

People gather to mark orthodox easter day at the cathedral of the Holy Protection of the Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, in the southern city of Zaporizhzhia (2022). Photo by Ed Jones/AFP via Getty Images

FOCUS

ON A CHURCH AT WAR

Archimandrite Cyril Hovorun on the Christian view of the Russia-Ukraine war, the influence of the Church, and how a legal fight within Ukraine is further dividing the orthodox people **PAGE 5**

Tbilisi Mayor: Tsereteli Avenue Will Be Fixed, Even If We Have To Do It Ourselves!

BY TEAM GT

Tbilisi City Hall, led by Mayor Kakha Kaladze, announced the commencement of the rehabilitation of Tsereteli Avenue and the Shota Shalikashvili Bridge on April 19, 2023. The works led to congestion, traffic rerouting, clouds of dust, and the characteristic-to-Georgia dangerous unlevelled and dug up walkways for pedestrians to navigate as works progressed.

Named after renowned Georgian writer Akaki Tsereteli, the avenue's rehabilitated form, despite contract extensions, is set to fully open for traffic by the end of January 2024, the Tbilisi City Hall press service has regularly insisted.

The final stages of the rehabilitation project being carried out throughout the Didube district include the completion of underground communication installations along Tsereteli Avenue. Road works, currently active and expected to conclude by month-end, will lead to the complete restoration of traffic in the area, City Hall has assured disgruntled citizens.

Continued on page 6



Tbilisi Mayor Kakha Kaladze, confident works will be completed on time. Source: IG

In this week's issue...

Garibashvili at Davos: Lead Poisoning Is the Most Pressing Challenge Facing Public Health Systems

NEWS PAGE 2

CNN Broadcasts Two Videos on Georgian Wine

NEWS PAGE 3

Gakharia's Party Requests Prosecutor's Office Investigate Alleged Georgian Manganese Corruption

POLITICS PAGE 4

The Allure of Le Méridien Batumi - Georgia's Leading Hotel

BUSINESS PAGE 7

Kekelidze Replaced as National Library Head

SOCIETY PAGE 9

How Georgia Celebrates the End of the Holiday Season

CULTURE PAGE 11

BONDS		Price	w/w	m/m	COMMODITIES		Price	w/w	m/m
GRAIL 07/28	91.88 (YTM 6.13%)	-0.1%	+1.1%		Crude Oil, Brent (US\$/bbl)	77.88	+1.4%	+1.7%	
SILNET 01/27	100.24 (YTM 8.28%)	+0.1%	+0.3%		Gold Spot (US\$/OZ)	2 006.25	-0.9%	-0.7%	
TBC 06/24	99.38 (YTM 7.24%)	-0.0%	-0.1%						
STOCKS		Price	w/w	m/m	CURRENCIES		Price	w/w	m/m
Bank of Georgia (BGE LN)	GBP 38.45	-4.5%	+7.9%		GEL / USD	2.6544	-1.1%	-0.9%	
Georgia Capital (CGEO LN)	GBP 10.60	+0.6%	+5.6%		GEL / EUR	2.8891	-1.9%	-1.0%	
TBC Bank Group (TBCG LN)	GBP 28.65	+1.8%	+2.5%		GEL / GBP	3.3623	-1.7%	-1.0%	
					GEL / CHF	3.0663	-2.7%	-0.3%	
					GEL / RUB	0.0301	+0.3%	+1.7%	
					GEL / TRY	0.0877	-2.0%	-5.0%	
INDICES		Price	w/w	m/m	GEL / AZN	1.5622	-1.1%	-0.8%	
FTSE 100	7 446.29	-2.7%	-1.7%		GEL / AMD	0.0066	-1.4%	-0.9%	
FTSE 250	18 864.37	-2.2%	-1.8%		GEL / UAH	0.0701	-0.6%	-3.0%	
DAX	16 431.69	-1.5%	-1.9%		EUR / USD	0.9189	+0.8%	+0.1%	
DOW JONES	37 266.67	-1.1%	-0.1%		GBP / USD	0.7889	+0.5%	+0.0%	
NASDAQ	14 855.62	-0.8%	+0.3%		CHF / USD	0.8644	+1.6%	-0.7%	
MSCI EM EE	41.52	-6.0%	-5.4%		RUB / USD	88.3789	-1.4%	-2.1%	
MSCI EM	958.39	-3.1%	-4.2%		TRY / USD	30.1329	+0.6%	+3.9%	
SP 500	4 739.21	-0.9%	+0.4%		AZN / USD	1.6990	-	-	
MSCI FM	2 277.37	-0.2%	+2.2%		AMD / USD	404.8900	+0.2%	-0.1%	

Garibashvili at Davos: Lead Poisoning Is the Most Pressing Challenge Facing Public Health Systems

BY TEAM GT

The Prime Minister of Georgia, Irakli Garibashvili, took part in the discussion "Towards a Lead-Free Future" within the framework of the World Economic Forum in Davos. He was invited to the event by USAID Administrator Samantha Power. During his speech, Garibashvili named lead poisoning as the most pressing challenge facing public health systems. According to him, this challenge is a global problem. The Head of the Government of Georgia also noted the results obtained as a result of the measures taken.

"In order to identify the sources and contact points of lead poisoning, within the same program, we started assessing the atmospheric conditions. As a result of these initiatives, there was a rapid improvement in indicators, which confirmed the effectiveness of the response



PM Garibashvili at Davos. Source: Government Administration

program. In the fourth year of the program, we saw an amazing - 75 percent - reduction in lead found during blood testing. These analyzes were conducted on children living in the regions, because the highest rate was recorded there," Garibashvili noted.

The World Economic Forum, which is being held in Davos this year for the 54th time, lasted from January 15 to 19.

According to the WEF's Global Risks Report, published last week, the world's top risk is climate change. Half of the list of the most pressing risks of the next 10 years are environmental challenges, among them critical changes to Earth systems, extreme weather, ecosystem collapse and more. That is why the founder of the WEF this year called on the delegations to cooperate in the fight against the climate crisis.

A Georgian delegation led by the Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili attended the Davos World Economic Forum, within the framework of which he also held bilateral meetings.

Ukraine Latest: Davos Used as Platform to Promote Aid for Ukraine; Blinken Warns of 'Real Problem' if Kyiv Gets No Extra Funding

COMPILED BY ANA DUMBADZE

The war in Ukraine has been dominating conversations at the World Economic Forum in Davos this week, with Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky making the most of the opportunity to address the global business and political elite.

Zelensky told delegates that his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, will "steal" years of peace and threatened the wider world if he is allowed to succeed in his invasion of Ukraine.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken met Zelensky at Davos on Tuesday and said there would be a "real problem" if Congress did not approve additional (and contentious) funding for Ukraine.

In other news, Putin said Tuesday it was "impossible" to take away from Russia the military gains it had made

in Ukraine.

Other key updates include:

Protesters in Baymak, a small town in Russia's central Bashkortostan region, clashed with riot police on Wednesday after a court sentenced eco-activist and campaigner for the protection of the Bashkir language, Fail Alsynov, to four years in prison for "inciting hatred". Police used teargas to disperse the protests, according to OVD-Info, which monitors protests across Russia. The head of the local interior ministry, Rafail Divayev, urged demonstrators to back down and said: "I advise you to come to your senses and not ruin your life."

Ukraine's foreign minister, Dmytro Kuleba, said his country's priority for 2024 was to gain control over its skies. "In 2024, of course the priority is to throw Russia from the skies," Kuleba said in an address to the World Economic Forum.

A new military doctrine that for the first time provides for the use of nuclear weapons will be put forward by Belarus,

its defense minister, Viktor Khrenin, said at a meeting of Belarus' security council on Tuesday.

A top NATO military officer said the war in Ukraine could "determine the fate of the world" and western armies and political leaders must drastically change the way they help Kyiv fend off invading Russian forces. The chair of the NATO military committee, Adam Rob Bauer, also said, at a meeting of NATO's senior officers at its headquarters in Brussels, that behind Putin's rationale for the war is a fear of democracy.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said he doesn't think a ceasefire in Ukraine is near, but he could see a future where Ukraine stands strongly on its own two feet. Blinken was in conversation with WEF founder Klaus Schwab and commentator Thomas Friedman in Davos.

