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Georgia's Prime Minister Steps Down, Ivanishvili Seeks to Replace Him with Kobakhidze

BY TEAM GT

On Monday January 29, Irakli Garibashvili stepped down from his post as Prime Minister of Georgia.

"I clearly served our country, uncompromisingly defended the interests of our country and people, and I am proud of the results I achieved with the team during this period," he told media.

Garibashvili served as the Prime Minister of Georgia from 22 February 2021, following on from Giorgi Gakharia. He had first served as prime minister from 20 November 2013 until his resignation on 30 December 2015.

"I would like to thank the founder and honorary chairman of our party, Bidzina Ivanishvili, the leadership and members of the party and the parliament, heads of ministries, and every employee- employees of the government administration, all civil servants, for the support provided during my work as Prime Minister," Garibashvili said.



Continued on page 2 Ivanishvili's choice for Georgia's new PM: Irakli Kobakhidze. Source: Wikipedia

GALT & TAGGART									
CREATING OPPORTUNITIES									
Markets									
As of 30 Jan 2024									
	Price	w/w	m/m		Price	w/w	m/m		
BONDS									
GRAIL 07/28	91.71 (YTM 6.19%)	-0.2%	-0.7%	Crude Oil, Brent (US\$/bbl)	82.87	+4.2%	+7.6%		
SILNET 01/27	100.30 (YTM 8.26%)	-0.0%	+0.1%	Gold Spot (US\$/OZ)	2 037.01	+0.4%	-1.3%		
TBC 06/24	99.53 (YTM 6.96%)	+0.1%	+0.1%						
CURRENCIES									
	Price	w/w	m/m		Price	w/w	m/m		
STOCKS									
Bank of Georgia (BGE LN)	GBP 37.85	+1.9%	-6.8%	GEL / USD	2.6820	+0.7%	-0.2%		
Georgia Capital (CGEO LN)	GBP 10.86	+3.2%	+6.3%	GEL / EUR	2.9087	+0.6%	-1.9%		
TBC Bank Group (TBCG LN)	GBP 28.60	-	+1.1%	GEL / GBP	3.4081	+0.9%	-0.4%		
				GEL / CHF	3.1113	+1.8%	-2.6%		
				GEL / RUB	0.0299	-0.3%	-0.7%		
				GEL / TRY	0.0883	-	-3.3%		
				GEL / AZN	1.5800	+0.9%	-0.1%		
INDICES									
FTSE 100	7 666.31	+2.4%	-0.9%	GEL / AMD	0.0067	+1.1%	+0.0%		
FTSE 250	19 349.50	+1.9%	-1.7%	GEL / UAH	0.0710	-	+0.7%		
DAX	16 972.34	+2.1%	+1.3%	EUR / USD	0.9220	+0.1%	+1.8%		
DOW JONES	38 467.31	+1.5%	+2.1%	GBP / USD	0.7874	-0.1%	+0.2%		
NASDAQ	15 509.90	+0.5%	+3.3%	CHF / USD	0.8618	-1.0%	+2.4%		
MSCI EM EE	42.53	+1.6%	-5.1%	RUB / USD	89.7533	+1.2%	+2.8%		
MSCI EM	980.59	+1.1%	-4.2%	TRY / USD	30.3539	+0.3%	+2.8%		
SP 500	4 924.97	+1.2%	+3.3%	AZN / USD	1.6995	+0.0%	+0.0%		
MSCI FM	2 301.60	+0.3%	+1.6%	AMD / USD	402.9000	-0.3%	-0.3%		



GEOSTAT: In December 2023, Company Registration by Foreigners Decreased by 40%

BY MARIAM MTIVLISHVILI

In December last year, 5,140 enterprises were registered in the country. The mentioned number is about a 20% decrease compared to the same period of 2022. The reduction is mainly due to the reduction of registration by foreigners, which has reduced by about 40%.

In a GEOSTAT report, in December 2023, compared to the corresponding period of the previous year, the growth of real gross domestic product amounted to 8.3%.

Two-way traffic reopens on Tsereteli Avenue from February 1



As promised, the two-way traffic will resume on Tsereteli Avenue from February 1," said Tbilisi Mayor Kakha Kaladze at the municipal government meeting this week.

Kaladze mentioned that cleaning up works were being done concurrently with final reconstruction works, which are in their final stage.

"The rehabilitation of the road on Akaki

Tsereteli Avenue is completed and traffic has been opened in both directions," he said Thursday. "We promised the public that we would open on the first of February. On one side of the avenue, the arrangement of a new network of outdoor lighting has been completed, and on the other side, the aforementioned works are still underway."

"From February 1, our beautiful city, Tbilisi, has another renovated avenue," he said.

Ukraine Latest: EU Agrees on €50bn in Additional Aid for Ukraine



The summit. Source: EU

COMPILED BY ANA DUMBADZE

Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orban dramatically dropped his objections to €50 billion in EU funding for Ukraine in a breakthrough announced as EU leaders were gathering for an emergency summit on the issue.

European Council President Charles Michel, who chairs summit meetings, announced on social media that the deal had been done.

Before the main gathering, Mr Orban held a meeting with the leaders of France, Germany and Italy, as well as Mr Michel and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen.

Following the meeting, Mr Michel said on X: "All 27 leaders agreed on an additional €50 billion support package for Ukraine within the EU budget. This locks in steadfast, long-term, predictable funding for #Ukraine."

The €50 billion is made up of grants and loans to Ukraine, and will be resourced from an expanded EU budget, known as the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF).

Hungary had sought the right to veto the funding over its four-year disbursement period.

According to a copy of the text, EU leaders will debate the funding on an annual basis, without any country having a veto over it.

EU funds for Hungary will remain frozen, regardless of the deal on aid for Ukraine, an EU diplomat said.

The diplomat said Hungary would still need to fulfil its own obligations in order to be eligible to receive EU funds.

Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal welcomed the EU's decision.

"EU Member States once more show their solidarity and unity in the actions to Ukrainian people to withstand the war," he said on X.

Earlier, Taoiseach Leo Varadkar said: "We can't go away without an agreement,

so one way or another we have to leave here today with an agreement on Ukraine.

"The war has now been raging for two years and Ukraine will not be able to continue to defend itself without the support of the European Union," he said.

PUTIN'S ANTI-WAR OPPONENT TAKES STEP TOWARD ELECTION

Less than six weeks until Russia's presidential election in mid-March, and the country's political establishment is gearing up for the vote.

Anti-war candidate Boris Nadezhdin said on Wednesday that he had submitted 105,000 signatures to Russia's Central Election Commission as he prepared to challenge incumbent Vladimir Putin in the upcoming vote.

Whether the CEC will accept all those signatures will be closely watched. There are concerns that the commission could try to disqualify Nadezhdin, a long-standing figure in Russian politics but a vocal critic of the war, from running.

A top official in Russia's Security Council claimed the West could try to "shake up" Russia's internal politics in the run-up to the presidential elections.

AS THE WAR ENTERS ITS 708TH DAY, THESE ARE THE MAIN DEVELOPMENTS:

A Russian bomb hit a hospital in north-eastern Ukraine, forcing the evacuation of dozens of patients, smashing windows and damaging equipment. Volodymyr Tymoshko, head of the Kharkiv regional branch of the national police, said the bomb made a direct hit on the hospital in the town of Velykyi Burluk, northeast of Kharkiv, and a second bomb landed nearby. Four people were slightly injured.

Ukraine's air defenses shot down 14 out of 20 drones launched by Russia in an overnight attack that injured one person and damaged commercial buildings. The air force said the Iranian-made Shahed drones and three Iskander missiles targeted five Ukrainian regions in the south and the east.

Russia said it destroyed 20 missiles launched by Ukraine over the Black Sea

and the Crimean Peninsula, which Moscow invaded in 2014 and then annexed.

Ukraine's air force commander Mykola Oleshchuk said its forces had struck the Belbek military airfield in Crimea. He did not go into detail.

POLITICS AND DIPLOMACY

Russia and Ukraine exchanged hundreds of prisoners of war. Russia's Defense Ministry said 195 of its soldiers were freed, while Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said 207 people, including some civilians, had been returned to Ukraine.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz told his country's parliament that he would rally European partners to deliver support for Ukraine that was "so huge" it would weigh on Russian President Vladimir Putin. His comments came ahead of a key European Union summit on 50 billion euros (\$54bn) of funding for Ukraine that was being blocked by Hungary.

Victoria Nuland, the United States acting deputy secretary of state, visited Kyiv and said she was encouraged by Ukraine's strengthening defenses and that Moscow should expect some "surprises" on the battlefield. A US military aid package for Ukraine is being held up in Congress by Republicans who want to link it to policy changes at the US border. Nuland said she was confident it would be adopted.

The International Court of Justice (ICJ) rejected much of a case filed by Ukraine that accused Russia of bankrolling separatist rebels in eastern Ukraine a decade ago, saying only that Moscow had failed to investigate alleged breaches.

WEAPONS

The EU's foreign policy chief Josep Borrell admitted that the EU's promise to supply Ukraine with one million artillery shells by March would fall short, with just over half that number expected to be delivered by that deadline. The remaining 155-mm artillery shells are likely to be delivered by the end of the year, Borrell said.

Georgia's Prime Minister Steps Down, Ivanishvili Seeks to Replace Him with Kobakhidze

Continued from page 1

"I would like to say a special thanks to my wife, children, and parents for their support. I hope now I will have more time to devote to my family. I wish peace, prosperity and unity to our homeland. May God be our protector," he said, before noting his plans to continue working in the Georgian Dream party and to actively participate in the election process and the development of the country.

According to the honorary chairman of Georgian Dream, Bidzina Ivanishvili, Garibashvili wanted to resign from the

position of prime minister himself.

