



## FOCUS ON GEORGIA

The EU grants Georgia EU Candidate Status

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Source: Salome Zourabichvili Instagram

## Dorka Takácsy on Orban's End Goal and How Georgia Fits into the Game

INTERVIEW BY VAZHA TAVBERIDZE

**D**orka Takácsy is a researcher who is pursuing her Ph.D. studies at the Corvinus University of Budapest, contemplating the broader topic of Russian domestic disinformation about the West. She is currently a Research Fellow at the Center for Euro-Atlantic Integration and Democracy (CEID), focusing on disinformation. Radio Free Europe/RL's Georgian Service sat down with her to find out more about Hungary's rogue president and what his latest moves might mean for Ukraine, Georgia and the EU as a whole.

### WHAT IS PRESIDENT ORBAN'S MODUS OPERANDI VIS-À-VIS THE EUROPEAN UNION THESE DAYS? WHAT'S THE GAME HE'S PLAYING?

At the moment, what we see is that it's in his interest to create a group of illiberal states and increase the number of illiberal states within the

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Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban. Photo by Bernadett Szabo/REUTERS

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BONDS		Price	w/w	m/m	COMMODITIES		Price	w/w	m/m
GRAIL 07/28	91.89 (YTM 6.09%)	+4.1%	+7.0%		Crude Oil, Brent (US\$/bbl)	79.70	+7.3%	-3.2%	
SILNET 01/27	100.05 (YTM 8.35%)	+0.9%	+1.1%		Gold Spot (US\$/OZ)	2 031.39	+0.2%	+2.7%	
TBC 06/24	99.45 (YTM 6.90%)	+0.0%	+0.1%						
STOCKS		Price	w/w	m/m	CURRENCIES		Price	w/w	m/m
Bank of Georgia (BGE LN)	GBP 38.35	+12.6%	+8.9%		GEL / USD	2.6837	+0.2%	-0.4%	
Georgia Capital (CGEO LN)	GBP 10.04	+2.0%	-0.6%		GEL / EUR	2.9366	+0.8%	-0.3%	
TBC Bank Group (TBCG LN)	GBP 28.65	+2.7%	+3.6%		GEL / GBP	3.3917	+0.3%	+0.6%	
					GEL / CHF	3.1075	+1.1%	+2.1%	
					GEL / RUB	0.0295	-0.7%	-3.0%	
					GEL / TRY	0.0920	-0.3%	-1.7%	
					GEL / AZN	1.5808	+0.3%	-0.3%	
					GEL / AMD	0.0066	-0.2%	-1.2%	
					GEL / UAH	0.0714	-1.2%	-4.4%	
					EUR / USD	0.9139	-0.6%	-0.0%	
					GBP / USD	0.7912	-0.2%	-1.1%	
					CHF / USD	0.8627	-1.0%	-2.5%	
					RUB / USD	90.9259	+0.9%	+2.7%	
					TRY / USD	29.1361	+0.5%	+1.3%	
					AZN / USD	1.6990	-	+0.1%	
					AMD / USD	404.2700	+0.4%	+9.9%	



## Georgia's Winter Resorts Officially Open Ahead of Upcoming Ski Federation World Cup

BY MARIAM MTIVLISHVILI

The season at the winter resorts was officially opened this week with an event held in Gudauri, where vacationers are greeted by two new ropeway complexes and three new ski tracks.

"The International Ski Federation, as a result of our high-level organization, decided to hold the World Cup stages

in Georgia every year," said Minister of Economy, Levan Davitashvili.

"This year, the first stage will be held in Bakuriani. Then we will have the World Cup stage in Gudauri in February. Of course, this high-level event in Georgia will be covered at the global level, and will increase the awareness of our winter resorts, ultimately bringing even more tourists with high purchasing power to our country.

"Of course, all of this is aimed at the dynamic development of our tourism industry," he noted.

## NBG Reduces its Monetary Policy Rate to 9.5%



On December 20, 2023, the Monetary Policy Committee of the National Bank of Georgia (NBG) decided to reduce the monetary policy rate (refinancing rate) by 0.5 percentage points. The Monetary Policy Rate stands at 9.5 percent.

Accordingly, this decision means that for all those persons whose loan is tied to the refinancing rate, the loan interest will be cheaper.

NBG says inflation in Georgia has continued to decline, registering a more pronounced decrease than anticipated. In November, it stood at 0.1 percent. Core inflation also followed a downward trajectory, reaching 1.8 percent in the same month. This tendency is driven by both domestic and external factors. The tight monetary policy implemented by the NBG has effectively anchored inflation expectations that continue to decline.

Meanwhile, inflation of domestically produced goods has gradually approached the 3 percent target, registering at 3.8 percent in November. Additionally, the stability in international commodity prices still contributes to maintaining low inflation for imported goods. Other things equal, the current forecast for 2024 indicates inflation temporarily overshooting its target, primarily driven by base effects, before it gradually aligns with the targeted rate in the medium term.

Despite these positive trends, there are

notable inflationary risks. In particular, economic growth dynamics pose the risk of demand-side inflationary pressures. Preliminary data suggests robust domestic demand, with the average annual economic growth from January to October recorded at 6.9 percent. Along with this high economic growth, the increased potential output in the post-pandemic era partially mitigates demand-side inflationary pressures.

Nevertheless, with the economy having fully rebounded to the pre-pandemic trend, the risk of demand-side inflation remains noteworthy. The NBG is vigilantly monitoring the economic dynamics and stands prepared to implement necessary measures should signs of sustained inflationary pressures emerge. A recent acceleration in credit growth rate, predominantly driven by business loans, is also being closely observed.

In light of these inflationary risk assessments, the monetary policy rate, despite the current reduction, continues to be maintained at a relatively elevated level. The NBG will continue only a gradual normalization of monetary policy, in alignment with the evolving inflation forecasts.

The NBG continuously monitors economic and financial market developments and will use all available tools to ensure price stability.

The next meeting of the Monetary Policy Committee will be held on January 31, 2024.

# Ukraine Latest: Kremlin Calls Ukraine Peace Plan 'Absurd,' US Says It Will Tighten Russian Oil Price Cap Enforcement



Soldiers on guard. Photo by Ozge Elif Kizil | Anadolu | Getty Images

COMPILED BY ANA DUMBADZE

Russia launched its fifth air attack on the Ukrainian capital Kyiv this month, Ukrainian officials reported Wednesday, saying that Ukraine's air defenses intercepted 18 of the 19 Russian drones launched at the city as well as Odesa, Kherson and other regions.

The development comes as Kyiv struggles to obtain approval for aid packages from the US and EU, and as its troops continue to face heavy fighting amid a bitterly cold winter.

In comments to journalists Wednesday, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said there was currently no basis for peace talks between Russia and Ukraine, and described Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's 10-point peace plan as "absurd." The plan includes requirements for the re-establishment of all Ukraine's internationally-recognized borders and the withdrawal of all Russian troops.

Peskov also accused the United Kingdom of pressuring Kyiv to refuse a draft peace deal shortly after Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022.

### US SAYS IT WILL EXTEND ENFORCEMENT OF OIL PRICE CAP

The US Treasury said it would tighten enforcement of its price cap on Russian oil by increasing actions targeting ship-owners and vessels that transport Russian crude being sold above the \$60 per barrel level.

"Today's designations demonstrate our commitment to upholding the principles of the price cap policy, which advance the goals of supporting stable energy markets while reducing Russian revenues to fund its war against Ukraine," Deputy Secretary of the Treasury Wally Adeyemo said.

The cap is a joint initiative between Western allies which seeks to curb Russia's ability to fund the war in Ukraine which sees countries signed up to the cap restrict access to financial and professional services to those transporting

seaborne crude trading above the cap. However, some have argued it requires greater enforcement following signs of ships evading the cap.

Urals crude is currently trading at a five-day average of \$59.48 a barrel, according to Neste data, but has mostly been above the cap through the summer and fall.

The US said it was updating its guidance on implementing the cap, and "designating [as sanctioned] a Government of Russia-owned ship manager as well as several obscure oil traders who have emerged as frequent participants in the seaborne transportation of Russian-origin oil following the imposition of the price cap."

### UKRAINIAN MILITARY MOVING TO DEFENSIVE POSITIONS, UK'S MOD SAYS

Ukraine's armed forces are taking up a more defensive posture, the UK's Ministry of Defense said in its latest analysis of the conflict, after their summer counteroffensive failed to achieve a major breakthrough against Russia's army and as winter weather sets in after almost 22 months of war. "In recent weeks, Ukraine has mobilized a concerted effort to improve field fortifications as its forces pivot to a more defensive posture along much of the frontline," the MoD said.

### RUSSIA LAUNCHES FIFTH AIR ATTACK ON KYIV THIS MONTH, UKRAINIAN OFFICIALS SAY

Russia on Tuesday launched its fifth air attack on Kyiv this month, Ukrainian officials said.

Ukraine's air force reported that its air defense systems intercepted 18 out of 19 drones that attacked Kyiv as well as the southern port city of Odesa, the southern region of Kherson and other areas.

"According to preliminary information, there were no casualties or destruction in the capital," the head of Kyiv's military administration, Serhiy Popko, wrote in a post on Telegram.

Officials said nine people in Kherson were injured in an overnight attack by Russian drones, and that four of them were children. Additionally, two Russian surface-to-air missiles were launched at

the eastern Kharkiv region, but there were no casualties from that strike, Ukrainian authorities said.