One person has been killed and five people injured after Russian attacks on multiple settlements in Kherson oblast,

regional authorities say. Its governor, Oleksandr Prokudin, shared a video of the damage to the area and said that Russian forces fired at the area for an hour. He added that three people were injured in Russian attacks against Beryslav and an 81-year-old woman was injured in an attack on the village of Romashkove.

British foreign secretary, David Cameron, told delegates at the World Economic Forum in Davos that there is a clear case for frozen Russian assets to be used to help pay for the reconstruction of Ukraine.

Russia is developing its relations with North Korea in all areas, including "sensitive" ones, Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said on Wednesday. North Korea's foreign minister held rare talks in the Kremlin with Putin, who has been invited by North Korean leader Kim Jong-un to visit the reclusive nuclear-armed country.

EU chief Ursula von der Leyen said she was "confident" of getting Hungary to drop its veto on a €50bn (\$54bn) aid package for Ukraine at a crunch summit in two weeks. Hungary's right wing prime minister, Viktor Orbán - Russia's closest EU ally - refused in December to sign off on the assistance to Kyiv's state spending over the next four years.

Russia will open polling stations for its March presidential election at three diplomatic missions in the US, its envoy in Washington said on Wednesday. Moscow said it had not yet decided if voting would take place in what it calls "unfriendly" European countries.

Ukraine downed 19 of 20 Iranian-designed attack drones launched by Russia at targets in southern Ukraine overnight Wednesday, said Ukraine's air force.

At least 17 people were injured after Russia fired two missiles at Kharkiv in north eastern Ukraine during the night, hitting apartment buildings and a medical center, said officials on Wednesday.

Three people were injured in the southern city of Odesa in a drone attack that forced the evacuation of about 130 people from an apartment building, regional governor Oleh Kiper said.

The Russian defense ministry said Wednesday that two winged Ukrainian drones and four missiles were shot down over the Belgorod region overnight and another around noon local time on Wednesday. It provided no details about damage or injuries.

Authorities in Estonia have arrested Russian professor Viacheslav Morozov on espionage charges in a case that his university said shows Russia's intent to "orchestrate anti-democratic action" in the Baltic country.

Germany delivered military supplies to Ukraine, including ammunition for Leopard 1 tanks, armored personnel carriers, missiles, drones and helmets. It also includes 16 Zetros tanker trucks, eight armored personnel carriers, 50 mobile satellite terminals, 25 Heidrun reconnaissance drones and 1,840 helmets.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov will travel to New York next week for a meeting of the UN's security council, confirmed foreign ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova.

Western companies supplied Russia with critical components worth \$2.9bn in the first 10 months of 2023, despite sanctions on Moscow, the Ukrainian president's office said on Wednesday.

Belgium does not oppose the confiscation of €280bn worth of frozen Russian central bank assets, but there needs to be a clear mechanism such as using the assets as collateral for Ukraine, Prime Minister Alexander De Croo said.

Ukraine needs financial support as well as military support in order to prevent the government in Kyiv from resorting to printing money to keep the economy afloat, the chief economist of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, Beata Javorcik, said in an interview at Davos.



US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky and Head of the Ukrainian President's Office Andriy Yermak meet during the 54th annual meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, January 16, 2024.

Georgia Ranks 50th in the Henley & Partners Global Passport Index of 2023

BY MARIAM MTIVLISHVILI

In the ranking of the world passport index of Henley & Partners, which reveals the “strongest” and the “weakest” passports, Georgia is in 50th place in 2023, up from 55th place in 2021 and 52nd place in 2022.

Henley’s World Passport Index is a ranking of the

passports of the world’s countries, based on how many countries a person can travel to without a visa. Chairman of Henley & Partners, Dr. Christian H. Kaelin, who invented the passport index concept, says that:

“Our latest research into how much global economic access each passport provides is a useful tool for investors, in addition to giving new insight into the ever-widening economic inequality and wealth disparity that has come to define our world.”



CNN Broadcasts Two Videos on Georgian Wine

CNN has shot two videos about Georgian wine. The National Wine Agency says the two 1-minute videos picture Georgia’s diversity, history and wine-making culture. The videos are broadcast on CNN on January 15-28.

Interest in Georgian wine was generated following a video that CNN broadcast during November, titled ‘We present you the homeland of wine.’

“CNN’s spotlighting of the history and

modernity of Georgian wine is very important for the promotion of Georgian wine in the United States of America,” the Georgian Wine Agency notes.

See video links

<https://www.facebook.com/nationalwineagency/videos/689667106364971>

<https://www.facebook.com/nationalwineagency/videos/645004420972157>



THE BILTMORE
TBILISI

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.

29 Rustaveli Avenue, 0108, Tbilisi, Georgia

T: +995 322 72 72 72 / info.bhtg@biltmorecollection.com



Gakharia's Party Requests Prosecutor's Office Investigate Alleged Georgian Manganese Corruption



For Georgia MP, Mikheil Daushvili

The political "For Georgia" party has requested the General Prosecutor's Office investigate a possible crime of corruption in "Georgian Manganese", Mikheil Daushvili announced at a briefing in Parliament.

Daushvili states the company has been managed by a state appointee for almost 7 years, whose authority was extended twice, despite the fact that he was unable to repair the damage caused to the environment or protect the interests of the local population.

Daushvili notes that there is suspicion that the company is managed by private individuals in order to satisfy their personal financial interests.

"The parliamentary team of For Georgia appeals to the General Prosecutor's Office to start an investigation of Georgian Manganese, which has been operating under a special management regime for almost 7 years. There is a well-founded suspicion about its inefficient management, which violates the legitimate interest of the state and our citizens, as there may be corruption, transactions and embezzlement of large amounts of funds.

"During the years 2009-2016, the original manager of the company grossly violated the legislation and environmental protection requirements, thus causing great harm to the population of Zestafoni and Chiatura, extremely polluting the environment. The damage caused to the environment amounted to more than 416 million GEL. "In 2012-2016, the sanctions used by

the state were not enough, the original managers of the company grossly polluted the environment and violated the law, harmed the interests of the local population, yet the suspension or cancellation of its license would have caused significant harm to the employees of the company. Accordingly, a special administrator was appointed in the company in 2017 on the court's decision. The task of the special manager was to repair the damage caused by the company to the environment and protect the interests of the local population.

"The special administrator was unable to repair the damage caused to the environment or to protect the interests of the local population, although the term of office of the special administrator was extended by 3 years in 2020, and by an additional 2 years last year.

"The state appointee has been managing the company for almost 7 years and, in reality, the special manager has failed to ensure that the damage caused by the company to the environment and the interests of the local population are protected. Accordingly, there is a well-founded suspicion that the company is managed inefficiently by the special manager appointed by the state, not in the interests of the employees of the enterprise, the local population, environmental protection and the country, but in order to satisfy the personal financial interests of private individuals. Significant corruption risks have also been identified," Daushvili noted.

Coalition Rule as a Presumed Political Panacea

OP-ED BY NUGZAR B. RUHADZE

Following in the electoral footsteps of Europe, a coalition rule has lately been thought up in Sakartvelo as the most optimal way to manage the country, an assumption embedded in the theoretical depths, as well as on the practical surface of the political opposition to the party in charge (the latter usually refraining from commenting on any coalition prospects). Sakartvelo has not been ruled in the recent past by a coalition government, so we are not very much used to a state governing style, based on which several political forces acquire the voter's mandate to create a government, who are prepared to collaborate to lead the nation together in good will.

Following the soviet collapse, it so happened that every dominant political force has come to power with absolute majority to single-handedly take care of the governed who elected them to govern. Now that Georgia's electoral system has finally dropped majoritarianism, and has turned to a fully proportional representation system, the likelihood of achieving a coalition type of rule is a tangible probability, though, as said, the idea is nursed by the opposition more enthusiastically than by the incumbent government.

This clearly emphasizes the confidence of the current decision makers about their winning the upcoming elections with an absolute majority, once again. The pre-electoral attitude of the opposition, however, is "don't count your chickens before they hatch." Indeed, this is the main political overtone we hear day and night on the already excited and roaring media waves of the country, which exude the hope that a coalition government will work as an actual panacea to cure the nation of all its faults and vices.