"What should I complain about? See what kind of man he is. He wanted it himself, I didn't want it," he told media.

The Constitution of Georgia states that should a prime minister resign or their authority be terminated, the government will continue to perform its duties until the appointment of a new prime minister, while the power of the prime minister ceases upon their resignation.

Parliament now has a two-week period to express confidence in a new prime ministerial candidate and the government team and program presented by

him. The party with the best results in the elections has the right to nominate a candidate for the position of prime minister. In this regard, a change has been made in the charter of the Georgian Dream party, according to which the political council of the party will approve the candidacy of a prime minister after their nomination by the honorary chairman of the party, this being Bidzina Ivanishvili.

In order to receive confidence, the support of the majority of the full composition of parliament, in all 76 deputies, is required.

Prior to the PM's official resignation, Imedi TV reported that Irakli Kobakhidze would replace Irakli Garibashvili as the Prime Minister.

The media outlet said the decision was made at the meeting of the Georgian Dream political council held on January 24, and would be made public after the party congress on February 1.

"According to our information, the acting chairman of the party, Irakli Kobakhidze, will be nominated for the post of prime minister, and Irakli Garibashvili will take the post of party chairman," ImediTV announced. "In addition, Irakli

Kobakhidze will also occupy the post of the Political Secretary of the Georgian Dream Party."

Representatives of the ruling party kept quiet about this information throughout the week, calling it pointless "speculation." Then, on Thursday, the news was confirmed: Irakli Garibashvili was elected Chairman of the Georgian Dream and Irakli Kobakhidze was nominated for the post of Prime Minister. Further, Irakli Chikovani will be nominated for the position of Minister of Defense, replacing Juansher Burchuladze, who said he wanted to move to another field.

EU's Greenhouse for Social Innovators Supports Sustainable, Smart Growth, Social Cohesion, and the Reduction of Inequalities in the EaP



Participants brainstorming



Norbert Kunz, founder of Social Impact gGmbH, with the trainees

BY KATIE RUTH DAVIES

On January 17 - 22, hotel Pine Astoria hosted a training for mentors in the framework of the EU funded project Greenhouse for Social Innovators. The training aimed to build the bridge between the representatives of traditional businesses and social enterprises by bringing together 17 founders of successful busi-

nesses from Ukraine, Georgia and Belarus to become future mentors for social enterprises.

Greenhouse for Social Innovators is a transformative initiative aimed at fostering active youth participation in the labor markets and social economies of Georgia, Belarus, and Ukraine. Its overarching goal is to contribute to sustainable and smart growth, social cohesion, and the reduction of inequalities in Eastern Partnership (EaP) societies.

The 6-day intensive training in Tbilisi included sessions on social entrepre-

neurship, impact measurement and diagnostics of enterprises.

After completing the training sessions, the mentors are to travel to Bootcamp in Warsaw, Poland, where, together with the selected social enterprises, will participate in the diagnostics of each enterprise.

Once the diagnostics are over, they will start the mentorship program with one of the selected social enterprises which will run for the next six months.

Greenhouse for Social Innovators seeks to empower local young social entrepre-

neurs and trainers in the three countries through the launch and implementation of an Acceleration program. This program places a special focus on sustainable green and digital social business models and international exchange opportunities through: Skills Development, contributing to enhancing the skills of social entrepreneurs in Georgia, Belarus, and Ukraine, aligning them with the principles of green and digital transition; Entrepreneurial and Career Support, improving the entrepreneurial and career management skills of its beneficiaries through targeted training and mentoring support to youth social startups, even those founded by political and war refugees from Belarus and Ukraine- support which enhances their economic resilience and social and environmental impact, and; Network Strengthening, building intraregional networks and partnerships between social innovators in the target countries, as well as

Germany and the Netherlands. It aims to foster collaboration between young social startups and private businesses, including those relocated due to political turmoil in Belarus and the military conflict in Ukraine.

Project Partners are IBB gGmbH Dortmund (Germany), an organization with extensive experience in implementing projects in Belarus, and maintaining contact with beneficiaries; the Georgian Heritage Crafts Association (GHCA), which supports the craft sector, fosters the young generation's engagement in social entrepreneurship, and strengthens the economic potential of heritage crafts products; and Ukraine Without Waste (UWW), a non-profit organization and social enterprise promoting waste management and conscious consumption through behavioral economics. It has won recognition and awards for its impactful work.

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.

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Lincoln Mitchell - I don't believe Bidzina's instincts are as strong as he might think

INTERVIEW BY VAZHA TAVBERIDZE

Lincoln Mitchell* has not been to Georgia since the spring of 2020, and says he would love to get back. Radio Free Europe/RFL's Georgian Service sat down with him to discuss his reasons for going quiet on Georgia, Bidzina's latest chess moves, and Kobakhidze as the new PM.

"I still follow Georgian politics and events closely, but, for some good reasons, and some not so good reasons, there's not a lot of interest in what I have to say," he tells us. "I think a lot of people who follow Georgia have very short memories. Additionally, I was critical of the Georgian Dream, which means I was no longer useful to them. And there remain a lot of people in Washington who want to tell themselves a story about Georgia and politics that begins with 'the UNM essentially made a few mistakes, but was basically good, pro-Western, committed to democracy, and it was ousted by something that felt like a coup in 2012,' - that is still a pretty popular frame in Washington. And if that is your own understanding of Georgia and politics, the last person you want to hear from is me. Because not only do I disagree, I have the receipts, I know what happened. If you want someone to write puff pieces for the Georgian Dream, I'm not your guy. And I'm not saying that as 'Oh, poor me, Lincoln Mitchell' - I've got a lot of friends, I make a good living. I teach classes, I'm very happy."

BACK THEN, YOU WERE CONSIDERED SYMPATHETIC TOWARDS GD, AND MANY WENT AS FAR AS TO CALL YOU BIDZINA'S "POCKET EXPERT." WAS THAT REPUTATION UNFAIR?

What justified that is that, unlike many Western analysts, I was never Misha's guy. I was the first western scholar to be critical of Saakashvili. And whereas most American experts for much of the Saakashvili period into the early Georgian Dream [GD] period could be essentially depended upon to largely tout the UNM line, I was never that person. I'm not going to sit here and tell you that Bidzina has delivered democracy to Georgia, that simply hasn't happened. I believe that in 2012, Bidzina, with GD's victory, stopped Misha from consolidating what was moving towards an authoritarian regime. And if that opinion, which I never concealed, made people think I was in Bidzina's pocket, well, I say what I believe to be true, and people can take it how they want. I'm a big boy, I've been called a lot worse.

BIDZINA PROMISED TO USHER IN DEMOCRACY BACK IN 2012. WHAT'S THE REASON IT DIDN'T HAPPEN?

Unfortunately, what happens in Georgia is cyclical: There's this moment of democratic hope, and it's followed by the failure to consolidate, and then the regime moves towards being less democratic so as to stay in power. The mystery about Bidzina and the Georgian Dream is how they managed to stay in power this long, and we can get to that later. But part of it is that creating, bringing up, strengthening democracy is much more difficult than people realize. Part of it is that both the leadership of GD and the leadership of the UNM tell

themselves a story which is not true, that Georgian democracy, and sovereignty and survival, is dependent "only on us, nobody else." Once you believe you're indispensable, you're giving yourself license to do anything, including to repress any opposition. And on top of it for the Georgian Dream, there is deep personal disdain for primarily Saakashvili, but generally for UNM leadership. In the elections, this works two ways. One, they win the elections, because most Georgian people share that disdain, an idea that is not widely understood in the West, but also that disdain makes them cautious about democracy, because they're afraid of the other side coming back to power. If Misha ever gets back into power, Bidzina is going to have to flee the country. Some of his people would end up in jail, some will have to flee too, and then the cycle will begin again. Both of the two earlier cycles, the Rose Revolution and Georgian Dream's victory in the 2012 elections, were seen as the onset of democracy - in my view, it merely showed that democracy was possible, which is something different than saying it's arrived.

In both cases, the regime was defeated by a broad opposition coalition. And such a coalition has not emerged in Georgia since. One, because the UNM is the number two party, which is not the way you're going to defeat the Georgian Dream. GD don't want a coalition to emerge that could defeat them, yet nor does the UNM want that coalition to emerge, because if a coalition emerges, led by somebody other than the UNM, then they will never get back into power.

DO YOU SEE A COALITION EMERGING?

The message of Georgian Dream, if you peel away all of the "Misha will come back", is "we've slowly improved the economy. We've gotten out of your life a bit, but we're not going crazy with liberal Western ideas," which I think most Georgian voters aren't all that comfortable with, but there's no war with Russia and most Georgian voters are okay with that.

The UNM says to voters in Georgia, "Listen, Bidzina is calling all the shots." I would assume most voters would say, "Yes, that's true. So what?" "Bidzina is a little too close to Russia," they might say, but these are the issues that elites care about, those in the West.

Yes, everyone knows that the regime has become less democratic, and there is abuse and corruption, beatings of opposition members. However, while people may not like it, they're not going to roll the dice on uncertainty, as long as they have Georgia more stable, with an economic curve in the right direction.

If we look at Georgia on the map, a few 100 miles to the west, there's this horrible war in Ukraine; a few 100 miles to the south, there's an even worse war in Gaza. If you're in Georgia, you're looking to the south and you're looking to the west, and you say, "You know what? We're doing okay, here." And that's a more powerful message than anybody in Washington can offer, particularly because the people who tend to care about Georgia overlap very heavily with the people who are very pro Ukraine, and I would put myself in both those camps.

IF THE GEORGIAN DREAM HAS SUCH A WINNING CARD IN HAND, HOW DO YOU BEAT IT?

