



FOCUS

ON IVANISHVILI'S RETURN

Bidzina is back, this time as "Honorary Chairman"

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The Matrona-Stalin Icon Scandal

BY TEAM GT

A scandal has been growing in Georgia this past week over an icon discovered in Tbilisi's main cathedral, Holy Trinity (Sameba), which depicts the Russian Saint Matrona of Moscow seated beside Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin, a man who ordered the extermination of tens of millions of people in the 1930s and 1940s.

Footage of the icon in Sameba was first shared on Saturday by Ilia Chigladze, a Georgian archpriest, on Facebook. Soon after, Giorgi Kandelaki, a member of the opposition European Georgia party and a researcher at the Soviet Past Research Laboratory, also shot and shared photos of the icon on social media.

The icon depicts Saint Matrona of Moscow, a 20th-century Russian Orthodox Church saint sitting beside a standing man who both Chigladze and Kandelaki claimed to be Joseph Stalin, the Georgian-born dictator and leader of the Soviet Union.

Among a wave of negative reaction to the icon among Georgians on social media, the Polish Embassy in Tbilisi shared the photo of the icon on its Facebook page with the following note in Georgian and Polish: "The Polish Institute of National Remembrance estimated the total number of Polish citizens who fell victim to the Soviet regime at 1.8 million. Of this, 150,000 lost their lives. Most of these victims were people repressed in the years 1939-1941, when the repression affected approximately 1.6 million people. The remaining 200,000 are people subjected to repression from 1944 to 1952. Research is still ongoing."

In an interview with Tabula on Saturday, Andria Jagmaidze, the head of the Patriarchate's public relations department, did not deny that Stalin was depicted in the icon, but stated that the icon was dedicated to Matrona, and not the Soviet leader.



The Matrona icon picturing Stalin. Source: 05varvara.wordpress.com

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Markets		Price		w/w		m/m	
BONDS							
GRAIL 07/28	91.83 (YTM 6.13%)	-0.4%	+6.6%	Crude Oil, Brent (US\$/bbl)	77.59	+2.2%	+2.3%
SILNET 01/27	100.13 (YTM 8.32%)	-0.0%	+1.2%	Gold Spot (US\$/OZ)	2 030.20	-1.4%	+1.3%
TBC 06/24	99.43 (YTM 7.06%)	-0.0%	-0.1%	CURRENCIES			
STOCKS							
Bank of Georgia (BGE LN)	GBP 39.40	-1.6%	+16.2%	GEL / USD	2.6834	-0.2%	+0.7%
Georgia Capital (CGEO LN)	GBP 10.44	+2.0%	+4.2%	GEL / EUR	2.9334	-0.2%	+2.3%
TBC Bank Group (TBCG LN)	GBP 27.90	+0.5%	+0.4%	GEL / GBP	3.4107	+0.6%	+2.0%
INDICES							
FTSE 100	7 683.96	-0.5%	+1.7%	GEL / CHF	3.1453	-0.5%	+0.0%
FTSE 250	19 294.02	-1.1%	+3.2%	GEL / RUB	0.0299	+1.4%	+3.1%
DAX	16 688.36	-0.5%	-0.4%	GEL / TRY	0.0895	-1.0%	-2.6%
DOW JONES	37 525.16	-0.5%	+3.5%	GEL / AZN	1.5792	-0.1%	+0.7%
NASDAQ	14 857.71	+0.6%	+3.2%	GEL / AMD	0.0066	-0.2%	+0.3%
MSCI EM	44.01	+0.2%	+2.3%	GEL / UAH	0.0704	-0.1%	-2.9%
MSCI EM	993.00	-2.3%	+1.8%	EUR / USD	0.9148	+0.1%	-1.5%
SP 500	4 756.50	+0.3%	+3.3%	GBP / USD	0.7868	-0.7%	-1.3%
MSCI FM	2 291.77	+1.1%	+5.6%	CHF / USD	0.8523	+0.2%	-3.1%
				RUB / USD	89.7216	-1.5%	-2.3%
				TRY / USD	29.9592	-0.8%	+3.4%
				AZN / USD	1.6990	-0.0%	-
				AMD / USD	404.1900	-0.0%	+0.8%



Victor Osimhen Calls Kvaratskhelia's Agent 'a piece of filth' over Saudi Transfer Rumor

Napoli striker Victor Osimhen has described the agent of teammate Khvicha Kvaratskhelia as a "piece of filth" after the Nigerian was linked with a move to Saudi Arabia.

Former Georgian footballer Mamuka Jugeli had suggested that Osimhen would move to the Middle Eastern nation in the summer while discussing the future of his client, who has similarly been linked with some of Europe's biggest clubs.

The pair fired Napoli to a first Serie A title in more than 30 years last season, but the club have struggled to replicate that success and linger in ninth in Italy's top flight this campaign.

Osimhen has been mentioned as a possible target of Chelsea and Arsenal amid the London clubs' continuing struggles in front of the goal, but the financial power of the Saudi Pro League has attracted many top footballers to the country.

The 25-year-old's reaction to Jugeli's suggestion hints, though, that he may not be Saudi-bound. He took to his Instagram story on Wednesday to show his displeasure at his teammate's agent.

He wrote, "Dear Mamuka Jugeli, you are a piece of filth and a disgrace. I'm

embarrassed at your sense of reasoning. Dumbf*ck! Keep my name out of your mouth!"

Osimhen signed a new deal in Naples last month with his contract now running until 2026 and a higher release clause set.

Kvaratskhelia is similarly tied to the club on a lengthy agreement, and Jugeli suggested that not even a mega-money offer would be enough to tempt the Georgian to Saudi Arabia, with the winger instead preferring a move within Europe.

"[Victor] Osimhen signed a new contract, but do you really think he will spend his entire career at Napoli?" Jugeli said to Georgian outlet ITV, according to La Gazzetta dello Sport. "I can already tell you he will go to Saudi Arabia next summer."

"Napoli have raised his salary, but Khvicha would not accept such a transfer even for €1bn. He'd rather play for Real Madrid, Bayern Munich, Barcelona or Manchester City. Kvaratskhelia has different targets and preferences."

"Kvaratskhelia wants to have success, and he is already achieving it. He is among the best three players in the world. All will happen at the right time, it's still early. No team would reject the chance to sign him," Jugeli stated.



Victor Osimhen reacted angrily to links with Saudi Arabia (Getty Images)

Tbilisi City Hall: Renovated Tsereteli Avenue to Reopen at the End of the Month

BY MARIAM MTIVLISHVILI

According to the press service of the Tbilisi City Hall, despite the extension of the contract with the Tsereteli Avenue rehabilitation contractors, the avenue will be fully opened for traffic at the end of January 2024.

Rehabilitation of Akaki Tsereteli Avenue in Didube district is at the last stage. The arrangement of underground communications has been completed on the avenue, and in just one small part, in the section of Eristavi Street, works are being wrapped up.

Currently, road works are actively underway, which will be finalized at the end of the month, and traffic will be completely restored on the road section, City Hall promises.



The Matrona-Stalin Icon Scandal

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"If, somewhere on the fresco of St. George, [the Roman Emperor] Diocletian is depicted, this does not make it an icon of Diocletian," he said, going on to claim that the controversy surrounding the Matrona icon had been ignited to deliberately overshadow the celebration of Orthodox Christmas on 7 January.

Archimandrite Ioane Mchedlishvili of the Holy Trinity Cathedral stated on Sunday that the icon had been in the cathedral "for several months" already. The same day, Gocha Barnov, a theologian, told TV channel Mtvvari Arkhi that the icon's presence in the cathedral was "blasphemous" and that it should be "removed immediately."

The following day, Davit Tarkhan-Mouravi, the leader of the conservative Alliance of Patriots party, announced that he had donated the icon to the cathedral himself, and that the icon recognized the fact that Stalin had met Matrona for counsel during World War II.

In a 2021 publication commissioned by the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy titled "13 Myths about Stalin," the Eastern European Center for Multiparty Democracy found that Russian President Vladimir Putin's regime has actively been trying to portray Stalin as a 'religious man,' despite the Soviet authorities' mass arrest of worshippers and demolition or destruction of churches and other religious buildings during Stalin's time in power. Indeed, in a recent study carried out by Guram Iurshmanashvili of the Sulkhana-Saba Orbeliani University, it was noted that Georgians of the soviet generation tend to view Stalin as a religious man due to his Georgian nationality ("He was Georgian, so he must have been Christian," a 56-year-old Georgian respondent stated), as well as his early-life attendance of the Tbilisi Seminary. Yet, seminarist and Stalin's comrade Philip Makharadze once wrote, "No secular school produced as many atheists as the Tiflis Seminary."

Mythdetector.ge claims that the meeting between Stalin and Saint Matrona has not been historically confirmed and is "only a legend," a fact they say was established by Archimandrite Job Gumerov, who was assigned to look into the history of Saint Matrona so that she could be canonized. The legend states that, in 1941, Stalin met with Matrona Nikonova, and on her advice had the icon of the Mother of God taken to the front line, which is what protected the USSR from the fascists.

Media outlet Obiektivi this week shared a video of Irma Inashvili, leader of the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia party, in which she discusses the supposed meeting between Stalin and Matrona. She highlights in her video that depicting



The damaged icon in Sameba Cathedral. Source: Reddit

negative figures on icons is a common practice.