Incidentally, this could be true, because the overall belief within the realm of political science is that it is coalition-style rule that has the resources to pull a nation out of political strife and economic crisis, giving the potential government a considerable amount of political acceptability and multiparty identity.

Georgia is a typical multi-party state, a fact which, in our political reality, does not lend itself to the creation of a good basis for a multi-party coalitional system of administration. After all, a coalition government purports to be nothing more than an arrangement, agreed upon by the political forces who have received the consent of the electorate to rule the nation, based on common cause and mutual interests within the forthcoming cabinet of ministers, to do its possible best to be productive. As simple as that!

Indeed, it needs to be clarified if the extant Georgian political spectrum is ready and qualified enough to function within the frames of collective political rule, seeing as our experience of coalitions is practically nonexistent. It is more than conceivable that the coalition government, if it ever comes into force in Georgia, will represent yet another political experiment which either fails or survives to continue work. The chances of this are probably fifty-fifty. And if the cards have it, the coalition government should at least be formed by two discrete political forces. Imagine the turmoil potentially created by those parties that get thrown overboard! In the fits of their political misfortune, they may not commit suicide, but their always-present political negativity, in such an unfortunate finale for them, might hit the fan, and this will cost us a lot.

The good news, though, might be that in the hands of a coalition government, although the answer to our problems would not be sturdy and perennial, our country will have a representative oppor-



Image source: thoughtco

tunity to address certain vital national issues, based on fair and unanimous beneficial solutions for our people. In a word, panacea or no panacea, the coalitional solution to the outcome of the

forthcoming parliamentary election this year might very well be a curiously refreshed construction of the political process in the country.

And finally, if you find yourself inter-

ested in additional details concerning the merits and flaws of a coalition government in Georgia, we refer our reader to the issue of January 27, 2022 of this newspaper.

On the Russian Church and Its Influence on the War

INTERVIEW BY VAZHA TAVBERIDZE

Archimandrite Cyril Hovorun, who was allegedly recently stripped of his rank by Russian Patriarch Kirill, is a professor of philosophy at Stockholm University College. Radio Free Europe/RL's Georgian Service sat down with him to discuss the Christian view of the Russia-Ukraine war, the influence of the Church, and how a legal fight within Ukraine is further dividing the orthodox people.

YOU PUBLISHED AN ESSAY IN 2015 TITLED, "CHRISTIAN DUTY IN UKRAINE." EIGHT YEARS ON, WHAT'S THE DUTY OF A CHRISTIAN WHEN IT COMES TO UKRAINE?

Duty stems from the gospel, from the words of Jesus. Everything that Russia does actually violates all 10 commandments, which are basic for all monotheistic religions, but particularly for Christianity. This violation of commandments should be clearly condemned by the Christians: Don't kill, don't steal, and so forth. Many Christians in different traditions, including orthodox, are very clear about this war, have been very explicit, and have spoken up against the war, and I would say they perform their duty as Christians very well. But the churches, the official churches, in their official statements, are hesitant, and there is therefore a gap, a significant difference, between what the people in the churches think and say, and what the official churches think and say, and this is a big problem for global Christianity.

We see that while the entire world has expressed very clear concerns about the war, and has shown solidarity with the Ukrainian people who are under attack, the churches, as a rule, have either kept silent, or still use euphemisms to describe the war, seeking not to name the perpetrator properly. They hesitate to make their position clear. This applies to the big ecumenical communities like the World Council of Churches, which quite often uses problematic language to describe the war. And it has a tradition of putting Ukraine and Russia on the same footing in this war, treating it as a war where all sides are somehow to be blamed.

The Roman Catholic Church, which is the largest church, still demonstrates uneven, unclear language. On the one hand, Pope Francis clearly condemns the war and expresses very clear solidarity with the Ukrainian people, but at the same time, he will use ambiguous words and language which upsets people in Ukraine. For example, when he called the war "a fratricide." And when he said that the war was caused by "NATO barking at Russia's door". But he is very clear in supporting Ukraine, in expressing his solidarity and empathy with the people. Some churches don't do even that, especially the orthodox churches, which seems very strange. The majority of Ukrainians are orthodox, and they expected much more solidarity from the orthodox people, orthodox countries, including Georgia.

WHAT IS THE REASONING OF THOSE ORTHODOX CHURCHES TO EXERCISE RELUCTANCE? LET'S START WITH THE VATICAN. WHY THE AMBIGUITY?

It has been a tradition since the beginning of the 20th century which sees the Vatican trying to use a language where they don't mention any perpetrator by name. This was the case with Hitler, for example; this was the case with Mus-



Archimandrite Cyril Hovorun

solini. The Vatican tried to develop political relations with the different regimes, regardless of whether they were good or bad, and for this reason they sought to avoid the language of confrontation.

It seems that the Vatican is still hopeful to develop some kind of relationship with even the Kremlin, so as to leave itself space to maneuver. They try to avoid a language of confrontation, which is an attitude that is more political than Christian, I would say. And yes, Pope Francis did famously say to Patriarch Kirill that he should stop being an altar boy of Putin! Instead of talking politics, though, he should talk the language of the Christian faith, yet, officially, when the Vatican hesitates to condemn violent regimes, and hesitates to name perpetrators, it is a political decision.

When it comes to the orthodox churches, I believe they are also hesitant to condemn the war for political reasons. And I believe it has to do with legacy - the Byzantine legacy, the legacy of a favored relationship between the Church and the state. It's an imperial modality of thinking, the orthodox churches still think in imperial terms: In the backs of their minds, Byzantium is still alive; the time when there was an emperor, where there was a Christian empire, and there was a church, and they were intrinsically connected with one another. I think many orthodox churches nowadays perceive Russia as a sort of new Byzantine, as a reincarnation of the old imperial authority which favored orthodoxy. They are ready to forgive everything that this new empire does, just for this dream of Byzantium. They believe, sometimes subconsciously, the Kremlin's claims that it protects orthodoxy. And the churches seem to be captivated, seem to be paralyzed by this dream of the reincarnation of Byzantium. And this is one of the main reasons why they keep silent. They believe that the West is hostile to them; they believe that Russia can protect them from the West; and they forgive Russia everything, whatever it does. Russia knows this and uses this weakness.

THERE ARE PLENTY OF EXAMPLES IN BYZANTINE HISTORY WHEN THE CHURCH, THE CLERGY, AND THE EMPEROR WERE AT ODDS.

Very true. And I think the reason is that people who make references to Byzantium don't know Byzantium for what it

truly was; they have a dream about Byzantium, but their design of it is mythological, not rooted in historical reality. Take, for example, the way Byzantium is constructed by one of Putin's main ideologists, Metropolitan Tykhon Shevkunov, who is now in Crimea. He has created his own bizarre Byzantium, he has produced a movie about Byzantium, and has published a book, and all his designs, his vision of Byzantium, are complete fantasy. The historical fact is there was always a tension between the church and the state in Byzantium.

WHAT ABOUT CERTAIN ORTHODOX CHURCHES' RELUCTANCE TO SPEAK UP BEING MOTIVATED BY POLITICAL COMMON SENSE, OR A SURVIVAL INSTINCT OF SORTS, NOT WANTING TO ALIENATE MOSCOW?

Yes, you're right. I said that the Byzantine dream is one of the reasons but it is not the only one. Certainly, there are some real political reasons for the churches to abstain from judging Moscow. Take, for example, the Church of Antioch: It's very much dependent on the Assad regime in Syria. And Assad is really a puppet of the Kremlin. Take the Serbian Church - the Serbian government is very much under the Russian influence, and so the Church complies. The same in Georgia. Unfortunately, the government, the present government, is quite pro-Russian and quite anti-Ukrainian, which is very much in conflict with its people's opinion. The Church unfortunately, relies on the opinion of the government, so political reasons play a very important role in the way the Church stands vis-a-vis this war. This is this is a distortion of orthodoxy. This is what I call political orthodoxy, which is a distortion of the true religion. And that's what we are observing in Russia to a great extent - the official policy of the Moscow Patriarchate is a distortion of orthodoxy.

HOW BIG HAS THE IMPACT AND THE ROLE OF THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH BEEN ON THE PEOPLE? IT SEEMS TO BE TURNING THIS WAR INTO A NEW CRUSADE FOR RUSSIANS.