The way you beat them is by breaking



Lincoln Mitchell. Source: lincolnmitchell.com

with the UNM. That's the only hope here: You cast the UNM away and then you chip away at the Georgian Dream's support base by offering the voter the promise that you will serve as a check factor on the Georgian Dream excesses. Not because we have a totally different vision for the country, but because it is valuable for Georgia to have an opposition voice in parliament that is not all about Misha. And if that party or that coalition or that block comes in second, now you have what we used to call a one and a half party system. Japan has that, Israel had that for the first two decades, three decades of its existence, that changed. But if you say we need radical change, Misha's talk of revolution was about as good a commercial for the Georgian Dream as they could have come up with, if they could have hired all the best political consultants in the world.

THE DANGER OF A ONE AND A HALF PARTY SYSTEM WOULD BE THAT GD WOULD TRY TO SUBVERT THAT OTHER OPPOSITION PARTY AND WOULD LIKELY SUCCEED, BECAUSE THEY WILL HAVE NO FUNDAMENTAL DIFFERENCES.

Even if it didn't succeed, people would think it had, right? The worst outcome for the UNM is for Georgian Dream to win. And the worst outcome for Georgian Dream is to not win, and the best way to ensure that is to make the UNM the second party. But we are now more than a decade into this. That's what's so surprising. The UNM has dug in on this, and many in the West have enabled that.

ON TO IVANISHVILI AND HIS THIRD ENTRANCE INTO POLITICS. QUESTIONS CAN BE ASKED BOTH REGARDING THE REASON FOR THAT RETURN AND THE TIMING.

I don't really consider it a return, because I'm reminded of the old country song: How can I miss you if you won't go away? You can't return to something you never left. Since 2012, Bidzina, regardless of the role, has been the prime mover of Georgian politics, and the prime mover of the Georgian Dream party.

Coming back to take on a formal role now is about timing - he wanted to get in on an election year. The shake up with the Prime Minister and Kobakhidze is something he wanted, and he wanted to do with it well in advance of the October election.

HE THRICE, MUCH LIKE BIBLICAL PETER, RENOUNCED THE IDEA OF REPLACING THE PRIME MINISTER. THREE TIMES HE DENIED THAT IT WAS ON THE CARDS, AND YET, ONE MONTH AFTER HIS RETURN, IT'S DONE.

Many things Bidzina does are baffling. My sense on Bidzina is that he's a good strategic thinker, but he's not a good political thinker. He understands strategy. He can think many moves down on the chessboard, but he doesn't understand politics and communication. So I'm sure part of what he thought is that nobody really cares that he said he wouldn't do it and then he did.

There's also the question why he would replace Garibashvili with Kobakhidze, who is more disliked than Garibashvili. It's a strange move. One thing not reported much is the extent to which it's difficult to get access to Bidzina, so the question of who's been whispering into Bidzina's ear for the last month is a massively important one, which most Georgians and certainly most outsiders who are trying to understand the situation don't know. For all we know, there was a whispering campaign that Kobakhidze wanted to be the Prime Minister, and that Garibashvili was tired and the public needed a fresh face.

There is no rational strategic reason for it. It is taking a guy who's unpopular with the voters and replacing him with a guy who's even less popular with the voters. Especially considering Garibashvili is extremely loyal to Bidzina, which is a very prized quality for Bidzina, even more loyal than Kobakhidze, in my subjective opinion. But I think he felt like Garibashvili had just been in there too long and they needed a fresh face, wanted to show some changes. Also, Garibashvili has been through this once, he knows the game and its rules, and Bidzina knows that he is a team player, he can be relied

upon. He may well come back again. His life has been transformed by his relationship with Bidzina, he is too smart to jeopardize that, and he understands that he doesn't serve the Georgian people - he serves Bidzina.

They have, in Bidzina's view, started the year hitting the ground running with this, making it difficult to attack him as a "behind the scenes mastermind." I suspect Bidzina believes, as he has for some time, that he is the best public face for Georgian Dream.

WHY DO YOU DOUBT HE'S THE BEST PUBLIC FACE FOR THE DREAM?

I don't believe Bidzina's instincts are as strong as he might think. And I don't know whether the Georgian voters see him as this extremely powerful and fundamentally benevolent, super rich guy, or they see him as part of the problem.

WHAT'S THE LEGACY GARIBASHVILI LEAVES BEHIND HIM, AND WHAT HAVE WE TO LOOK FORWARD TO WHEN IT COMES TO KOBAKHIDZE?

Garibashvili's biggest legacy, this time round, is the relationship with Russia. The major thing that happened during his tenure was the war in Ukraine, and he steered the state through that in a way that I am sure pleased some people, displeased many others, but he's the guy who oversaw the war, so to say. As for Kobakhidze, his mission will be to win the election, full stop. I don't see this swap as signifying any change in the big picture policy for Georgia. Georgia, like every small country, particularly in this part of the world, is going to find it increasingly difficult to navigate between Moscow, Beijing, Turkey, the Arab world and the West, and it is not clear to me that the Georgian government, the current team, are really focusing on that challenge.

*Lincoln Mitchell is a political analyst, pundit and writer based in New York City and San Francisco. Lincoln works on democracy and governance related issues in the former Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, the Caribbean, the Middle East, Africa and Asia.



Zurab Tsertsvadze/AFP via Getty Image

POLITICO: Georgia Follows Putin's Lead

According to a report produced by the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum and released last week, Vladimir Putin's war on Ukraine is dividing Europe's eastern neighborhood — with some countries moving closer to the European Union but others, “including Georgia,” “gladly” following Russia's path to authoritarianism, reads an article titled “Georgia follows Putin's lead” published by POLITICO.

The report by the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum noted that Russia's invasion of Ukraine boosted relations between some eastern states and the EU on energy, trade and transport. But while public administration increased in Ukraine and Moldova, things are trending downward in “politically polarized Georgia,” POLITICO says.

“Dictatorships or autocratic regimes, they learn from each other. And I think there is definitely a learning curve that we see in some of the countries. We also saw it in Georgia,” Alexandra Sabou of the Forum told POLITICO.

Georgia attempted to install a Putin-style foreign

agent law in March 2023, which led to major domestic protests. The law was “kind of a copy-paste from Russia, with some ... local elements — but the similarity was obvious,” Sabou said.

Georgia also experienced a plunge in democracy, good governance and policy convergence — which mirrors the country's political polarization, the Eastern Partnership Index 2023 found. “Basically, in every area, there was a decrease, in spite of the fact that the EU rewarded it with candidate status,” Sabou said.

The Eastern Partnership Index notes that Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia all applied for EU membership after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, but claims that now, the trio has become “a less distinct entity, and the lines between EU neighborhood policy and EU enlargement policy have blurred.”

According to the report, while Georgia slowly drifts away, Ukraine and Moldova “are steadily making the kinds of systemic changes that Brussels expects them to do to proceed along the accession path,” reads the article.

MoU Signed Between Georgia and Armenia



A memorandum of strategic cooperation was signed between Georgia and Armenia, [now former] Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili announced at a briefing held together with his Armenian colleague on January 26, during Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's visit to Georgia.

“We are traditionally, historically, very strong allies, friends, not just neighbors,” Garibashvili noted. “We have a very good relationship, cooperation, partnership in all directions. It can be said that, de facto, we were already strategic friends and strategic partners, and it can be said that today this reality, this fact, has been formalized and so today we officially signed an agreement on strategic partnership.”

Garibashvili noted that both countries are committed to further develop trade and economic relations.

In addition, Garibashvili spoke about establishing long-term peace and stability in the South Caucasus region.

“We have always been and are ready to make our contribution to this long-term peace-building work, which will benefit the countries and peoples of the entire region,” he said. “We look at the ongoing dialogue between Azerbaijan and Armenia with great optimism and hope. I would like to express our hope that Armenia-Azerbaijan will sign a peace agreement soon, which will undoubtedly promote and strengthen the peace and stability in the region, which is important for all our countries and nations.”

In 2023, Georgia Received \$4.125 bln from Tourism



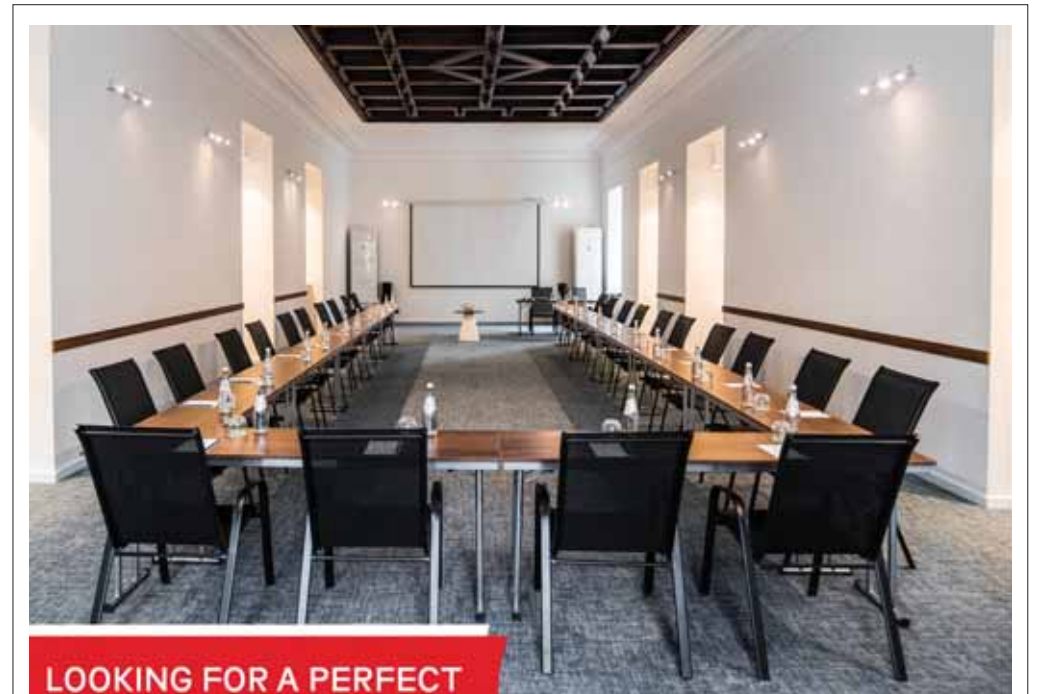
BY MARIAM MIVLISHVILI

According to the estimates of the National Bank of Georgia, in 2023, Georgia received a very high income from tourism (4.125 billion dollars). They also announced that in the last year, revenues from international travel have increased by \$608.7 million.