"...a conversation between Holy Matrona and Stalin took place, and then the Icon of the Mother of God was displayed, which helped the fighters against fascism in these positional battles, and then the opponents of fascism achieved a number of successes. This concept is depicted [in the icon]," Inashvili said. "...Why is the dragon depicted on the icon of St. George, i.e. the devil, and why are real devils depicted on icons? Let's turn it all around, change the iconography school, then."

The Patriarchate of Georgia released the following statement on the icon: "Since Stalin's meeting with St. Matrona, due to insufficient evidence, is not included in the canonical text of his life, it is not recognized by the Russian Church, which has conducted special research into the matter. As such, we appeal to the donor to make the appropriate changes to the icon himself, or we will do so."

The icon of Saint Matrona in question, with the image of Stalin beside her, was created by Ilya Pivnik in 2008. The display of the icon in St. Petersburg likewise resulted in protests from the people there. The head of the St. Petersburg Diocese blamed the media for generating such a story around the icon and sent the icon to Moscow so that the scandal would end and the icon would not be damaged by "liberal extremists."

In Georgia, though, the icon received no such protection, and since release of the news of the icon's placement in the Holy Trinity Cathedral, it has had paint thrown at it.

Civil activist Nata Peradze posted a video on her Facebook page this week showing the paint-damaged icon of Matrona, leading to members of the far-right Alt-Info group beginning a rally on the street outside her home in downtown Tbilisi in protest.

Police had to block off the road leading to the residential area to prevent the mob from reaching the building in which Peradze lives. The Ministry of Internal Affairs said that law enforcers were in attendance "to protect public order," and called on the protesters to act within the Law on Freedom of Expression and Public Assembly. They eventually dispersed, promising to rally again, this time outside Parliament, after the Old New Year festivities are over.

Meanwhile, an investigation was launched into the damaging of the icon of Matrona under Article 166 of the Administrative Offences Code, which pertains to petty hooliganism. Georgian Dream party member and lawyer Anri Okhanashvili on Thursday told journalists: "We are initiating amendments in the next few days calling for stricter criminal liability for damage to religious premises and property."

WHO WAS SAINT MATRONA?

Matrona Dmitrievna Nikonova (1885 - 1952) is a canonized saint of the Russian Orthodox Church who is said to have been born with the gifts of prophecy, spiritual vision, and healing. Her impoverished parents were planning to place their child in an orphanage after birth, but her mother changed her mind after she dreamed of a white bird of divine beauty with empty eye sockets landing on her breast. When Matrona was born blind, with eyelids closed over empty eye sockets, her mother took it as a heavenly sign and kept her. It is said that by the time she was eight, she had already revealed prophetic and healing powers. The Russian Revolution of 1917 led Matrona to travel in search of work and food, and in 1925, she moved to Moscow. Staying with friends and relatives in various apartments and basements, she gained a reputation as one who could be turned to for godly advice. Preaching the Russian Orthodox faith, she was not popular with the Communists, and yet, unlike the majority of religious people who were sent to the Gulag or into exile for their beliefs, she was not, as none who knew her would give up her location.

Such was the people's veneration of her "holy" powers, many years after her death she was canonized by the Russian Orthodox Church. Her remains were placed in the Church of the Protecting Veil of Our Lady at the Intercession Convent in Moscow, and attract thousands of pilgrims to visit each year seeking her aid from beyond the grave.

Her day is commemorated by the Orthodox Church on May 2.

Ukraine Latest: Zelensky Denies There Is Pressure to Stop Fighting Russia



Photo by Alina Smutko | Reuters

As the war enters its 687th day, these are the main battlefield developments:

- Two Russian S-300 missiles struck a hotel in the center of northeastern Kharkiv injuring 11 people, including journalists, according to Mayor Ihor Terekhov. Several other buildings, including two apartment blocks, were also damaged.
- At least one person was killed in a Russian-guided bomb attack on the village of Olkhovatka in the Kupiansk district of the Kharkiv region, according to Oleg Sinegubov, the head of the regional military administration. 10 private homes, a shop and a school were damaged, he added.
- Authorities in Belgorod evacuated some 392 children from the Russian

border city after weeks of shelling from Ukrainian forces. Some 300 residents have already left the city, one of the biggest civilian evacuations on Russian soil since Moscow began its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

- Russia and Ukraine reported intense battles along the front line in the south and east around Avdiivka, Mariinsky, Kupiansk and Kherson. Russia claimed Ukraine had lost at least 450 soldiers in the confrontations, while Ukraine claimed it had killed 800 Russian troops.

ZELENSKY SAYS NO PRESSURE TO STOP FIGHTING RUSSIA

Diplomatic pressure could be mounting on Kyiv to pursue a diplomatic way out of the war with Russia as the conflict approaches its second anniversary.

Italy's defense minister said Wednesday that while Rome's support of Ukraine remained steadfast, the time had come for "incisive diplomatic action alongside the aid we are providing."

On a surprise trip to Lithuania today, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said there was no pressure from the country's partners to stop the fight against Russia, however.

A day before the World Economic Forum begins in Davos, Switzerland, next Monday, Ukraine and Switzerland are due to co-host a summit of allied national security advisors with the focus on promoting Ukraine's 10-point peace plan. Russia will not be attending the event.

RUSSIA EXPLOITING ITS POSITION IN UN SECURITY COUNCIL BY PROCURING NORTH KOREAN WEAPONS, US SAYS

A joint statement from the US and seven other countries on Wednesday accused Russia of exploiting its position as a permanent member of the UN Security Council to acquire weapons from North Korea.

The export of weapons from North Korea violates multiple UN Security Council resolutions, according to a statement released by the United States Mission to the United Nations.

"Each violation makes the world a much more dangerous place. And a permanent Security Council member that willingly engages in these violations demonstrates a clear exploitation of its position," it said.

Alongside the US, the joint statement was issued on behalf of France, Japan,

Malta, the Republic of Korea, Slovenia, Ukraine and the UK.

UKRAINE, LITHUANIA SIGN DEFENSE SUPPORT AGREEMENT

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said in a post on X, formerly Twitter, on Wednesday that he and Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda signed a new defense support agreement.

"I am grateful for Lithuania's new defense support that we have agreed upon—not only aid but also joint production—particularly of anti-drone equipment, which is critical at the frontline, as well as other areas of defense production. We signed relevant documents today," Zelensky said.

Zelensky also described weapons and other equipment as well as training for military personnel and Lithuania's role in the process of clearing mines in Ukraine as "sources of strength."

Earlier in the day, Zelensky said that he was making a surprise visit to Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia.

As the Russia-Ukraine war approaches its second anniversary in February, neither side is in a position to capitulate or compromise in the conflict. Ukraine's counteroffensive last summer failed to shift the front lines significantly and Russian forces are heavily entrenched in fortified positions across the south and east of Ukraine.

Military experts predict little change in 2024 unless Western support for Ukraine dries up, and warn that neither side will be ready for peace talks unless they hold the upper-hand in the war, giving them negotiating power in any talks.

WESTERN ALLIES CONDEMN ARMS TRANSFERS BETWEEN NORTH KOREA AND RUSSIA

The US and its Western allies issued a statement Tuesday condemning alleged arms transfers between North Korea and Russia.

"We condemn in the strongest possible terms the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's (DPRK) export and Russia's procurement of DPRK ballistic missiles, as well as Russia's use of these missiles against Ukraine," said the joint statement, issued by the foreign ministers of the US, UK, EU, Australia, Germany, Canada and partner nations.

"The transfer of these weapons increases the suffering of the Ukrainian people, supports Russia's war of aggression, and undermines the global non-proliferation regime," they noted, adding that Russia's use of North Korean ballistic missiles in Ukraine also provides "valuable technical and military insights" to Pyongyang.

"We are deeply concerned about the security implications that this cooperation has in Europe, on the Korean Peninsula, across the Indo-Pacific region, and around the world," the statement added.

The US accused Russia of using North Korean ballistic missiles against Ukraine on Dec. 30 and Jan. 2, with Ukraine's international partners condemning their use.

When asked on Tuesday to comment on the White House's claims, Kremlin Press Secretary Dmitry Peskov said "we are leaving it with no comment."

"I just want to remind [you] that Ukraine is targeting our territories, like Belgorod, with missiles that are manufactured by foreign states, like Germany, France," he added.



The Biltmore Tbilisi Hotel Honored with UN Global Compact Corporate Sustainability Award for Decent Work and Economic Growth

A comprehensive initiative the 'Empower Workforce, Drive Growth' project has been undertaken by the organization. By emphasizing the principles of fair employment, job creation, and sustainable economic practices, a contribution is being made toward the realization of SDG 8 - Decent Work and Economic Growth.

The team at The Biltmore Tbilisi Hotel aspires to create a positive impact on their employees, the community, and the overall economic landscape. They aim to foster an environment where everyone has the opportunity to thrive and contribute to the sustainable development of our society.

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Most Significant Security Challenges and Opportunities for the Caspian Region: The Georgian Perspective



BY VICTOR KIPIANI, GEOCASE
CHAIRMAN GEORGIA

These currents of polycrisis – the war in Ukraine, post-pandemic aftershocks, and the first global economic warfare – expose countries of the region, including Georgia, to a number of qualitatively new challenges and “known unknowns.” For Georgia itself, there are a number of risks specific to its geography, foreign policy objectives, and internal politics. Regardless of the ample variety, we can group them, along with related opportunities, in the following way:

SECURITY CHALLENGE

The hot-phase conflict in Ukraine fur-

ther underlines the vulnerability of Georgia and the extent of the country's exposure to regional disorder and instability. The quest for a solid “security umbrella” is more existential than ever before. In the absence of formidable security guarantees extended by international partners, Georgia's pursuit of its foreign agenda could be bumpy enough, while also contributing to considerable fissures in the domestic political process.

