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## MP Maka Botchorishvili on the "Foreign Agents" Bill and Georgia's Chances at EU Integration under Georgian Dream Leadership

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW BY EREKLE POLADISHVILI

**M**aka Botchorishvili, Georgian Dream MP and Chairperson of the Committee on European Integration, sat down with GEORGIA TODAY to discuss the widely contested "Foreign Agents" law (Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence) and what it means to her party and for Georgia's future. The interview has been redacted for clarity.

**THERE WAS NEITHER REQUEST FROM THE EU NOR A PUBLIC DEMAND BACKED UP WITH REFERENDUM RESULTS FOR THIS LAW. WHO OR WHAT MADE YOU THINK THERE WAS A NEED FOR IT?**

First, we have to look at the decision-making process in Georgia and the role of non-governmental and civil society organizations. There are over 20,000 such organizations registered in Georgia and they are part of our political life. One of the EU's recommendations also relates to enhanced civil society engagement in decision-making process.

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Georgian Dream MP Maka Botchorishvili

Markets						
As of 07-May-2024						
	Price	w/w	m/m			
<b>BONDS</b>						
GRAIL 07/28	90.20 (YTM 6.77%)	+0.2%	-0.5%	Crude Oil, Brent (US\$/bbl)	83.16	-5.3%
SILNET 01/27	101.07 (YTM 7.92%)	-0.1%	-0.2%	Gold Spot (US\$/OZ)	2,314.10	+1.2%
TBC 06/24	99.89 (YTM 6.61%)	+0.0%	+0.1%			
<b>CURRENCIES</b>						
<b>STOCKS</b>						
Bank of Georgia (BGE LN)	GBP 46.80	-13.0%	-8.6%	GEL / USD	2,6793	+0.0%
Georgia Capital (CGEO LN)	GBP 11.50	-15.7%	-12.2%	GEL / EUR	2,8817	+0.8%
TBC Bank Group (TBCG LN)	GBP 28.80	-16.8%	-9.7%	GEL / GBP	3,3504	+0.1%
				GEL / CHF	2,9457	+1.0%
				RUB / USD	0,0293	+2.1%
				GEL / TRY	0,0829	+0.2%
				GEL / AZN	1,5752	+0.3%
<b>INDICES</b>						
FTSE 100	8,313.67	+2.1%	+5.1%	GEL / AMD	0,0069	-0.1%
FTSE 250	20,413.08	+2.2%	+3.5%	GEL / UAH	0,0682	-0.9%
DAX	18,430.05	+2.8%	+1.4%	EUR / USD	0,9298	-0.8%
DOW JONES	38,884.26	+2.8%	-0.1%	GBP / USD	0,7994	-1.2%
NASDAQ	16,332.56	+4.3%	+0.5%	CHF / USD	0,9084	-1.2%
MSCI EM EE	47.45	+3.3%	+2.3%	RUB / USD	91,5488	-2.0%
MSCI EM	1,068.26	+2.1%	+2.2%	TRY / USD	32,2652	-0.5%
SP 500	5,187.70	+3.0%	-0.3%	AZN / USD	1,6998	-
MSCI FM	2,323.40	+1.2%	-1.1%	AMD / USD	388,2500	-0.0%



# Ukraine Latest: Kremlin Warns of 'Huge Danger' if NATO Troops are Sent to Ukraine

COMPILED BY ANA DUMBADZE

**T**he Kremlin doubled down on warning that any deployment of NATO troops in Ukraine would represent a significant and dangerous escalation of tensions between Russia and the military alliance.

When asked to comment on a petition posted on the Ukrainian presidential website Tuesday calling for NATO troops from the US, UK and EU to be sent to Ukraine, Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov told reporters that such a move posed a "huge danger."

Earlier Wednesday, Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova told reporters French troops will be targeted by the Russian army if they are deployed on Ukrainian soil.

In other news, Russia used more than 50 missiles and 20 drones to attack Ukraine's infrastructure overnight, Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky said Wednesday, with the country's energy network suffering a "massive blow."

DTEK, the largest energy company in Ukraine, said on Telegram that Russia had attacked three of its thermal power plants, causing "another extremely difficult night for the Ukrainian energy industry."