Well, I have quite a radical opinion about that. My opinion is that without the Russian Church, this war would probably not have happened. It would have been

impossible, because war needs ideas, war needs explanations, reasons, for the war to be. This war does not make any sense without the explanations provided by the Church. That doesn't mean that the Church's explanations make any sense speaking from the Christian perspective, but they at least construct ideas that attempt to explain the war, to inspire people to go to war. Most Russian soldiers who come to the frontline are interested mostly in money, they are mercenaries, but when the Church says "it's a holy war, it's a just and righteous thing to do," it also gives these soldiers social capital of sorts.

It's important for the Russian population to support this war - the Russian population is being deprived of many things nowadays as a result of the war, but this deprivation is compensated to a great extent by the explanations provided by the Church as to why this war should be important to the Russians. The Church explains this war as an existential, metaphysical, cosmic battle against the powers of evil incarnated in the West. I sometimes compare this war with a mine that has explosive material inside, and it has a fuse that actually causes it to explode. The explosive material is the weaponry, Russian artillery, tanks, the jet fighters and so forth; the fusion inside is the ideas. Without the ideas, the explosion would not have happened. And that's what the Russian Church does - provides the fuse. That's why I think the role of the Church is absolutely crucial in this war, and it needs to take responsibility for this war as well. When that day comes, when all the perpetrators of the war, all those who are responsible for this war, are brought to justice, I think there should be a tribunal, an international court. And in this framework, I think we should consider bringing to justice those in the Russian Church who are responsible for the invasion and continuation of the war.

GIVE US YOUR TAKE ON THE OVERARCHING AND ONGOING RELIGIOUS DISPUTE BETWEEN THE ORTHODOX CHURCHES OF UKRAINE.

There are two orthodox churches in Ukraine: One is autocephalous, independent, and the other is still connected with the Russian Church. That connection is unclear - even the representatives of the Church seem to be split on the matter; some deny the connection; oth-

The Russians are being deprived of many things as a result of the war, but this deprivation is compensated to a great extent by the explanations provided by the Church

ers say they still commemorate Patriarch Kirill. It's really a gray zone where they are. And this dispute is problematic, and is not good for Ukraine, because Ukraine needs the unity of its people to withstand the aggressor. The churches should contribute to this consolidation, but instead they use different rhetoric to accuse one another: The autocephalous church accuses the quasi-Moscow Patriarchate of collaboration with the aggressor, and the latter accuses the former of being non-canonical and schismatic, which is also a big exaggeration. They use exaggeration to fight each other. It's not helpful. The churches are among the dividing forces for Ukrainian society at the moment. It is very unfortunate.

THERE IS A PENDING BILL IN UKRAINE AIMED AT PREVENTING RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS FROM BECOMING A CONDUIT FOR RUSSIAN INFLUENCE. YET CRITICS THINK IT IS DESIGNED TO CLAMP DOWN ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM. WHICH ONE IS IT?

Legally, it is impossible to a ban or outlaw the [Moscow-affiliated] Church, because the law, at least the draft - we still don't know what the final version will look like - does not envisage a precondition for that. The legislation never mentions the Ukraine Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate, let alone saying that it will be prohibited: It says that the churches that have their administrative centers in the aggressor country, which is Russia, should be deprived of registration, or should be registered differently. And, if the Ukrainian orthodox that claim that it is not a part of the Moscow Patriarchate anymore are afraid of being prohibited in this way, then it is an implicit way to acknowledge that "yes, we are still a part of the Moscow Patriarchate." So in order not to be afraid of the consequences, they just need to break up, very clearly and honestly, with Moscow. The real harm is how it will be perceived internationally. It is already harmful for Ukraine, so I think it would be better not to proceed with this draft.

That said, I don't see in this draft any threat to religious freedom in Ukraine; the religious freedom in Ukraine is very high still, and the religious diversity is astonishing. It's a polyphony of religious beliefs for the Ukrainian cause. For example, take the relations between Muslims and Jews in Ukraine: Nowhere in the world can you find such friendly relations between these two as they are in Ukraine.

Tbilisi Mayor: Tsereteli Avenue Will Be Fixed, Even If We Have To Do It Ourselves!

Continued from page 1

In a development this week, Tbilisi City Hall terminated its contracts with the previous rehabilitation contractors for Tsereteli Avenue. A simplified purchase of 17.7 million was announced for the avenue's rehabilitation, citing non-compliance by the previous contractors, which resulted in project delays. The new plan sets a deadline of January 31

for the completion of the project by the newly contracted companies Enco, Parma, Geo Group, and Black Sea Group.

Deputy Mayor Irakli Bendeliani confirmed the signing of contracts with the four companies and emphasized their active involvement in ongoing rehabilitation works.

Mayor Kakha Kaladze expressed confidence in the government's commitment to completing the Tsereteli Avenue pro-



The capital and the country have a powerful government that will not allow the public to be misled, deceived or lied to. Contracts have been signed with four new companies. Works are actively being carried out



12 tombs were uncovered. Source: GT



Tsereteli works as of October last year. Source: Tbilisi City Hall

ject and highlighted the dedication of all involved, including himself, his deputies, and the staff, to meet the end-of-January deadline.

"Even if we have to work - me, my deputies and our staff, the rehabilitation of Tsereteli Avenue, the road infrastructure will be completed by the end of January," Kaladze said this week.

In related news, politician and head of the For Georgia opposition party, Giorgi Gakharia, this week said, "We have appealed to the Prosecutor General of Georgia to launch an investigation on

the systemic elite/political corruption of the Tbilisi Mayor. Inactivity, which has become a pattern, opens the door to impunity and fuels more corruption, which is effectively used for electoral fraud and vote manipulation by GD. Everyone has their share of responsibility in conducting free and fair elections!"

"The capital and the country have a powerful government that will not allow the public to be misled, deceived or lied to," Kaladze countered. "Of course, we will complete the Tsereteli Avenue project. We will carry out other important work that the capital needs, everything will be done for the future of our country."

Interestingly, as part of the avenue's long journey towards rehabilitation, on May 8, 2023, Tbilisi City Hall announced the discovery of 19th-century crypts on Tsereteli Avenue. Archaeologists and the Georgian National Agency for Cultural Heritage Protection were called in to oversee the study of these underground constructions, which are believed to be tombs.

According to the archaeologist Merab Dzneladze, around 12 tombs were discovered in the area surrounding the nearby church.



Tsereteli Avenue, works in progress. Photo by Aleksandre Devadze

MEPs Show New Year Support for Imprisoned President Mikheil Saakashvili



Mikheil Saakashvili, photographed February 2023. Source: reuters

BY TEAM GT

Members of the European Parliament on the occasion of New Year, sent a letter of support to the former President of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili.

Petras Austrevicius, Miriam Lexmann, Thijs Reuten, Michael Gahler, Anna

Fotyga, and Andrius Kubilius wrote the following:

"Please be assured that we in the European Parliament are always aware of your situation and are doing our utmost to improve it. Let us continue to pursue common goals in the name of a strong, united and prosperous Georgia in Europe. We hope that the year 2024 will bring you good health and reunification with your family and friends. We admire your strength and believe that good will shall prevail."

Levan Davitashvili on the Benefits of Cooperation with China

BY MARIAM MTIVLISHVILI

According to Georgia's Vice Prime Minister, Levan Davitashvili, along with the challenges, there are many opportunities in the world that can be taken advantage of by countries only through cooperation. He claimed that Georgia is part of this trend. Davitashvili noted that the Georgian authorities had correctly assessed the situation when they started talking about prospective economic cooperation with China. The Vice-PM emphasized that China is a strategic partner of Georgia, and the dialogue between the countries is ongoing on the implementation of very important, strategic projects, where Chinese business can play an important role in boosting Georgia's economy.

"At the Davos Economic Forum this year, the Chinese delegation is represented at the highest level, under the leadership of their Prime Minister. This emphasizes that the world needs more cooperation to overcome global challenges, and it is impossible to talk about overcoming said challenges without the participation of China," Davitashvili claimed.



The Allure of Le Méridien Batumi - Georgia's Leading Hotel



In a momentous announcement by the World Travel Awards, Le Méridien Batumi proudly secured the title of Georgia's Leading Hotel for the year 2023. This esteemed accolade sets the stage for a deeper exploration of what makes this hotel a jewel on the Black Sea. In a candid and expansive conversation with General Manager Toni Toshev, we unveil the myriad features that contribute to Le Méridien Batumi's distinction. From its prime location, to its commitment to sustainability and active community engagement, the hotel stands as a beacon of elegance in the vibrant cityscape.