### YEKATERINA DUNTSOVA APPLIES TO RUN AGAINST PUTIN FOR RUSSIAN PRESIDENCY

Former TV journalist Yekaterina Duntsova put her name forward to stand in the Russian presidential election in March that Vladimir Putin is expected to win by a landslide. Duntsova, 40, has called for an end to the conflict in Ukraine and the release of political prisoners, including opposition leader Alexei Navalny.

In her interview with Reuters, Duntsova avoided using the word "war" to describe the Russia-Ukraine conflict, which Putin calls a "special military operation," and acknowledged she was afraid.

"Any sane person taking this step would be afraid - but fear must not win," she said.

### FOREIGN AID APPROVAL TO KYIV APPEARS UNCERTAIN AS EU AND US SEE INCREASING OPPOSITION

The US and EU both failed to approve their latest military aid packages to Kyiv, sparking concern among many supporters of Ukraine and prompting Zelensky to travel to Washington to lobby lawmakers himself.

Several Republican lawmakers are refusing to back any funding package that does not also include what they deem as sufficient funding for US border security.

Senate leaders said a deal was not likely to happen soon. Senator Dick Durbin, the second-highest ranking Democrat in the Senate, said any progress may have to wait till January.

"I hope that they're going to prepare the text and sit down and roll up their sleeves and finish up as soon as we get back in January," Durbin told press.

"I am certain, US and European financial support will continue," Zelensky said during a wide-ranging press conference Tuesday. "I'm confident the United States won't betray us."

### ZELENSKY: UKRAINIAN MILITARY IS ASKING FOR UP TO 500,000 MORE PEOPLE TO BE MOBILIZED

Ukraine's military is asking for between 450,000 and 500,000 more people to be mobilized, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said during a news conference, but he added that a final decision has not been made.

Senior military and government officials still needed to discuss "this very sensitive issue of mobilization," and then the country's parliament would have to vote on it, Zelensky said.

The development comes as the president once again asks Western allies for more aid funding, and as troops continue heavy fighting in Ukraine's east amid a bitterly cold winter.

## For the First Time, Perfect 5G Is Available in Georgia

BY MARIAM MTIVLISHVILI

Cellfie Mobile, a Georgian mobile operator serving more than 1.3 million customers across Georgia, spoke on Wednesday at an official ceremony in Gudauri about the introduction of 5G technology in advanced telecommunications.

5G technology, which offers fundamentally new services to users, is already fully available in Gudauri and Bakuriani, as well as in two districts of Tbilisi - Didube and Didi Dighomi.

The 5G network of Cellfie was launched in pilot mode in Tbilisi on November 21, and it has already been used by more than 5,000 users.



# Georgia Celebrates EU Candidacy Decision

BY TEAM GT

**O**n the evening of December 14, the European Council announced it was opening EU accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova and was granting EU Candidate Status to Georgia.

Georgia has been celebrating the news since, with European Union flags flying in the streets and on different buildings in Tbilisi and countrywide, and the TV tower above the capital lit up in blue and white.

A public celebration of the announcement was held in Freedom Square in Tbilisi on December 15, just before the official New Year lights were lit citywide, with speeches from the country's Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili, and Ambassador of the EU to Georgia Pawel Herczynski, congratulating the country, followed by a live orchestral rendition of the Georgian and EU anthems, and several musical numbers from Georgian celebrities and choral groups.

The Prime Minister thanked all the people who had "laid each brick in the cause of this historic victory and brought this victory to the people".

He also thanked European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, European Council President Charles Michel, European Commissioner Oliver Varhelyi and the leaders of all 27 EU member states for granting Georgia EU status.

"With great pride and joy, I congratulate you on the historic decision. Georgia has become a candidate country for EU membership. I want to congratulate every citizen on today's historic day. This is truly a victory that our government obtained for our country and our people. We fought, we won. I want to express my sincere gratitude to our European friends," Garibashvili said.

The European Council's decision to grant Georgia EU Candidate Status followed on from the European Commission's recommendation to grant candidate status to Georgia on November 8.

Georgia officially applied for EU membership on March 3, 2022.

## US AMBASSADOR CONGRATULATES GEORGIA

"We welcome the commitment of the European Union and its member states to the expansion of the family of European countries," US Ambassador to Georgia Robin Dunigan said. "The United States celebrates with you that you are Georgians and, therefore, Europeans. We are proud to support Georgia on this path and will continue to do so."

## LITHUANIAN PRESIDENT: A NECESSARY POLITICAL SIGNAL

"An amazing political process is going on: Just yesterday we were talking about the obstacles related to Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, and today we are celebrating, and I am really proud to be a European. It was necessary to send this political signal to our friends, especially Ukraine, because the country is at war. I had the opportunity to communicate with President Zelensky, I called him and said: You deserved this decision, you made a lot of efforts to carry out the necessary reforms, and you were rewarded for it," said Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda.

## NATO REP HAILS EU'S DECISION ON GEORGIA, EMPHASIZES NEED TO CONTINUE REFORMS

Javier Colomina, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General of NATO in the Caucasus and Central Asia, described the granting of candidate status to Georgia as a 'historic moment'.

"The decision by the European Union is a historical decision for Georgia, but it is also a decision that should help the



Source: GT

international community to continue to support Georgia," Colomina said at the press conference in Tbilisi.

He expressed the expectation that Georgia will fulfil the nine recommendations of the European Union, aligning with NATO's requirements.

"I believe this moment should help the bilateral relationship between NATO and Georgia," he added.

Colomina further acknowledged that while Georgia has implemented some important reforms, there is still room for improvement, specifically mentioning areas such as security services, the judicial system, depolarization, and de-oligarchization. He emphasized the need for continued efforts to address the remaining challenges.

The NATO Representative emphasized the significance of fair and competitive elections as a vital component of democracy, and highlighted the shared responsibility of both the government and the opposition in ensuring the democratic process. Colomina expressed expectations for the year 2024 to be crucial for Georgia, not only in terms of reforms, but also due to the scheduled elections.

## KOBAKHIDZE: NEGOTIATIONS ON EU ACCENSION WILL START NEXT DECEMBER

Chairman of the ruling Georgian Dream party, Irakli Kobakhidze, this week said he expects the opening of negotiations on EU accession for Georgia in December 2024.

The GD Chair noted that the government is working on the fulfillment of the European Commission's newly-defined 9 steps.

"Ukraine and Moldova were granted candidate status in June last year, and negotiations opened in a year and a half for these countries. In our case, we believe negotiations will open much earlier based on the information from our European partners," Kobakhidze said during an interview on the Tavisufali Khedva (Free Vision) Program of TV Channel 1.

"The discussion on this issue is scheduled for December at the level of the European Commission and European Council, which means one year after granting the status. Work is in progress and we hope negotiations on accession will open in one year."

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# Dorka Takácsy on Orbán's End Goal and How Georgia Fits into the Game

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EU. Hungary is already in the EU, and now he's very proudly promoting the accession process of many countries, including Georgia, for example, though, interestingly enough, not that of Ukraine. But the promotion of the increasingly illiberal Georgia's accession process is a flagship project for him: he wants to create a makeshift alliance of like-minded countries.

## IS HE, AS MANY CLAIM, THE KREMLIN'S MAN IN THE EU? OR IS HE PLAYING HIS OWN GAME?

Unfortunately, the two aren't mutually exclusive. Blocking the 50 million Euro financial aid to Ukraine is, to date, the biggest favor he has done the Kremlin. He likes to talk about things, likes to make symbolic gestures towards Russia, but pleasing Moscow in such a way as this was until now absolutely unheard of. Of course, his deeds are very much praised by the Kremlin: basically, everything Orbán is doing is handy for the Kremlin and helps it maintain its own domestic propaganda, where it tells its people: "Look, the EU is not unified - There is Hungary, there is Slovakia. The EU and the West collectively do not have a united strong stance against us." So his deeds and his rhetoric have already been exploited by the Kremlin for a very long time. But to underpin it with an actual blocking of financial aid to Ukraine is taking it to a new level.

## OK, SO HE BENEFITS THE KREMLIN, BUT WHAT DOES HE GET IN RETURN?

That is the million-dollar question. The governmental rhetoric usually claims this relationship is beneficial for Hungary in terms of getting it cheap gas, but this is a myth. Hungary does not receive gas any cheaper than other regional countries that do not have friendly relations with the Kremlin. Even so, the rhetoric always refers to this. Most likely,

The cost of being in such a visibly close relationship with Russia is paid by the country and by the Hungarian people



Dorka Takácsy. Source: ceid.hu

it's not the national interest, but the financial interests of the government and its close circles, because otherwise, this would not be logical - the cost of being in such a visibly close relationship with Russia is paid by the country and by the Hungarian people.