The very same risks, however, allow both Georgia and its partners unique and timely opportunities to identify and implement ways and solutions nearly unthinkable prior to the war in Ukraine. It is indeed a good momentum for innovative and bold decisions with regards to the meaningful integration of Georgia into the West-led security system, and in order to address the nearly 30-year-long conundrum of the coun-

try's “geopolitical flux.”

HYBRID WARFARE

The incessant and tangible encroachment on Georgia's security and national interests that started from the very early days of the collapse of the Soviet Union has continued until the present day through various means of disinformation war and other forms of exertion of malign influence. In real terms, hybrid warfare bears threats to further undermining state institutions in the country, sowing and deepening public disorder, and diluting premises for national sustainability and development.

These challenges present Georgia, its partner nations, and international institutions with further opportunities for mutual cooperation, as well as offering the Western communities a handy momentum to acquire better geopoliti-

cal traction in the wider region.

ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY

Volatility in uninterrupted food and energy supplies relates to the country's economic resistance and viability. In addition, an increased dependence on Russian supplies, as well as reliance on Russia as the significant export market, is of direct relevance to Georgia's national security concerns. Next in the row of challenges is redesigning the global supply chains in a way that does not disrupt existing or potential transport routes and logistic lines running through the country.

Prospects of redesigning global supply chains could potentially lead to acknowledging an increased role and status for the Black Sea and Caspian Sea region, facilitating the creation of a modern regional business ecosystem along with contributing to the resistance and com-

petitiveness of the respective national economies.

FUNCTION AND PURPOSE

When talking about the Georgian dilemma in the context of regional security, one must necessarily emphasize constant concern about the functional need and “usefulness” of our country. This may happen only through the implementation of large-scale projects that are based on strategic vision. Georgia already obtained relevant historic memory and experience at the turn of the previous and current centuries (e.g., Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan, Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum). Now, this historic memory needs to be refreshed by implementing new transborder and regional projects. It is unarguable that a meaningful integration of Georgia into the interconnectedness and interdependency cross-system would serve to entrench Georgia in the broader security system. An attempt to make someone “like” or “befriend” you in the modern world might be generous and exciting, but it's an insufficient and illusory endeavor. In regard to a country, it is necessary to make others need you and, in light of that need, to act pragmatically for better management of your own national security in this stripped-of-romanticism modern world.

That said, the Middle Corridor and the Black Sea Electricity Cable mega projects present Georgia with the right opportunity to bring new vigor into the country's regional profile, renewing and re-identifying its role as a contributor to the regional security and economic new order.

This article is a guest contribution from a conference in July 2023, that the CPC hosted together with the Near East South Asia Center of the National Defense University (NDU), “Connecting Central Asia, the South Caucasus and Beyond”.

When in Rome, Shouldn't We Do as the Romans Do?

OP-ED BY NUGZAR B. RUHADZE

Such rhetorical questions are, in most cases, preposterous, and very rarely make much sense, but this particular one seems to be quite relevant, and I ask it for a purpose: to finally make clear where we stand, and how firmly and sincerely we stand where we stand. Frankly, the intention is to instigate an honest and balanced discourse on the subject of celebrating Christmas and New Year twice in this Christian-Orthodox country of belated but incipient Europeanism.

There are various suppositions concerning the time of our Good Shepherd's birth. The fixed ecclesiastical date has been December 25 since the beginning of the 4th century, which falls on the traditional date of the winter solstice on the Roman calendar, and which is precisely nine months after Annunciation on March 25. Christmas Day is a public holiday on January 7 in countries such as Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Serbia, Moldova, Macedonia, Montenegro, Egypt, Ethiopia and Georgia. Until very recently, it was so in Ukraine too, but no longer, as a result of the Zelensky government's freshly-adopted decree. History has it that, based on the differences in liturgical calendars perpetuated by the Church, the countries of the Eastern Roman



Participants march on the street during “Alilo”, a religious procession, to celebrate the Orthodox Christmas in Tbilisi. Source: REUTERS/David Mdzinarishvili

Empire celebrated Christmas on 7 January, which was considered Christ's birth date by the old Julian calendar, whereas most Christian believers observe the Redeemer's birth on 25 December, following the Gregorian calendar, which is universally espoused and joyously used throughout the world.

In Georgia, people today have an innate penchant to embrace the globally recognized Day, but at the same time enjoy

the historical tendency to celebrate the Great Instant of Joy and Light on 7 January, following the old tradition. Notably, Greece, the paternal country of Christian Orthodoxy, a century ago, officially adopted December 25 as the date to observe Xmas, alongside modification of the church calendar. This numerical alteration was introduced to bring the Greek Orthodox Church into line with the Western Christian tradition of cel-

brating Jesus's birth on 25 December.

We could make the same kind of move here in Sakartvelo too, which would culturally contribute to our full-right membership in the European family of nations, but there is something powerful that keeps us rolling on the Christian-Orthodox orbit. Paradoxically enough, Georgian men and women have a proclivity to be mentally Western and spiritually Orthodox at the same time.

Religiously speaking, most of us want and are sincerely prepared to dig in where we are right now, strongly desiring to be baptized and married in the Christian Orthodox tradition, being confident that our divine righteousness could only be based on our belonging in the Christian-Orthodox world. Well, there might be sporadic exclusions, especially among the young, and, specifically, among those who were lucky enough to go to Western schools. Yet even the most highly westernized Georgian politicians often make allusions to Christian Orthodoxy as the foundation of our statehood and morality.

It is curious that for the majority of Georgians, the old values are very much alive and functional, among them the sense of the traditional family; a strong belief in old-style marriage; respect of children for seniors; the fading-away patriarchate (still hanging on in there); electing a dictatorial Tamada as a master of ceremonies at get-togethers like weddings, wakes and birthdays; ubiq-

uitous folk singing and dancing; a marriage proposal still being the man's job; profuse toasting when imbibing; keeping up the national cuisine as the most acceptable diet for the majority of local gourmands; the habit of turning friendship into a strong vehicle for survival; particularized love for the motherland as the loftiest spiritual inner urge; unceremoniously vexing loudly in public places; overdosed doting on little ones; obfuscated poetic expression of thoughts both in black-and-white and in oral word; men's selfless veneration of mothers, sisters and daughters; taking a neighbor's house as one's own family abode; having a clergyman kick the ball into a game; explicit refusal to cremate the dead; building huge marble-cement-and-gravel cemeteries over wide swathes of land with images of the deceased on public display; being loath to carry plastic bags and disposable gloves while walking four-legged family members in the street; goggling at those with unorthodox orientations; knocking on a friend's, relative's or neighbor's door without a preliminary phone call; living in one's parents' house well into a solid age- this list being short of numerous other indigenous ways and means. Having all those traditional kinks and quirks in our blood and everyday life, so unwestern, how natural and unbiased can we look when in Rome, where one has to do as the Romans do?

Bidzina Back in Politics (Officially!)

BY TEAM GT

The founder of the Georgian Dream party, Bidzina Ivanishvili, on December 30 announced his official return to politics after years of being claimed by many to have ruled from the shadows.

Georgian Dream elected Ivanishvili as the "Honorary Chairman" of the party at a congress boasting around 350 delegates in attendance.

"Good to see Ivanishvili finally came out of hiding. His excuses were weak. Challenge accepted!" former Prime Minister and the Chairman of the For Georgia party, Giorgi Gakharia, wrote in response to the news.

"The only thing I could not count on was the betrayal of the country and the team by Giorgi Gakharia one month after I distanced myself from politics," Bidzina Ivanishvili stated in reply, adding that he was forced to take on the function of advisor as a result.

"For the first time since 2018, I find myself having to return to politics. I recall the words of the former ambassador of the European Union, an ambassador with whom I was friends, who told me back then that if I did not return for even a month, there would be nothing left of the ruling party. I fulfilled my mission. We organized the team, set up the system, and after that I left politics for a second time- to retire, and I had a good reason for doing so.

"The only thing I could not count on was the betrayal of the country and the team by Giorgi Gakharia one month later. I had to act as an advisor. If I hadn't helped the team, through consultations, the processes would have developed into a most difficult scenario for the country.

"I have been regularly communicating with 2-3 leaders of the party, helping to maintain a healthy situation in the team. A former leader of the party advising the team is a common occurrence, it happened and is happening in many democratic countries," Ivanishvili noted.

Ivanishvili said that despite claims to the contrary,



he will not be a candidate for Prime Minister. "I will not be a candidate for the position of Prime Minister. The Prime Minister will not change," Ivanishvili said.

When asked whether changes in the party or the government are expected after his return, Ivanishvili says that "no such thing is planned".

"Bidzina, take the hands of the Iraklis, Liluashvili, Partskhaladzes, Sozars and go to Mother Russia!" Chairman of the United National Movement, Levan Khabeishvili, wrote on his Facebook page in response to Bidzina Ivanishvili's return to politics. "What has

Bidzina Ivanishvili done in 11 years that he still allows himself to ask for support?! Bidzina, take the hands of the Iraklis, Liluashvili, Partskhaladzes, Sozars and go to Mother Russia! People want Europe, peace, security and prosperity!

"We will win the main battle and the Georgian people will win! In 2018, the people won and Ivanishvili 'returned'; he shed tears and promised the people prosperity; he cashed in, then left.