THE ENCHANTING LOCATION

Toni Toshev expresses his enthusiasm for the exceptional location of Le Méridien Batumi, strategically positioned at the commencement of the historic boulevard that has graced the city for many a year. The hotel seamlessly integrates Le Méridien's signature contemporary design with Georgian aesthetics, offering a modern, stylish haven that complements the surrounding cityscape. In Toni's words, "The location is truly the heart of Batumi, allowing our guests to experience the best of what the city has to offer."

Highlighting the distinctive design, Toni points out that each suite within the hotel is a testament to the marriage of modernism and local flavor, envisioned by talented Georgian designers. He emphasizes, "The materials used, such as metal and brass, intertwine effortlessly to elevate the hotel's overall ambiance."

SPACIOUS RETREATS WITH PANORAMIC VIEWS

Toni Toshev takes pride in the generous space offered by Le Méridien Batumi's rooms, a rare find with each boasting an expansive 35-36 square meters. "Our focus on spaciousness is intentional. We want our guests to feel a sense of comfort throughout their stay," says Toni.

Beyond the sheer size, each room boasts meticulous design, blending elements that capture the essence of Georgia's rich cultural tapestry with the sleekness of modernity. According to Toni, "The presence of balconies in all rooms provides guests with a coveted feature, allowing them to soak in the beauty of the Black Sea during the day or revel in the city lights during the evening."

SUSTAINABILITY AS A GUIDING PRINCIPLE

Le Méridien Batumi's commitment to

sustainability emerges as a significant part of its identity. In a region where waste management practices are evolving, the hotel takes a proactive stance. Toni Toshev acknowledges the challenges and notes, "We are actively participating in projects, collaborating with entities like USAID, and investing in education to foster a culture of environmental responsibility."

Education has become a cornerstone in Le Méridien Batumi's strategy for promoting sustainability. Toni emphasizes the hotel's investment in educational initiatives, stating, "We firmly believe that true change begins with education. By imparting knowledge about environmental responsibility, we aspire to cultivate a mindset that transcends generations." This commitment not only reflects a global awareness but also positions Le Méridien Batumi as a responsible steward of its local environment.

CULINARY EXCELLENCE AND DIVERSITY

The culinary journey at Le Méridien Batumi unfolds with La Brasserie, the hotel's main restaurant, offering a delightful interplay between buffet-style and à la carte service. Toni emphasizes, "Our culinary offerings are a key aspect of the Le Méridien experience. We strive to provide diverse and enticing options for our guests." The recent addition of a new chef, hailing from the Gulf, promises an exciting transformation of the hotel's menus. Toni elaborates, "With his knowledge of diverse cuisines, we aim to introduce enticing food and beverage options, elevating the overall dining experience for our guests."

ENGAGING WITH THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

In an era where hospitality extends beyond the confines of hotel walls, Le Méridien Batumi, under the astute leadership of Toni Toshev, has elevated its role to that of a community partner, weaving a tapestry of initiatives that transcend traditional hospitality boundaries. In shedding light on Le Méridien Batumi's active involvement in the local community, Toni underscores the hotel's role beyond the realms of hospitality. "Our PR marketing manager, sales team, and multi-property director of Human Resources are deeply engaged in various initiatives, collaborating with governmental institutions and embracing private initiatives that contribute to the betterment of Batumi," notes Toni. Initiatives range from supporting the elderly

and orphanages to contributing to the local dog shelter, showcasing a holistic approach to community engagement.

Beyond government-led endeavors, Le Méridien Batumi extends its reach to embrace private initiatives that bear testament to a holistic approach to community engagement. Toni highlights the hotel's involvement in diverse initiatives, ranging from supporting the elderly and orphanages to playing a pivotal role in contributing to the local dog shelter. It is a conscientious effort to address various facets of community well-being.

The hotel's involvement in societal initiatives is not an obligation; it's a genuine expression of care and responsibility towards the city that embraces it. The ethos is clear: Le Méridien Batumi doesn't just reside in Batumi, it actively contributes to the city's growth, development, and the overall quality of life.

DIFFERENTIATING BETWEEN TBILISI AND BATUMI

Drawing from his extensive experience, Toni reflects on the distinctions between Batumi and Tbilisi, emphasizing the unique charm of each city. In Toni's words, "While Tbilisi pulsates with the energy of a bustling capital, Batumi embodies a more relaxed, tranquil atmosphere." The city's greenery, subtropical climate, and proximity to the mountains contribute to a more laid-back lifestyle. Toni explores the sociocultural aspects, noting that Batumi's rain-prone weather fosters socialization, encouraging people to gather in cozy settings and engage in leisurely conversations.

WELCOMING A DIVERSE MIX OF GUESTS

Discussing the diverse mix of guests, Toni delves into Batumi's evolution from a purely resort destination to a multifaceted hub attracting visitors for various purposes. "Beyond leisure travelers, the city welcomes business professionals, gamblers drawn to its renowned gaming facilities, cultural enthusiasts seeking Georgian experiences, and sports aficionados attending international events," says Toni. The hotel's strategic location, coupled with its versatile offerings, positions it as a preferred choice for a myriad of guest profiles.

CHALLENGES AND FUTURE PLANS

As Le Méridien Batumi prepares for the upcoming high season, Toni Toshev unveils plans for enhancements and improvements. The hotel envisions refin-

ing its product offerings, focusing on areas such as room aesthetics and public spaces to elevate the guest experience. However, amidst the excitement, Toni acknowledges a looming challenge—the scarcity of skilled associates in the hospitality sector. The demand for qualified personnel far exceeds the current supply, necessitating collaborative efforts between the government, educational institutions, and the private sector to address this critical issue collectively.

In anticipation of an influx of visitors, Batumi faces the ambitious target of welcoming over 4 million visitors to the Ajara region, presenting both an opportunity and a challenge. As the hotel gears up for a busy season, there is a concerted effort to balance growth with sustainability, ensuring that the influx of guests does not compromise the city's charm or the quality of service provided by the hotel.

GUEST MIX AND GLOBAL RECOGNITION

Toni Toshev delves into the diverse mix of guests that Le Méridien Batumi welcomes, highlighting the transformation of Batumi from a pure resort destination to a multifaceted hub. "Our guests range from leisure travelers and corporate professionals to cultural enthusiasts and sports aficionados. The strategic location of the hotel makes it an ideal choice for various profiles," says Toni. The recent accolade from the World Travel Awards as Georgia's Leading Hotel further solidifies the global recognition that

Le Méridien Batumi has garnered, attracting visitors not only from neighboring countries but also from far-flung destinations.

EMBRACING THE FUTURE

In looking ahead, Toni Toshev expresses both excitement and concern. The hotel's growth plans align with the city's aspirations to welcome millions of visitors, but the scarcity of skilled associates poses a formidable challenge. "Our commitment to sustainability goes hand in hand with our vision for growth. We are not just preparing for a busy season; we are laying the groundwork for a sustainable and enriching future for Le Méridien Batumi," he states. The hotel aims to continue contributing to the community's well-being, participating in initiatives that extend beyond the realms of hospitality.

As the conversation concludes, Toni Toshev's passion for Le Méridien Batumi shines through. The hotel, beyond being a luxurious retreat, emerges as a dynamic player in community engagement, environmental responsibility, and the seamless fusion of culture and modernity. Le Méridien Batumi stands not just as a hotel but as an integral part of the city's narrative, contributing to its growth, sustainability, and the unique charm that defines Batumi on the global stage. As Toni eloquently puts it, "Our journey is not just about providing accommodation; it's about being woven into the very fabric of Batumi, enriching the experiences of both guests and locals alike."



Revelers to Raise Thousands for Charities Again at 14th Tbilisi Burns Supper



BY STUART MURDOCH

On February 10, the Sheraton Grand Tbilisi Metechi Palace Hotel will host the 14th edition of a Scottish-themed charity gala event held in honor of world-renowned 18th century Scottish poet, Robert Burns.

