrainians are being treated now. So, if the Russians are defeated in Ukraine, we then have the breakup of the Russian Federation itself, and its disintegration into a couple of dozen different principalities that do not see the world the same way. And nukes are part of that conversation. So this, from the American point of view, is a defining moment. From the Russian point of view, from the former Soviet point of view, this is just the beginning of the end.



Darchiashvili Tells UN General Assembly, "The World Needs Peace"

The Minister of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, Ilia Darchiashvili participated in a special session of the United Nations General Assembly on the anniversary of the war in Ukraine, held in New York.

In his speech, Darchiashvili condemned Russia's war against Ukraine, which, as he noted, has been a brazen attack on the international rules-based order, shattering the global peace and security architecture. "It has resulted in grave humanitarian consequences, loss of lives, and mass displacement. We succeed only if each and every member of this Organization stands firm in defending its founding principles," the Minister said.

The Georgian Foreign Minister highlighted the increasing role the UN plays in maintaining peace across the globe. He reiterated Georgia's support for the Peace Formula Initiative, which goes beyond the restoration of peace and territorial integrity of Ukraine and has a more overarching aim of defending the core values of the United Nations.

"Ukraine needs peace, our countries and our peoples need peace. The world needs peace. We face the global challenges of unprecedented scale, climate change, natural disasters, pandemics, terrorism, and unconventional threats that require our joint efforts, our cooperation. There is so much the United Nations can and have to do. We need to do so for our children. We need to do so for future generations," Darchiashvili said.

The Minister noted that Georgia stands

in solidarity with the people of Ukraine in these trying times. He also focused on the difficult situation in the Russian-occupied regions of Georgia. "It has been almost 15 years since Russia's full-scale military aggression against Georgia and consequent occupation of 20% of its territories in blatant violation of the principles of the UN Charter, Helsinki Final Act, and the Charter of Paris."

In this context, he highlighted the importance of the international community's joint efforts. "Georgia remains committed to peaceful resolution of the Russia-Georgia conflict that relies on the de-occupation of two Georgian regions by Russia on the one hand and reconciliation and confidence building between the communities across the occupation lines on the other. While Georgia remains in full compliance with the EU-mediated 12 August 2008 Ceasefire Agreement, the consolidated approach of the international community is essential in urging Russia to comply with its obligations under that Ceasefire Agreement and withdraw its military forces from the territory of Georgia. In this regard, Georgia tries to utilize the existing negotiations format of the Geneva International Discussions," Darchiashvili explained.

The Georgian Foreign Minister reaffirmed Georgia's firm support to the draft resolution, which once again sends a clear signal in defense of the core principles of this Organization, principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity, and calls for a comprehensive, just, and lasting peace in line with the UN Charter.

Speaker: If Choice is Between Peace and War, Georgia Chooses Peace

The Chairman of the Parliament of Georgia, Shalva Papuashvili, spoke about peace, noting that there is a narrative circulating that suggests Georgia is facing a choice between peace or freedom.

"They put an equal sign on war and freedom, saying that if we choose freedom, that means we choose war. They offer us such false dilemmas. In fact, today there is a choice. Not a choice between peace and freedom, but a choice between peace and war. All countries that support Ukraine face this choice. NATO member countries also have this choice: They could all join the war today, but they instead choose peace. And that's why Georgia, of course, chooses peace," said the Speaker.

He went on to point out that Georgia does not have the security umbrella of



NATO, nor does it have the protection of the European Union.

"We fought against Russia three times. The countries that fall under that umbrella, be it NATO or the European

Union, have more opportunities than us, but even they don't go to war, so the choice really is between peace and war. Like all other countries, we also choose peace," Papuashvili said.

PM: We Have Officially Started Taking Action to Build Anaklia Port



We are officially starting action to build Anaklia Port. Construction will start this year, - Irakli Garibashvili, Prime Minister of Georgia, announced this week.

51% will belong to the state, while 49% will be tendered internationally, he noted. Nevertheless, the Government will not wait until investors express their inter-

est, and construction works will commence this year.

Garibashvili stated that roads and highways are being actively constructed, airports extended, and other concepts developed.

"We are officially starting action for the construction of Anaklia Port. The Ministry of Economy is designing relevant procedures. 51% will belong to the state, 49% will be tendered inter-

nationally, and potential investors will be invited to bid. Nevertheless, we will not wait for their interest and will launch the construction process this year regardless. This task is to start the construction of Anaklia Port this year. Roads and highways are being actively constructed, airports extended and other concepts developed. So, we have positive news in every direction," concluded Garibashvili.



The English - Speaking Union

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Invites 16-20 year old young speakers to take part in the

Public Speaking Competition

The theme of the competition is "Relations between nations are too important to be left to governments alone". Speakers may interpret this theme in any way they see fit, but they should not use the theme as their title. Each speaker will be allocated 5 minutes. The competition will be held in three rounds. The first round March 8, 11, 13 at the English Language Centre "British Corner". The date and theme of the second round will be announced later.

The competition is sponsored by the Bank of Georgia.

ESU-Georgia will send the lucky winner to London to take part in the final and organize 5 day stay in England.
The deadline for registration is March 6
Contact us:
"British Corner", Vake Park
(entrance from I. Abashidze St.).
Tel.: 591339993, 557030080 E mail: britishcornerbc@gmail.com
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Euronest PA Adopts Resolution on Supporting Path of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia Towards EU Membership

The Parliament of Georgia reports the EuroNest PA adopted the Resolution on supporting the path of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia towards EU membership at the session in Chisinau.