**ORBÁN RESISTED UNTIL HE GOT 10 BILLION EUROS UNFROZEN FOR HUNGARY AND THEN, IN A TELLING GESTURE, LEFT THE HALL, CLEARLY NOT THERE TO PROTEST OPENING THE ACCESSION TALKS WITH UKRAINE. HOWEVER, HE WAS VERY MUCH PRESENT WHEN THE FINANCIAL AID TO UKRAINE WAS BEING DISCUSSED, PROMPTLY BLOCKING IT 1 TO 26. HOW FAR CAN THE EU GO WHEN IT COMES TO AIDING UKRAINE, WITH ORBÁN POPPING UP EACH TIME AND DEMANDING MORE MONEY?**

I see the risk of exactly this happening. Before the meeting, he and his government were talking about how Hungary is not going to link these two issues,

There will be multiple occasions when Hungary's agreement is needed, and Orbán threatens to hinder this process every single time

Hungary's frozen funds and the whole Ukraine issue. But already on Friday morning, Orbán, in his customary radio interview that he does every week, was claiming exactly the opposite; that the beginning of the accession talks is merely

a symbolic process, and over the years, throughout these negotiations, there will be multiple occasions when Hungary's agreement is going to be needed, and that it will somehow hinder this process every single time, because, as he said, "Hungary needs to get all the money, not half and not quarter." This is the textbook definition of blackmail. But as far as the Ukrainian financial aid package goes, since this was not vetoed, but blocked, it can eventually be circumvented by other countries, and they have already demonstrated their willingness to do so. But what Hungary did will definitely slow down the process for Ukraine, which is a big blow.

## LET'S MOVE FROM UKRAINE TO GEORGIA, WHICH, AS YOU SAID, IS ONE OF ORBÁN'S FLAGSHIP PROJECTS. JUST HOW GRATEFUL SHOULD GEORGIA BE TO ORBÁN FOR ITS GETTING EU CANDIDATE STATUS? DID HE PLAY A ROLE?

It's a very good question, but if we look at the Hungarian government, we see it's becoming increasingly isolated, and there are precious few countries willing to be in their camp. So, therefore, you see this lovely relationship with a fellow illiberal regime, big symbolic steps, for example, inviting PM Garibashvili as a keynote speaker at the Conservative Conference in Budapest, then paying him a familial visit to Georgia. And considering Orbán isn't really keen on foreign trips like these, especially this far, it's a sign of personal favor. There are many other clicking interests, a very, very similar rhetoric, with what the Georgian Dream is doing in Georgia and Orbán in Hungary - they are cheering illiberalism, they demonstrate, eventually, a despise towards the "decaying" West and a love of worshipping sovereignty, whether real or perceived. And they also have a really pronounced anti-Kyiv stance: neither government believes that Ukraine can win in this conflict. And, interestingly, each time Orbán says Ukraine isn't ready for EU membership, that it's not democratic enough, and brings up its corruption and oligarchs, he conveniently ignores all similar criticism towards Georgia. And if the investigative journalists are right, then we can talk about the shipments from Hungary to Russia, and similar kinds of business being conducted in Georgia as well. So all this brings them rather close. But I would urge Georgia to be cautious when following Hungary, lest this puts the country's EU aspirations under question as well. Hopefully, the Georgian leadership, if European integration is truly their objective, will be rational enough not to put all bets on Hungary as it becomes more and more isolated.

## I'VE SEEN IT THEORIZED THAT GEORGIA SHOULD BE SEEN AS AN INSTRUMENT FOR ORBÁN

**TO DRAG DOWN UKRAINE'S EU PROGRESS - EACH TIME KYIV TAKES A STEP, ORBÁN WILL POP UP AND VETO IT "UNLESS GEORGIA IS ALSO GIVEN WHAT IT WANTS." THAT CREATES ADDITIONAL HEADACHE IN BRUSSELS, WHERE THEY MIGHT NOT BE SO EAGER TO EMBRACE GEORGIA AS THEY ARE TO EMBRACE UKRAINE. IS THAT A CORRECT READING OF THE SITUATION?**

It might very well be. It does create leverage for him, for sure. I don't really know what the probability of this scenario is, but it is one of the possible scenarios for sure.

## WHAT'S HIS END GAME? WHAT'S THE FUTURE THAT ORBÁN IS STRIVING FOR?

Well, it's difficult to predict. Even though he uses anti-EU rhetoric, I don't think he would want to see Hungary outside the EU, at least not in the foreseeable future, because he knows that Hungary has weight and leverage only as long as it is in the EU. That's his position of strength, that's where he can bargain and derail the EU from. If Hungary leaves, it becomes much less significant and way less interesting, for example, for Chinese investors and investments, which Hungary's foreign policy is somehow treating as the golden cow at the moment. As such, even though he is constantly criticizing the EU, he doesn't want to leave it. And yet, he aspires for a weaker EU where he is given more leeway. And this is why he is constantly hoping for other more Euroskeptic partners, like Slovakia's current government, so that the Euroskeptic group within the EU grows.

## TELL US ABOUT ORBÁN'S TRANSFORMATION FROM A PRO-DEMOCRACY, ANTI-RUSSIAN LEADER TO THE ORBÁN WE SEE TODAY.

The transformation was really something remarkable, especially because when he entered into great politics, he became famous by holding a public speech about how the Russians should leave Hungary. This was at a time when the Russian tanks were still there. So his first step into politics definitely stands in harsh contrast with the current rhetoric. His party, Fidesz, has undergone a similar transformation. They had to spend eight years in opposition and they, so to say, learned their "lesson". The chief impetus for this transformation towards illiberalism and anti-democracy is the desire to stay in power, for as long as possible. There is this rather telling quote of Orbán's, which he said when he lost back in 2002: "The homeland cannot be in the opposition." I think this explains many things they have done since 2011, which basically includes state capture, media capture and so on.

# Plant Based Treaty Georgia on the Results of COP28

For the past 27 years, the United Nations Climate Change Conference managed to ignore the cow in the room. This year at COP28 in Dubai, UAE, things started to change, albeit not necessarily in a good way. Despite food systems accounting for a third of global greenhouse gas emissions, the discussion around this topic has only just begun. Even if we decide to keep fossil fuels in the ground from now on, the emissions from the food system alone will still take us beyond the 1.5 degrees Celsius global temperature rise limit of the Paris Agreement. With the science being clear, the animal agriculture industries can no longer hide the cow in the room, so they

are resorting to either downplaying their impact on the climate or, worse, portraying the cow as a climate solution hero.

Our current animal-based food system is wreaking havoc on our planet, contributing not only to climate change but also to the breaking of other planetary boundaries such as land use, biodiversity loss, phosphorus and nitrogen, and freshwater use. Renowned scientist Johan Rockström said at COP28 that "food systems transition is equally important [as fossil fuel phase-out]." Although the conference is mainly focused on climate change, it is essential to remove our 'carbon tunnel vision' to understand how this planetary boundary interacts with others to see the bigger picture of the Earth crisis we find ourselves in.

A whopping 36% of anthropogenic methane emissions come from farmed animals, making it the single largest source of this greenhouse gas. Since it is much more potent than CO<sub>2</sub>, with a Global Warming Potential of more than 80 over a 12-year period, eliminating it is our best hope for immediate impact in slowing down global warming.

Yet, dairy-based companies could be seen at COP28 talking about making their industry a "climate solution," with so-called solutions being methane masks for cows, feed additives, and selective breeding. In the face of this climate emergency, these greenwashing tactics are merely rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic—it is imperative that we stop

farming ruminant animals if we want a chance at preserving our planet.

Our current food system is not only environmentally damaging; it is extremely inefficient. 83% of the planet's agricultural land is occupied by animal agriculture, yet animal products provide only 18% of global calories and 37% of protein. This also raises the question of food justice—how are we producing enough food to feed around 80 billion farmed animals each year, yet not enough to feed humans?

On December 10th at COP28, it was Food, Agriculture, and Water Day, and the Plant Based Treaty team held a press conference on the release of the new report titled 'Safe and Just: The Plant Based Treaty's Vegan Doughnut Eco-

nomics Approach to the Food System.' This groundbreaking report is inspired by and modeled on respected Oxford economist Kate Raworth's Doughnut Economics framework, and it provides a holistic and systems-thinking approach to creating a food system that is both ecologically safe and socially just.

The 'Safe and Just' report gives a comprehensive overview of our current planetary crisis and a guide on how we can move back into a safe operating space. A plant-based food system with restorative, regenerative, and diversified crop production practices can help create a resilient food system that will be a carbon sink rather than a carbon source.

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# Plant Based Treaty Georgia on the Results of COP28

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And since the IPCC's carbon budget makes the optimistic assumption that we have already made the food systems transition, we must take immediate action to realize this new food system.

In fact, this is not only a new food system, but it was also one of the past. More often than not, delegates from wealthy Global North countries could be heard using Indigenous Peoples as an excuse to justify their consumption of animal products. Youth Indigenous activist from Mexico Xanaine Calvillo stated at the official opening of the Food4Climate Pavilion that plant-based food systems had existed for 10,500 years in Mesoamerica: "This is not something that we are doing alone, but is something that we are building on the work of our Elders but also on the dreams of the Youth."

We rarely hear those same delegates talk about the dangers and struggles Indigenous Peoples of the Amazon face with deforestation, forest fires, and land grabbing by industrial agriculture and factory farming, and how Western animal-based diets threaten the oral traditions surrounding ancestral diets. Interestingly, meat giants including JBS and Marfrig were sponsors of the Amazon pavilion, where chicken meat could be found served for catering. We conducted interviews with people visiting this pavilion, asking their opinion on this fact, and nobody seemed to find it mind-boggling. Or in other cases, they found this topic uncomfortable and were hesitant to comment on it.

As global temperatures increase, the number of animal agriculture lobbyists also rises. According to DeSmog, there were three times as many meat and dairy lobbyists at this year's COP as compared to the previous year. The Plant Based Treaty team was joined by other vegan individuals and organizations in protesting against such lobbyists, and to demand that a Plant Based Treaty be negotiated



at COP28. The treaty calls for a food system change through 3 key points - to stop land use change for animal agriculture, redirect subsidies from animal-based to plant-based food systems, and restore ecosystems.