"Unless a disaster happens, I will not return," he said. It's a disaster for him - the people won and we got candidate status for the European Union.

Now he is back again, fearing the loss of power ... our work, the activism of the people and the involvement of Saakashvili in the process completely destroyed the Russian party...what has he done in 11 years to give him the right to ask for support?" Khabeishvili asked.

Tina Bokuchava, chair of the UNM faction in parliament, said Thursday: "De-oligarchization means getting rid of the harmful influence of one oligarch and ensuring the independence of institutions. The return of Ivanishvili to politics cannot ensure this. On the contrary."

For Georgia Party Initiates Amendment to the Constitution to Allow Presidential Elections Again



BY ANA DUMBADZE

Former Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia's party "For Georgia" is taking the initiative to return direct election of the president to Georgia's constitution.

"We call on the honorary chairman of Georgian Dream and the parliamentary majority to start working on the constitutional amendment from this spring session, regarding the return of the rule of direct election of the president by the citizens of Georgia," Beka Liluashvili, a member of the For Georgia party, said at a briefing in the parliament.

He claims that Bidzina Ivanishvili himself recognized the problem of uncontrolled power, however, as a way to solve the problem, he offered himself to society in the role of controller. Liluashvili noted that in a democratic system, it is impossible for one person to be the guarantor of state stability.

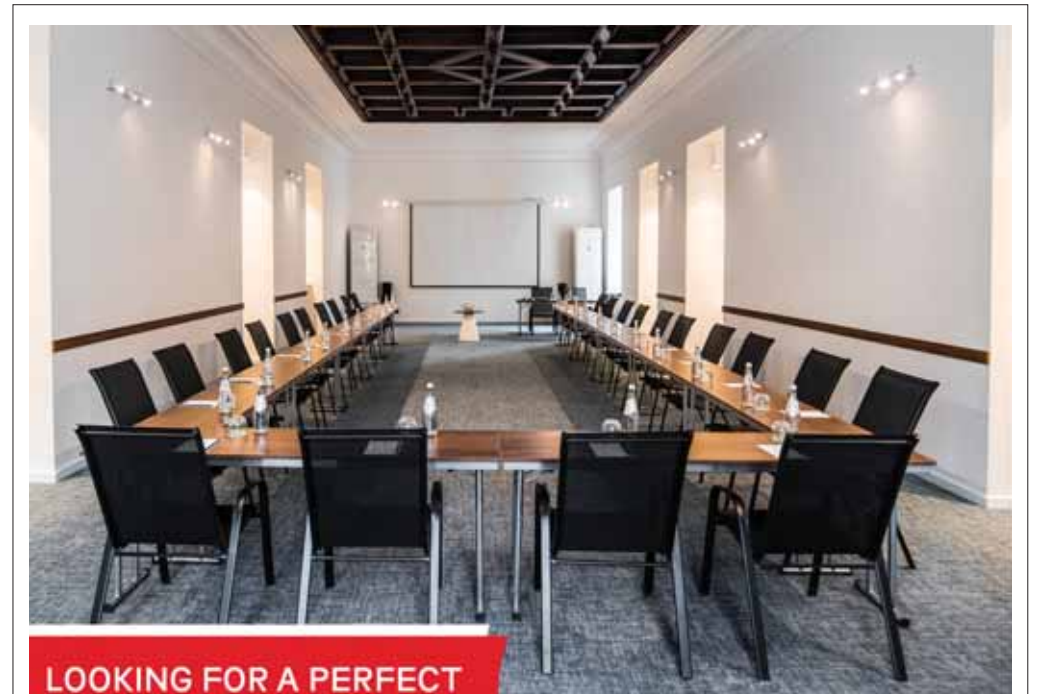
"Gakharia's team, the party For Georgia, has come up with an initiative to make changes in the Constitution of Georgia regarding the procedure for electing the president. In particular, the previous rule should be returned and the future president

of Georgia should be directly elected by the citizens of Georgia instead of the electoral college. This provides the necessary legitimacy and independence of the president.

"Bidzina Ivanishvili also spoke about the problem of balance in the government, recognizing the issue of the unlimited and uncontrolled power of the Georgian Dream government, but instead of solving the problem constitutionally, he proposed himself as the controller, for the third time already.

"Power must be balanced. In a democratic system it is impossible for one person to be the guarantor of state stability. Logically, it should be in his interest to preserve the constitutional institutions of high legitimacy. Therefore, we call on the honorable chairman of the Dream and the parliamentary majority to start working on the constitutional change from this spring session, to bring back the rule of direct election of the President by the citizens of Georgia.

"We had this issue as part of the party's election program, but as a result of the New Year surprises [Ivanishvili's return], these processes were accelerated for our benefit. This experience is not foreign: many European states had to return to the rule of direct election of their presidents," Liluashvili said.



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"I'm doing my best to make Putin worried" – Interview with "Traitor of Russia" Ilya Ponomarev



Ilya Ponomarev. Source: milkeninstitute

INTERVIEW BY VAZHA TAVBERIDZE

Exiled in Ukraine since 2016, Ilya Ponomarev is the political head of the Freedom of Russia Legion, a volunteer militia believed to include around 1,600 Russian dissidents and defectors using pinprick attacks to aggravate Russian troops with the hope of one day being able to march on Moscow. By profession, he is a politician and technology entrepreneur. In 2016-2022, after being expelled from Russian Parliament by putinist forces, he became involved in investments in Ukraine. After Putin's invasion in February 2022, Ponomarev joined Kyiv's territorial defense and returned to active politics, calling to replace Vladimir Putin to stop the war. He is now a member of the Executive Council of Congress of People's Deputies of Russia. Radio Free Europe/RL's Georgian Service sat down with him to talk about the Ukraine-Russia war and who is winning it.

"Ukraine is winning. The war is about achieving certain objectives, and it's quite clear that Mr. Putin is not able to achieve the objectives that he put before himself when he started the invasion. Vice versa: The Ukrainians have managed to defend their country, which was their objective," he tells us. "Obviously, there is an ultimate goal to liberate all of its territory. Yes, right now, as we understand, the fighting is at a difficult stage, but nevertheless, the Russians have not advanced, so the answer is simple: The Ukrainians are winning.

IS UKRAINE CLOSER TO ACHIEVING ITS OBJECTIVE OF RECAPTURING ALL THE SEIZED LAND THAN PUTIN IS TO HIS AIM TO SEIZE ALL OF UKRAINE?

I think that right now, as Gen. Zaluzhny suggested, there is a certain stalemate. But still, the chances of Ukraine achieving a breakthrough are higher than the chances for Russia. But the end of this war is not about liberating all of Ukrainian territory; the end of this war is about changing the regime in Moscow. Without that, they will be no end to it, no matter where the front line is. Even if Ukraine liberates all of its territory, it just means that the front line will move alongside the border, but it will still be war. This

war didn't start in Ukraine, it started in Chechnya, continued in Georgia... Now it spread to Israel, we see what is going in West Africa, we see the situation between Venezuela and Guyana. Everywhere Putin and the Kremlin have played a role in starting new military hostilities. So that's why the answer is to change the regime in Moscow.

BACK IN JULY, YOU CLAIMED THAT THE POST-PUTIN ERA WOULD SOON BE UPON US. WITH THE NEW STALEMATE, HAS THE CALCULATION CHANGED?

Well, we shouldn't be too tragic about what's going on. Even in a stalemate, you need to trust the professionals who are leading the campaign. I think that Zaluzhny and his team have proven to us that they're more than capable as military commanders, while what we have seen from the Russian side is by far not what one would call the most successful: The Russians managed to lose everything they had, the most elite forces they had. At the very beginning of the large scale invasion, they flushed them all down the toilet.

YOU PUT A LOT OF FAITH IN ZALUZHNY, BUT HE HIMSELF SAID NEITHER SIDE CAN ADVANCE UNLESS SOMETHING MAJOR HAPPENS. SO HOW FAR INTO THE FUTURE HAS THE POST-PUTIN ERA MOVED?

We need to read Zaluzhny properly. What he says is: if there is no military support, no new weapons, no assistance, then it could be a stalemate. He says that no matter what, the Ukrainians are capable of defending their territory, but if the world expects advances, then they will have to do something about it. Everybody is waiting and hoping that the Ukrainians by themselves will be able to achieve everything, and then they think they can just join in at the celebration after? That's not how things work. Where there are problems controlling the Ukrainian air space, a subtle and very severe disparity in the armor, problems with artillery, then achieving major breakthroughs means putting a lot of lives on the line, and that's absolutely unacceptable for the Ukrainian military command, and that's what Zaluzhny is writing about.

Nobody wants a long campaign, and I am absolutely certain that we can achieve everything we want in 2024. But there has to be two conditions: First is a coor-

dated approach between all of the Ramstein coalition in terms of military supplies and the stupid limitations on the types of military facilities on Russian territory which still exist. And secondly, we need to attack the Kremlin politically, economically and militarily; we need to treat the origin of the war and not just the consequences.

IN THE LAST TWO MONTHS, THREE MAJOR WESTERN OUTLETS WROTE ABOUT YOU, ESSENTIALLY TOUTING YOU AS A MAN PUTIN SHOULD BE AFRAID OF. DOES PUTIN HAVE REASON TO BE WORRIED?