As report notes, the Assembly welcomes the historical decision of the European Commission made on June 23, 2022, concerning the granting of the EU candidacy to Ukraine and Moldova and underlines that all three countries are part of the EU enlargement policy.

The EuroNest PA calls on the Russian Federation to immediately terminate the military actions in Ukraine and respect the territorial integrity of Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova as of utmost importance for European security.

"Today, we witness quite a new reality

in the EaP region. Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine enjoy the EU membership perspective, and now it is crucial to take effective action in view of the EU membership of all three countries. And that's why the Parliamentary Assembly shall clearly and strongly support this process and the EU membership of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine," the Chair of the EU Integration Committee, Maka Botchorishvili stated when introducing the Resolution.

The EuroNest PA recognizes the contribution of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine to the EU security and welfare and underlines the importance of the EU integration of all three countries for the stability and security of the region, calls on the EU member states to trigger the EU enlargement process and take certain steps in this direction.

French "Wilmotte" to Design the Modern Art Museum on the Mikhailov Hospital Territory



sion, since I have worked in many countries in the field of restoring, renovating and assigning other functions to historical monuments. This historical place, once a hospital, will acquire a new function dedicated to the promotion of art and education," he said.

14 leading global architectural bureaus participated in the international competition announced in the spring of 2022.

In the first round, well-known architectural firms ARCHEA ASSOCIATI (Italy-Florence), CHRIST&GANTENBEIN (Switzerland), EMRE AROLAT ARCHITECTURE (Turkey), HERZOG AND DE MEURON (Switzerland), SHIGERU BAN ARCHITECTS (Japan), and WILMOTTE&ASSOCIES (France) were selected. Two out of six architects are laureates of the prestigious global Pritzker Prize.

Two companies made it to the finals – Herzog and De Meuron and Wilmotte & Associés Architectes.

In the third round, the French Wilmotte & Associés Architectes won, a company with huge experience in large-scale projects involving museum construction and the restoration of cultural monuments. For the future creators of Tbilisi's new modern art museum, it is very important to take a careful approach to the reconstruction of the former hospital and preserve the appearance of its constituent buildings.

Among the many projects implemented by Wilmotte & Associés Architectes, the reconstruction, renovation and design of the Louvre (1987-2008) stand out, as do the renovation of the Museum of Impressionism in Paris MUSEE D'ORSE (2008); the design of the Qatar Museum of Islamic Art (2008); and the reconstruction and design



of the RIJKSMUSEUM Amsterdam, which is included in the top ten most requested museums.

In the process of these competitions, foreign architectural bureaus were actively partnered with Georgian architectural companies. Moreover, Georgian architects will also be involved in the creation of the architectural project of the winning French company.

Construction will start in 2024. More than \$30 million will be invested directly in the five-year project, excluding the collection.

The international architectural competition for the design of a new center (museum) of modern art in Tbilisi has ended. According to the results of the three stages, the international jury identified the winning company which will develop the construction project of the modern art center (museum) in Tbilisi by the end of 2023.

According to the decision of the jury, the company "Wilmotte" will design the opening of a new cultural space in Tbilisi.

The author and investor of the project idea is patron, collector and businessman from Batumi Shalva Breus. He will build an ultra-modern complex on the two-hectare territory, where his personal and rich collection of modern paintings will be on display.



"We will create a unique space in Tbilisi for the presentation of modern works of art, for educational and scientific activities, for the exchange of cultural heritage, for cooperation with such leading centers of the world as Pompidou Center, Tate, Guggenheim Foundation, etc.," Breus noted.

"At the same time, our goal is to create the warmest and most comfortable environment where a person can spend the whole day, visit an exhibition, arthouse films, interesting books in a store, take children to an educational center, visit a cafe with friends, and take a walk in the park near the museum."

The founder of the winning company, Jean-Michel Wilmotte, noted that it is a great honor for him to work on this project.

"It was a pleasure to work on this project, it is an honorable mis-



The Expat Lifestyle: Phillip Abramishvili the "Chill Dad" Bringing French Seafood to Georgian Tables

INTERVIEW BY KESARIA
KATCHARAVA

Our new regular column "The Expat Lifestyle" sees us out and about meeting expat business owners who have chosen to make a life in Georgia. We'll be finding out about their lifestyle, hobbies, culture, likes and dislikes about Georgia, and how this life compares with that abroad. For our first interview, GEORGIA TODAY sat down with entrepreneur Phillip Abramishvili, owner of Malongo Brasserie and the fish market Oyster Bar, to discuss his lifestyle changes since moving here, as well as his insight on French cuisine, which he interestingly claims is not so dissimilar to Georgian cuisine.

"We import fresh products from France, such as oysters, fish, cape, poultry and so on. We also have two restaurants today: Oyster Bar Seafood & More, where you can try the best French oysters and seafood, and Malongo Brasserie, where we offer breakfasts, lunches and dinners in a French home-family style," he tells us. "We also host many events here, such as jazz dinners, DJ brunches, and children's cooking classes. Children learn how to cook croissants, cookies, bread and other interesting things with our chef. At the same time, parents can relax and enjoy our dishes and European wine.

"I've been importing fresh products from France to Georgia for three years now. My import and restaurant partners are French. We're trying to increase the culture of consumption of oysters and seafood in Georgia, and to show the real culinary culture of the European Union. We always try to adapt European cuisine to local tastes and create combinations

with local products."

WHAT IS YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH TBILISI?

I'm Georgian, but my whole life I've lived abroad. My father is from Sokhumi. Four years ago, I moved my whole family to Tbilisi and I'm very happy living here. I love the people, I love the city and the weather, it's all great.

WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE REGION IN GEORGIA?