But is there hope?

Members of the Plant Based Treaty together with a coalition of other vegan and environmental organizations pushed for the specific inclusion of the words "plant-based" in the COP28 UAE Declaration on Climate and Health (which Georgia has not signed), but the final text only stated the vague wording "sustainable healthy diets," which can be open to several interpretations. The outcome of COP28 assumes that there is such a thing as "sustainable" animal agriculture, which clearly goes against the science.

However, there is significant improvement since last year's COP in Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt, where vegan food was next to impossible to find. COP28 in Dubai had a fully vegan food park in the Blue Zone, which was run by PXB Lifestyle, where a variety of food was served, including national dishes, healthy meals,

83% of the planet's agricultural land is occupied by animal agriculture, yet animal products provide only 18% of global calories and 37% of protein

and more indulgent ones. The menus even included carbon labeling, which is recommended in the 'Safe and Just' report for transparency so consumers can make informed decisions about what they eat. Although the plant-based foods have nothing to hide—it's the animal-based dishes that need honest labeling! Interestingly, the menus at this food court did not have huge 'vegan' labels everywhere (while still making it clear that the food did not contain any animal products), as they will inevitably become in the future. The general feedback at the plant-based food court was that the food was delicious and that many of the delegates were unaware that it was all vegan!

Another positive step was seeing the vegetable farm in the Green Zone where the food grown is used as ingredients for the permanent vegan cafe and restaurant onsite, where vegan cooking masterclasses were held during the conference. This serves as a model for future green cities, where communities come together to cultivate their own food, helping to restore our relationship with

nature. This includes fostering respect for other animals that share our planet, recognizing their inherent right to live free from harm and exploitation.

It was encouraging to see so many other delegates at the conference this year who happened to be vegan, as last year we hardly met any outside of plant-based organizations. It proves that with the right information, individuals can make conscious decisions about what they eat. This is why climate literacy and health education play a key role in shaping our food system, as discussed in 'Safe and Just'. According to an Oxford study, adopting a vegan diet is the single most effective way to reduce our impact on the environment, surpassing measures such as going car-free or avoiding transatlantic flights.

Azerbaijan can make history and real progress at next year's COP29 if it hosts a fully vegan climate conference that's in alignment with our global climate target, and if all parties unite to adopt a Plant Based Treaty for a safe and just transition of our food system.

Read the full 'Safe and Just' report at [VeganDonutEconomics.org](http://VeganDonutEconomics.org)

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DJ

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**GATSBY GALA NIGHT**  
PARTY LIKE A GATSBY ON THE LAST FRIDAY OF THE YEAR  
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SPECIAL DJ ARTIST - ZUKASU  
DECEMBER 29 21:00  
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**31 DECEMBER**  
21:00  
Gala dinner with set menu  
Sopio Murusidze & Jazz Band  
ATI  
Rooftop Restaurant  
Dj

**SHERATON GRAND**  
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*Festive Season Calendar 2023*

# The Future of AI in the Business Industry

BY SHELBI R. ANKIEWICZ

The concept of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has become a popular topic, and in recognition of this, experts in the field came together in a Tbilisi roundtable on December 15 to talk about the future of this tool in the business industry.

The AI roundtable was hosted by Startup Grind at Tbilisi State University and included three experts in their respective fields, Co-founder and CEO of Kernel, Giorgi Tukhashvili, CTO and Co-founder of Pulsar AI, Zaal Gachechiladze, and Venture Partner of the Global Public Offering Fund, Mike Sigal. The event was a discussion panel for speakers to talk about the stage of AI, its risks, opportunities, correlation to business, and to give a general overview.

Gachechiladze said that AI is in the early stages of its development, and as such it is hard to predict what will happen in the future.

"It's a tool, technology, and what all technology does is make us more productive," he said. "It makes the things we were doing early cheaper, and much faster, just like the internet."

Pulsar AI is a product company that was founded in 2017 that's geared towards solving the conversational AI problems that take place in the automotive industry. Gachechiladze said the idea was to create a tool that allowed AI to do jobs such as replying to emails and SMS messages, so as to increase productivity and allow workers to focus on face-to-face meetings. Pulsar's product automated responses with human language was a niche that was missing in the US market.

According to Gachechiladze, the company exceeded expectations and was

bought out by a US company in 2021, just 20 months after it started. However, the Georgian version of the company, now called Super Nova, still exists, and involves many variations of AI, including text, face recognition, audio, and more. Gachechiladze has since shifted his focus towards another venture that focuses on the linguistics of AI technology.

AI Lab is a company that does fundamental research on language models. Gachechiladze said the goal is to create a Georgian language model that can be used, since language acts as a divider in many situations. The company started in August and the model will be presented in the upcoming week. If the project succeeds, the hope is to incorporate other worldwide languages into this model.

Regarding AI, Gachechiladze said each year tasks and jobs are becoming more and more efficient, and those who don't recognize this or don't follow the new trend will not be able to compete with those who do.

"People who obey the rules will be left behind, and people who don't will be able to use the technology in whatever goals they're pursuing," he said.

Tukhashvili's main concept at the AI roundtable was about the application of AI in businesses and startups, and how companies have become the beneficiaries of the AI revolution. His company, Kernel, helps microbusinesses with AI technology by giving them monetization strategies with access to finance and giving users tax compliance and digitalization. They have over 140 companies using their product worldwide, but their primary focus is India, Indonesia, Philippines, Bangladesh, and Pakistan.

The biggest AI service Kernel uses is voice navigation, which allows a customer to directly talk to the application



Set up for the AI Roundtable event at Tbilisi State University. Photo by Shelbi R. Ankiewicz.

and say what they want created, such as an invoice, which is then automatically made without having to manually input anything. For India, this is a big benefit for 69% of the population, where 400 million people are illiterate.

According to Tukhashvili, their company is also using traditional, or common, methods of AI. Still, their next goal is to develop AI training on documentation and the frequently asked questions page. This would enhance the automation and individualization of messages to customers across many channels, including the "get started page" which would be in a simple, video format tai-

lored towards the individual, rather than having to read 10 pages-worth of text. Like Gachechiladze, Tukhashvili also believes that AI technology is going to skyrocket efficiency and productivity in the workplace.

In addition to the use of AI in the business world, Tukhashvili said the technology will also play a big part in increasing digitalization and mental health. He said that people in his generation are having a hard time connecting with others, and that will only progress with upcoming generations. Therefore, AI could become a method people use to stay connected, understood, and valued.

"AI could be an escape from reality... with digital AI friends, girlfriends, significant others - this is the realistic cure for the broken market of marriages and relationships which is going to become more transactional," said Tukhashvili.

Startup Grind, the organizer of the event, is an international startup community with many chapters and members worldwide. It serves as a platform to share, educate, connect, and inspire with monthly events on different topics. Most of the organization's events require a cover fee, but others that are of high importance, such as the recent AI roundtable, are free to attend.

## Renewables, Transport and Logistics, and Digital Transformation – Key to Boosting Georgia's Growth: IFC and World Bank

Tapping Georgia's vast renewable potential, developing its transport and logistics infrastructure, and supporting digital businesses could boost the country's productivity and economic competitiveness, helping the country reach high-income status, according to a new IFC and World Bank report. The Georgia Country Private Sector Diagnostic

(CPSD), the country's first, aims to support private sector growth by identifying opportunities and pinpointing constraints.

Despite positive trends, structural challenges persist, including weak productivity growth and the limited creation of high-quality jobs. In addition, while the country's business environment is favorable, low digitalization levels hamper broader business innova-

tion. The report identifies the key sectors to accelerate private-sector-led growth and provides policy recommendations to unlock that potential.

"Georgia's economy has proved resilient during the pandemic, but the country is striving to do more. Reforms in key sectors could help Georgia realize its renewable energy potential, increase its participation in global value chains, and drive productivity. Attracting pri-

vate sector investment would be key and IFC is ready to underpin these efforts," said Alfonso Garcia Mora, IFC's Vice President for Europe, Latin America, and the Caribbean.

"Georgia has the potential to further unleash private sector development. As the report shows, this could be achieved by increasing the enforcement and predictability of laws and regulations as well as by supporting connectivity and

logistics, digital transformation, and green investments as catalyzers of growth," said Rolande Pryce, World Bank Regional Director for the South Caucasus.

Renewable energy: Georgia boasts a substantial renewable energy potential of 18 gigawatts, with less than 20 percent harnessed. To tap into this potential, the country would benefit from a clear and reliable policy, regulatory, and permitting framework, and sustainable incentive schemes.

Transport and logistics: As the gateway to the Caucasus and Central Asia, Georgia aspires to become a regional logistics hub. To accomplish this, the country will need to expand the capacity of seaports, strengthen information flows and data accessibility, and improve the reliability of railroad operations, among others. Enhancing connectivity along the Middle Corridor would facilitate the integration of Georgia into the global economy.

Digital business: While Georgia excels in some areas, such as ranking among the top three countries worldwide for contactless payments, the development of digital businesses needs to be accelerated. E-commerce and fintech are among the most promising digital sub-sectors. To drive productivity and competitiveness, key challenges, such as a lack of digital skills, will need to be addressed. For example, only about 1 percent of the population possesses basic programming skills. The country will need to foster programming skills and address challenges related to technology and early-stage finance.