Oh, I very much hope so, because I'm doing my best to make him worried. And I think that he is worried, based on the way he's acting. I see a lot of coordinated efforts inside his administration to confront what we are doing. They are clearly trying to somehow redirect where the threat is coming from. At first they were denying the activities of the Russian guerrilla fighters, partisans in Russia, then Mr. Naryshkin was with his counterparts in other CIS countries, saying "it's a CIA plot, and we understand what's behind it." But I think they themselves know the truth: That it's a genuine movement of Russians seeking to replace Putin. A year ago, everything that is related to armed resistance was a big taboo. Right now, it's becoming more and more mainstream, and the Russian opposition has basically been split half and half; half supports the armed resistance and half prefers non violent actions. Unfortunately, the leaders are not yet there; they are usually very cautious, dependent on financial infusions which come in from different Western countries. A good example is Belarus, which indicates that without having a committed group of people who are ready to use force to overthrow the regime, nothing will happen.

YOU WOULD NEED PEOPLE INSIDE THE KREMLIN AS WELL. DO YOU HAVE SUCH SUPPORT?

We have access to some. Otherwise, it would be impossible to achieve anything. But all of that needs to happen gradually and we need to understand which circles of society are more rigid, which circles of society are more fluid. At the beginning, it happens among youngsters, who are more radical by nature, more committed fighters, then it comes to people who have something to lose by siding with the elites. It's very important that it is combined with thoughtful sanctions, because these put pressure on them, forcing them to act. But I think we're moving in the right direction. Too slow sometimes, but it's getting there.

DO YOU THINK YOU ARE PERSONALLY VIEWED BY PUTIN AS A THREAT?

I already had several attacks tried on me here, so yeah, I do think so. I don't know what kind of weight he associates with me, how high I am on his hit list, but I think he understands that non-violent protest is not a danger for him. That's what all of our opposition guys will say, "Oh, he's so scared of us." I never felt that he was ever scared of non-violent protesters. But he is always afraid of national groups and religious groups, because he understands that they can always take up arms. And now he has reason to be afraid of Russians as well.

LET'S TALK ABOUT, IDEALLY, THEORETICALLY, THE WORLD OF THE FUTURE. WHAT WOULD PALOMARES RUSSIA LOOK LIKE?

[laughs] Well, I hope there will be an opening with Russia, because what we are fighting for is a Russia without any "Führers".

My Russia is very decentralized; power is with the people, with local communities primarily, in all parts of the country; people decide for themselves how they want to live. My Russia is very innovative, is part of the global community, global economy, and is the leader of new technologies, new ideas, and the most talented people, who travel freely and move the world forward. My Russia is a parliamentary republic, where there's no tsar or president or any other type of unilateral leader; where the power is distributed among all the branches, with a true division of powers. In general, I highly encourage all of your readers to visit the website of the Congress of People's Deputies, which is the shadow Russian parliament, where right now approximately 100 former MPs of different levels are creating the legislation for the new Russia, including the new Russian constitution.

WHAT ABOUT FOREIGN POLICY? AN INTERESTING QUESTION FOR THE NEIGHBORING COUNTRIES, I THINK.

Well, I believe Russia is part of the West. I think that Russia should be a member of the European Union and of NATO. Mr. Surkov recently adopted the concept that I was promoting for a very long time, the concept of a broader national union. I always thought that the civilizations, the countries coming from Judaic Christian civilization, should basically live in one union, the union of countries of the Renaissance. And that includes Europe, that includes the post-Soviet space, that includes both Americas. I think that's a very natural alliance, which will inevitably be formed at one point or another.

WHAT WOULD HAPPEN, FOR EXAMPLE, WITH THE POST-SOVIET CONFLICTS - WHAT WOULD HAPPEN TO TRANSNISTRIA? I DON'T THINK I HAVE TO ASK ABOUT WHAT WOULD HAPPEN TO CRIMEA, BUT WHAT WOULD HAPPEN WITH THE CONFLICTS IN GEORGIA, IN THIS NEW RUSSIA?

Obviously, the Russian republic should withdraw all the military forces from all of the occupied territories, or the territories where it has a military presence, like Transnistria, which is formally not an occupied territory, but is a quasi-occupied territory, and we definitely would withdraw. We already designed such a piece of legislation, which is called the Act of Peace, which regulates how the demilitarization process would actually take place. The cornerstone of our political views is to grant to all the nations of the post-Soviet space the right to self determine their future. Some of them are already independent, but some are not. Some want to be independent, some do not. We need to ask everybody: who wants to build a state of Russia? Who wants to be a separate state? I don't envision that many of the territories of modern day Russia will decide to secede, but some definitely can. Chechnya demonstrated in the past their desire to be an independent state and such desire definitely needs to be granted. As for Georgia, we respect the territorial integrity of Georgia, we think that everything that happened before was unlawful, that the situation needs to be reversed. And we will sit down and discuss how that can happen.

LET'S ASSUME AN IDEAL SCENARIO WHERE PUTIN IS NOT RIGGING THE ELECTIONS, WHERE RUSSIANS SIMPLY HAVE TO GO AND VOTE FOR THEIR CHOICE. WOULD THEY VOTE FOR YOUR RUSSIA OR PUTIN'S?

Approximately 20% of Russians in Russia are against the war, 10% of Russians there are for the war, and 70% of Russians just want to be left alone. "Don't ask us, because we're afraid and because nothing depends on our opinion." And there are a lot of different opinions inside. But you know what unites them? It's that "nothing depends on us, so leave us be." And that's my target audience. I want them to wake up and fight. With the local governments, with the ability to elect their local authorities, which they never had in reality. In our transition period, what we envision is that we will first form local communities, local governments, self governing bodies, starting from school councils and going all the way up. We need to wake them up. And then they would form the new federal government. But first, they need to understand that something depends on them, on their will, on their views, on their desires. Right now, they don't know what they want. They've been asleep. How would they know?

HOW DO YOU PLAN TO WAKE THEM UP? HOW DO YOU SELL YOUR IDEAS TO THEM?

Through local issues, things that bother everyone. What house you're living in, what kind of roads you have, what's by your window, what kind of trees are planted in your backyard, what kind of kindergarten is for free for your kids. This is something that you don't need to think big about the country and about certain political concepts. These are very local things. And as soon as you give the person the right to decide on them, they understand they can influence the local budget, make decisions locally, and that's when they wake up. And then they gradually start to think bigger and bigger, because when they get a taste for local self governance, they will get ideas on what to do at the national level. People first need to uncover their potential at the local level, and then graduate to the top.

THAT WOULD COVER ALL THE DOMESTIC PROBLEMS YOU'VE LISTED. BUT HOW WOULD THESE "AWAKENED PEOPLE" LOOK AT THE FOREIGN POLICY THAT YOU'RE PROPOSING? WHAT IF THEY SAY: WE DON'T WANT RUSSIA TO BE SMALLER THAN IT IS. WHAT HAPPENS THEN?

At the beginning, they'd have no say on the foreign policy. That will take time. First of all, the new government in Russia will inevitably be coming from the outside, like the government in Germany after World War Two came from the outside. First comes a forceful intervention from the global community, and then you start from bottom up to build the new structures of power, but within the new constitution, where the basic principles and basic directions will already be carved in stone and cannot be changed.

FINAL QUESTION: DO YOU PLAN TO BE IN THAT GOVERNMENT?

I am planning to be, during this transition period. The most important reform for Russia will be judicial reform, and as soon as the transition period is over, I want to concentrate on judicial power.

Economic Power of Creativity: USAID's Impact on Georgia's Creative Industries

ECONOMIC POWER OF CREATIVITY: USAID'S IMPACT ON GEORGIA'S CREATIVE INDUSTRIES

The term "creative economy" may lack a precise definition, but its essence lies in economic activities fueled by individual or collective creativity, skill, and talent. This expansive concept encompasses various sectors where creativity is the driving force behind generating intellectual property and commercial value. From advertising and architecture to animation, film production, and software development, creative industries play a pivotal role in shaping the economic landscape of countries.

GLOBAL LANDSCAPE OF CREATIVE INDUSTRIES

The contribution of creative industries to a country's economy is diverse and dynamic, influenced by factors like cultural heritage, development level, and investment in the sector. These industries span cultural, artistic, and innovative realms, impacting gross domestic product (GDP), job creation, export value, and cultural influence. Creative industries are not confined by borders; they are highly mobile, capable of shifting production to countries offering attractive environments and incentives.

As the global nature of creative industries evolves, governments worldwide are recognizing the significance of both hosting international projects and nurturing domestic creative sectors. Governments are challenged to formulate policies and regulations that enhance competitiveness and stimulate economic growth.

USAID'S ACTION FOR GROWTH IN GEORGIA'S CREATIVE INDUSTRIES

In Georgia, the USAID Economic Security Program stands as a pivotal force, championing the empowerment of the private sector representatives within the creative industries. Marika Shioshvili, the COP of The USAID Economic Security Program, emphasizes, "Our program has been instrumental in strategically investing in intellectual property rights protection, education, workforce development, and international partnerships to catalyze innovation and foster economic prosperity in Georgia's creative industries."

Shioshvili provided further insights into the program's comprehensive strategy aimed at supporting the growth and development of Georgia's creative industries. Over a five-year span, she highlighted, "The USAID Economic Security Program has implemented various activities covering pre and post-production value chains, collaborating with entities like National Intellectual Property Center of Georgia - Sakpatenti and the U.S. Department of Commerce CLDP to address copyright issues and promote legal alternatives to piracy, such as Cavea Plus."