I love all regions in Georgia, but, to be honest, Batumi is not at the top of my list. I can go there from time to time for a day or two, but I always find myself eager to get back to Tbilisi. My father always taught me that, back in the day, Georgians would rather go to Sokhumi than Batumi, as it has always been more of a port city. I do agree that Batumi is a beautiful city now, but still, there is not enough movement for my taste.

WHAT SORT OF RESTAURANTS DO YOU LIKE IN TBILISI?

I like simplicity, good food and good wine. I like it when there is a variety of cheese, but, unfortunately, that's not so common in many restaurants in Tbilisi. You can always tell when a chef makes something with passion, because they go for the best possible ingredients. I like artistic takes on Georgian cuisine.

DO YOU HAVE A REGION-SPECIFIC DISH THAT YOU LIKE?

I like khashlama, I like ostri, I like kharcho, I like elarji. I like all Georgian dishes because I'm Georgian; it's in my blood, I love it!

BEING SO FAMILIAR WITH FRENCH CUISINE, TELL US SOME SIMILARITIES AND

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN IT AND GEORGIAN DISHES.

When we opened this restaurant and started creating French family dishes, we realized a lot of them were very close to Georgian cuisine. When you eat rata-touille and close your eyes, you can taste khashlama. The only difference is that French cuisine is softened. The choice of seafood is lacking in Georgia, unfortunately. There's not a variety of fish in the Black Sea because it's too warm. I would say the main difference is in the sauces: While Georgian is always on the spicier-sourer side, French is sweet-soft.

WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN YOU'RE NOT COOKING UP DELICIOUS DISHES?

I like to work and I like to travel. I go to the mountains, I go to historical places to find out more about them and feel a connection to them. I really love visiting different countries, and Europe is my favorite, because I absolutely adore small cities, though I'm also keen on big cities like Barcelona. I also like talking to people from those countries and seeing things from their perspective.

YOUR KIDS ARE ATTENDING SCHOOL HERE. HOW WOULD YOU RATE GEORGIAN EDUCATION?

There are different kinds of schools in Georgia. My kids are in public school, but I'm considering transferring them to a private school, because from time to time you have conflicts in relationships. I do believe the Georgian government intends to work hard to make all the schools better, and in two or three years it may be so.

WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY "CONFLICTS"?



I finished school years ago, I don't want to go through it again, I'm not supposed to do a teacher's job in my free time. School shouldn't give parents the work to do when most of us are already struggling to find free time. Plus, I don't want to be the one controlling my kids behavior in school. I think the teacher is supposed to have enough authority that my involvement isn't needed. "Why didn't your kids do their homework?" Oh well, I don't know, you tell me!

DO YOUR KIDS TAKE PART IN ANY EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES?

One of my children is taking horse riding classes, another is into basketball and is part of a team in Rustavi- he tried it once there and after that refused to do it anywhere else! My third child is always chopping and changing - trying out swimming, martial arts, something else. But children are children, and I don't want to push them into anything. I'd rather let them try out whatever they are interested in and hopefully at some

point they'll find their true passion. In a way, I'm a democratic, chill father: "Your life is your life, I give you everything I can, but I will never push you into anything."

HOW DO YOU LIKE TO SPEND YOUR FREE TIME IN TBILISI?

To be honest, I don't have a lot of free time because of my work. I have four kids, and I'll say that in Georgia, there aren't a lot of places I can go with them. That's the main problem for me: When I want to go somewhere with my kids, I find I don't have much choice beyond the cinema or something. Europe has a lot of places where kids can play while adults enjoy their free time or play with them. This was the main reason we started organizing masterclasses for children, so their parents can drink, eat and have a good time while their kids are playing and learning.

When I need "me" time, I also like fishing, and sometimes I like to go for a swim or head up into the mountains to think about life.

Another Deadly Earthquake Hits Turkey and Syria

BY KETEVAN SKHIRTLADZE

A new earthquake of magnitude 6.4 struck the Hatay province in the south of Turkey on February 20, followed by a second 5.8 magnitude quake.

At the time of going to print, as a result of the earthquake, six people died and 294 people were injured. The quake, which struck just as the rescue work from the initial devastating earthquake was winding down, was felt in Syria, Egypt, and Lebanon. More than 500 people were injured in northwest Syria.

This comes two weeks after a massive quake killed more than 47,000 people and damaged or destroyed hundreds of thousands of homes.

The death toll from the earthquake in Turkey has reached 41,020, and in Syria, it has exceeded 5,800. Neither Turkey nor Syria has specified how many people are considered missing. In Turkey, as a result of the earthquake, 105 thousand buildings were partially or completely destroyed and damaged. Hatay is one of the most affected provinces.

More than 430 thousand people have been evacuated from the areas affected by the earthquake. 11,488 rescue teams mobilized from more than 80 countries and continue to work on the ground.

President Tayyip Erdogan said 865,000 people are living in tents and 23,500 in containers, while 376,000 are in student dormitories and public guesthouses outside the earthquake zone.

Erdogan's government has faced criticism about what many Turks say was a slow response, and over-construction policies that meant thousands of apartment buildings collapsed, trapping victims under the rubble.

"It is our duty to hold the wrongdoers accountable before the law," Erdogan said.

He faces presidential and parliamentary elections in May, although the disaster could prompt a delay in the vote.