# Launch of the Green Agenda Project: Georgia's Step Towards Sustainability and EU Integration

**T**his week, with the launch of the Green Agenda for Georgia project, Georgia takes a significant step toward both climate neutrality and European integration. This three-year initiative is in line with the principles of the EU Green Deal, illustrating Georgia's commitment to aligning its policies with those of the EU in an effort to accelerate the transition to a greener and more sustainable future.

The project is a collaborative effort led by the Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI), together with the Government of Georgia. The project is funded by Sida (the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency).

As part of the launch event, Deputy Head of Administration of Government, Zviad Barkaia, along with the Commissioner for the Environment, Oceans and Fisheries, at the European Commission, Virginijus Sinkevicius, and Head of Development Cooperation and Deputy Head of Mission at the Embassy of Sweden, Erik Illes delivered opening remarks outlining their objectives and plans for the project implementation in Georgia. The First Deputy Minister of the Environmental Protection and Agriculture of Georgia, Nino Tandilashvili, and the Deputy Minister of Finance, Ekaterine Guntsadze also addressed the participants.

"Thank you for gathering here today to mark the launch of the Green Agenda Project," said Virginijus Sinkevicius in his welcoming video remark. "I congratulate Georgia for being granted the EU candidacy status by the European Council, a pivotal milestone on the journey to future membership. The Green Agenda project will serve as a hub for joint national and international efforts

towards sustainable development, resilience, and prosperity.

"By adopting sustainable policies and practices, Georgia aligns its policies to European standards to enhance the quality of life for its citizens, opens up new business opportunities and strengthens trade and economic relations with EU member states. Achieving a green future is challenging, but with dedication, innovation and active participation of all stakeholders, success is within reach. Therefore, I encourage all those involved in the Green Agenda project to persist in their invaluable work and collaboration, setting an example for others."

"Today marks the launch of the Green Agenda project as we gather here to discuss recent developments and deliberate on future plans, particularly in the context of EU accession," said Zviad Barkaia, Deputy Head of the Georgian Government Administration. "The EU has recognized Georgia's commitment to joining the European family, officially granting candidacy for EU membership. The Government of Georgia is fully prepared to play an active role in and contribute to the Green Agenda project. We have already identified and presented key individuals to participate in the project's implementation and are enthusiastic about commencing this initiative in Georgia."

In his opening remarks, Erik Illes said, "The EU candidate status not only symbolizes Georgia's aspirations for European integration but also presents a new chapter in countries' cooperation. The journey towards EU integration and sustainable development go hand in hand. By embracing sustainable practices and green technologies, Georgia can not only contribute to the global fight against climate change but also reap economic



benefits and improve the well-being of its citizens."

"The EU candidacy status represents both a benefit and a significant responsibility for Georgia. The environmental protection agenda is highly complex, and the Green Agenda project enables the Georgian Government to address all aspects of the EU Green Deal. Georgia has implemented various policy documents aimed at reducing emissions and attaining climate neutrality. We are prepared to collaborate with the Green Agenda project, working closely to advance Georgia's green transition and facilitate the implementation of the EU Green Deal," said Nino Tandilashvili.

The launch event, which brought together representatives from state authorities, the Embassy of Sweden, SEI and project implementing partners in Georgia, also marked the official start of the project's National Steering Committee (NSC) in Georgia. The NSC is a decision-making platform overseeing the country's project activities, ensuring alignment with Georgia's priorities and promoting synchronization and coherence at a national level.

The Green Agenda project, active from September 2023 to March 2026, is being implemented in Georgia by CENN, a partner development organization. Addressing various policy areas aligned

with the EU Green Deal, the project encompasses areas such as climate change, energy efficiency, sustainable construction, smart mobility, circular economy, pollution reduction, food systems and ecosystem conservation.

The initiative will also undertake a comprehensive assessment of Georgia's green transition to serve as a basis for developing a Roadmap for Climate Neutrality 2050. In addition, the project will deliver awareness-raising activities to foster understanding and support for the roadmap. These activities will aim to engage a wide range of stakeholders and enhance their capacity to effectively contribute to the project's objectives.



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# The Mediator Profession is Actively Developing in Georgia - Professional Day of the Mediator Celebrated Again in Georgia!

TRANSLATED BY MARIAM  
MTIVLISHVILI

**O**n December 14, 2019, the Mediators Association of Georgia was founded for the first time in Georgia, and thus December 14 was declared as the Professional Day of the Mediator. The day was celebrated in Georgia for the fourth time this year.

GEORGIA TODAY talked to the chairman of the Mediators Association of Georgia, Irakli Kandashvili, who was elected to the position of chairman for the second time at the election meeting of the Mediators Association of Georgia on December 16.

## CONGRATULATIONS ON THE FOURTH PROFESSIONAL DAY OF THE MEDIATOR. HOW WOULD YOU EVALUATE THE PAST FOUR YEARS FOR THE PROFESSION?

It is a great honor for me that trust that was unanimously expressed in me by my fellow mediators at the meeting. It is a great responsibility. I am glad that the profession positively evaluates the past four years and that we continue the institutional introduction and development of mediation in Georgia with a united team approach.

Mediation is a new word in the Georgian reality, it is a truly unprecedented reform in the last decade, which allows the disputing parties to resolve the conflict between themselves. The past four years were full of challenges and difficulties for the newly founded association and the profession, although it can be safely said that the Georgian mediators coped with all the challenges and difficulties with dignity; we were able to take many effective steps in this short period, which will become a prerequisite for the further development of the profession. I am glad that all the steps taken during these years were aimed at the development of the profession and the future of the profession; I am doubly glad that my



colleagues evaluate this path positively.

## WHAT WOULD YOU HIGHLIGHT IN THE ACTIVITIES?

The introduction of a new profession and its institutional recognition simultaneously require a solid infrastructural arrangement of the organization, as well as increasing awareness and gaining credibility in society. During these four years, we have taken equally effective steps in the mentioned direction, seeing Georgian mediators already having a working environment in the form of an office. We were able to develop, with the involvement of foreign experts, European standards for entry into the profession, which leads to public confidence in the qualifications of those in the profession,

as well as to develop a code of professional ethics and the rules for disciplinary proceedings based on European standards. We also agreed on mandatory annual professional development training courses for mediators, so the public know that they meet in their profession mediators who have studied to high professional standards, who will be retrained every year, and whose activities will be based on ethical standards.

We also introduced an online remote production platform for mediation, which was a correct and effective step in the development of the profession in time and space against the background of the global pandemic.

The priority for the association is to increase the awareness of mediation in

society, and in this direction, about 60 memorandums of mutual cooperation have been signed with representatives of various public and private sectors, with the support of which the process of development and establishment of mediation in Georgia will continue successfully. Among them, it is a priority for us to introduce the teaching of mediation as an alternative dispute mechanism in secondary and higher education institutions, and we can proudly say that from September 2021, mediation has already been introduced in the textbooks of ninth grade students, mediation is taught as a compulsory subject in three universities, and it has become an optional subject in law faculties of almost all universities.

With the support of the United States Agency for International Development, we have introduced the very important annual international forum "Mediation for Business" and "Mediation for Lawyers", and therefore, every year, specialists in this field will have a platform where they can learn about the latest news and practices. In 2022, the ceremony of taking the professional oath of new mediators entering the profession took place for the first time on the Professional Day on December 14. This year, up to 100 newly joined mediators took the professional oath.

I'm very happy that our professional association hosted first Regional International Conference within the Mediation Week 2023 and Mediators from Ukraine, Moldova, Azerbaijan and Armenia participated in the event, am glad that we decided to make this event annual, that once again underlines Georgia's role in region and the stage of development of Mediation as dispute resolution mechanism in our region.

## TELL US ABOUT THE MEDIATION MECHANISM. WHAT CHARACTERIZES MEDIATION, DISTINGUISHING IT FROM OTHER DISPUTE RESOLUTION MECHANISMS?

Mediation is the only dispute resolution mechanism that allows the parties, considering each other, to be able to and reach a mutually beneficial agreement tailored to each other's interests. With the development of mediation, the culture of reasonable dialogue and social peace is introduced in Georgia.

I will take advantage of your newspaper and once again congratulate each mediator on their professional day and wish them professional success, development, remember that behind us is the good name, credibility and collective reputation of the profession and that the professional activity of each of us today is the tomorrow of the mediator profession!

Happy new year 2024 to all of Georgia!

## SOCIETY

# MAC Georgia Awarded Prestigious Zero Project Award



Sharing knowledge. Source: MACGeorgia

**T**he McLain Association for Children - Georgia (MAC Georgia) is the first recipient in the country to be presented with a Zero Project Award for its efforts to promote a barrier-free world for persons with disabilities. This highly competitive award is viewed as the 'gold standard' for innovation and inclusion worldwide. Founded by Austrian non-profit Essl Foundation in 2008, the Zero Project is a global and research-driven initiative to work for a world with zero barriers and to support

the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD). The Zero Project identifies and shares scalable solutions that improve the daily lives and legal rights of all persons with disabilities, focusing on Education, Employment, Accessibility, Independent Living and Political Participation, and ICT.