## KYIV TARGETED IN RUSSIAN AIR ATTACK OVERNIGHT, OFFICIALS SAY

Ukraine's military said Wednesday that the capital Kyiv was targeted by Russian missiles overnight.

"The Russians hit Kyiv with Kh-101/Kh-555/Kh-55 cruise missiles, all targets were destroyed by air defense forces, there were no casualties," the military said on Telegram.

Ruslan Kravchenko, the head of Kyiv regional military administration, said on Telegram that Russian forces had attacked the capital with one-way attack drones and cruise missiles. Air raid warnings lasted four hours, he said.

"No hits to residential or critical infra-



US soldiers attend welcoming ceremony for US-led NATO troops near Orzysz, Poland. Source: cyprus-mail.com

structure objects were recorded," he said, although falling debris (as a result of intercepted drones and missiles) injured several people and some residential buildings, he noted.

"Damage to power lines was recorded. One of the villages [in the Kyiv region] is partially without electricity. Energy workers are already working quickly to restore power," he said.

## RUSSIA SAYS IT SEIZED TWO MORE UKRAINIAN VILLAGES

Russian forces claimed Wednesday that they had seized two more villages in the Donetsk and Kharkiv regions.

Russia's defense ministry said its central and western grouping of troops had

occupied Novokalynove in Donetsk, eastern Ukraine, and Kyslivka, in Kharkiv, northeast Ukraine.

The ministry did not provide evidence for its claims, announced on Telegram, although Russian forces have been making incremental advances in eastern Ukraine in recent weeks.

It was widely reported that Russian forces had been looking to try to capture the strategically-valuable town of Chasiv Yar in Donetsk before the May 9 Victory Day military parade in Moscow, but the latest territorial gains, or "liberations" as Russia calls them, are not located near Chasiv Yar. Analysts at the Institute for the Study of War think tank noted Tuesday that "Russian forces continued

assaults near Chasiv Yar on May 7, but there were no confirmed changes to the frontline."

## RUSSIAN STRIKE HITS SCHOOL SPORTS FIELD, INJURES CHILDREN AND ADULTS

A Russian air strike hit a school sports field in Ukraine's city of Kharkiv on Wednesday, injuring multiple children and adults, regional governor Oleh Syniehubov said on Telegram.

Three male teenagers were injured while playing soccer. Syniehubov said, adding that two of them were in a serious condition and had been taken to hospital. A young girl as well as three adults were also injured, some of whom

were also hospitalized, he said.

## RAILWAY STATION IN KHERSON TARGETED, STATE RAIL OPERATOR SAYS

Railway infrastructure in the southern city of Kherson came under fire Wednesday, the state-owned rail operator Ukrzaliznytsia said.

"Ukrzaliznytsia is under the enemy's sights again! On the morning of May 8, the terrorist country attacked the civilian railway infrastructure in Kherson. As a result of enemy strikes, the tracks at the city station were damaged," the railway network said on Telegram.

Railway officials limited the movement of a train on the Kyiv-Kherson route, but said 99 passengers on the affected train were safe. The rest of Ukrzaliznytsia's trains continue to run according to schedule.

Russian officials continue to claim that their armed forces are not targeting civilian infrastructure.

## RUSSIA USED MORE THAN 50 MISSILES AND 20 DRONES IN OVERNIGHT ATTACKS, ZELENSKY SAYS

Russia used dozens of missiles and drones to attack Ukraine's infrastructure overnight, Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky said Wednesday morning.

"More than 50 rockets and more than 20 'shaheds' [drones] were used to hit infrastructure in the Lviv, Vinnytsia, Kyiv, Poltava, Kirovohrad, Zaporizhzhia, and Ivano-Frankivsk regions," Zelensky said on Telegram.

Ukraine's Air Force Commander Lieutenant General Mykola Oleschuk also posted on the social media platform that, overnight, Russian forces had "launched a combined strike with missiles of various types and attack UAVs. In total, the enemy used 76 means of air attack - 55 missiles and 21 attack drones."

"The whole world should clearly understand who is who," Zelensky said.