Image source: indiana.com

UNDP and Japan Assist National Forestry Agency to Protect Forests from Illegal Logging and Wildfire



A new Business Service Yard opened in Jighaura village on 21 February to supply people with sustainably harvested timber. The Business Service Yard sells registered fuelwood to citizens and businesses, ensures that vulnerable families receive a certain amount of timber free of charge, and reinvests the revenues to the National Forestry Agency supporting sustainable forest management in Georgia. It also works to protect a fragile forest ecosystem from wildfire and reduce threats to life and property. Jighaura, Dzegvi and Qyemo Lisi are

three villages in Mtskheta Municipality where Business Service Yards were established by the National Forestry Agency with support from Japan and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). Japan and UNDP helped the National Forestry Agency to equip Business Service Yards with modern firefighting tools, solar panels and all-terrain vehicles, train foresters, and organize an information campaign for local communities. In total, these three facilities will provide services to over 43,000 people living in rural areas of Mtskheta Municipality. Otar Shamugia, Minister of Environ-

mental Protection and Agriculture of Georgia, H.E. Imamura Akira, Ambassador of Japan to Georgia, and Nick Beresford, UNDP Resident Representative in Georgia, visited Jighaura on 21 February to open the Business Service Yard and meet with the local authorities, foresters, and village residents. "Business Service Yards are essential for the success of the ongoing forestry reform in Georgia," Minister Shamugia said. "Our goal is to gradually replace social logging with forest-friendly services and create easy access to sustainably harvested wood resources for citizens and businesses."

"Forests are critical for Georgia's climate-smart development and people's well-being," said Ambassador Imamura Akira. "Japan is proud to share its decades-long experience in forest management and contribute to the protection and sustainable use of natural resources." "UNDP supports forest reform in Georgia as a step forward to protecting nature, sustainably managing natural resources and mitigating climate change," said Nick Beresford. "With Japan's support, we assist the Government to reduce illegal logging, address wildfires, and promote climate-sensitive approaches to forest management

at both national and local levels." With \$920,000 in funding from Japan, UNDP assists the National Forestry Agency to build, develop and improve Business Service Yards in Mtskheta Municipality and introduce a successful forest management model to be expanded to the other regions of Georgia. This support is part of UNDP's global Climate Promise effort to assist 120 countries and territories to achieve their climate goals. Georgia is one of 23 countries where the Climate Promise is funded by Japan, the largest supporter of this pioneering and groundbreaking initiative.



The Georgian Women's National League: Preparing the Nation's Homefront

BY MICHAEL GODWIN

With Russia's invasion of Ukraine now one full year in, European and other countries have taken steps to increase their ability to defend themselves: NATO allies have garrisoned large battlegroups, organized by Brussels, within their border; non-NATO allies like Georgia have bolstered military technologies and increased recruitment. However, not all of this preparedness is taking place at the government level.

Communities have taken it upon themselves to prepare. From the formation of civil defense groups to ensuring that extra canned food and water are ready at hand, Georgians have hedged their bets. One important part of this is the activities of the Women's National League. Led by Ana Brelidze, a lawyer currently focusing on criminal law, the organization aims to prepare women and girls for the challenges the country may face. With lessons learned from the invasion one year ago and seeing the striving of Ukrainian civilians, Georgian women are becoming experts in ensuring safety for themselves and their families.

Be it a natural disaster or another invasion from Russia, Ana and her team have committed themselves to preparing their candidates for the worst. Ana says that her passion for public speaking and the inspiration from her father, a career soldier, drove her to found the League almost ten years ago. GEORGIA TODAY sat down with Ana to ask her about the goals of the Women's National League, what challenges she has faced, and where the organization will go in the future.

WHAT INSPIRED YOU AND YOUR GROUP TO FOUND THE WOMEN'S NATIONAL LEAGUE?

I met my group members two years ago in the General Mazniashvili Youth Legion



First-aid training conducted by the Women's National League. Photo by Ana Brelidze

while taking the course Basics of Military and Hiking. After passing the exams and becoming a member of the Legion, we realized that we had to start something new together. Actually, all the experience and information we gained there inspired us to create an organization called the Women's National League.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE LEAGUE TO A YOUNG WOMAN DECIDING IF MEMBERSHIP IS RIGHT FOR THEM?

I think the most important part about this organization is our goals, which include crisis management. The person who passes the course will master the skills and a person who becomes a member of the league will be involved in all the activities provided. At the moment, the team of the League consists of 20 members and has already trained 105 citizens.

THE ORGANIZATION SEEMS TO HAVE SOME PARAMILITARY AND OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES. WHAT IS THE GOAL OF

war and emergency situations. Within the course, we teach our cadets what to do during natural and man-made disasters. For example, how to survive an earthquake and flood and how to get ready for a mass riot and war. In parallel, we have started a two-day training session. Within the framework of that course, we go to the regions everywhere throughout Georgia and provide information on those issues. The target group of this training course is families. The first day of the two-day training is devoted to elements of civil safety and preparedness and the second day to the basics of first aid.

WHAT HAVE BEEN THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES FOR YOUR GROUP AS YOU'VE GROWN?

Working on those topics was quite challenging, since we started working on issues that were new even for us and there was a lack of information on aspects of civil defense and safety. We started from a blank page. We had to work really hard for months to find any information that was suitable for us, meet relevant

people and start working directly on the concept of the organization.

HOW IS YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE GOVERNMENT? WHAT DEPARTMENTS HAVE BEEN THE BIGGEST "FRIEND" OF YOUR CAUSE?

The Ministry of Defense of Georgia supports us and we also cooperate with various agencies. We cooperate with the Parliament of Georgia and we are planning to have active cooperation in the future.

ARE THERE ANY TOOLS OR ALLIES THAT COULD MAKE THE ORGANIZATION ELEVATE TO THE NEXT LEVEL? HOW COULD THAT HAPPEN?