Partnerships, skill development programs, certification-based trainings, and support for quality standards were initiated, all geared towards enhancing the capabilities of the creative industries. Shioshvili affirmed, "These initiatives are crucial components of our strategy, fostering collaboration and boosting the overall growth and sustainability of Georgia's creative sector."

Visibility-building efforts, international partnerships, and grant programs were also highlighted in the interview, showcasing how these endeavors propelled Georgia's creative potential on the global



stage. Shioshvili noted, "Our goal is not just to create growth within Georgia but to position its creative industries as globally attractive and competitive players."

Considering the long-term impact, USAID envisions the Creative Industries in Georgia continuing to be a key player in the country's economic landscape. Shioshvili expressed, "Our initiatives have breathed life into the content production and post-production value chains, leading to substantial growth."

The government's recognition of the sector's economic importance, coupled with actions against piracy and improvements in intellectual property rights, has elevated Georgia's standing.

In terms of the lasting impact on GDP, job creation, and cultural development, Shioshvili emphasized, "The resulting surge in audiovisual content production positions the creative industries as a globally attractive force, fostering sustained economic growth, job creation, and a lasting cultural impact."

Regarding the promotion of the creative economy, USAID recognizes the pivotal roles of international partnerships, collaboration with the private sector, and initiatives focused on innovation, education, and workforce development. Shioshvili highlighted, "Our program actively supports initiatives enhancing intellectual property rights, implementing filmmaking technologies, and transferring knowledge to Georgian stakeholders."

These carefully crafted initiatives not only improve the business environment but also attract investments, stimulate innovation, and promote skills development, ensuring a lasting positive impact on all stakeholders within the creative industries.

GEORGIA'S JOURNEY IN FILM PRODUCTION AND STREAMING

In the realm of distribution and streaming, USAID's Program support for Cavea Plus has been pivotal, as the creation of this Cavea Plus platform and the gathering of licensed products on this platform took place with the help of the USAID Economic Security Program. This partnership addresses the challenge of piracy by establishing a licensed streaming platform, offering a legal alternative for users. Cavea Plus has not only gained popularity with over 300,000 registered users but also serves as a unified platform for advertising, Georgian film pro-

duction, and other services, contributing to the share economy.

Otar Bubashvili, Co-Founder of Cavea Plus, highlights the significance of legal streaming services. Bubashvili notes, "For the first time, the online streaming service is now setting foot in Georgia, it has been a year since Cavea Plus has been in existence. Generally in the West and around the world, streaming is the main form of content consumption, and then there is everything else. Until now, many people in Georgia have been using content in a pirated way."

Bubashvili emphasizes the positive impact on the local creative industry, sharing, "In terms of production, our focus in general is whether we would be able to produce a critical quantity and a critical quality of Georgian content. Several films and six TV series have been made with the participation of Cavea Plus, and we have serious plans for next year as well. We have a specific strategy here as well, according to which we will act. It is planned to export this content outside of Georgia. Such productions employ Georgian professionals and create more jobs in the creative industry."

In this way, Cavea Plus not only addresses piracy concerns but also becomes a catalyst for promoting and exporting quality Georgian content, contributing to the growth of the local entertainment industry.

POST-PRODUCTION AND ELEVATING GEORGIA'S FILM INDUSTRY STANDARDS

Beso Katcharava, Entrepreneur and Founder of POSTRED, delves into the pivotal role of post-production in shaping Georgia's identity in the global film market. Katcharava underscores the critical importance of certifications such as the Trusted Partner Network (TPN), stating, "The certification for the film industry has become absolutely crucial for us to earn the trust of major studios like Disney and Warner to work with us. This is the highest cybersecurity certificate." In securing this certification, the USAID Economic Security Program played a vital role, fully financing and facilitating the process for POSTRED. Additionally, USAID Program supported initiatives such as intellectual property sessions for students and awareness-raising campaigns.

Beso Katcharava, Entrepreneur, POSTRED Founder, and Sound Designer,

articulates the unique challenges faced by a country like Georgia in the cinematic and global markets. He emphasizes the trust deficit, not stemming from a negative reputation but rather from a lack of recognition. Investing in or conducting business in lesser-known places always poses risks for large corporations. Katcharava underscores the transformative significance of film industry certification, especially in earning the trust of major studios like Disney and Warner. This certification holds paramount importance for POSTRED and contributes significantly to the country's image on the global stage. Katcharava emphasizes the positive economic impact of promoting the film industry, drawing parallels with California's reliance on the film sector and Montreal's video game industry influence.

FILM PRODUCTION IN GEORGIA, COLLABORATIONS AND ECONOMIC IMPACT

Sophia Bendiashvili, Producer and Co-Founder of Enkeny Films, provides valuable insights into the impact of international collaborations, particularly with Universal Pictures and the USAID program, on Georgia's film industry and the broader creative economy. In 2019, Enkeny Films played a pivotal role in providing production services to Universal Pictures for the filming of Fast & Furious 9 in Georgia. Bendiashvili acknowledges this collaboration as a monumental step forward for the local film industry, bringing about advancements in various aspects, notably the qualification of the Georgian film crew. Reflecting on this achievement, she states, "It was especially important for Georgia to involve as many people as possible in the filming process and to get experience in similar types of film production."

A significant aspect of this endeavor was the successful cooperation with the USAID program, facilitating the training of an additional 40 individuals across various film production departments during the Fast & Furious 9 filming. Bendiashvili notes, "These people are still actively involved in the shooting process as highly qualified personnel." This collaboration addresses a crucial challenge in the industry - the need for a greater number of qualified professionals to propel rapid development. Regarding the contribution of the Georgian creative industry to the country's economy,

Bendiashvili observes a substantial increase. She envisions continued growth, particularly with adequate support from both the state and international institutions. Expressing optimism, she states, "With the right support, I think this direction has the potential to become one of the significant driving forces of the rural economy."

ANIMATION RENAISSANCE: NURTURING TALENT AND INDUSTRY GROWTH

Animation in Georgia has undergone a significant transformation, and Mariam Kandelaki, Founder and Director of the Georgian Animators Association - SAKANIMA, provides a glimpse into this thriving industry. Established in Tbilisi in 2019, the Association now boasts about 100 members from Georgia and neighboring and European countries, including France. Open to anyone interested in animation and art, the association hosts an annual animation conference with a primary goal of fostering both economic and creative development within the industry.

Kandelaki highlights the pivotal role of Georgia, playing a bridge function between the Western animation industry and the Georgian side. Despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, the animation sector has proven to be resilient. Unlike film production, which experienced interruptions, animation continued to flourish, with an increase in orders attributed to the adaptability of online work.

SAKANIMA is not only a collaborative platform but also a proactive force in preventing the outflow of Georgian talent. Kandelaki emphasizes the association's mission in retaining professionals and nurturing the industry's growth. In this endeavor, the SAQANIMA Animation Hub and ANIMATBILISI - International Animation Conference was established, with support from USAID Economic Security Program, aimed at fortifying Georgia's position as a hub for animation projects. This initiative aligns with the broader goal of preventing brain drain and creating a conducive environment for sustained success in the animation industry. In her assessment of the profession, Kandelaki notes that "animation is both an expensive and lucrative field. Particularly noteworthy is the increasing representation of women within the Georgian animation industry. The industry's resilience during challenging times and its potential for economic growth position Georgia as a significant player in the global animation arena."

The USAID Economic Security Program's initiatives have played a pivotal role in nurturing Georgia's creative industries. By dedicating resources to enhance the business environment, raise awareness through education, develop the workforce, and establish international partnerships, the program has effectively fueled the growth of the creative economy. As Georgia continues to position itself as an attractive destination for international productions, the creative industries are poised to play an even more significant role in the country's economic landscape. The journey towards an increased share of the creative industry in Georgia's economy involves partnerships, continued investment, and a commitment to fostering innovation. This holistic exploration underscores Georgia's comprehensive strategy, positioning the country as a powerhouse in the multifaceted global entertainment landscape.

Shangri La Batumi: Celebrating Success and Facing Tax Challenges



In the heart of December, the luxurious Shangri La casino at the 5-star Ramada Plaza in Batumi hosted its inaugural lottery, boasting a substantial prize pool of 100,000 GEL. Since its grand opening in August of the same year, Shangri La Batumi has quickly emerged as a preferred destination for players hailing from various corners of the globe.

The recent lottery unfolded with joy as the fortunate winner of the main prize - a brand-new Mazda CX5, effusively expressed appreciation for Shangri La's impeccable service, enchanting atmosphere, and the sheer delight of triumphing in such a riveting event. "What an adrenaline rush - a spectacular night with extraordinary prizes. Heartfelt thanks to Shangri La for orchestrating these exceptional events," the exuberant winner exclaimed.

In tune with the entertainment preferences of its esteemed guests and following the resounding success of the recent

lottery, Shangri La announced the 2024 Lottery Season. This upcoming series of events promises a substantial prize fund of 100,000 GEL, with draws scheduled for the 20th of January, 24th of February, and 23rd of March.

However, amid the jubilation, CEO of Storm International, Darren Keane, voiced his concerns about the challenges looming on the horizon. While recognizing Shangri La's dedication to comprehending the entertainment desires of its guests, Keane expressed reservations regarding future events. These concerns are triggered by a recently implemented law that not only raises the gross gaming revenue (GGR) tax from 10 to 15 percent but also introduces a player winnings tax on withdrawals, escalating from 2 to 5 percent for gaming operators.