Revenues from tourism by country:

Russia – 938.3 million dollars
Turkey – 639 million dollars
EU / Great Britain – 6 million dollars
Israel – 308.2 million dollars
Ukraine – 5 million dollars
Armenia – 161.4 million dollars
Azerbaijan – 6 million dollars
Iran – 128.2 million dollars
Belarus – 102.7 million dollars
Saudi Arabia – 100.7 million dollars

Other countries – 879.2 million dollars



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Elkana Trains Specialists in Hazelnut Pruning and Shaping in Western Georgia

The Biological Farming Association Elkana has trained specialists in hazelnut pruning and shaping within the project “Organic Hazelnut Value Chain Creates Income and Decent Employment in Western Georgia”. 12 participants were enrolled in the course, whom six completed both the theoretical and practical aspects. The graduates decided to create working groups in Zugdidi and Tsalenjikha municipalities.

Each group was provided with the necessary inventory within the framework of the project, following the principle of participation. From January, hazelnut farmers living in the region will receive quality service from certified specialists in hazelnut pruning and shaping.

Elkana has been cooperating with the organic hazelnut producer Caucasnut for years, which unites approximately 700 farmers. The majority of farmers often pointed out that the activities of hazelnut pruning and shaping in the region were hardly supported. Next year, two groups will start working, and while



Source: CENN

they may not cover the entire region, the initial steps will have been taken, laying the foundation for the comprehensive development of quality services.

Elkana assists Caucasnut to achieve the following objectives:

- Promoting the certification of hazelnut producers by organic and fair-trade standards;
- Providing farmers involved in the certification system with essential advice and technical support for hazelnut production;
- Promoting the sale of organic and fair-trade certified hazelnuts at premium prices through interested market partners;
- Promoting the development and accessibility of various services necessary for hazelnut farmers.

Caucasnut employs a group certification system, involving ongoing training of member farmers, offering farm inspections, facilitating their external audits by an accredited certification body, and ensuring traceability of the manufactured products at all levels of the production chain.

Georgia: EIB Global and TBC Bank Sign a Guarantee Agreement Enabling over €31 mln to Support Businesses



The European Investment Bank (EIB) has signed a guarantee agreement financially supported by the European Union with TBC Bank, enabling it to extend financing to the local private sector on favorable terms, including with reduced collateral requirements.

The EIB guarantee will unlock over €31 million of financing for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Georgia by providing 80% of the coverage of potential losses on each loan originated by TBC Bank. It will contribute to inclusive economic growth in the country with a specific focus on regional entities, women-led businesses, young entrepreneurs and start-ups.

The guarantee is under the SME Access to Finance Initiative supported by the European Fund for Sustainable Development. This joint program by the EIB and the European Commission aims to enhance access to finance for SMEs and promote financial inclusion of underserved segments, such as start-ups or

youth- and women-led businesses.

The guarantee operation also contributes to sustainable economic recovery under the European Union's flagship Economic and Investment Plan for the Eastern Partnership, which aims to help 80 000 SMEs in Georgia.



The guarantee will focus on regional entities, women-led businesses, young entrepreneurs and start-ups

“The EIB is pleased to support women in business, young entrepreneurs and start-ups in Georgia through our joint initiative with the European Commission,” noted EIB Vice-President Teresa Czerwinska, responsible for the Bank's activities in Georgia. “To be implemented by one of Georgia's leading banks, TBC Bank, this guarantee facility will promote financial inclusion for underserved SMEs and increase their contribution to the economy. Supporting the growth of enterprises and diversification of the Georgian economy is particularly important as the country has just recently been granted EU candidate status.”

“The EU's Economic and Investment Plan for the Eastern Partnership is the backbone of EU-Georgia cooperation to support small businesses, stimulate jobs and growth, promote connectivity and foster Georgia's green and digital transition,” European Union Ambassador to Georgia Paweł Herczynski said. “We are pleased to support today's guarantee agreement, which takes an inclusive approach to providing access to finance

and job creation. Economic growth that is inclusive and sustainable is crucial for Georgia's socio-economic development and for the resilience of Georgia's economy. Working on these EU priorities – a more inclusive, sustainable economic growth – will help Georgia on its EU path.”

“We are happy to continue our strategic partnership with the EIB and announce the successful completion of another risk-sharing agreement,” said Vakhtang Butskhrikidze, CEO of JSC TBC Bank. “This transaction is testament to the well-established, strong partnership between our organizations, and our shared values to strengthen women's economic empowerment, promote young entrepreneurs and start-ups and support the country's regional development. Innovative financial instruments of this kind are very important, as it enables TBC to accelerate financing for underserved SMEs, strengthen their competitiveness and support sustainable economic development and job creation in Georgia. I would like to thank the EIB

for this extended support, and I'm convinced we will have many more opportunities to work on impactful deals in the future.”

About the EIB and EIB in Georgia
The European Investment Bank (EIB) is the long-term financing institution of the European Union, owned by its Member States. It provides long-term finance for sound investments in pursuit of EU policy goals, supporting projects in four priority areas: infrastructure, innovation, climate and environment, and SMEs.

Since 2010, their operations in Georgia have promoted economic and social development in the country. They have supported key sectors, including energy, transport, water and wastewater management, sustainable agriculture and small businesses. Their financing in Georgia is aligned with the European Neighborhood Policy, the Eastern Partnership and other EU bilateral agreements.

Their operations are guided by the European Union's Global Gateway strategy and the EU Economic and Investment Plan for Eastern Partnership. They work hand-in-hand with our partners from Team Europe to promote territorial development and green projects. They also support reforms aimed at strengthening Georgia's economy as it pursues EU membership.

About the SME Access to Finance Initiative

The SME Access to Finance Initiative is a joint program launched by the European Investment Bank and the European Union that aims to enhance access to finance for small and medium businesses (SMEs), as well as financial inclusion of underserved segments, such as start-ups or youth- and women-led businesses.

The Initiative helps strengthen the local private sector, enhancing economic resilience and sustaining employment in the European Union's southern and eastern neighborhood as well as sub-Saharan Africa.

It is supported by the European Fund for Sustainable Development under the European Union's External Investment Plan.

Lineate – Offering Custom Technology Solutions for Improved Revenue Generation

Lineate is a software development company with two decades of experience building platforms and apps (web and mobile) capable of simplifying complex data problems. Its story began in New York in the early 2000s, when a successful engineer, in the true spirit of US entrepreneurship, created a company with distinct values and a constant dedication to technological progress. Since its inception, their custom technology solutions have helped companies improve revenue generation by enabling smooth, fast, and modern platforms to address the most significant pain points reliably and realistically.

Using modern technology, industry best practices, and agile development methodology, Lineate consistently seeks to achieve the best outcome, and this is what inspired GEORGIA TODAY to reach out to Giorgi Tsikolia, Vice President for the EMEA region at Lineate, to find out more. A former diplomat who, until recently, served as the Deputy Chief of Mission of Georgia in the United States, Tsikolia is also a vice president of the America-Georgia Business Council, a non-profit organization based in Washington, DC., who received his education from The Fletcher School of Diplomacy at Tufts University.

“We operate four offices on two continents, with our headquarters in NYC and a European regional office in Tbilisi,” he tells us. “We also have a presence in Yerevan, Armenia, and Krakow, Poland. Our primary clients operate in the US and European markets. Since 2006, we have completed over 910 projects, primarily in the AdTech, MarTech, Med-



Giorgi Tsikolia is a former diplomat who, until recently, served as the Deputy Chief of Mission of Georgia in the United States. Currently, he holds the position of Vice President for the EMEA region at Lineate, a U.S. technology company. He also serves on the board of Geocase, a non-partisan think-tank in Georgia, and as a vice president of the America-Georgia Business Council, a non-profit organization based in Washington, DC. He received his education from The Fletcher School of Diplomacy at Tufts University.

Tech, FinTech, and Media industries. Our clients include notable players in the US MedTech, FinTech, and AdTech fields.”

Over a year ago, Lineate established its office in Georgia to expand its reach and better serve customers in the US and European markets. The decision, Tsikolia says, was motivated by several factors, including Georgia’s favorable business climate, highly educated and skilled workforce, and location at the crossroads of Europe and Asia. Georgia

has a strong IT sector and a growing startup ecosystem, making it an attractive destination for software development companies like Lineate.

“The country’s strategic location will make it easier for the company to serve customers in Europe and Asia, which is why Georgia is crucial for its international expansion. Alongside that, the Georgian government has also implemented business-friendly policies to encourage foreign investment, further supporting Lineate’s expansion plans.”

Tsikolia notes, adding that Lineate is committed to working closely with government agencies responsible for developing the local tech industry, such as GITA, Enterprise Georgia, and the Ministry of Education, as well as other stakeholders, such as universities and vocational education training centers.