Our organization is built on volunteerism from start to finish. Therefore, we often have to carry out various activities with our own finances. We don't have an office and we always rely on our partners. Funding is an issue that is unfortunately holding us back on various levels.

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD FOR THE WOMEN'S NATIONAL LEAGUE AND WHERE WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE IT GO?

Our organization has many courses and activities planned. We think we will gradually grow and awareness about us will increase. The work we're doing is brand new for our country, meaning no organization has existed with such goals and objectives in Georgia until now. Accordingly, each of us feels a greater responsibility. We are sure that our organization will make a great contribution to the civil development of our country.

For more information or to get involved with the Women's National League, find them via Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/w.nationalleague?mibextid=ZbVVKwL> or through their email address at w.nationalleague@gmail.com



Emergency situation preparedness classes with the Women's National League. Photo by Ana Brelidze

A Vegan Baker on His Passion for Bringing Some Humane Sweetness to Georgian Lives



Lasha Kavrishvili, the creator of online bakery Sweet Vegan

INTERVIEW BY KATIE RUTH DAVIES

On February 27, the Orthodox “Great Lent” begins in the lead up to Easter on April 15. For the most devout, this means a two-month abstinence from animal-derived food. For some, though, “fasting” is a way of life that is growing in popularity and has more to do with health and a belief in animal rights than it does to do with the Church. It goes by the name of veganism.

To explore this more, GEORGIA TODAY contacted 21-year-old Lasha Kavrishvili, the creator of Sweet Vegan, an online bakery that opened just a month ago, which he runs alongside his mother Eka and grandmother Naira.

“My motivation for creating an online bakery was that there are very few options in terms of vegan cakes in Georgia, and yet there is a great demand from vegans. I decided to create my own online pastry shop, where I could offer tasty and colorful vegan cakes at affordable prices,” he tells us.

WHAT IS VEGANISM TO YOU?

For me, veganism is primarily a way of life, a healthy way of life; humanity and love for the world and animals.

HOW DID YOU DISCOVER IT/BECOME VEGAN?

Even in childhood, I didn't like to eat

meat, but I was “forced” to because they thought it was good for my health. When I turned 15, I decided to categorically refuse all meat products. At first, my family didn't understand me and opposed me, but over time they got used to it and realized that I would never eat meat again and there was no point forcing it anymore. They saw I wasn't doing anything harmful to my body; on the contrary, they realized that vegetarianism/veganism is a better and more humane choice. I was a vegetarian for seven years and one year ago I became vegan.

WHY DID YOU STOP EATING MEAT?

At first, I stopped eating meat because of my love for animals, and over time I realized that it was good for my health too.

WHAT WAS YOUR MOTIVATION BEHIND OPENING YOUR BAKERY?

Confectionery is my hobby, as are painting and art. I like drawing, painting, plants, animals, and nature in general.

As a child, I often baked cakes for myself and my family members, and I was quite good at it. Now, those same family members help me manage my bakery - we work together. I want more people to know about my pastry, and I train and try to develop in this field every day so as to help people understand that vegan cakes and cookies can be as, if not more, delicious than non-vegan ones.

WHO ARE YOUR CLIENTS AND



Tofu pelmeni



Vegan tart with apple jam

WHAT ARE YOUR BEST-SELLERS?

Right now, my main customers count vegans and vegetarians. We only opened the bakery a month ago, but so far, our best-selling product is cakes. We're gradually adding a variety of vegan cakes and pies to our list, as the demand grows.

WHAT CHALLENGES HAVE YOU FACED AS A BUSINESS/AS A VEGAN?

It's early days, but so far I haven't faced any challenges. The only good challenge is that at this stage we have a lot of orders we're trying to fulfill. Our aim right now is happy customers!

VEGAN FOOD TENDS TO BE MORE EXPENSIVE THAN NON-VEGAN FOOD, AND THIS IS ONE FACTOR THAT PUTS PEOPLE OFF TAKING UP OR STICKING TO A VEGAN DIET. HOW WOULD YOU ANSWER THAT?

Vegan food is really expensive compared to non-vegan food in Georgia, in most part due to the fact that there are fewer vegan spaces. I often buy vegan sweets and other food in vegan spaces, but in many cases I find it unaffordable. One of the reasons I created my own vegan space was to have somewhere I could offer both food and sweets at a price

everyone can afford.

NEXT WEEK THE "GREAT LENT" STARTS FOR ORTHODOX PEOPLE. DO YOU EXPECT MORE DEMAND FOR YOUR PRODUCTS?

There may be more demand for my products during Lent, yes, as people often buy fasting sweets in such periods.

DO YOU THINK THE ORTHODOX FASTING DIET CAN BE USED TO PROMOTE VEGANISM?

My personal opinion is that fasting should not be used to promote anything, as fasting is not a diet. During fasting, a person seeks to cleanse himself, both physically and spiritually, of accumulated sins. Fasting is related to religion, and people should remember that they should at least express their desires and needs during fasting. In comparison, veganism is a way of life.

HOW DO YOU SEE THE FUTURE OF VEGANISM IN GEORGIA?

The number of vegans and vegetarians in Georgia is growing faster than before, which is very gratifying. I think, over time, more people will come to understand the ideology of veganism and there will be ever more vegans and vegetarians in Georgia.

CULTURE

Pepping up the Somber Nest of Science

NUGZAR B. RUHADZE

The signs of rapprochement between the public and academic forces are becoming increasingly vivid in the new era of proliferating knowledge. One of the best instances of this helpful move might be that of western academia trying to popularize its scientific achievements by talking to people and letting them participate in debates.