"The whole world has no right to give Nazism another chance," he said, noting that the latest attack took place on the international Day of Remembrance and Reconciliation commemorating those who died in World War II.

# Georgia to Celebrate First Europe Day with European Union Candidate Status

BY SHELBI R. ANKIEWICZ

**G**eorgia is celebrating its first Europe Day as a candidate of the European Union (EU) on Saturday, May 11, at the Expo Georgia exhibition center in Tbilisi.

Festivities and events have been taking place in Georgia to celebrate Europe Day since 2014. Head of Cooperation with the EU Delegation Nicholas Cendrowicz, who has been working with the European Commission for over 30 years, said that since Georgia was granted candidate status in December of 2023, there will be even bigger things to enjoy at this year's celebration. Last year saw 10K people in attendance - the first time the event was held post-COVID-19, and they expect more people to be interested now that Georgia is progressing toward the EU.

"We have seen the incredible interest that the Georgian people have in the European Union and in joining, and this is an opportunity to learn a little bit about what that is and to meet the people who will make that happen," says Cendrowicz. "We're very clear in saying that Georgia's culture is in the European Union, and that the people who come to the Europe Day events are future EU citizens."

Europe Day will consist of various activities. There will be ambassadors from all the EU member states with embassies in Georgia, who will talk about what they do in the country, how they provide support, and their current projects. Cendrowicz says it's not only the EU that supports Georgia, but the member states as a part of the 'Team Europe' approach. They will speak about their countries and what it meant for them to join the EU, in coordination with the European Investment Bank and the EU Monitoring Mission in Georgia.

There will also be a spot for representatives from projects that have benefited from EU assistance by growing or building their businesses. Here, visitors will be able to speak to entrepreneurs and purchase items from small businesses. Cendrowicz tells us there will also be a new food yard called 'Unique Georgian Taste.' This spot will showcase the businesses that have benefitted from the EU's assistance in the agro-food industry. They will have products and dishes that people can sample.

The day, however, is not only for adults. There will also be various activities for children, including a puppet show called 'Luna and the Planet of Fireflies.'

Europe Day is a publicly observed holiday in Europe and the EU Ambassador to Georgia, Pawel Herczynski, says it's much more than just a day of celebration.

"It is proof of the enormous success of the European project that began in 1950 with Robert Schuman's Declaration that brought peace, democracy, and prosperity to all EU Member States. It is a day when we reflect on our common past and look forward to the future we want to build together," stated Herczynski in a report. "This year the celebration in Tbilisi will underline that the doors to EU membership for Georgia - an EU candidate country - have finally been opened wide. Now it is up to the Georgians to walk through those doors by swiftly implementing the necessary reforms."

The event will have themes throughout, one of them being the elections. Cendrowicz says there are elections throughout the European member countries next month, and Georgia's own elections later this year. He notes there will be fun and educational talks related to this theme, and others.

Europe Day will host several celebrity guest speakers in panel talks moderated by journalist David Gorgiladze. A report regarding the event said the talks will cover many topics, and all will aim to promote a better understanding of the EU's partnership with Georgia.

Concerning the recent rallies and protests against the 'Foreign Agents' law in Georgia, Cendrowicz says they anticipate seeing those who picture Western developments for Georgia.

"We have been moved by the protests



Table set up from Europe Day 2023. Image from EU in Georgia website

in the streets, young people mainly, spontaneously saying they see their future in the EU," Cendrowicz tells GEORGIA TODAY. "Europe Day will not be about those protests, but we're hoping that those who say very clearly that 'Our future is in the EU,' can come and celebrate that with us."

This event is free of charge. Most of the EU delegation and all the EU member states with embassies in Georgia will be in attendance. Businesses from the 130 active projects the EU currently has within the country will also be present. Cendrowicz highlights that the projects and businesses will not only be from those in Tbilisi, but from all around the country, so they can share their stories of how they got to where they are.

Europe Day is celebrated each year on May 9 to remember the political coop-

eration introduced between European countries in 1950. However, this year's event is held on May 11 to allow for a higher attendance number. There are five pavilions and a courtyard at Expo Georgia, that will be arranged accordingly with all the activities and tables for the day. The event will run from 11:00 until 20:00.