Keane underscores the potential adverse effects of this new legislation on gaming tourism, especially for a prominent gaming destination like Batumi. He apprehensively points out that the projected

slowdown may lead operators to make difficult decisions, potentially slashing marketing expenses due to perceived diminished effectiveness in the face of increased taxation and decrease of gaming tourism.

With regards to this legislation, Darren Keane states, "This legislation will lead to foreign players who are to be taxed now not visiting Georgia anymore. They will now fly to other countries such as Cyprus and Armenia where there are no such taxes on winnings. With fewer foreign players, it could lead to some closures and thus more unemployment and thus a huge reduction in taxation for licenses to the federal and regional governments."

As Shangri La Batumi navigates through these challenges, the commitment to delivering unparalleled experiences for its guests remains unwavering. The juxtaposition of triumphs and tax concerns adds a layer of complexity to the narrative, reflecting the dynamic landscape of the gaming industry.



FAO: World Food Prices Reduced by almost 14% in 2023

BY MARIAM MTIVLISHVILI

In 2023, world food prices decreased by 13.7%, and in December, in annual terms, prices decreased by 10.1%, the report of the United Nations Food and Agriculture

Organization (FAO) notes.

According to the results of 2023, the prices decreased by these indicators: the price index of cereals by 15.4%, the price index of vegetable oil by 32.7%, the price index of milk products by 16.6%, the price index of meat by 3.5%. And the sugar price index with the total results of 2023 increased by 26.7%.

Georgia to Host M&I, One of the Largest Forums in Business Tourism

BY MARIAM MTIVLISHVILI



In 2024, the international business tourism forum M&I Tbilisi 2024 will be held in Tbilisi, organized by the Georgian National Tourism Administration. It is expected to be attended by representatives of more than 250 international companies.

"In Germany, France, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Cyprus, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Thailand, presentations and business meetings have already been held in order to plan for large-scale events, conferences and forums in Georgia.

At the M&I Forum held in Oslo in 2023, Georgia's was named the best among 180 companies providing tourism services," said the Georgian National Tourism Administration.

Tbilisi Tango Celebrates Anniversary with the Global Community through Argentinian Dance

BY SHELBI R. ANKIEWICZ

Tbilisi Tango, a school that teaches the iconic Argentinian dance, is celebrating its 16th anniversary with its 5th annual Tbilisi Tango Weekend (TTW) from January 26-28.

The school first opened in 2008 and has since been teaching classes to the public. The current owner, Levan Gomelauri, who is also a teacher and organizer of the event, has been with the school since it first started. TTW is an event comprised of several different nationalities, the biggest one being Georgian, but people from 10-15 other countries often attend the event as well.

“This experience helps generally, to develop our dance and share our embrace,” said Gomelauri.

According to Gomelauri, tango is a social dance that is intended to share intimacy and closeness with those with whom you are dancing, so by having visitors from various countries, everyone can share the characteristics of the dance. TTW is for people who already know the basics of tango. The dance has various levels, and since this event will act as a social event, rather than a choreographed one, people will be doing improvisations with those they meet there.

“In this embrace you find some sensations, as to friends, family, someone you love,” Gomelauri emphasized.

Tango events usually have different formats that they are conducted in, such as Encuentros and Festivals, but TTW will be in the style of a marathon. It will

first start on Friday with dances, also known as milongas, from 21:00-3:00, followed by an all-day schedule on Saturday and Sunday. In total, guests will be able to enjoy 27 hours of social, tango dancing.

Gomelauri first discovered tango when he was studying at Tbilisi State Conservatory. He had a teacher who started dance classes for students and teachers, which eventually expanded into something that was offered to the community. When the teacher moved away, Gomelauri took over his classes and made the school what it is today.

In 2017, after learning the dance secondhand, Gomelauri visited Argentina for three months to discover where it had originated from. It was there he met his current wife, Cecilia Acosta, who is also now a teacher at the school along with Gomelauri’s brother, Beka Gomelauri. Beka initiated TTW after he participated in marathons in Europe and realized their school could run similar events. At the time, Tbilisi Tango’s marathons were happening at random times throughout the year, and at different venues. Gomelauri suggested aligning it with the school’s anniversary, and it’s been that way since.

TTW’s venue has changed a few times over the years, so the capacity for guests depends on where the event is being held. In 2024, the maximum number of participants is 160. Gomelauri said that after COVID-19, tango exploded with events because people were dying to have that social interaction they had been missing out on.

In addition to being a tango instructor, Gomelauri is also a music composer who teaches in the conservatory. To him, composing and tango both serve



Levan Gomelauri and Cecilia Acosta performing the tango. Photo from Levan Gomelauri’s archives.

as an artistic outlet where he can express his feelings.

“It’s something that is inside, and you want to share this emotion somehow, like go out and do art with it, I found the same thing in tango as composing something,” said Gomelauri. “In tango, you also express emotions in body language that you are taught, so it was very interesting for me as a form of how you can take the emotions you have inside you and through music share them with the partner you are dancing with.”

Tango, a social dance, is designed to allow dancers to share the full spectrum

of emotions. The dance is performed through music, so partners can share their feelings of sorrow, energy, and anything that coincides with the music playing in the moment.

For the attendees, there will be snacks and drinks available throughout the weekend. There will also be additional events free to participate in, including a city tour, a yoga class, and two dance classes. The dance classes connect to tango and will be biomechanics, which is developing the biomechanics of the body for dancing tango, and Argentinian folklore dances, the samba, and

chacarera.

The event will take place at 28 Lado Asatiani Street, a five-minute walk from Liberty Square in Tbilisi. Those wanting to participate must register online and pay 120 euros, the total cost for the weekend. The organizers are hoping to create a community for the weekend where everyone feels welcome.

“Our main goal, as organizers of this weekend, is to create a cozy and friendly atmosphere, making it a perfect place to exchange embraces and all the warm emotions,” the event’s Facebook page states.



Last year’s Tbilisi Tango Weekend where attendees can be seen dancing. Photo from Levan Gomelauri’s archives.

Back to "Winter"



BLOG BY TONY HANMER

Returning from tropical Phuket, paradise island of Thailand, was more of a shock than leaving winter for the beach. Although the Turkish Airlines pilot had described "clear skies" for Tbilisi, that had obviously changed by the time we touched down at about 4pm on Christmas Eve. Sleet slapped us in the face as we waited for our taxi home.

Resulting in me catching cold... nothing too serious, but the temperature and weather changes must simply have been too much. Not even all those fresh mangoes and other exotic fruit were enough to bolster my immune system sufficiently, I suppose. I medicated myself and stayed

in our warm apartment.

My next trip, however, was supposed to be into full-on winter, visiting our village home in high Svaneti. I had recovered, and bought a train ticket from Tbilisi to Zugdidi for January 1, intending then to catch anything going up into the mountains from there.

At least I had news in time before leaving that the Svaneti road had just closed. On New Year's eve, a house-sized rock fell and that was that: nothing in or out for at least a couple of days, said the report. The only other road into or out of Svaneti, north from Kutaisi through Lentekhi to Ushguli and then down, is always closed for winter anyway, so no go there. I got a refund on my train ticket and resigned myself to not trudging back into meter-high snow. Oh well, it was not to be for that time. A bit later, maybe.

A friend invited us to a New Year's Eve party in his house on Mtatsminda, which would potentially give good views of all the fireworks. Last year I had borrowed a friend's tripod, hoping to end up with a set of layers of all the bursts going off one after the other. But I left my setup too late, and barely managed to get anything useable. This year I had my own tripod, and was practiced in using it. So I walked up higher to a clear spot overlooking part of the city, and then took shot after shot of about 1 second each, to show each firework ascending and then exploding as a stream of light. 45-odd stacked layers later, it looks as though there are more "salutes" than buildings... Sorry indeed for the pets who might be traumatized by all the banging, though, I must say.

Lali and I also decided to take in the Christmas/New Year's festival atmos-



phere on and near Rustaveli Avenue. Hundreds of kiosks were selling all manner of souvenirs and holiday food, and friends had told us that there was some really good aged Georgian mountain cheese on offer on Orbeliani Square. We found it, among the mulled wine, coffee, decorations and other delights. Although about 10 months old and delicious indeed, it will have to come down in price to compete with the much cheaper imported foreign cheeses available all over Tbilisi. The same for the newly available Tushestian blue cheese at the Railway Station market: wonderful stuff, but quite a bit pricier than its Danish or German equivalents. I hope it can survive: I would much rather buy Georgian and support local markets!

At least for a resident of either Canada or high Svaneti the cold season in Tbilisi is quite mild. Yesterday as I write this (January 10) we drove east to Sartichal to visit friends... and were greeted by enough snow there to whiten the ground. It hardly touched the capital, though, as

we discovered when returning. Last night was the first time we bothered to turn on the central heating radiator in our bedroom, although the rest of the apartment is toasty. I still hope to return downtown alone in the evening to catch the Christmas lights with my camera before they are dismantled.

Scandals of icons featuring Stalin notwithstanding, it's good to be safe in a peaceful city for the midwinter holidays. I can only hope and pray that elsewhere in the world where it is not so, normality will return; although I am not very optimistic going into 2024. Peace, please...

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/. He and his wife also run their own guest house in Etseri: www.facebook.com/hanmer.house.svaneti2



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Gaetano Donizetti's "Anna Bolena" - a Timeless Masterpiece on Power and Abuse

BY DR. PHIL. LILY FÜRSTENOW

In the masterfully staged production of Gaetano Donizetti's "Anna Bolena," by internationally acclaimed David Alden, the opera transcends its historical narrative to become a riveting exploration of power dynamics and abuse. The staging, marked by meticulous attention to detail, unfolds like a living tapestry that interweaves art historical allusions with the central historical events and characters, creating a visually arresting and thematically rich experience.