Sakartvelo, as small and inconsequential as it might look in the eyes of the rest of the world, has an uncanny capability to emulate the well-developed world in many ways, copying the western behavioral paradigm. Just a week ago, something totally unbelievable took place within the walls of Georgia's Academy of Sciences, corroborating the above description of our ethnic character. The stage of the Academy's main conference hall was set intellectually ablaze when Academician Innes Merabishvili presented her brilliant talk to a full house

on the issue of the famous Georgian medieval epic “The Knight in the Tiger's Skin” by Shota Rustveli. It was a moment that saw the Georgian Academy of Sciences loudly claim its deserved niche among the vital academies of the world; ready for and capable of publicly discussing the burning issues of liberal arts and science with an intrepid sense of freedom and modernism taken together.

The gist of Professor Merabishvili's approach was that one of the main protagonists of the poem, Nestan-Darejan, along with her beloved knight Tariel, venerated by the Georgian people throughout the centuries, were presented as deliberate plotters and executors of the unlawful elimination of another nation's potentate's son. This is a very nontraditional interpretation of those acclaimed characters, and it led to understandable concerns being heard from other scholars of the field. For them, Merabishvili's argument was catastrophically off the beaten track, as in early medieval times this kind of treatment of fellow humans was a “norm.” Yet, the unrelenting professor argues that science should not refrain from telling the

truth if that truth deserves daylight. She says that, otherwise, angelic Nestan-Darejan carried out an immoral act in this particular case. It was a flagrantly controversial bomb of a kind, but the audience liked the new approach to the poem's customary reading, locked as it tends to be within the restrictive frames of literary criticism, and never tried before in the nation's history.

How solid might the contemporary relevance of Professor Merabishvili's argument be, the huge challenge for conservative Rustavelian scholars that it is? From the viewpoint of introducing a certain amount of flexibility into understanding Rustaveli's masterpiece of Oriental Renaissance, it might be fair to state that Merabishvili's spirited and audacious approach makes sharp progress in the wide and significant realm of Georgian literature. A new word is always an indication of evolution, if not revolution, which we lack in the strict and stringent academic world.

The presentation was accompanied by a motley spectrum of emotional reaction to the animated presenter's speech: The public was agog; the stern panel-mod-

erator sounded annoyed, having prematurely left the conference; the excited podium-holders wanted to reflect their long-nursed conservative ideas in their stressful comments, vainly trying to overwhelm the leading actor of the day. Conclusively, the Academy looked rejuvenated, reinvigorated and revitalized to the extent of the attending public's obvious elation, who interrupted the speakers with applause. On the whole, the event was asking to be evaluated as a social and cultural change that might be seen in the life of Georgian academia in the long run.

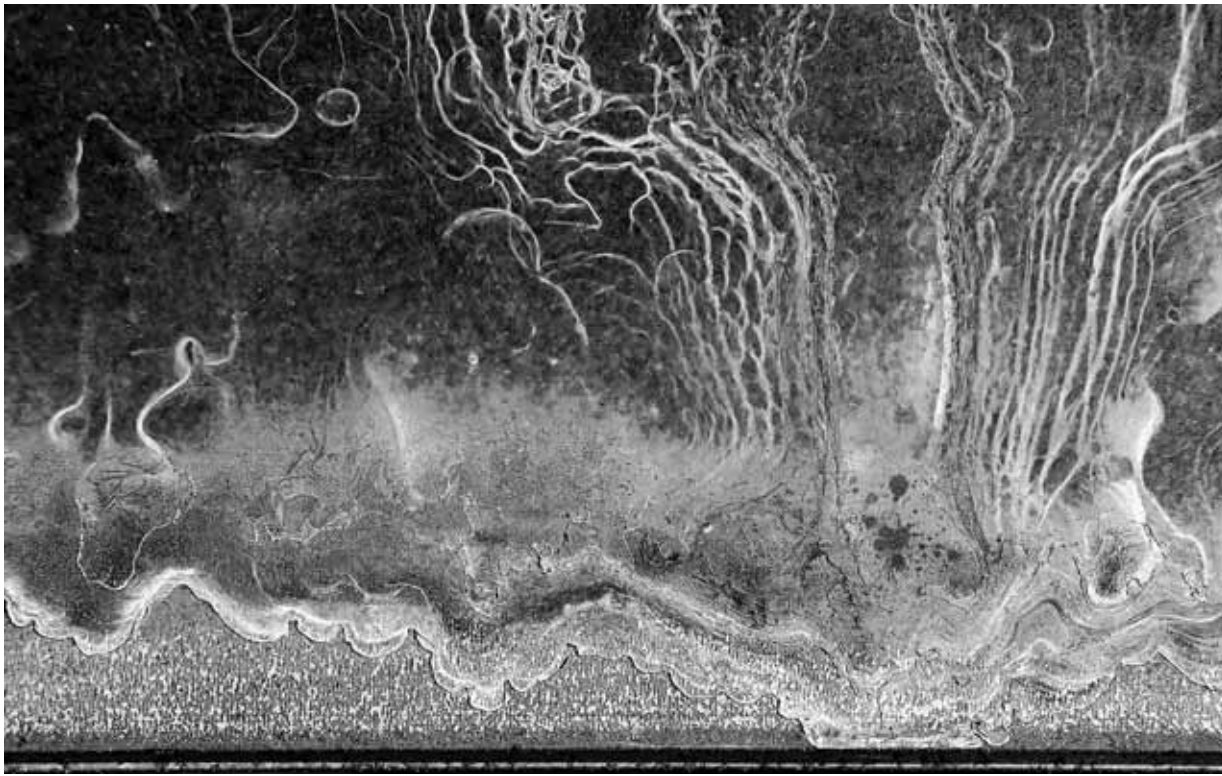
On another count, the Georgian national Academy of Sciences is a real old-timer, still alive and kicking in the erstwhile tradition of holding the learned men and women of science and liberal arts within a special club of national level, where science in general has been kept tamed and organized, the difference between then and now being that, before, the system was administered by the communist regime to keep the high-caliber soviet holders of valuable expert knowledge at bay, and today, in the era of freedom of speech and thought, intellectuals



Professor Merabishvili suggests that one of the main protagonists of the poem, Nestan-Darejan, and her beloved knight Tariel, venerated by the Georgian people throughout centuries, were deliberate plotters

are no longer under any governmental pressure, but are still on the official payroll of the state. Notably, among the creatively thinking scholars of the country, there are quite a few like Academician Innes Merabishvili, who keep fighting with courage and determination to keep science vibrant and pulsating in the public eye.