MAC Georgia was recognized for its innovative program Mshoblis Skivri (Parent's Chest), which is an online repository of disability information for parents and families of children with

disabilities. It was created during the pandemic to help isolated Georgians who lacked the essential knowledge needed to provide for their family's special needs. This included a range of Facebook Live trainings and discussions; targeted education, and demonstrations on issues such as feeding, wheelchair positioning, and use of adaptive aids and assistive technologies. The platform is also used to share international best practices and provide accurate information on health-related issues such as vaccine safety and universal health precautions. Post pandemic, Mshoblis Skivri has remained a strong component of MAC services, increasing technical support and disability expertise to rural, remote, and low resource areas of the country. Sign language interpretation is provided at every online event. As Facebook is the preferred platform for many parents of children in Georgia, this is used as a primary platform for knowledge dissemination and communication. However, multiple online platforms are used to strengthen community reach, including a strong presence on Instagram and YouTube. Live events are held several times per week on a range of disability topics from local experts within MAC and in the broader disability network.

Mshoblis Skivri strives to be highly

interactive and inclusive of needs across contexts. Live events have a discussion component, allowing viewers from all over the country to ask questions and receive help in real time. There is also an option to register for a one-on-one consultation with a specialist on MAC's team who can provide more support that is tailored to the needs of an individual family. Because of its accessibility, families across Georgia have been able to build a strong network of support, connecting isolated families and children with disabilities with others in similar situations.

The Zero Project award brings international attention to the work of MAC Georgia, and further highlights their innovation and commitment to transform the lives of the most vulnerable members of Georgia by providing them with the resources they need and by strengthening the systems and individuals that give them care. "We work hard every day to enhance the lives of persons with disabilities and to support families and other care providers," stated Jeremy Gaskill, CEO of MAC Georgia. "Every person on our staff shares this commitment. And when the pandemic started, we had to come up with creative ways to continue to support people across the country. It can be isolating for a family who has a

child with a disability, and we knew it was important to find ways to stay connected. Mshoblis Skivri evolved from the brainstorming of staff, including those who are themselves a parent of a child with a disability."

The Zero Project Awardees 2024 were revealed on the occasion of the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, held on December 3rd of each year. An unprecedented 526 nominations from 97 countries across six continents were submitted during this year's call for nominations. Nominees were peer-reviewed by experts from the international disability inclusion community and winners were selected based on three criteria: innovation, impact, and scalability. From this, 77 programs from 43 countries were recognized with the coveted Zero Project award. MAC is proud to be included within this elite group, and the first ever awarded this international recognition in Georgia. A core team of the program staff will attend the Zero Project Conference in Vienna in February 2024, and have even been selected to present at the conference. "It's a huge honor for MAC to receive this award", Gaskill noted. "We knew we were doing good things in Georgia, but it's quite rewarding to have other experts around the world recognize our work as well."



# Best of 2023 in Caritas Czech Republic in Georgia



BY NINA KOPALEISHVILI

The Year 2023 was among the most results-oriented for Caritas Czech Republic in Georgia. We closed two large-scale initiatives in the healthcare and social protection sectors with distinguishing results and started a considerable endeavour for early childhood care and inclusive education improvement in the country. Our team contributed to establishing of wastewater management in the mountainous Racha, supported sustainable agricultural development in the highlands of Georgia, and started a new initiative enabling youth to increase their entrepreneurial skills.

Let's dive deep to learn more about our success in 2023.

## STRENGTHENING PRIMARY HEALTHCARE AND EQUIPPED CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL

Caritas Czech Republic has been supporting the Government of Georgia in implementing healthcare reforms nationwide since 2015. Our activities include improving and assuring the quality of primary care services, support for early detection and prevention of oncological diseases, developing and implementing digital health solutions and assuring quality of maternal and child healthcare services.

At the end of the year, we had one more success to celebrate with the Government of Georgia – together with the Ministry of Health of Georgia we presented the results of the project "Support to Primary Healthcare Strengthening in Georgia," on which the project team worked for more than three years. The project achieved crucial outcomes for the development of Georgia's health sector, namely that the country now has updated clinical protocols and care pathways for family doctors with improved clinical skills and IT solutions supporting family medicine practices throughout Georgia.

In June 2023, Caritas Czech Republic summarized one more crucially important project for the healthcare sector of the country. Within the initiative, we donated medical equipment with a total budget of 150 000 USD to the Zhvania Children's Hospital of TSMU, which was the final stage of a project that aimed to develop a long-term care service focused



on the social and medical needs of children with severe disabilities in state care.

The support provided at an earlier stage of the project envisaged the provision of Zhvania's Children's Hospital with necessary medical equipment, elaboration of the package of regulatory documentation for the arrangement of the long-term care system, and capacity-building training sessions for medical personnel across the country.

## A STRATEGY AND AN ACTION PLAN FOR THE DEINSTITUTIONALISATION IN GEORGIA AND NEW FAMILY-TYPE HOMES FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

In Georgia, the process of transferring adults with disabilities from large boarding houses to family-type homes began in 2011 and is still ongoing. In 2020, Caritas Czech Republic, in close cooperation with the Government of Georgia and respective partners, developed a deinstitutionalisation strategy and an action plan.

Within the project, 115 persons with disabilities in the Dusheti and Martkopi boarding homes received psycho-emotional support. In addition, by the end of 2023, our organization provided six community-based homes and services for persons with disabilities who had previously lived in two large boarding homes under state care.

The end of the year 2023 was the finishing one for this exciting endeavour as Caritas Czech Republic had the opportunity to speak about the results of the project at the annual presentation of the Unified Coordinating Council for the Implementation of the Law of Georgia "On the Rights of Persons with Disabilities", initiated by the Ministry of Health of Georgia.

## WASTEWATER MANAGEMENT INFRASTRUCTURE FOR MOUNTAINOUS AREAS

Since 2018, Caritas Czech Republic's environmental activities focuses on raising awareness about the importance of sustainable waste management and introducing relevant practices in rural Georgia. In this regard, our organization has been actively supporting the development of infrastructure in the regions for waste collection, separation and recycling and introducing waste separation, recycling and composting practices in the Racha-Lechkhumi and Kvemo Svaneti region and providing respective

technical assistance in the Dusheti and Khulo municipalities.

With this in mind, in 2023, we continued working on developing the wastewater management infrastructure in Oni municipality to improve water quality and resource management there. Within the project, in the spring of 2023, Caritas Czech Republic and Ecocentrum Sosna handed over an assanisation vehicle to the Oni Municipality City Hall, which helps the municipality manage the wastewater infrastructure.

Our experts developed the strategy and action plan for the Oni Municipality's wastewater and water treatment system, guidelines on wastewater treatment solutions, and replication strategy for implementing wastewater treatment projects.

Last, we have supported the local community with wastewater treatment solutions (biofilter, biological wastewater treatment plant, compostable toilet). Also, we awarded three local schools with portable water laboratories.

## SUPPORT TO THE CATTLE BREEDING

The growth of highland regions is part of Georgia's regional development policy. However, it requires a specific approach as mountainous settlements, contrary to the other areas of the country, have limited agricultural resources, fewer economic opportunities, and are more at risk of natural disasters. Caritas Czech Republic's rural development initiatives include supporting local farmers and entrepreneurs in mountainous settlements of Georgia and providing trainings tailored to the local needs. Our interventions contribute to Georgia's national sustainable development goals.

Within our rural development initiative started in 2022 and targeting 75 farmers from Tusheti, Pshav-Khevsureti, and Khulo Municipality, this year, vari-



ous important activities were conducted, namely veterinary training sessions and consultations for local farmers, financial support to fifteen farmers enabling them to ensure cattle with better feed, awareness-raising campaigns on artificial insemination with 100 processes conducted, support to four projects oriented on developing veterinary services, establishment of four demo plots for introducing a system of rotational grazing allowing local people to properly manage the pasture, enhance its productivity and thereby improve the productivity of cattle.

Notably, Caritas Czech Republic has established cooperation with the National Food Agency, within which we will grant them the thermo bags and a generator for the storage of vet preparations.

## NEW INITIATIVE WHICH ENABLES YOUTH FROM GEORGIA, ARMENIA, AND MOLDOVA TO INCREASE THEIR ENTREPRENEURIAL SKILLS

In Georgia, Armenia, and Moldova, the realisation of vulnerable young people in the labor market and their active involvement in democratic life is still a challenge. The mentioned especially prevents ensuring a dignified life for youth with disabilities. That is why Caritas Czech Republic and the Coalition for Independent Living, together with the Moldavian organization Milenium and the Armenian organisation



Agate, started a European Union-funded project that will support the employment of vulnerable youth, the improvement of entrepreneurship opportunities, and their active participation in democratic life.

The project works in three main directions, namely: strengthening existing state and CSO-based employment support services in terms of digital career counselling, increasing the technical capacity of CSOs working with disadvantaged youth including PwDs and NEETs and upscaling their digital competencies, and ensuring active participation of youth in democratic and socio-economic life by increasing their awareness on the opportunities of digitalisation as well as risks of cyberbullying and disinformation.

## SMALL RECAP TO PAST PROJECTS

This year, we have toured around various regions of Georgia to see the results of the initiatives supported through our projects several years ago.

First, we went to Tusheti, a historic mountainous region in the north of the country, often called the paradise of

tion in the Zemo Alvani village, which provides wool to the whole country, and the women's enterprise working on the felt craft products for locals and tourists.

In the Racha-Lechkhumi and Kvemo Svaneti region, we got acquainted with the livelihood projects' results supported during COVID-19. We saw how those people maintained the endeavours born during the challenging pandemic.

We also had an opportunity to see how the children with developmental delays are treated appropriately at the early childhood development center and how the autism programme works there supported by Caritas Czech Republic through its autism project.