Cendrowicz said the EU celebrated 20 years of the largest expansion of countries that joined in 2004 last week. It was a big moment for them to reflect on where they have come from, and where they are headed.

"We do hope and expect larger numbers this year than last. People are saying very clearly that this is where they want to go, maybe they will come to this show of the EU on Europe Day," said Cendrowicz.



# MP Maka Botchorishvili on the "Foreign Agents" Bill and Georgia's Chances at EU Integration under Georgian Dream Leadership

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It's a factor that requires a more transparent approach. The weight of political responsibility of course is on the shoulders of politicians, but as it is in any democratic society, and as we in Georgia also have to take into account the positions of civil society and non-governmental organizations. I believe we have an absolutely legitimate right to know more about them. People and the government should know what the interests are behind these organizations which want to be part of the political process in Georgia. We want to inform our citizens more and protect and prevent there being unwanted results in our political processes that can come from any lack of transparency.

**IMEDI TV AND POSTV IN THE PAST SUGGESTED THAT CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENTS AND NGOS LIKE SHOW MOVEMENT AND ISFED WANTED TO OVERTHROW THE GOVERNMENT. IF ONE OF THE MAIN ARGUMENTS FOR ADOPTING THIS LAW IS TO FIND OUT WHO'S BEHIND SUCH ANTI-CONSTITUTIONAL ACTS, WHY DIDN'T GD INTRODUCE IT SOONER?**

In recent years, we have seen that the actions, positioning and behavior of these organizations created grounds for unconstitutional developments in Georgia. One of the most evident was during the 2020 elections, when ISFED made a mistake in suggesting parallel vote counting, which led to protests and a parliamentary boycott which, at the end of the day, caused the country to suffer and risked our reputation. Georgia has no luxury to lose time on wrong actions like this.

Such moves need to be studied properly, and we think that transparency

could create that preventive measure for everybody, for donors, for organizations to think twice before they do something that might damage Georgia's interests or reputation, and instead to encourage them to focus on promoting what is in the interests of Georgian citizens.

**MAMUKA MDINARADZE SAID THAT IN MARCH 2023, THE RULING PARTY AND DONOR ORGANIZATIONS MADE AN UNOFFICIAL AGREEMENT THAT IN EXCHANGE FOR KILLING THE DRAFT LAW, DONOR ORGANIZATIONS WOULD MAKE THE PROCESS OF FINANCING LOCAL NGOS MORE TRANSPARENT. WHO WERE THOSE DONOR ORGANIZATIONS?**

When we introduced this law for the first time, we had to show our partners the lack of transparency and justify why we thought the law was in the interests of Georgia's development. Throughout this year, we have mentioned a couple of those organizations. One example is the European Endowment for Democracy. The Speaker of Parliament mentioned several times that he had written to them asking for a more transparent approach with regards financing. I don't want to name others or make any distinction among countries, partners or funds. This should be the rule for everybody who wants funding in Georgia and who wants to influence Georgia's social or political life.

**NO DONOR ORGANIZATIONS HAVE SAID THAT THEY WERE IN TALKS WITH THE PARTY ABOUT THIS MATTER.**

I can show you the letter. I don't know if it's public, but I know that there were a couple of letters, requests to look at the situation and take into account Geor-



Georgian Dream MP Maka Botchorishvili

gia's legitimate concern to have more transparency in funding. Unfortunately, we didn't get a reply, nor moves for a transparent approach in funding.

The right approach among partners would be to have a more transparent relationship, and this angle of the law is taken very incorrectly. We are a young democracy, one which has received lots of aid and assistance from our partners.

This money has played an important role in the development of the country, and we are very grateful for it. I think citizens should know who those people are who are helping to develop this or that sector in Georgia, and there is no reason why one should hide if one is doing something good in the interests of Georgia, in the interests of Georgian citizens, in the interests of the Georgian nation.


Making parallels to such laws in undemocratic countries is absolutely inappropriate. Georgia has an established democracy, is a candidate country of the European Union, and it is simply not correct to put Georgia on the same level as Russia and have the same expectations from Georgia and the Georgian government as you might have from Russia.