Just the Rust: Tbilisi



BLOG BY TONY HANMER

Oops, the Nekresi Monastery article I expected to write for this week will have to wait, though its photos are ready. Something equally interesting has captured my interest.

Some friends and I recently visited a steel materials stockyard in the city, on the edge of the great Eliava Bazaar. We had looked around to find one which wasn't roofed, demonstrating a certain divergence in the steel sellers' and my own preferences: They want to minimize rust on their product (forming as a result of rain and snow), whereas I want to photograph the rust and am not interested without it. We found what we were looking for, and then returned so they could video me taking my shots, part of a documentary film they are making of me as an artist.

The best parts of all the various sizes, forms and gauges of Fe on display, for

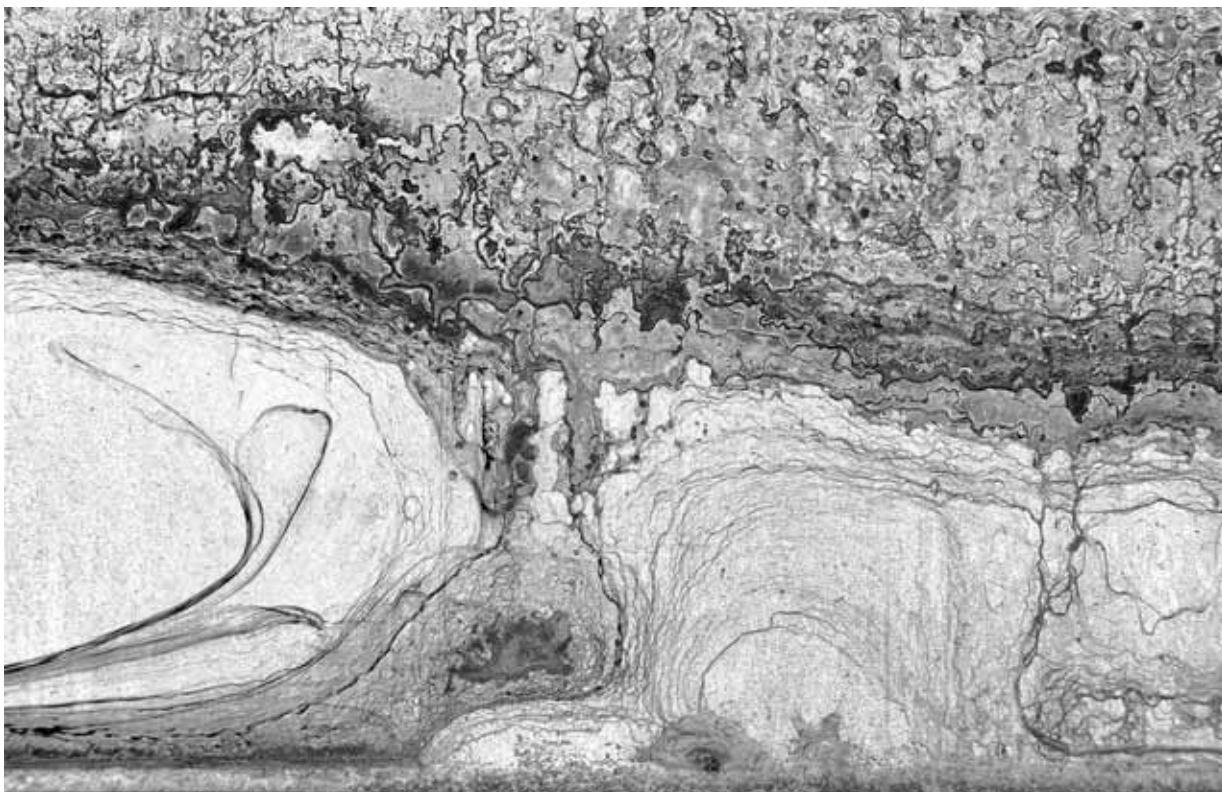
my purposes, are the giant flat sheets or plates, stacked according to thickness and size. These are still quite new and have a bluish sheen which contrasts perfectly with the reds and oranges of the corrosion slowly forming on their surfaces. I roamed around and began shooting, aiming straight down and trying to get my camera's plane of focus perfectly parallel to these flat surfaces, in order to achieve sharp focus everywhere. The curved or flat sides of square or round tubes were less interesting to me, though not at all less colorful, simply because they were older and also would be much less in the sharp focus which I wanted.

Because I can find beauty everywhere, it was not hard to be delighted. The alien worlds and freakish landscapes were sights I have never seen before, just lying out there in the open for anyone who will (or can) notice and be dazzled. I even bought a couple of small squares, about 12 inches on a side, for 7 GEL each, to take home as souvenirs. These I had to decide about: Spray varnish onto them, thus fixing their patterns and arresting

further development, or leave them in, say, my bathroom to continue slowly rusting more each day?