The stage design, reminiscent of grand Renaissance court paintings, provides a stunning backdrop for the unfolding drama. The attention to historical accuracy is evident in the sumptuous costumes and regal settings, transporting the audience to the tumultuous court of Henry VIII. The careful choreography underscores the nuances of power dynamics, with characters moving through the space like living embodiments of political intrigue and personal tragedy.

The thematic exploration of power and its abuses is accentuated by the opera's poignant musical score. Donizetti's composition skillfully mirrors the emotional turbulence of the characters, from the tender moments of introspection to the explosive crescendos that accompany moments of political machination and betrayal. The arias, marked by their emotional depth and lyrical beauty, serve as windows into the souls of the characters, enhancing the opera's exploration of power struggles and their personal toll.



Anna Bolena. Photo by Bettina Stöß

Arthistorical allusions are woven seamlessly into the production, with visual motifs reminiscent of portraiture from the Tudor era. The careful consideration of historical events and characters enhances the narrative, providing layers of meaning that extend beyond the immediate drama. Each scene becomes a tableau vivant, drawing on the visual lan-

guage of art history to deepen the audience's engagement with the complex interplay of power, passion, and political maneuvering.

In this production of "Anna Bolena," the fusion of music, staging, and art historical allusions transforms the opera into a multi-dimensional exploration of the human condition. The result is a

theatrical experience that not only captivates the senses but also resonates with intellectual and emotional depth, inviting the audience to reflect on the timeless themes of power and its consequences. The premiere of the opera was made unforgettable by the impressive performances of Vasilisa Berzhanskaya as Giovanna Seymour, René Bar-

bera and Federica Lombardi in the leading part.

To Georgian audiences, Gaetano Donizetti is best known for his mesmerizing opera L'ELISIR D'AMORE that runs this season. Yet the timeless drama of Anna Bolena about political intrigues, power and injustices are as topical in contemporary Georgian societies as ever.

BI Auction's Meet the Artist: Beka Sakvarelidze



Beka Sakvarelidze. Source: BI Auction

BY KATIE RUTH DAVIES

Whatever we experienced in 2023, we are starting another New Year with good wishes and hope. I want to introduce your readers to a very good modern artist - no doubt a great artist of the future, Beka Sakvarelidze - BI Auction Founder Partner Bengü Akçardak Küçük tells GEORGIA TODAY. "We're very proud to announce that Beka Sakvarelidze's first solo exhibition, organized by Mariam Shakarashvili at the National Gallery of Georgia, has opened and can be visited until January 28," she adds. Beka Sakvarelidze

won the first BI Auction Competition for young artists in 2019 and Mariam Shakarashvili won the competition in 2020.

Beka Sakvarelidze has been a teacher at the Tbilisi State Academy of Fine Arts since graduating with a license and master's degree in painting from the Faculty of Fine Arts (2010-2016). Since 2019, Beka has participated in numerous international exhibitions and auctions in Georgia and abroad. Most recently, two of his canvases were sold at the Hessinck Contemporary Art Auction, and these are also featured in the current Tbilisi exhibition.

The exhibition "Someone is Stirring" presents works made by the artist in recent years using a variety of techniques and materials. For the first time, visitors

will see canvases which until now were known only to private collectors, and works that were created specifically for this exhibition. In the near future, Beka plans to open an exhibition in Eristavi Gallery in Belgium.

GEORGIA TODAY sat down with him to find out more.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR ARTWORKS?

My work process is quite impulsive, requiring a lot of emotional and physical effort. I can't say that it's a very pleasant process, and I've often wondered if it's worth what I'm putting into it, yet it comes from so deep within me, it's unthinkable to exist without its vital energy.

It's difficult for me to single out any particular artist who has influenced me, as this world in that regard is inexhaustible. Over time, the fascination with technical features becomes secondary, and thinking comes to the fore; conceptual exploration and a message conveyed through minimalist aesthetics.

NAME A PIECE OF ART YOU THINK EVERYONE SHOULD SEE IN REAL LIFE.

In this case, I will stay within the borders of our country and give an example, in my opinion, of one of the strongest sculptors of our time: Rusudan Gachechiladze, and his series of portraits.

WHAT IS YOUR VIEW OF THE VIRTUAL ART SPACE, OF ONLINE EXHIBITIONS, AUCTIONS AND SALES?

The easier access to a work of art becomes, the less emotional it becomes. In general, comfort reduces the feel and quality of art. However, despite my skeptical attitude to it all, we cannot escape the reality and demands of the 21st century.

HOW DO YOU POSITION YOUR ART AND YOURSELF IN THE GEORGIAN ART SCENE?

In general, as has been proven, in more developed countries, a curator or galleryist works for an artist, yet in our country this approach has yet to be established. As such, the artist has to present himself, putting him in a situation which to a greater extent contradicts his inner needs. However, unfortunately, or fortunately, I do not belong to this group of artists.

HOW DO YOU SEE ART IN GEORGIA CHANGING?

The Georgian artistic arena is interesting and it is growing. Georgian art is still the bearer of that great energy of which the art of more than one country in the world has already been deprived for the most part. If Georgia uses this great potential correctly, it will be able to send very accurate and thought-provoking messages to the world.



WHAT DO YOU WISH FOR ART AND ARTISTS IN GEORGIA?

I wish the Georgian art space appreciation of the quality it possesses.



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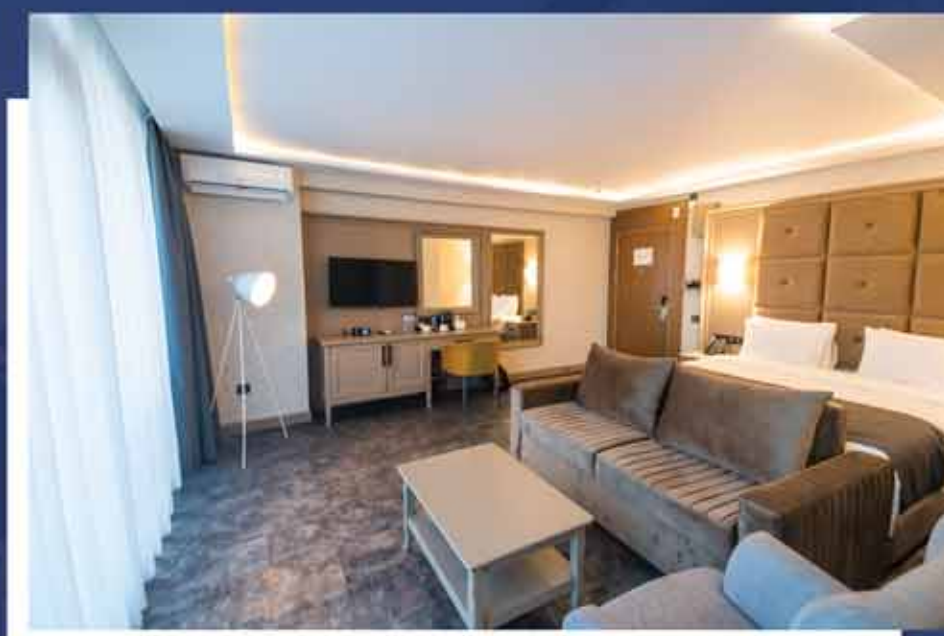
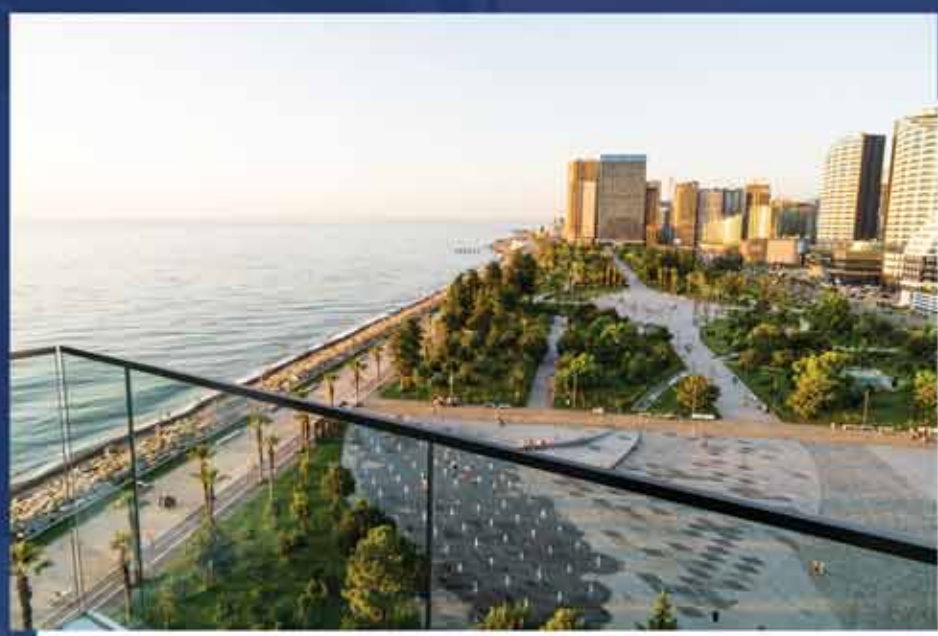
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