No-one should be afraid of this law. It is about transparency, not to shut down civil society organizations. There is no ground to think so. Saying so questions the democratic credentials of Georgia, and is absolutely irrelevant to Georgia's European way and European integration.

**IS GEORGIA AN ESTABLISHED DEMOCRACY OR A DEVELOPING ONE?**


Any democracy needs constant work to keep what we have. Georgia is young but already has an established democracy. We see how active citizens can be in Georgia. Nobody is repressing them for their views, political or otherwise. Transparency is important for Georgia's democratic development. The participation of citizens in this process is to keep the process transparent. The civil society organizations here are a little different from what we see in Western European countries in terms of getting funds mostly from outside and sometimes people don't realize these differences. One Western journalist asked me why civil society organizations are part of the political decision-making process when people vote for the government to be responsible for political decisions. In Georgia, we have a specific situation where civil society organizations want to play and are playing an important role in that decision-making, and I think that is something that we have to take into account.




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# The Correct but Untenable Geopolitical Quadrangle

OP-ED BY NUGZAR B. RUHADZE

Georgia has been trying for quite a while now to convince the world that living within a peaceful and potentially fruitful geopolitical configuration, which could verbally qualify as the Sakartvelo-West-Russia-East-Quadrangle, could well be the most optimal way for us to survive and successfully develop. But this thought-provoking polit-economical vision, plausibly and conditionally sounding like a dupe's dream, has proven to be of little effect. In the current neo-realistic world order, with a looming multipolar international arrangement, dreams are only dreams, and facts are just facts.

Trying to put the current situation in clearly folkloristic terms, Georgia gives the impression of being in two minds, but this is not trivial geopolitical shilly-shallying: Georgia is simply seeking to form its most optimal and successfully working niche in the family of nations, a niche which excludes chaos and war and includes only mutually beneficial cooperation and peaceful coexistence in the mentioned Quadrangle. Do we have any tangible reason to believe that this model of operation is not good for this nation? The truth of the matter is that the interests of the cherished Quadrangle's nominally specified parties are so utterly disparate and often contradictory that it seems it would be almost impossible for Sakartvelo to meet all their mismatched endeavors and stay safe and sound at the same time: The



Image source: dhakatribune

good old West is perseveringly coaching Georgia in the complicated but rather agreeable subject of western liberal democracy, raising eyebrows at the Georgian people's sporadic recalcitrancy towards that obligatory schooling in western ways and means; the historically angered and now universally beleaguered Russia is desperately trying to pull Georgia back into the soviet phony drama, within which the ostentatious love and brotherhood between the nations was sickeningly ineffectual, trying to achieve the goal by means of surreptitious usage

of covert diplomacy, a wide spectrum of manipulative feints, strongly influential paraphernalia and other tested means of hybrid warfare; the less aggressive East is not asking for much, but keeps a sharp eye on the way Georgia behaves in the imaginative Quadrangle, so as to catch a favorable moment to make use of as-yet-unexploited economic and geostrategic assets of the nation that, historically speaking, was always tossed around either as a suitable partner or a condescending vassal; and finally, Sakartvelo, which is doing its best to maintain

its long-recognized image of the owner of useful geopolitical terrain to facilitate the strategic and tactic operational aspirations of certain bigger players of the game, tripling down so as not to hurt anybody's feelings in the ephemeral Quadrangle and beyond.

Another question is if Georgia can afford to be a party to the Quadrangle, maintaining the genuine status of a self-determining and self-governing nation. National liberty, based on the idea of unconventionality, purports a tendency for nonconformity with the desires and

designs of other nations of the world, yet it also means remaining in firm, versatile collaboration with every single one of those nations, provided they are ready and willing to cooperate. Taking this definition of Georgia's interaction with the rest of the world as a prerequisite for further international discourse, it would not be very difficult to conclude that Sakartvelo has to be ready in the near future to make its own decisions, but without even the vestige of an isolationist political stance, adequately and unwaveringly strengthening the notion of the Quadrangle, within which it might seek unseen-before political comfort and economic relief. On the other hand, the unfortunate geopolitical reality is leading to Sakartvelo never being allowed to partner up with West and Russia at the same time, and even with the East, depending on which part of the East is partnered with the West, and which one is friendly with Russia.