During the tour, we visited several rural doctors who told us how their capacities were increased through initiatives. We also saw the Zugdidi Screening Center that became the hope for thousands of people living in West Georgia to identify cancer diseases at an early stage and, thus, stay alive.

## DONOR ORGANISATIONS MAKE A SPECIAL CONTRIBUTION TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF GEORGIA

Czech Development Agency (CzechAid), United Nations Development Program (UNDP), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Partnership on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNPRPD) Multi-Partner Trust Fund, European Union (EU), Slovak Development Agency – this is the list of donor organisations that positively evaluated the results of the projects implemented by Caritas Czech Republic Country Office in Georgia in the past years and expressed their trust in us in 2023 as well.

The projects initiated by the public and private sector partnership gave us the opportunity to work at the systemic level, and to participate in the improvement of people's lives in various directions. The above-mentioned projects could not be implemented without the desire and constant support of our local partners among which we would like to express special gratitude to the Ministry of Health of Georgia, Georgian Medical Holding, and State Care Agency, and local governments in the projects' target municipalities.



# Thai'd for First Place

BLOG BY TONY HANMER

**W**EEK two of our paradise getaway from Georgian winter. It's been snowing in the mountains of Svaneti and elsewhere, the skiers are getting ready, and here I am in swimming trunks and silk shirt, trying not to get too burnt by the sun.

We have had some chances to explore the island of Phuket a bit now, on foot and by taxi, and are getting used to it the tiniest bit. The Big Buddha, about 45m tall and covered in fine white stone, gazes down at us. Tigers, from newborn to full-grown (only about 300 of them remain in Thailand) allow us to stroke them in their sanctuary; unbelievably large as the adults are, apparently Siberian tigers are about twice this big. We emerge unscathed and awed.

I discover my two favorite linguistic jokes. Bang Nun Tea, sorry, is one. The other is a bad translation, for the island's largest nationality of visitors by far: satay chicken rendered in Russian as chicken of Satan. (It's not that hot... though other curried dishes can be). We continue to go through exotic fruits and vegetables at my adventurous wife's urging: snake fruit, rambutan, more we still can't identify.

My wife posts videos of our sorties and gets over 16,000 views of one on Face-



book, is helped by Anna to set herself up on Tik Tok.

One evening, coming home after dark, one of our friends calls out, "Snake!" near the condo door. My wife, a true herpetophobe, screams and backs away, though she hasn't even seen it. The other man of the group and I stamp it away, over a meter long and black. We resolve to check carefully before every exit and entrance, to avoid and more unpleasant

encounters. Although I have no fear of snakes at all, from my Zimbabwean childhood no doubt, Lali is at the opposite end of that spectrum.

We hire a traditional wooden fishing boat for half a day, and I get three strikes which I don't manage to land, but all big enough to bend the rod far. Frustrating but a good start. I'm reassured that I haven't lost the ability to cast with the rod and reel, last practiced, what, 40

years ago in Canada? I was never much of a fisherman, but at least this time I try hard and almost succeed.

Although desert dunes are far away, I still manage to find delightful sand-chaos in the flow of small rivers into the sea, and in the play between wavelets and shore. (No big waves here, ever, but that's fine, I'm no surfer.) The other two ladies are getting closer to swimming freely, bolder, winning over fear.

We dip into the old city of Phuket enough to know that we want more, so are going back there today. I still am set on having a silk suit made, but am compromising by getting the material here and using a tailor in Tbilisi, because return trips for final fitting and pickup here are too far.

We discover a universe of pinky-thumb-nail-sized crabs on the beach. Each of these makes a hole for itself in the sand by throwing out little balls of compacted material... in PATTERNS which cover half the shore, and are repeated after every tide, some sort of miraculous gratuitous display of design.

It's a beautiful place, though I know we're just touching its surface. What it must be like in the season of endless rains is hard to imagine; we chose carefully to avoid that time. Mosquitoes would certainly be an issue.

I can see, though, why many expats would consider Phuket as a place to retire. It's cheap and tropical and delicious and relatively safe. Our dip in is only a start, but convincing.

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 over 2000 members, at [www.facebook.com/groups/SvanetiRenaissance/](http://www.facebook.com/groups/SvanetiRenaissance/). He and his wife also run their own guest house in Etseri: [www.facebook.com/hanmer.house.svaneti2](http://www.facebook.com/hanmer.house.svaneti2)

## CULTURE

# Tbilisi Big Band – Hardly Anything More Western Around

OP-ED BY NUGZAR B. RUHADZE

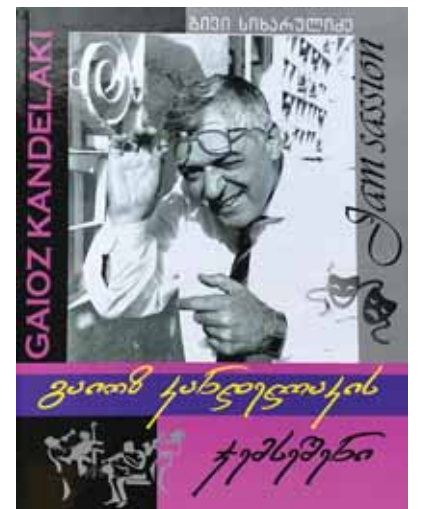
**A**ll our life is jazz, full of harmony, day-to-day improvisations and interchanging rhythms, the heartbeat as we hear it – these words belong to Gaioz Kandelaki, the indisputable founder of Tbilisi Big Band, securely and cozily sheltered under the powerful wings of City Hall. Listening to our Big Band's fantastic jam sessions, one sees 21 professional players on the stage, clad and poised right in the old nostalgic style of all those eminent Western jazz groups and personalities like Miles Davis Quintet, Duke Ellington's Jazz Orchestra, Benny Goodman Swing Band, Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, Count Basie, Dizzy Gillespie and many others of that caliber.

Yes, it is amazing that our Tbilisi Big Band is fairly comparable to those memorable musical giants of the American twenties, thirties and forties, saying nothing about contemporary jazz performers. The Band is now 25 years old, and is getting ready to celebrate the anniversary on April 30 next year, on the weathered stage of the Tbilisi State Concert Hall, in the formidable presence of the acclaimed American octogenarian jazz drummer Billy Cobham, who performed in Tbilisi exactly a quarter of a century ago. Hopefully, together with him, the numerous Georgian jazz fans will have a chance to lis-

ten to the beautifully female but strong and clear voice of the amazing Nik West and the mesmerizing tunes of her bass guitar. Incidentally, the world-renowned NikWestBass is Gaioz Kandelaki's granddaughter-in-law, very much in love with Sakartvelo and its warm and loving people. The Big Band's silver jubilee is going to look and sound even greater thanks to the presumable appearance on the stage of its absolutely insurmountable 85-year-young Givi Gachechiladze, the Georgian jazz wizard and the band's unchanged musical director.

History has kept many incredible stories of the founding the Band. Kandelaki and his enthusiastic coterie started the group in the attic of the Marjanishvili Drama Theater in the torn-apart post-civil-war Tbilisi, when Gaioz was the Theater's director. But, truth be told, nothing could have happened without the huge moral and material assistance provided by the Tbilisi City Hall and its leaders of those disturbed times. There is another, no-less-important, side to the history of Big Band, and that is the indigenous musical tradition. There was a time in this country when music lovers of Sakartvelo avidly listened to the jaw-dropping performance of jazz by unforgettable Constantine Pevzner and his outstanding variety ensemble Rero. Yes, the Georgian jazz roots are right there, in those old-timers' talent and genuine professionalism.

On top of all that, jazz was so popular in this capital right after WWII that the



young fans and listeners would sooner go hungry than be left without the expensive black-market records, sneaked into Soviet Georgia by myriad fits and starts and the obvious risks to be apprehended, because the Soviets had a sick, unbridled fear and aversion to jazz as a pernicious bourgeois art, dangerously saturating the tissue of pristine communist lifestyle. This was a considerable obstacle on the way of gingerly grafting the western culture on this side of the Iron Curtain, brought to life by relentless enthusiasts like Gaioz Kandelaki. By the way, recently, a big-format book-album came out, saying volumes about Kandelaki's life in jazz and his prolific activity in general to the benefit of our culture. Not in vain. He carries the title of Tbilisi Honorable Citizen and Merited Art Personality of

the country. Kandelaki is certainly not alone in the field. For instance, the celebrated dazzling Georgian jazz performer Maia Baratashvili joined the orchestra when she was literally a kid, and practically grew up on the stage in the lap of the Band. Together with her are the Band pianists Otar Magradze and Dini Virsaladze, drummer Valery Pailodze, tenor-sax Kakha Jagashvili, solo-guitar davit Koiava, and of course Maia's fellow jazz singers Zaur Shavgulidze, Mariko Ebralidze, Temur Sajaia, Nestan Jibladze, Nino Gvelesiani and Giorgi Sukhitashvili. Big Band is lucky enough (and it deserves all it has achieved) to be housed in Tbilisi Rose Garden Park, in its pretty, comfortable premises called the Big Band Rehearsal Studio. They do about 200 concerts a year, including charity per-

formances at various universities, as pure American tradition has it. The Band also does three to four concerts a month at its rehearsal studio, to which the interested public is always welcome, without charge. One of the most prominent venues for Big Band recitals is Tbilisi Sheraton Hotel, with 1000 seats, always packed full when the sounds of jazz are heard. Big Band has more than 350 music pieces on its repertoire, containing both real McCoy American jam session wonders and national melodies of the famous Georgian Voices, often performed ensemble. Georgian jazz, as we may call it, is a natural part of the UNESCO idea of Jazz World Day of 30 April, celebrated in the world simultaneously in 218 countries. To slightly alter the popular French saying – Ala West Come ala West!