Routinely raising thousands of dollars for local charities, the evening has become one of the highlights on Tbilisi's social calendar. The Tbilisi version follows a long tradition of Burns Suppers, with sumptuous food and plentiful drink, punctuated by toasts, Scottish country dancing, a live auction, and a raffle with some magnificent prizes.

"We can't wait to gather and once again celebrate the life and works of perhaps Scotland's greatest son. This year's event, like the previous thirteen, will be an absolute treat for those interested in Scottish poetry, music, cuisine, and generally having a good time. First and foremost though, this is a charity project, and we're proud of what the event has contributed to local causes over the years. With the funds raised, we will again help three brilliant

The Tbilisi Burns Supper every year attracts a large and illustrious crowd

beneficiaries in Georgia," said master of ceremonies and co-organizer of the event, Alastair Watt.

The Tbilisi Burns Supper attracts a large and illustrious crowd, and guests this year will again be greeted by the incomparable sound of traditional Scottish bagpipes, played by Richard Jasper, who has piped at the world-famous Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo for the last two summers.

With an authentic feel to every aspect of the occasion, supper-goers can also look forward to a parade of the haggis (a Scottish delicacy), some poetry from

the incomparable Burns, and toasts including the Selkirk Grace, the Immortal Memory, as well as the Address to the Lassies and the Reply.

A mouthwatering four-course menu of Scottish-themed treats will also be served, including of course the irreplaceable haggis, while a further seal



of Scottishness comes from the live music performed by the Glencaig Band, who fly in every year to play in Tbilisi, comprising Nicol McLaren (accordion), Isobelle Hodgson (piano), and Maggie Adamson (fiddle).

The delightful trio, led by McLaren, will summon the revelers to the dance floor to perform Scottish country dances such as the Gay Gordons, the Dashing White Sergeant, and Strip the Willow.

There will also be a charity auction marshalled with unique swagger by the irrepressible Cliff Isaak, who encourages guests to bid for artworks and other precious items, with the proceeds going to three terrific causes.

In particular, this year the Tbilisi Burns Supper and Ball is supporting:

Temi Community (caring for a wide range of vulnerable people) - www.temi-community.org;

The International Women's Association of Georgia (supporting small local organizations, families, and individuals for over 25 years) - www.iwa.ge; and

Dog Organization Georgia (providing shelter for stray animals along with sterilization, vaccination and adoption programs) - dog.org.ge.

"All three charities are well known and widely respected for the amazing work they do for the community, so everyone coming to the event knows they are contributing to really valuable causes," Watt told GEORGIA TODAY. "When doing such a major event, it's important to have absolute trust in the beneficiaries, and we certainly have that. It's also a broad



Everyone coming to the event knows they are contributing to really valuable causes

spectrum of causes, meaning that the funds raised can have a positive impact on various people and aspects of Georgia."

In addition to Watt, the event is co-organized by Sara Kemescei and Rhona Gillam, with all three keeping alive the annual Tbilisi tradition first established by Fiona Coxshall in 2010.

Watt outlined: "The event might be about a man and it might be hosted by a man, but it simply wouldn't happen without some magnificent women. In particular, Sara, who will likely remain the only Hungarian to ever organize a Burns Supper in Georgia for all eternity, puts in an unbelievable amount of work to make the event such a success. She's the driving force, make no mistake.

"My fellow Scot, Rhona, also contributes massively, and it's a privilege to work with both of them.

"Of course, going a little further back, the mastermind of the Tbilisi Burns Supper was Fiona. Although she's back in England these days, Fiona's influence on the event remains. She set an incredibly high standard, and we've done our very best to match it. What says it all to me is that now we have an organizing committee of three people - when Fiona was in charge, it was a committee of one. She was the committee! We'll raise a glass to her as always this year, and hope to have her back as a guest one day."

Tickets are selling fast for what is expected to again be an unforgettable evening, so those interested are encouraged to move quickly and email burnstbilisi@gmail.com to reserve your place, while updates regarding the event are posted on the event's Facebook page - Burns Supper & Ball Tbilisi - and the official website: www.burnstbilisi.com.



Mariam Kvrivishvili, Deputy Minister of Economy and Sustainable Development

Mariam Kvrivishvili: Kutaisi International Airport to Serve Travelers with New Parking Lot for 700 Cars

BY MARIAM MTIVLISHVILI

Mariam Kvrivishvili, Deputy Minister of Economy and Sustainable Development of Georgia, said that Kutaisi Airport is one of the first places that international travelers see after arriving in the country, and it is important that they are greeted with the maximum service.

"Tens of thousands of our citizens use Kutaisi Airport, too, and we must serve them with high quality. That is why a

new parking lot for 700 cars has been installed to serve travelers at the Kutaisi International Airport."

"The service of Kutaisi International Airport has become even more comfortable for both local and international travelers. As of today, the new parking lot for 700 cars is already in operation, and by the end of the month, the renewed lighting system of the area will be fully operational. Our goal is for Kutaisi Airport to fully meet the best international service requirements," Kvrivishvili said.

She also spoke about the fact that last year about 1.7 million passengers used the airport, and there is an expectation that in 2024 this number will increase.

Kekelidze Replaced as National Library Head



Giorgi Kekelidze. Photo by equilibrium

BY TEAM GT

On January 11, it was announced that The National Library of the Parliament of Georgia has a new head - Konstantine Gamsakhurdia, the son of the first President of Georgia, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, who is replacing Giorgi Kekelidze.

Giorgi Kekelidze, the Director of the National Library of the Parliament of Georgia, says the Speaker of Parliament Shalva Papuashvili told him that he should leave his post because "11 years is too much" and "it's time for renewal".

"The Speaker of the Parliament met me and told me that I have to leave my post because 11 years is too much, even though I worked well, and said it's time for renewal. I calmly told him that legally it is up to him, but there is another law, and according to this law, this is a great

injustice," Kekelidze wrote on Facebook.

Giorgi Kekelidze has been the general director of the National Library of the Parliament of Georgia since 2012. His time there has seen a boom in activity promoting the library, literacy, the arts and resource provision. Numerous "Georgian Corners" were set up in libraries around the world, and villages throughout Georgia were supplied with books to encourage youth to read. One of the most impactful projects has been the National Library's project with e-book house "Saba" and TBC - the annual literary competition "Tsignieri." The aim of the competition is to popularize book reading among schoolchildren. The doors of the library headquarters in Tbilisi were also opened to numerous exhibitions, concerts and awards ceremonies, promoting the library as a commonspace for all to enjoy.

Parliament Speaker Shalva Papuashvili stated that Kekelidze's removal from the post was a personnel decision, not political.

"The National Library has nothing to do with politics, nor should it," he said.

"I am grateful to Giorgi Kekelidze for all the good work he did with his team - this is a personnel decision that is important for the further development of the National Library. I am not going to make additional comments on the issue, since it is purely a personnel decision," Papuashvili noted. "These attempts to somehow connect the National Library with politics in itself show the dishonesty of those who try to make such a connection. The National Library is the heritage and future of our common Georgian people in one organization and one building," he added.

"The National Library is bigger than each of us, with almost two hundred years of history, and the work that has been done there over the years is important work. Behind this is the great team of the National Library, which has brought us the National Library as it is, with the

vision of the future that it has. I am grateful to Giorgi Kekelidze for all the good things he did with his team," said the Speaker.

"Every organization needs new energy and it is with this new energy that the National Library will continue to work," he added, going on to announce that the new head of the National Library will be Konstantine Gamsakhurdia. "It is not even necessary to explain how suitable Konstantine Gamsakhurdia is for the position, and I would like to wish him success. He will be officially approved in the coming days. I think that Konstantine Gamsakhurdia will play an important role in the further development of the National Library of Georgia."

"I confirm and it is my consent to take on this role," said Gamsakhurdia. "It will take some time to start working, but not long. There are some procedural issues to be solved first."

Konstantine Gamsakhurdia is the only son from politician Zviad Gamsakhurdia's first marriage, named after his paternal grandfather, Konstantine Gamsakhurdia, a leading 20th-century Georgian novelist. After the 1991-92 coup d'état against his father and the legitimate government, the family fled to Switzerland. He lived in Dornach and worked as a translator and as a freelancer for several newspapers.