So, the peace-loving and industrious little nation of Georgia is deprived of the right to continue living in peace and cooperation with the rest of the world if it wants to use that most practicable and almost flawless Quadrangle as a conditional immediate framework for bringing to life that peaceful cooperation. We know we can't have it all – a friendly hand from the West, benevolence from Russia and the prospect of thicker bread-and-butter from the East, but nobody has the right to disparage our dream. Says Sakartvelo: Give me my deserved spot in my beloved Quadrangle and let me do what I think is right for me, and I will never breathe a word of rebuke in anybody's address. Truly golden words!

## MP Maka Botchorishvili on the "Foreign Agents" Bill and Georgia's Chances at EU Integration under Georgian Dream Leadership

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### KNOWING THIS, WHY DID YOU NOT INTRODUCE THE BILL EARLIER, AFTER YOU CAME TO POWER?

Maybe it would have been better to adopt this law earlier, when we saw that civic organizations were playing such an important role in Georgia's development and social and political life. Sometimes, circumstances dictate what you need to do and when you need to do it. But "better late than never". This society is not the same society we had decades ago. This is different kind of society. The young generation has different ideas about Georgia because they were born and brought up in a different Georgia than ours. They have much higher expectations and compare Georgia to much more developed countries.

We need to find correct ways to develop, to keep our society engaged in these processes and to learn to respect the elections, to respect those who win, and also to respect the rights of those who are represented in Parliament when these political intentions are genuine and in the interests of the Georgian population. We need to learn in this process of democratic development and not be too emotional about certain things.

### WHEN EXPLAINING WHY THE LAW IS CRUCIAL FOR GEORGIA, THE RULING PARTY OFTEN MENTIONS SHAME MOVEMENT, ISFED, OR TBILISI PRIDE, BUT THEY NEVER TALK ABOUT THOSE NGOS WORKING ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, EDUCATION, PUBLIC HEALTH OR AGRICULTURE. WHY?

What we are talking about is a general rule for everybody. We are extremely grateful to those donors and those partners who have invested so heavily in Georgia and Georgia's development, and I don't think there is a single citizen in this country who hasn't benefited from those good things, but they need to understand what information and transparency serves for Georgian citizens.

This law creates a preventive measure

against promoting unconstitutional activities by NGOs, especially when they are financed by our partners and create additional diplomatic problems in these relationships.

Transparency is not just a Georgian issue, and Georgia is not the only country where it is discussed – donors demand it, beneficiaries too, in different countries, in the US and EU. Citizens have rights to know where their money is spent, where taxpayers' money goes.

### GD MPS IRAKLI ZARKUA AND DIMITRI SAMKHARADZE SAID THAT AFTER THIS LAW IS ADOPTED, NO PRO-LGBT, ANTI-CHURCH OR ANTI-SOVEREIGNTY ORGANIZATIONS WILL REMAIN IN THE COUNTRY.

I'm not familiar with such a statement, but one thing is clear when we talk about partners, donors and donor assistance: It is important to look at the needs of the country, and we have very good practice of doing so. In 2014, when the Association Agreement was signed with the European Union, we had excellent cooperation with donor organizations, providing them with directions where we would need their expertise to implement the AA conditions, and make good progress for the country. This should be back in our relationship with donors. But we shouldn't forget that, aside from those partners, there are other countries who have interests here, and we need to make it transparent where this money is going.

I think we have a lack of genuine and frank discussion, one without extreme approaches and labeling. The place is being killed for healthy discussions and positions with arguments; a normal, calm space for discussion. When they, say, label this a "Russian" law, I know it not the right thing. But I need to hear arguments from them why they think that this law might kill civil society in Georgia. And they have no arguments.