“To leverage the opportunities presented by the Georgian market, we have invested in its Tbilisi office and hired local talent to support its growth,” he tells us. “Lineate has created 95 new jobs in Georgia and plans to continue increasing its headcount in 2024. Lineate aims to achieve this by recruiting and training local talent, providing mentorship educational programs to employees, and through Lineate Dev School, its innovative program.”

Lineate also provides scholarship programs for Free University and Kutaisi International University students. Tsikolia says the company welcomes the Georgian government’s efforts to increase the local talent pool in the IT sector, including the 5000 IT Specialist Training Program, and was the first foreign company to receive the FDI grant, a government incentive for foreign investors implemented by Enterprise Georgia. Tsikolia tells us the company is also actively working with international donors, including USAID, to expand the IT labor market in Georgia.

In 2023, Lineate supported the Grace Hopper Award Program, recognizing girls and women in the Georgian ICT industry, a program which highlights organizations and initiatives that promote women’s participation in the ICT sector.

“We are also actively supporting local

tech events, including hackathons, boot camps, and meetups, to connect with the local community and promote innovation in the industry,” Tsikolia says. “The company understands the importance of engaging with the local community, supporting social causes, and contributing to the economic development of Georgia through its operations in the country.”

Lineate and the US Embassy in Georgia also support the local Public School at Odzisi village near the administrative borderline. Lineate is committed to supporting the development of the next generation of tech leaders in Odzisi School by providing the students with access to knowledge, modern technology, and coaching.

“We are committed to being responsible corporate citizens, contributing to our communities’ economic development and social well-being,” Tsikolia notes. “To achieve this goal, Lineate has implemented a comprehensive CSR program that includes job creation, partnerships with local businesses, and investment in the local community. This dedication and commitment to positive change were crucial in my decision to join the company, leaving behind a successful diplomatic career.”

“Today, as a critical player in the Georgian tech ecosystem, we are dedicated to promoting innovation and supporting local talent. We will actively participate in regional events and initiatives to help foster a thriving tech community in Georgia. By doing so, Lineate hopes to contribute to the growth and success of the Georgian tech industry for years to come.”

Terabank Publishes Growing Results for Small and Medium Business in 2023



TERABANK PUBLISHES 2023 RESULTS FOR SMALL AND MEDIUM BUSINESSES

☎ 255 0000 | terabank.ge

Terabank presented a comprehensive overview of its financial achievements in 2023, focusing on the strategic sector of small and medium-sized businesses. Notably, the bank continued its tradition of exhibiting positive trends in the small and medium business client segment with a 25% increase in the credit portfolio and an 8% rise in the deposit portfolio as compared to 2022. The number of business clients also surged by an impressive 22%.

Throughout 2023, Terabank provided financial support to thousands of businesses across various sectors, notably in production, trade, education, and tourism, thereby significantly contributing to the country’s economic development.

Of particular significance is Terabank’s ongoing collaboration with state financing programs evidenced by its substantial 20% share in loans issued by the Enterprise Georgia agency. The success of these partnerships was bolstered by the introduction of new products, spe-

cifically preferential Start-up business and agricultural loans, designed explicitly for state financing programs. Noteworthy is the issuance of a total of GEL 6 million in start-up business and agricultural loans in 2023 with the project continuing to date.

In 2023, Terabank introduced another crucial product for small and medium-sized businesses - Tera Leasing. Developed in collaboration with Bizon.ge, this offering empowers entrepreneurs by providing them with the opportunity to

purchase, lease and rent machinery and equipment tailored to their specific needs. Tera Leasing enhances access to essential business resources, facilitates enterprise retooling and brings businesses closer to modern standards.

Terabank continued its commitment to offering innovative, convenient, and flexible services to business clients. In pursuit of this objective, the bank became the first in Georgia to launch the Visa B2B Connect international settlement platform in 2023. This platform enables any business client to utilize cutting-edge, non-card-based, bank-to-bank messaging and settlement services, facilitating fast, secure, and flexible international payments in 107 countries.

Furthermore, Terabank implemented additional innovative initiatives to promote the development of small and medium-sized businesses over the course of 2023. The business digitization platform, Saasargeblo.ge, was specifically created for this segment, acting as a guide for business representatives. It aids in the seamless implementation of digitalization, introduces digital and innovative solutions, and enhances business processes with reduced costs and increased efficiency. Saasargeblo.ge hosted 2 B2B meetings in its inaugural year and is actively contributing to the development of the SaaS ecosystem with a memorandum of cooperation signed between Terabank and the Georgian Innovation and Technology Agency.

To further support businesses, Terabank initiated collaborations with international financial institutions, including the NASIRA guarantee program of the Development Bank of the Netherlands (FMO). This marked the first involvement from Georgia in this program with the program aiming to increase financial access for

micro, small and medium businesses in the country. Supported by the European Union and the government of the Netherlands, NASIRA will assist Terabank in expanding lending to these enterprises with a particular focus on small farmers, women entrepreneurs and young entrepreneurs facing challenges in accessing finance. Additionally, Terabank’s commitment to fostering entrepreneurship is evident through its support of the Social Impact Award, an international program organized by Impact Hub Tbilisi. This initiative provides education and mentorship to young entrepreneurs in the field of social entrepreneurship.

In recognition of its outstanding contributions, Terabank’s business support initiatives received acclaim in 2023. The Tera Online Catalog for 100 Georgian Businesses project was honored at the Meliora 2022 competition of responsible business in Georgia, specifically in the category of “Conscientious Activity in the Market.” This initiative effectively supported and showcased the products and services of 100 Georgian small and medium-sized businesses through an online catalog on Facebook and Terabank’s website, facilitating easy access and contact for interested individuals.

On the global stage, Terabank received the Fastest Growing SME Bank Georgia 2023 award from the prestigious British publication Global Banking & Finance Review. Another important step taken by Terabank last year was the development of a new MSME strategy in collaboration with the European Investment Bank (EIB). This strategic initiative, aimed at enhancing competitiveness and fostering the development of the MSME sector, will continue to unfold with the implementation of innovative products and services in the coming year.

Homo Sapiens & the Technogenic Environment

OP-ED NUGZAR B. RUHADZE

The ever worsening environmental contamination in the XXI century has become the number one world problem, affecting everyone's body and social existence – this is the way the book 'Homo Sapiens & the Technogenic Environment' starts, enticing the reader with all the power of a breathtaking science fiction novel, although the work is in actual fact deep, scientific research into the precarious issue facing our global ecology. The authors of the edition, Prof. Giorgi Kvesitadze (in the very recent past, the longtime president of the Georgian National Academy of Sciences) and Dr. Alexander Potemkin (Hamburg, Germany), pose a question that is central to the field: What happens to the highly hazardous and huge amount of toxic compounds that we dump into nature, nature being the still predominant power for decontaminating the planet from this increasing toxicity? The professional, complicated and humanely thoughtful answer to this scary question is provided within the 200 pages of this big-format, album-size, thick-cover book, meaningfully titled 'Homo Sapiens & the Technogenic Environment', recently presented to the world for serious meditation on one of the most bothersome of global problems by the famous Piko Valanda Publishing House.

Our technogenic environment does not recognize the zealously protected



On June 9, 2023, the Technical University of Georgia organized a presentation of the new works of Academician Giorgi Kvesitadze and Alexander Potemkin. Source: science.org

national borders and the misgivings of international politics. The ecological contaminants cover the entire planet. In the past, the picture was radically different, but today, as the authors emphasize, the ecological situation has dramatically changed. Based on certain available calculations, they argue that, on a global scale, up to one billion tons of chemicals are produced annually for our various needs, among them pesticides, mineral and organic fertilizers, paints and varnishes, solvents and emulsifiers, saying nothing of petroleum,

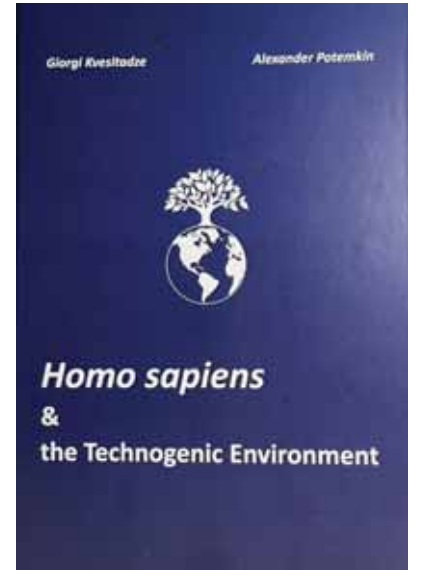
pharmaceutical products and explosives - and the amount is on the rise! Science warns us that all these products are toxic, and yet it seems a plain heads-up doesn't have the effect it should, because Mankind continues on with its accelerated urbanization, unpredictable industrial growth, speedy transportation development still heavily dependent on internal combustion, and with its arms race and egregious warmongering.

Another question that is becoming a global problem, and the authors are acutely concerned about it, is: What can

be done to minimize pollution and prolong humankind's existence by providing at least the minimum of drinkable water, edible food and breathable air? The only imaginable viable answer to the question posed by Kvesitadze and Potemkin is that global society has to make a deliberately organized effort to turn its undivided attention to nature, and seek to copy and intensify all-natural biological processes. They insist this process be based on selectively chosen active microorganisms and plants which increase the ecological power to eliminate the deadly chemical toxicity from our air, water and soil. The book is an indispensable environmental guide, one which should be a desk reference for anybody in the world who thinks that it is high time for all of this planet's dwellers to pull together their act and start seriously thinking about the need for a more reasonable treatment of nature. And unless we do it without any further irrational delay, we will find ourselves in trouble, equal to catastrophe.