In 2004, Gamsakhurdia returned to

Georgia and began work as a politician. He has been part of the opposition to Mikheil Saakashvili's government since then, and founded the Tavisupleba ("Freedom") party. He was elected to the Parliament of Georgia on May 21, 2008 parliamentary elections, but refused, together with several opposition politicians, to take the seat, claiming that the polls were rigged. He was allowed to regain the seat and joined the Parliament in November 2009, becoming a chair of the parliamentary commission investigating the death of the late President Zviad Gamsakhurdia.

GIORGI KEKELIDZE MOVES TO BIBLUS

Giorgi Kekelidze was quick to find new work, and was this week appointed as the creative director of Biblusi. He told media that he received an offer from the director of Palitra Media Holding immediately after leaving the National Library.

"I met with the director of Palitra Media Holding, and we agreed on plans we have for the external activities of the company, among which is the "literacy society" project, which will see us supplying rural libraries with books and computers, conducting different types of thematic lectures and seminars, the establishment of literary awards, and many other things, which I will reveal step by step," Kekelidze said.



Koko Gamsakhurdia. Source: tabula

UNDP Georgia Set to Continue Championing for Environmental Protection

BY TEAM GT

The month of January is the best time for launching new projects and activities, - the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Georgia announced this week. "We're proud to continue our support for Georgia in safeguarding the atmospheric ozone layer in line with the country's ambitious goals under the #Montreal-Protocol - phasing out 97.5 percent of ozone-depleting substances by 2030."

The new 12th phase of this pivotal initiative was officially set in motion on 16 January, at a working meeting bringing together representatives of the Georgian Government, the private sector, civil society, educational institutions, and international organizations.

UNDP noted what Georgia has achieved so far: A legal framework supporting the exemptions for Ozone Depleting Substances (ODS) use, mandatory certification of Refrigeration and Air Conditioning (RAC) technicians, regular

monitoring and reporting systems to examine ODS consumption and phase-out levels, capacity-building of customs officers and environmental inspectors, and capacity-building of vocational education and training schools to integrate ODS management into their curricula.

As a party to the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer and the Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer, Georgia aims at an overall reduction of the most harmful ozone-depleting substances - Chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) and Hydrochlorofluorocarbons (HCFCs) by 67.5% and 97.5% in 2025 and 2030 respectively.

With funds from the Multi-Lateral Fund to the Montreal Protocol, UNDP continues assistance to Georgia in fulfilling the Montreal Protocol schedule in phasing out HCFCs. Building on the achievements of the previous phase, the current initiative focuses on three strategic areas:

1. Control over supply, demand and emissions/releases of HCFCs
2. Collection, recovery, recycling and reclamation of HCFCs, including from end-of-life refrigeration and air-conditioning (RAC) equipment



Image by Nino Zedginidze/UNDP

3. Natural refrigerants/low Global Warming Potential (GWP) including fiscal incentives and revising the national legislation related to the consumption

of harmful substances. Activities carried out as part of the mission include addressing flaws in the legal, regulatory, and procedural frame-

work; skills and knowledge development to ensure the Reduce Reuse Recycle (RRR) network, environmental inspectors, technicians, and customs officers have the necessary capacity; implementing demonstration projects to introduce RAC operators and technicians to technologies based on natural/alternative refrigerants with low GWP impacts and encourage their use in the domestic market; and supporting good servicing practices in the refrigeration sector.



Georgia aims to phase out 97.5 percent of ozone-depleting substances by 2030

Georgian Firsts. Part 1



BLOG BY TONY HANMER

This year, 2024, sees me celebrating a quarter century since I first visited Georgia! Yes, in July it will be the 25th anniversary of that trip; and on December 1, the same anniversary of my moving here. In light of this, here I present some first or greatest things ever in my life which happened to me in this country.

Living longer than anywhere else: The next competitor for me is Canada (about 15 years), followed by Russia (7 years) and Zimbabwe (6). In descending order, the others are the UK (1.5), Austria (0.75) and Azerbaijan (0.5).

Meeting a head of state: This was president Mikheil Saakashvili, twice. He initiated the Teach and Learn with Georgia (TLG) program to invite volunteers here to teach English in 2010, primarily in village schools. Having lived here for 10 years already when the program began, I joined in Group 1. The president invited us and Group 2 for lunch on the Batumi Boulevard. I met him again to receive a medal for Civic Sacrifice in 2013, after having been the subject of Imedi TV channel's Heroes of Hope weekly program; all the year's subjects were similarly be-medalled at the same occasion, at the Presidential Palace in Tbilisi.

Meeting ambassadors: Those of the UK (several), USA and Hungary to Georgia; and of Canada to Turkey. Also, the Consul of Canada to Georgia.

Meeting Chechens: Many of whom were refugees from the 1999 war of inde-

pendence from Russia. President Shevardnadze opened Georgia's border for them to flee across and take up with their old cousins, the Kists.

Getting mugged and robbed: In the dark, dangerous Tbilisi of Shevardnadze's time, in 2000. It was a wake-up call to become more street-smart. Getting knocked out by a blow to the back of the head also robbed me of a few minutes' memory prior to and since the blow, meaning I have no psychological trauma, so I got off pretty lightly. The thief didn't even bother with my 35mm camera equipment, which survived by being in a plastic shopping bag and thus perhaps not being obvious. Though I went to the police, this was never solved; not that I was expecting it to be, this being pre-Rose Revolution.

Becoming blood brother to a Svan who was cousin of the Aprasidze clan which ruled Upper Svaneti post-communism until Saakashvili had them "dealt with". There's a whole book there, I suppose; now that my blood brother is dead a year, I may be allowed to tell it. (He was also one of two best men at my wedding). Georgia also saw me become old enough to be older than a sitting head of state for the first time; this was also Saakashvili, nearly a year younger than I am.

Here, I started learning my first non-European language and the first one with not a single letter in common with English. This is, of course, Georgian. (I've also studied Russian, which remains my strongest non-native tongue; and French).

First time being accused of being a spy and a separatist, for championing the 4000-year-old language of Svaneti.

First and only time getting married, to



Lali Skhirtladze, in May 2009! Still going strong!

First time living in the highest village of a continent: Winters 2007-9, in Ushguli, about 2200m above sea level. (This status is hotly contested by a village in Tusheti which IS higher but has only one permanent inhabitant, and another in Azerbaijan, about which—is it Europe or not?) This also led to...

First time sleeping in a room getting to below freezing temperatures. I had the best sleeps of my life there, though.

Ushguli was allowed one electric heater per house as the village's electrical supply couldn't handle more. I was fine! Never sick!

First time writing regularly for a periodical publication: Weekly for Georgia Today since March 2011. (I had written a few irregular articles for the Reporter newspaper of Stony Plain, Alberta, Canada, as I set out in summer 1989 intending to bike around the world nice and slowly. This series ended in 1991). May we have many more years together! And

I'll be continuing this series of firsts next issue...

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



CAR RENTAL **+995 599 78 74 78**

 <p>Toyota Prado</p> <p>55\$</p>	 <p>Mercedes Viano</p> <p>50\$</p>	 <p>Mercedes Sprinter</p> <p>70\$</p>
--	--	--

How Georgia Celebrates the End of the Holiday Season

BY SHELBI R. ANKIEWICZ

To mark the end of the holiday season, January 19 signifies a new year and rebirth with recognition of the Christian holiday of Epiphany and the burning of Georgian Christmas trees.

Epiphany, a holiday also known as Natlisgheba in Georgian, is one of the major Christian holidays celebrated throughout the country aside from Christmas and Easter. It is a day to celebrate the baptism of Jesus that took place in the Jordan River. This holiday is celebrated by all of those who recognize the Orthodox religion, although it is celebrated on January 6 in the Western world because of the difference in calendars.

Each year on January 19, numerous churches around the country, including the Holy Trinity Cathedral, perform mass baptisms and acts of water blessing. As per tradition, the Sameba blessings will be performed by Patriarch Ilia II. Water is blessed and thus becomes holy water, which is kept until Epiphany is celebrated again the following year. People who attend the church festivities are sprinkled with this holy water and traditionally take some home, as it is said not to go bad or "decay," for it holds immortal power.

Those in the Orthodox religion believe that when the holy water is blessed on Epiphany, "each river, ravine, or creek is given the same grace as the Epiphany of the Savior of the Jordan River," an article on Sputnik states.