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# Georgia on the World's Ballet Map – A Look Back at the 2023 Successes with Nina Ananiashvili



Lado Vachnadze in Bayadera

BY LÉA MONTAGNE

Now Georgia is on the Ballet map - Nina Ananiashvili, artistic director of the State Ballet of Georgia, proudly claimed during her exclusive interview with GEORGIA TODAY. Indeed, that global recognition of Georgian ballet, and the lengths Georgia has come in the art, has been achieved, without any doubt, thanks to Nina Ananiashvili and her team within the Tbilisi Zakaria Paliashvili Opera and Ballet State Theater over the past 20 years.

2023 was a very successful year for Tbilisi's Ballet, and while the season is already coming to an end, you do not have to worry, as you can expect a lot more surprises ahead for 2024!

GEORGIA TODAY went to speak to Nina and her team about the busy year we are soon to say farewell to, but first, let's start by reviewing the origins of the State Ballet of Georgia to understand its current role in Georgia's artistic tradition.

## TBILISI ZAKARIA PALIASHVILI OPERA AND BALLET STATE THEATER: A TUMULTUOUS PAST BUT AN UNDENIABLE ROLE IN THE CREATION OF GEORGIAN BALLET

The Opera and Ballet Theater of Tbilisi was first opened in 1851, and the first ballet performance took place in 1852, with a staging of the second act of Filippo Taglioni's La Sylphide and Polka-Vengerka by the St. Petersburg Ballet Company. The first official premiere and first full-length ballet performance took place two years after, with La Gitana. It was a major event for Georgia during the 19th century.

Unfortunately, the building that French novelist Alexandre Dumas defined as Georgian's "jewel," unmatched with the multiple theaters he had seen, burned down first in 1874 and then again a hundred years later in 1973. The Opera House was renovated between 2010 and 2015 to increase the quality of work for dancers and employees alike, in its redesign, remaining loyal to its first look while introducing new technologies.

The Opera and Ballet Theater of Tbilisi had to go through a tough period linked to the geopolitical context of

Georgia at the end of the 20th century and in the early 2000s, as, while Russia had brought a broad audience to Georgia's stages during the Soviet period, the collapse changed everything. Nina Ananiashvili, a prima ballerina, remembers the call begging her to take charge of the Tbilisi Ballet. The decision to take on this great responsibility meant she had to say goodbye to her illustrious career as a ballerina, marked by international acclaim, prestigious awards, and a plethora of unique solos. As a star ballerina, she left not only an indelible mark on the global stage, but also contributed significantly to the cultural heritage of Georgia when she decided to move back and "tie her name with" the country's Ballet. In 2024, it will be 20 years since she first took on that artistic directorship; 20 years seeing her always busy making sure everything turns out perfect, or at least the very best it can be.

## 2023: A SUCCESSFUL YEAR WITH A FULL AGENDA

In 2023, the Ballet of Tbilisi claimed a very successful year, keeping up with a tradition of excellence.

The year started in the traditional way of the Opera and Ballet Theater of Tbilisi, with the festive Nutcracker ballet, closely followed by Pinocchio. Then, in February, the Ballet went more international, welcoming Kazakh dancers from



Don Quixote

the Astana Opera, Shugila Adepkhan and Armanur Azov, as the soloists in Don Quixote. Razmik Marukyan, the leading soloist of the Armenian National Theater of Opera and Ballet, was also invited to perform in Don Quixote. The ballet also added to the Georgians' success story with the debut of Nino Khatutashvili.

In spring, a successful tour was conducted in several cities of the United States of America. Two ballets by George Balanchine were presented: Serenade, and Concerto Barocco. As is customary, Yuri Possokhov's Sagalobeli, a signature piece of the Tbilisi Ballet, was included

Summer 2023 was very busy, with the reintroduction of an almost-lost tradition: The Tbilisi Ballet Festival, which aims to promote Georgian Ballet by presenting the most celebrated repertoires, including Othello, Don Quixote, Le Corsaire, La Sylphide Adagio, Giselle and even Carmina Burana. The 4th edition of this festival was held from June to July, and welcomed conductors and dancers from across the world to meet their eager ballet fans in Georgia. Some masterclasses were successfully held within the frames of the festival with Angel Corella and Elena Gluridze, both world-famous ballet dancers.

in international competitions and were awarded, for sure giving hope for numerous future ballet dancers in Georgia. This could not have been possible without the involvement of the Friends of the Georgian Ballet, a non-profit organization founded in 2006 with the aim of supporting the initiatives of the State Ballet of Georgia, and contributing to the development of the Georgian Ballet. During the 2022/2023 school year, the organization funded full-year scholarships for 10 students, and supported selected students' participation in the Domenico Modugno International Ballet Competition, as well as other projects



Khatia Jijeishvili at the Tbilisi Ballet Festival 2023

on this international tour to promote Georgia's Ballet art.

At the beginning of May, the Tbilisi Ballet expanded its performance of Don Quixote to Bologna, Italy. With Giselle presented to the public at the end of the month, Mariam Eloshvili and Masaaki Goto made an outstanding debut.

In September, the unique and immortal Swan Lake was performed, and Julio Bocca visited Tbilisi for a special masterclass. In October, Don Quixote was again presented at the Opera and Ballet Theater of Tbilisi.

Olivier Patey visited Tbilisi Ballet in November and, with the support of the French Institute, held classes on the occasion of the premiere of Bayadera on the 14th. The Bayadera premiere was highlighted as a true success.

As the end of the year is coming, Nutcracker is back, for the pleasure of all the lovers of this traditional Christmas ballet. This season's Nutcracker will see the debut of Sesili Guguchia and will feature international dancers like Maria Kochetkova and Efe Burak, the latter appointed leading soloist of Tbilisi Ballet this year.

But we cannot talk about the top dancers without mentioning the vibrant pupils following in their footsteps; the next generation of Georgian stars wishing to become like the idols they see dancing on the main stages of the world. These are the pupils of the Vakhtang Chabukiani Tbilisi Ballet School. The school has also done a lot this year for its students: between masterclasses, cultural visits and participation in ballets such as Pinocchio, Don Quixote, Swan Lake and Bayadera, they also participated successfully

related to the State Ballet of Georgia.

## WHAT TO EXPECT IN 2024

2024 will start as 2023 ends, with the Nutcracker. Then, Nina Ananiashvili tells us, we can expect a return of Bayadera, which was so successful that the public keep demanding it be brought back. Sleeping Beauty is also to be expected on the stage in 2024, while the Tbilisi Ballet Festival is already getting set for its 5th edition next summer, with new guests to connect Georgia even more tightly to the global world of Ballet.

Nina emphasizes the importance of tours to promote what is done here in Tbilisi, noting that she is hopping for more tours next year: in Japan, Italy, the UK. Indeed, the spirit seems to be that if people cannot come to Georgia to see the Ballet, then the Ballet will come to them, and Nina confides that there is no bigger compliment than someone telling her they want to come to Georgia to see more of the company.

She is indeed admirably sticking to her goal to promote the country that raised her, a country that clearly and deservedly makes her proud. And where 2023 set high standards with many successful projects and outcomes, 2024 will undoubtedly be full of equally worthy surprises that will put stars in anyone's eyes.



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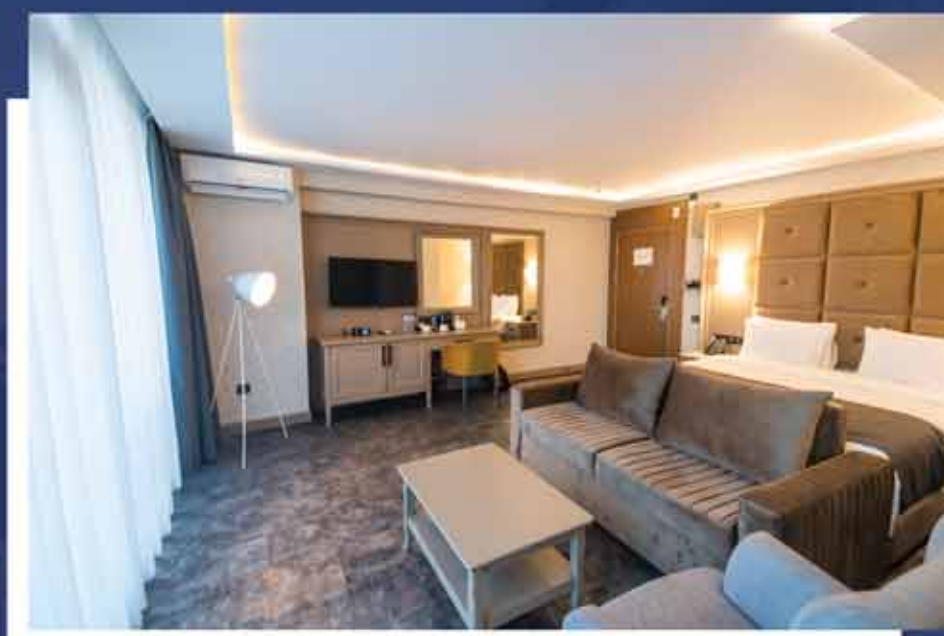
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