This valuable book might have escaped our attention had it not been authored by our famous countryman Giorgi Kvesitadze, whose contribution to the world's chemical and biological science is immense, and it is a book that is highly appreciated by global scientific circles, his word being one of the significant scientific factors that determines contemporary technogenic developments.

I will once again borrow an excerpt from this vital book to use as the most logical conclusion to this emotional piece: "Friendly-to-nature biological technolo-



The published book. Source: science.org
gies, based on natural transformations, are more efficient than all known modern chemical, physical, and ecological technologies, but so far, no-one has even tried to change the modern human logic and philosophy of life so as to direct it to milder forms of environmental management, never forgetting the famous universal motto: 'Everything for Man.' The caring-about-humanity authors are sincerely worried that humanity has chosen the wrong track in its treatment of the planet's natural assets. I hate to think that 'Everything against Man' might be truer, unless we pick up courage and patience, and start thinking and acting as Mother Nature expects us to.

Parki Ar Minda Reviews a Successful, Environmentally-Friendly 2023



BY KATIE RUTH DAVIES

The year 2023 was full of events, achievements and challenges, -Parki Ar Minda announced on social media this week. "We passed an important milestone for us by collecting more than 100 tons of waste for recycling-107.8 to be exact, not counting e-waste and small elements like corks, etc."

In this amount were: 30 tons of plastic (with PET making up about 85%), 19.4 tons of paper and cardboard, 1.8 tons of aluminum, and 3.1 tons of tin.

"Each of these numbers represent resources saved and given to recycling



facilities to develop a circular economy," the organization notes. "For example, recycling 1 ton of paper saves 17 trees, 24.5 cubic meters in the landfill and two barrels of oil- enough to drive almost 2000 km."

Their Eco-taxi client base continued to grow throughout the year, within the first nine months collecting 10 tons of waste. Georgia generates 900,000 tons of waste annually, and only 5% is recycled. Wanting to increase this number, Parki Ar Minda began offering a door-pick up service that allows businesses and individuals to have their recyclable waste taken away. The service charges per stop, not per person, so as to encourage people to collaborate with their neighbors.

"We were happy to see more businesses

joining responsible waste management practices and collaborating with us not only in waste collection but also in educational activities," the organization says.

In total, Parki Ar Minda picked up waste via Eco-taxi 2332 times. The number of rides and amount of waste collected through their services in 2023 grew 1.5 times compared to the previous year.

"Thanks to the support of Garage IT Company, in April 2023 we opened our third Garage, widening the geography of drop-off possibilities to the Chughureti neighborhood," they said.

17,128 people visited their Garages overall during 2023, some repeatedly, some just once or twice, a number four times higher than in 2022!

"We think it is totally amazing and definitely a reason to continue our work," the Parki Ar Minda team stated. "All these visits were possible thanks to the support and dedication of our volunteer team that grew to 70 people already! Together, they did 1031 shifts totaling 1650.5 working hours!"

In recognition of the organization's efforts and the importance of the project Eco-taxi (including Garages), Parki Ar Minda received a prestigious international

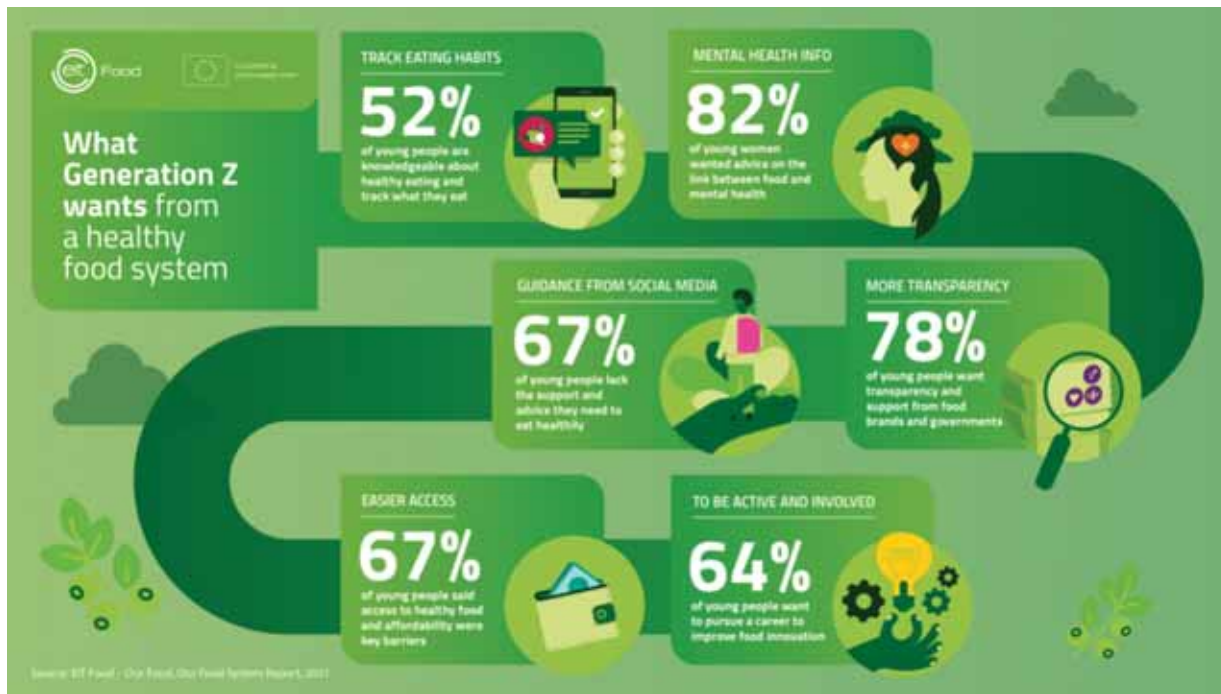
Energy Globe Award in sustainability. They were also nominated for the CSR Award organized by the Global Compact Network in Georgia, and were recognized by the Plant Based Treaty Georgia team.

"Yet, with all these great numbers and achievements, 2023 was tough on the recycling industry, and we all felt the struggles. For example, a local cardboard recycler with whom we started working early in the year closed their factory after just a few months because they couldn't compete with cheap imported paper products. In general, the prices for secondary materials have been decreasing around the world, has which resulted in the reduction of income from waste sales.

"While residents of Tbilisi are more and more concerned with the situation with waste and are eager to recycle their waste, the economic situation in the recycling sector restricts the development not only of our project but the infrastructure in general," the Parki Ar Minda team notes. "However, we believe that these are temporary downfalls which will soon pass. We continue to work to offer the possibility to recycle the widest range of waste types and our goal is to make it even more comfortable for you!"



Vegan Georgia Promotes Plant-Based Dining in Georgia's Universities



BY KATIE RUTH DAVIES

With over 235 million students enrolled in higher education worldwide, and tens of millions of faculty and staff working at these institutions, universities and colleges are key food providers.

In 2018, the world's biggest food production analysis, conducted at the University of Oxford, concluded that rejecting resource-intensive and pollutive animal agriculture, and adopting a plant-based diet, was the best way a person could reduce their carbon footprint. Gen Z (born between 1997 and 2012), which makes up around 25% of the planet's population, and which is the biggest demographic group right now, is known to be the most enthusiastic about plant-based foods. A University of Massachusetts dining survey found that students are asking for more plant-based menu items, including burgers, sausages and pizzas, while plant-based breakfast options were found to be popular among both the vegan and omnivore student diners.

Among the suggested solutions for universities seeking to reduce their students' carbon footprint are:

- Replacing the meat options on the menu with plant based ones - simple ingredient swaps that will not affect quality, taste, or cost;
- Introducing new plant based options on the menu;
- Organizing an alternative catering service for those students who prefer plant based dishes, through collaboration with vegan venues/producers and delivery companies;
- Encouraging other institutions to follow the changes by providing media and social media support to the campaign.

Good examples of the global push towards plant based menus in universities include the 2011 announcement by the University of North Texas that it was opening the first all-vegan dining hall in history, embracing not only the students of UNT but many other residents of the area; in 2021, the authorities of Berlin launched a program to reduce carbon footprints by implementing plant based foods in its university canteens with 68% vegan, 28% vegetarian and only 4% of meat and fish dishes; the Plant Based University campaign, launched in the UK in 2021, announced its goal to move towards 100% plant based menu in cafeterias by 2025; in 2022, all public schools in New York launched Vegan Fridays, which means that every Friday 930,000 students are served plant based meals, and the same year, the government of California invested \$700 million in plant

based school meals. Further, on January 23 this year, Odd Burger, Canada's first 100% vegan fast food joint, opened at Western University - the first of its kind on a Canadian campus.

Last year, Vegan Georgia started its own university menu veganization campaign, called "Future Food". Its main goal is to veganize the menus in all university canteens of Georgia, then those of kindergartens and other institutions. So far, they have given presentations in a number of Tbilisi universities, run food giveaways, and sought to spread information about veganism and its importance.

To find out more, GEORGIA TODAY spoke to Nini Turashvili, President of Vegan Georgia, and her colleague, Oleg. "On December 5 and 7, we held two events in front of Tbilisi State University and Ilia State University," Nini tells us. "Our primary goal was to collect signatures to give to the rectors of the universities, to push for the addition of more plant based options on the canteen menus. Besides collecting signatures, we handed out flyers in Geo/Eng about the Future Food campaign, its advantages, and the importance of plant based food. We also gave out free vegan sushi for students to get perhaps their first taste of delicious cruelty-free alternatives."

WHY DO YOU SEE IT AS IMPORTANT TO VEGANIZE UNIVERSITY MENUS?

"Being vegan is a moral-ethical minimum, which is the only way to liberate animals and stop the climate crisis," Nini says. "Eating plant based food is a great chance to take care of our health and the planet in parallel. Veganizing menus in universities means raising awareness about the

need for veganism and helping animals and the planet. In other developed countries, there are rapidly rising statistics on the veganization of different institutions, which ultimately leads to the future we want to achieve."