In the end I opted for the fixing. One square has a man's neck and head on it, in profile, mouth open and speech visible in front of him. His thoughts rise above him in a series of small balloons. The other square simply features a tree alone on a hill, its leafy branches blowing sideways in the wind.

Home again, to post-process in photoshop. This was largely about increasing the saturation and contrast of the images, making them pop and become even more other-worldly. Then I went a step further from reality: I also made black and white versions, which are full of contrast as I raise or lower the amount of brightness of six different colors relative to each other. Now what you see has never existed in nature, because rust on steel is always full of its own colors. That's fine with me. I'm not out to document reality but to find or make beauty everywhere I go. Even something as entropic, mundane and undesired as corrosion from mois-



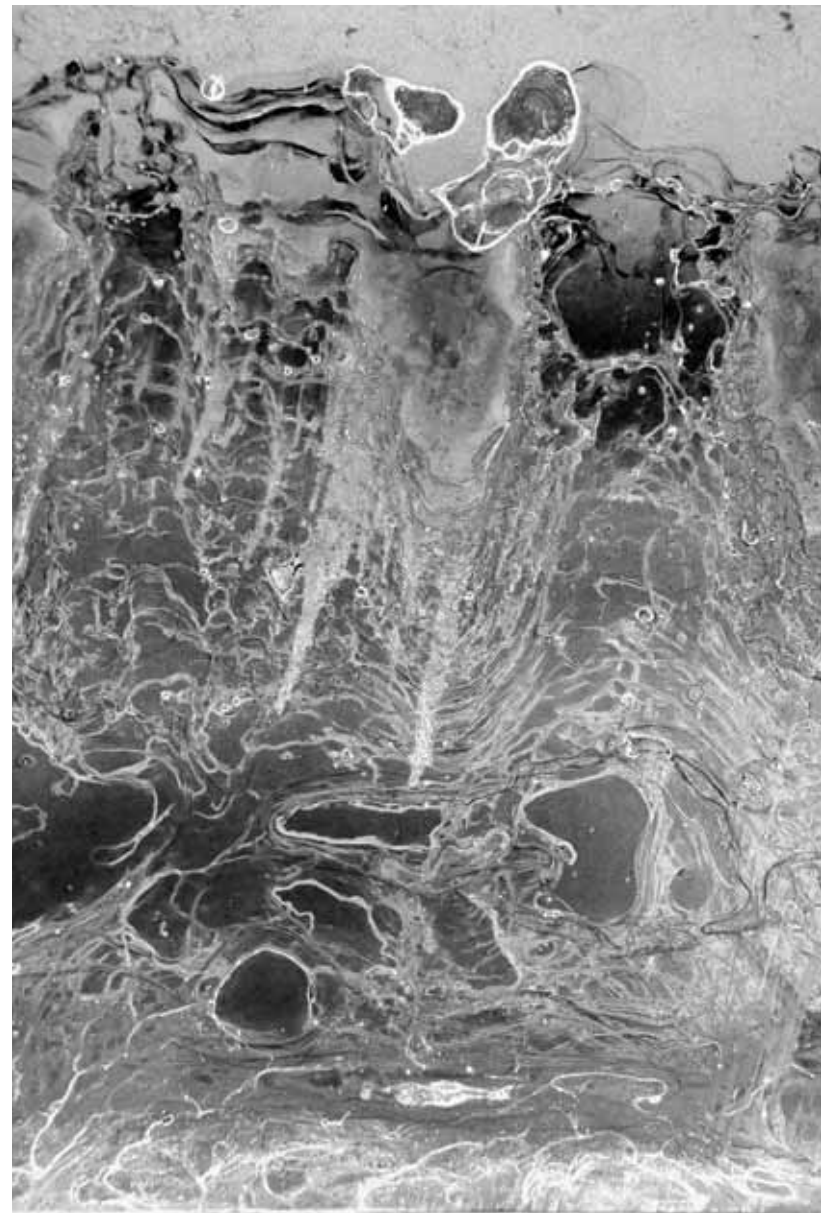
ture on ferric surfaces can be transformed into little planes of existence which sparkle with imagination.

I may go back in a few days, once the current rains have dried on the steel and brought more rust, or people have bought a topmost sheet or two, giving me new material with which to work. I may also try getting as little as possible in focus, by angling the camera in relation to the plane of each sheet.

A final thought occurs to me, impractical in my situation but waiting for someone with the means to make it work. This would be a Timelapse of the same piece of steel, over weeks or months, say one shot a day as it continues to rust. It would

need constant lighting daily and a camera devoted to the task. Maybe someone will do it, and take RUST to a whole new level even from that which I have found. Until then, open your eyes and see what is there right before you. See.

Tony Hanmer has lived in Georgia since 1999, in Svaneti since 2007, and been a weekly writer and photographer for GT since early 2011. He runs the "Svaneti Renaissance" Facebook group, now with nearly 2000 members, at www.facebook.com/groups/SvanetiRenaissance/. He and his wife also run their own guest house in Etseri: www.facebook.com/hanmer.house.svaneti



PUBLISHER & GM
George Sharashidze

COMMERCIAL DEPARTMENT
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Katie Ruth Davies

Layout:
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Sergey Gevenov

Circulation Managers:
David Kerdikashvili,
David Djandigava

ADDRESS
1 Melikishvili Str.
Tbilisi, 0179, Georgia

Tel.: +995 32 229 59 19
E: info@georgiatoday.ge
F: GeorgiaToday

ADVERTISING & SUBSCRIPTION
+995 555 00 14 46
E-mail:
marketing@georgiatoday.ge

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