When broken down, the word Epiphany comes from the Greek word "epiphaneia," which means manifestation. Therefore, the celebration is called Epiphany to commemorate the manifestation of God through Jesus' baptism, that brought together the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. This day is seen as a public holiday by most since a large number of the Georgian population is Orthodox and is also known by other names, including the Feast of Revelation of God, The Feast of Theophany, or Three Kings' Day.

Another tradition in Georgia that takes place on January 19 is the burning of the



The Patriarch of Georgia blesses the water on Epiphany. Source: 1TV

traditional Christmas tree, Chichilaki. The concept first came to be centuries ago, when the tree was introduced as the New Year's tree (it wasn't called a Christmas tree until years later when Christianity was adopted as the country's main religion).

The Chichilaki is created from wood, each tree traditionally carved from a single branch of dried hazelnut or walnut. They come in various sizes: Some stand as high as a person, and others can be seen on a table or counter because of their small size. They are normally decorated with various items such as fruit, churchkhela pieces, colored string, leaves and berries. The form of the tree (carved from a single branch) is said to bare similarities to the beard of St. Basil the Great, who can be compared to Santa Claus in the Western world. Chichilaki is also known to represent the tree of life.

"Early in the morning, the Chichilaki masters, called Veluri (wild), go into the forest just before the New Year, cut a branch of a hazelnut tree, and soak it in water. Then, they heat it over a fire, remove the bark, and start cutting thin shavings from end to top. This is how Chichilaki—the Georgian national Christmas tree, is made," Georgian Journal reported.

The trees are most popular in the west-

ern areas of Georgia, close to the Black Sea, but because of their traditional roots, they can easily be found in Tbilisi as well. When the trees are sprayed with water, the wood becomes looser, and the tree can be spread apart to become more "fluffy." Since the tree has a connection to life, and a representation of hope and prosperity, having one can also be seen as a sign of a plentiful harvest and hope for the years ahead.

As a visual representation of letting go of the past and welcoming the New Year with all it brings, Chichilaki trees are ceremoniously burned on January 19 to say goodbye to last year's troubles. This is also the day when all Christmas decorations and markets must be taken down, or bad luck can be brought into the New Year.

Over the years, as Chichilaki trees have become more known to the world, they have generated a greater association with Georgia. Now around the Christmas season, a large Chichilaki tree can be seen in front of the president's palace. Additionally, considering the tree's environmental benefits (turning away from the Western pine trees and simply cutting off dead branches to assist hazelnut tree growth, Chichilaki trees are now on the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage List.



The chichilaki trees outside the president's home. Source: Salome Zurabishvili/IG



Many babies are baptised on Epiphany. Source: Georgian Journal



Titsian Tabidze. Source: tbiliselebi

Georgian Poets: Titsian Tabidze

TRANSLATED FROM
GEORGIAN INTO ENGLISH
BY KETEVAN TUKHARELI

Victuals and he never
Stepped aside.

That which tortured him,
Up to his death,
Was the Georgian sun
And the Georgian earth,
They hid from him the
Happiness, but he gave
Happiness to the verse.

I don't write verses...
The verse writes itself
And accompanies me all my life.
I call the verse a landslide,
That comes running,
Carries you out
And buries you alive.

Titsian Tabidze, commonly known as Titsiani in Georgian, was a prominent Georgian poet and a key figure in the Georgian symbolist movement. Born in March or April 1890, he tragically became a victim of Joseph Stalin's Great Purge. Tabidze was unjustly arrested and subsequently executed on fabricated charges of treason on 16 December 1937. Notably, he maintained a close friendship with the renowned Russian writer Boris Pasternak, who translated Tabidze's poetry into Russian.

I don't write verses...
The verse writes itself,
And accompanies me all my life.
I call the verse the landslide,
That comes running,
Carries you out
And buries you alive.

Carries you out
And buries you alive.

I was born in April,
From blooming apple flowers
The whiteness rains on me
And tears as a heavy shower
Run down my cheeks.

I know, when I die
The verse I say will remain.
If even one poet will take it
To heart,
It will be enough for him
To express sympathy
Thus.

They will say so...
There was a poor,
Orphan boy, brought up
In Orpiri on the Pshani,
The verses were his

Madrid Fusión: Hospitality Is the Main Dish in Georgia

BY MARIAM MTIVLISHVILI

More days before the opening of the world's most influential gastro congress, the Facebook page of Madrid Fusión published another post about Georgia.

"Georgia is a guest country of Madrid Fusión. It is a combination of tradition and creativity, Georgia is a country where hospitality is the main dish," they wrote.

Georgia will be presented as a guest at Madrid Fusión 2024, on January 29-31. At the international congress, at the stand of the Georgian National Tourism Administration, guests and representatives of the culinary field will have the opportunity to discover Georgian cuisine, wine and tourism products.



PUBLISHER & GM
George Sharashidze

COMMERCIAL DEPARTMENT
Commercial Director:
Iva Merabishvili
Marketing Manager:
Natalia Chikvaidze

EDITORIAL DEPARTMENT:
Editor-In-Chief:
Katie Ruth Davies

Journalists:
Ana Dumbadze,
Vazha Tavberidze,
Tony Hanmer,
Nugzar B. Ruhadze,
Mariam Mtvilishvili,
Erekle Poladishvili,
Shelbi R. Ankiewicz

Photographer:
Aleksi Serov

Website Editor:
Katie Ruth Davies

Layout:
Misha Mchedlishvili

Webmaster:
Sergey Gevenov

Circulation Managers:
David Kerdikashvili,
David Djandigava

ADDRESS
1 Melikishvili Str.
Tbilisi, 0179, Georgia

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

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

Reproducing material, photos and advertisements without prior editorial permission is strictly forbidden. The author is responsible for all material. Rights of authors are preserved. The newspaper is registered in Mtatsminda district court.

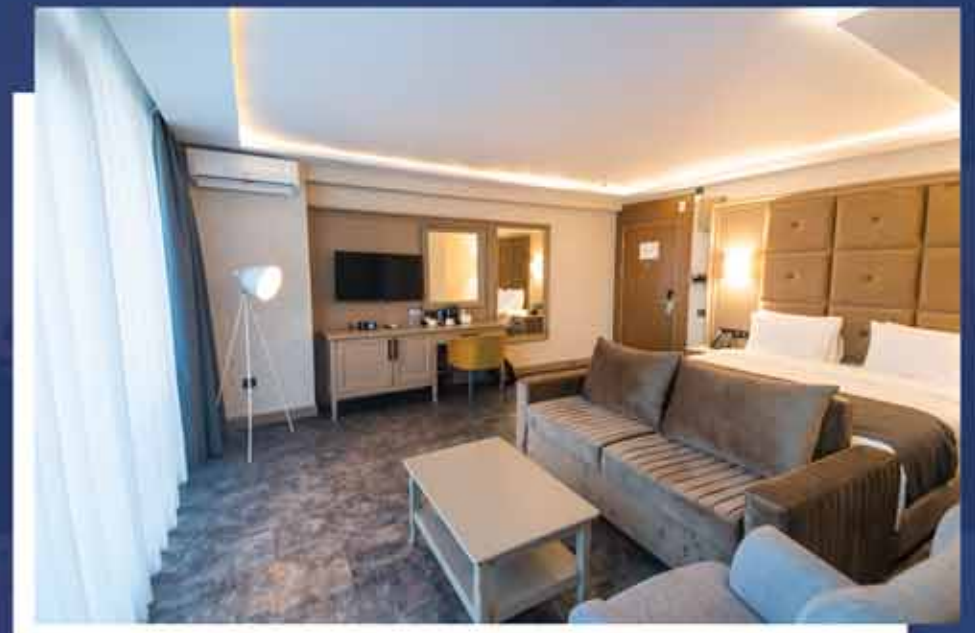
Reg. # 06/4-309



34
კვმ-დან
SQ.M

აპარტამენტები ზღვის ხედით
APARTMENTS WITH THE SEA VIEW
ВСЕ АПАРТАМЕНТЫ С ВИДОМ НА МОРЕ

شقق فندقية فاخرة للبيع



+995 555 097 097

+995 555 098 098

BATUMI CITY, LEKH AND MARIA
KACHINSKY STREET № 8

WWW.BATUMIVIEW.COM

batumi view apartments