"We came up with this campaign following the worldwide trend and being inspired by the amazing results of our foreign comrades who were extremely kind to share their experience and materials on the topic," Oleg adds.

WHAT HAS THE FUTURE FOOD CAMPAIGN ACHIEVED SO FAR?

"We launched this campaign at the end of spring, too close to the end of the semester, and then couldn't get back to it until October, when the classes in the universities started up again, so we haven't had much time for active events yet," Oleg says, "but we are already collaborating closely with the Medical Academy, whose eco-club does incredible work supporting the campaign. We also found a fantastic vegan chef for the campaign, who is elaborating some awesome plant based meals for the university menus. We had those food giveaways Nini mentioned, and we also conducted a survey among the students of the Medical Academy and were absolutely stunned by the results: 60% of the respondents would like to try new plant based options, and more than 40% would visit the university canteen more often if there were more plant based options on the menu. In other words, we are very excited with the campaign and its foreseeable outcomes!"

"Menu veganization should happen in every institution," Nini says. "But starting the process in the universities is an efficient start. In future, we plan to cover

not only universities, but also schools, kindergartens and more."

WHAT CHALLENGES ARE THERE IN GEORGIA FOR SUCH VEGANIZATION?

"The main challenge is the social-cultural background in Georgia," Nini tells us. "Some people don't have enough information about veganism or its meaning connected to animal freedom, climate crisis and health. Also, the food alternatives we are trying to suggest need to be more affordable. Unfortunately, in Georgia, unlike in other European countries, imported vegan food alternatives are higher in price than non-vegan. Luckily, though, we have tons of other delicious vegan food in Georgia, which is affordable and healthy, and so we are focusing on these alternatives."

"It's not that easy to approach universities, especially in terms of their canteens, if you don't have strong support from at least one student attending that university, because the changes we are suggesting cannot be brought in from the outside - there should be an internal initiative, which Vegan Georgia then assists with," Oleg says. "So, we highly encourage all the students who are reading this, and who would like have this campaign launched in their university, to contact us. It won't be a complicated or challenging task to help us start the campaign, but without your support we won't be able to put it together to kick it off!"

"It is important to do, because we see the students as our priority audience, the hope and the future," he concludes.

WHAT SUPPORT DOES VEGAN GEORGIA OFFER UNIVERSITIES WANTING TO TAKE PART IN THE FUTURE FOOD CAMPAIGN?

"The Vegan Georgia Future Food campaign involves supporting students' initiatives to include plant based dishes on the menus of their universities; providing all guides and theoretical materials that can be helpful to implement these changes; providing the help of a professional chef who will be happy to make culinary workshops and presentations for the cooks of the local canteens; organizing events connected with the launch of the plant based options on the menus of the universities; and providing media and social news concerning the positive changes to the menus," Nini outlines.

"Our chefs can offer a lot of healthy, filling and environmentally friendly plant based dishes for the canteen or buffet menu, even for vending machines," she adds. "Some of our suggestions are Seitan Burgers served with mashed potato and green salad; Tofu Sandwich; Tofu Casserole; Soya and Mushroom Dump-

The UN FAO estimate that 10 million hectares of forest are cut down each year.

Livestock takes up nearly 80% of global agricultural land, yet produces less than 20% of the world's supply of calories.

Today, animal agriculture:

- uses ~83% of the world's farmland;
- provides only 37% of our protein and 18% of our calories;
- contributes 56 to 58% of food's different emissions;

- livestock emissions from manure and gastroenteric releases account for roughly 32% of human-caused methane emissions;

- is a chief driver of deforestation and the loss of biodiversity (~69% since 1970);

- is a major cause of pandemics, including SARS, Swine Flu, and the Spanish Flu;

- is responsible for the abuse and slaughter of 88 billion farm animals per year.

lings; Falafel served with rice and aubergine salad; lentil, carrot, chickpea, tomato, pumpkin and other vegetable soups; and pastries such as apple pie, pancakes with cherry jam, and buns with lemon stuffing."

SO, WHY GO PLANT BASED?

It's eco-friendly, it's healthy, it's tasty! Animal agriculture and the production of animal products bring great damage to the planet, causing air, water and land pollution. Besides, nowadays, most nutritionists agree that at least decreasing of consumption of animal products is recommended, as it leads to fewer diseases and disorders. What's more, it's kind-the compassionate treatment of animals is a world trend of the 21st century, and is among the reasons for plant based meals' growing popularity being reflected in legislation, economic and social changes.

ABOUT VEGAN GEORGIA

Vegan Georgia was founded in 2015 as the first and so far the only NGO in Georgia aimed at protecting farm animals and other representatives of the animal kingdom, regardless of species. They see their main goals in: Educating others on plant based nutrition and fundamental animal rights, confronting unethical industries, enterprises and practices, legislative work and legal support for animal protection and initiatives, and supporting plant based venues, initiatives and events.

For more information or to sign on to the Vegan Georgia campaigns, contact Nini Turashvili at nini.turashvili@vegangeorgia.org and check out vegangeorgia.org.



The Symbol of Freedom

BLOG BY TONY HANMER

The Symbol of Freedom is the name of a new exhibition at Corner House Coffee/Caucasus Culture Exchange (details below) which opened a few days ago. I was able to attend the opening evening, which saw a lot of guests, and also to conduct an interview with the person who set it up, Mariat Abdulkhmidova, a member of crisis group "Marem," which helps women of the North Caucasus who suffer from domestic violence.

"I have eight cousins in Dagestan; they are beautiful girls of different ages, all born into loving families. But my heart breaks when I imagine girls who face violence on a daily basis. And it is very important to talk about it," Mariat says.

HOW DID IT HAPPEN THAT YOU CONNECTED WITH THE CAUCASUS CULTURE EXCHANGE AND ARRANGED THIS EXHIBITION?

"Last summer, I was working on another exhibition project in Georgia, and at the same time, the first exhibition of



Giovannino Gabadze opened at CCE," she says. "I loved the space, and as soon as we started discussing the exhibition, I was one hundred percent sure that we should show it here. It was important to me that our values coincided. I wrote to Michelle Gagnon [gallery curator] and we agreed pretty quickly about setting up the show, for which I am very grateful. Then I found out that Eli Moyer [gallery owner] had earlier

spent a lot of time in Dagestan.

WHAT DO YOU HOPE VIEWERS WILL TAKE AWAY FROM THE EXHIBITION?

"Above all, I want people to know that they have somewhere to go for help if they need it.

"After the opening, we discussed the exhibition a lot with my friends from the North Caucasus. I wouldn't want viewers

to come away from the exhibition thinking that the North Caucasus is a center of domestic violence. But this is indeed one of the big and important problems that I hope we can solve in the future.

"The exhibition features a number of iPad screens, each showing a different animated video in Russian with English subtitles. Viewers can listen to each video's narration on headphones if they wish, or simply watch and read the subtitles. The gallery is also "decorated" with symbols of the situations depicted in the videos, such as a bedroom scene and an item of women's clothing," Mariat tells us.

These are harrowing and very moving stories of violence against women in Dagestan—not a problem unique to Dagestan, but nevertheless highlighted here. The show is open Feb. 2, 3 and 6, from 11am to 7pm, so get it while it lasts! Note, this exhibition is not recommended for under 16s.

GALLERY DETAILS

109 David Aghmashenebeli Avenue, Tbilisi, 2nd floor (-10 minutes' walk from Marjanishvili metro towards Dinamo Stadium)

<https://www.facebook.com/caucasuscultureexchange>

https://www.instagram.com/marem_group/ Assistance to women from

the North Caucasus; psychological & legal support, evacuation; email: support@maremgroup.com

WHERE TO GO FOR HELP IN GEORGIA

Hotline for victims of domestic violence: 116006 (24/7, free, anonymous, in eight languages)

Sapari—legal, social and psychological assistance. Tel. 032 230-7603, email unionsapari@gmail.com

Rights Georgia—general legal assistance. Tel. 032 299-8856, for help in gender-based and domestic violence: Tel. 577 541655, email office@rights.ge

The Human Rights Center—legal assistance. Tel. 032 237-6950, 032 238-4648, email hrc@hrc.ge

Partnership for Human Rights—strategic litigation in cases of violence against women. Tel. 032 233-1356, email info@phr.ge

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.svaneti

"From Life to Life" Wins Best European Film Award at the Chandler International Film Festival

BY TEAM GT

Directed by Beka Sikharulidze and starring Givi Sikharulidze, Beka Sikharulidze, Nino Kuratashvili, Ia Shugliashvili and Roman Gventsadze (and with a 30-second scene featuring Georgia Today's own editor-in-chief Katie Ruth Davies!), "From Life to Life" received three nominations at the eighth annual festival on January 19-28, in Chandler, Arizona (Best European Film, Best International Feature, Best Actor), before being named the Best European Film 2024.

The story is set in 1990s Georgia, after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Luka is a surgical doctor, who saves lives, but struggles to adapt to the ruthless and corrupt new system and by all available means tries to stay loyal to his profession. However, eventually he has to make a choice between his family and the lives of others, which leads to irreversible consequences.

The Chandler International Film Festival (CIFF) began in 2016 with a simple idea to share international films in a local setting. CIFF is proudly located in Chandler, Arizona and is one of the fastest-growing film festivals in Arizona. The festival is dedicated to uniting the community through the film—whether you're a filmmaker or a casual viewer there is something for everyone.

CIFF 2024 showcased over 120 films submitted from all over the world, spanning six continents and 35 countries.

GEORGIA TODAY got in touch with director of the film Beka Sikharulidze to find out more about the win and the film itself.

HOW DO YOU FEEL WINNING THIS PRIZE?

"From Life to Life" was representing our country Georgia at the Chandler International Film Festival in the US, and I feel absolutely thrilled and honored to have won the best European Film Award! It's a surreal and humbling experience to see our hard work and dedication recognized by such a prestigious event. This award means a lot to me and the entire team who poured their passion into bringing this project to life. I'm grateful for the opportunity to showcase our film and am genuinely touched by the positive reception it has received. This recognition motivates us to continue pushing boundaries and telling meaningful stories through the art of filmmaking.

WHAT WAS YOUR GOAL IN MAKING "FROM LIFE TO LIFE"?

We wanted to create a thought-provoking piece that not only entertains but also prompts the audience to reflect on and inspiring story. Throughout the film-making process, we carefully crafted characters and narratives that embody resilience, determination, and the triumph of the human spirit. We wanted



viewers to connect with the characters on a deep, emotional level.

Our goal was to make a cross-cultural film which would inspire younger generations through a story about humanity, professionalism, love, care, family values, dignity and more.

WHAT CHALLENGES DID YOU FACE IN MAKING IT/GETTING IT OUT INTO THE WORLD?

The journey of creating and bringing "From Life to Life" to the world was marked by a multitude of challenges. Foremost among them was the financial aspect, particularly in the case of co-producing, which necessitated numerous adjustments, including filming in English language with foreign actors despite it

being a story deeply rooted in Georgia. Due to this conflict, my wife and I decided to sell our Los Angeles home, my residence for many years, to finance the project independently.

One of the most significant obstacles encountered during production was location scouting. Set in 1990s Georgia, primarily in hospitals, the task of finding existing facilities with the appropriate vintage inventory and decorations proved immensely challenging. One of our key hospital locations was demolished just days after our shoot.

Once the film was completed, the challenge shifted to getting it out into the world. Navigating the competitive landscape of the film industry posed additional difficulties. We worked tirelessly

to find the right platforms that aligned with our vision for the film. We had to strategize to make our film stand out and connect with the target audience.

Despite these challenges, our unwavering passion and commitment to our first feature film prevailed. Each obstacle transformed into an opportunity for growth and learning. We take pride in having surmounted these hurdles and are enthusiastic about sharing our film with audiences.

This is our 6th win for "From Life to Life" since embarking on a festival journey in September 2023, and it has received five nominations to far.

WHAT'S NEXT FOR "FROM LIFE TO LIFE," AND YOU?

As "From Life to Life" continues to receive acclaim with multiple wins and nominations, our focus shifts towards broader distribution and reaching a wider audience by actively exploring further international film festivals to ensure the film's accessibility. The film has been submitted to more film festivals, and we hope 2024 will mark a successful global journey for our project. The premier in our native Georgia is also planned this year.

As for future projects, we are in the early stages of developing a couple of new and exciting endeavors. The experience gained from this film has fueled our creativity, and we're eager to embark on fresh storytelling journeys. Stay tuned for more from our team at Beka Film Productions, as we navigate the next chapter in our cinematic journey!

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CAR RENTAL



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Mercedes Viano



50\$

Mercedes Sprinter



70\$

From Dreams to Metal - Alexandra's Artistic Alchemy in 'INVOLUTIONS'

BY KESARIA KATCHARAVA

Young French artist Alexandra Pavlovskaya-Lokchine, currently pursuing her craft at the Royal Academy of Arts in The Hague, Netherlands, unveils her versatile force through the exhibition "INVOLUTIONS," gracing the walls of Vere Gallery in Tbilisi, Georgia, from January 30 to February 3, 2024. In an intimate conversation, Alexandra shares insights into her creative process, from the intricate printmaking techniques she employs to the emotions and mysteries she seeks to evoke in her audience.

METAPHYSICAL INSPIRATIONS

The genesis of "INVOLUTIONS" lies in Alexandra's insatiable curiosity for the non-real and the imaginative. Immersed in the captivating narratives of literature and entranced by the deliberate, unhurried pace of cinematic masterpieces like those crafted by Bela Tarr and Andrei Tarkovsky, Alexandra articulates her artistic vision, saying, "I always try to show something ungraspable, something which is not visible in general, or something which doesn't exist." This quest for the intangible becomes the guiding force behind her exploration of the subconscious mind, fostering a unique perception of the world that transcends the confines of conventional reality.

PRINTMAKING TECHNIQUES

The etchings primarily featured in this exhibition undergo a meticulous and time-consuming process that involves the delicate manipulation of metal plates. As Alexandra says, "You lose yourself a bit. You lose the perception of time, and your hands already know what to do, and it becomes a part of your movement, part of your body and mind."

Using metal plates, predominantly zinc, she embarks on a journey that demands both patience and precision. The artist meticulously polishes the plate, a reflective act mirroring the reflective surface it will soon bear. Delicate manipulation and shaping follow, where the plate becomes a canvas for Alexandra's imagination. As Alexandra delves into the intricate dance of printmaking, she immerses herself in the alchemy of creation. The etching plate, now prepared, is grounded and introduced to the transformative embrace of acid. It is in this chemical embrace that her vision takes form, etched into the very essence of the metal. Through the delicate dance of a needle on metal, Alexandra breathes life into her creations, each stroke a testament to her artistic vision.

The hours invested in the creation of a single etching become an immersive experience for Alexandra. The repetitive yet intricate steps in the process allow her to lose herself, transcending the boundaries of time and space. As she passionately describes, the hands become an extension of her thought, seamlessly translating the ethereal into the tangible. This intimate connection with the material transforms the act of creation into a symphony of time and movement. Printmaking, for Alexandra, is not merely



a technique but a personal journey. Working alone in a workshop, she forges a deep connection with the material. The solitude becomes a canvas for self-discovery, where hands instinctively navigate the plate, and the artist becomes one with her creation. The act of printmaking ceases to be a mechanical process; it becomes an intimate conversation between the artist, the material, and the envisioned artistry.

SPATIAL AND GEOMETRIC EXPLORATION

"INVOLUTIONS" is not a static visual encounter but a dynamic journey through space. Alexandra's etchings, bathed in compelling light and stark contrast, invite viewers to embark on a profound exploration. Drawing inspiration from classical masters like Goya and Durer, as well as contemporary artists like Anthony Tapies, Alexandra skillfully integrates geometric shapes with abstract elements. "It's like a journey in space. I'm interested in incorporating geometrical shapes and at the same time, some abstract stuff, and I try to combine them all together."

EMOTIONS AND MYSTERIES

Beyond the visual spectacle lies an emotional depth, as Alexandra aims to evoke feelings of mystery, darkness, and a sense of the forgotten. "For me, it's always about some kind of mystery, darkness, and maybe something forgotten, like the feeling of forgotten, which never existed." Her acknowledgment of the subjectivity of art emphasizes the viewer's role in interpreting and experiencing the enigmatic quality of her creations. Darkness, a recurring theme in her work, is not merely an absence of light but a catalyst for introspection. It serves as a metaphorical canvas where emotions can be explored without the constraints of explicit definition. The shadows within Alexandra's art become an invitation to

reflect on the darker corners of human experience, a journey into the emotional recesses often left unexplored.

Central to her artistic philosophy is the concept of the forgotten, a feeling she infuses into her creations. This sentiment, she suggests, is not rooted in historical or tangible events but in the elusive and subjective realm of emotions. The feeling of forgotten takes on an ethereal quality, hovering between existence and non-existence, inviting viewers to confront the intangible aspects of their own memories and emotions. Her acknowledgment of the subjectivity of art underscores the unique relationship between the artwork and its observer. Alexandra recognizes that each viewer brings their own subjective lens to the experience, interpreting and experiencing the enigmatic quality of her creations in a deeply personal manner. In this acknowledgment, she grants agency to the audience, allowing them to become active participants in unraveling the emotional tapestry she has woven.

COLLABORATION WITH REACH ART VISUAL

The collaboration between Alexandra and Vere Gallery unfolds as a symbiotic dance, a harmonious union that brought "INVOLUTIONS" to life. Alexandra expresses gratitude for the opportunity to showcase her work in her first solo exhibition, underscoring the importance of initiatives that champion emerging talents. "I'm really happy that it had happened because it's my first solo show, and I never showed my work anywhere. It's really impressive that people believe in young artists, especially when you're still studying."

EDUCATIONAL JOURNEY AND FUTURE ASPIRATIONS

Amidst the creative fervor of Alexandra's artistic endeavors, her current

aligns seamlessly with Alexandra's multifaceted artistic approach. Reflecting on her educational trajectory, she articulates, "I genuinely find enjoyment in my school. We have access to numerous facilities, and it's highly receptive to any experimental endeavors. Currently, I am engaged in various forms of expression, including experimental paintings and videos. I also have plans to explore installations in space. So, for me, it marks a promising beginning." Her experience unfolds as a delicate balance between structured learning and the freedom to carve her artistic path. As she navigates the corridors of academia, Alexandra contemplates future aspirations, hinting at a potential exchange program in Paris, a city where her half-French roots lie unexplored.

"INVOLUTIONS," a profound exploration into the unknown. Beyond an exhibition, it unfolds as a poetic journey through layers of inspiration, meticulous craft, and emotional resonance. Alexandra's work stands as an ode to the limitless possibilities of art, inviting viewers to traverse the metaphysical, where imagination and emotion converge in an ever-evolving dance with the mysteries of existence. The exhibition becomes a mirror reflecting the subtle nuances of human sentiment, where each piece becomes a vessel carrying the weight of unspoken emotions and forgotten memories. "INVOLUTIONS" is not merely an exhibition; it is an immersive experience, a profound exploration of the infinite.



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