### THE LAWS INTRODUCED BY THE EU AND FRANCE PLACE EMPHASIS NOT ONLY ON THE SOURCE OF FINANCING, BUT

### ALSO ON THE ACTIVITIES OF THE ENTITIES. COULDN'T GEORGIAN DREAM DO THE SAME?

I don't think this is the right approach, to create different groups of non-governmental organizations. Who will define it? That would be complicated in Georgia's case. I think the simplest approach we took with this law is transparency for everybody, full stop: No assessment of the activities. Even the law says it can't be used to hamper the operation of this or that organization. What is important to understand is the objective of the law. When we make a mistake understanding the objective of a law, that's where interpretation starts. I do follow the discussions in different countries in the EU. Nowhere is it easy, and everywhere exist different positions about such laws, even about the European directive, which is discussed in the European Parliament. That's normal, that's democracy. There should be different opinions about it – that is the right approach to have, the way Europeans do it: Discuss it, everybody voices their opinions and fears, if such fears exist, but also safeguards, if there are safeguards needed to protect the better operation of civil society organizations. That would be healthier, but, unfortunately, we are very far from that healthy discussion, and we see that this process is in the streets rather than in Parliament, which is not helping to promote understanding of the objectives of the law.

### IS THERE A SINGLE NGO FINANCED BY WESTERN DONORS WHICH HAS SAID THAT IF THE LAW IS ADOPTED, THEY WILL CONTINUE OPERATING IN GEORGIA?

I don't remember having such a discussion, but I don't think that this law is creating any unfavorable ground to have future cooperation with donors working in the interests of Georgia and its citizens. Just work transparently and continue doing the good things you are doing.

### CARITAS GEORGIA SAID: "IF THE DRAFT LAW ON TRANSPARENCY

### OF FOREIGN INFLUENCE IS ADOPTED, THOSE PEOPLE WHO ARE IN NEED WILL NO LONGER BE ABLE TO RECEIVE ASSISTANCE FROM US."

That is part of the international discussion we are having about the law, if it can be called a discussion; we do hear statements from outside the country, and we do hear concerns on the international level. But, again, they lack arguments. If you see the problem in something, you have to indicate what the problem is. Transparency itself cannot be a problem even in international relations. If we are talking about good faith and partnership and friendship, especially strategic partnership and being a candidate country for the European Union, why should transparency be a concern for the European Union at all? If the EU is helping us in the process of integration, there is nothing for it to hide. If there is a misunderstanding of the objective of the law and somebody thinks it is targeting non-governmental organizations to kill them, that's another thing, and is not the case in this law. The nature of discussion locally and internationally should be very much oriented to arguments and understanding why this law is needed: It is needed for the better future of Georgia, the more secure and stable future of Georgia, and stable political processes in this very, very difficult neighborhood, where lots of bad things are happening around us.

### SO, YOU ADMIT THERE ARE NO GUARANTEES THAT IF THE DRAFT LAW IS ADOPTED, ORGANIZATIONS FUNDED BY THE WEST WILL REMAIN IN THE COUNTRY, AND YET YOUR PARTY PLANS TO ADOPT IT? IS IT WORTH IT?

I'm sure every single citizen outside protesting the law wants a stable and good future for Georgia. So if we are talking about foreign assistance for that future, what is there to hide? Why not continue? Why not, if today they are helping Georgia to be more prosperous, a better, more beautiful country, with a European future, and I'm sure we will have a very intensive

process of European integration where there will be lots of European funds needed, as all other candidate countries need it in this process, alongside expertise from our friends and colleagues. I don't see that this law, which is focused on transparency, can be an obstacle for partnerships based on good faith.

### DON'T YOU THINK THAT WHAT SCARES THEM MOST IS THAT EACH AND EVERY ONE OF THEM WILL BE LABELED AS FOREIGN INFLUENCE AGENTS WITH NO ARGUMENTS? WHO WOULD WANT TO BE CALLED AN AGENT?

Well, first of all, there is no term in the law as "agent", but "foreign influence," and talking about foreign influence, we have to look at the facts. Foreign influence exists globally, and there are different means to implement – and for us to tackle – that foreign influence. Foreign influence does not necessarily mean something bad. We are talking about the best interests of the country, because that is the worry and we have to look at that and work out what the angle is.

### SO, NO MATTER WHAT THEY DO, JUST BECAUSE THEY RECEIVE FUNDING FROM FOREIGN COUNTRIES, THEY ARE WORKING FOR FOREIGN POWERS?

The law defines those who are implementing or active in foreign influence. The concern here is stigmatization, right? Europeans also discuss their directive on that, what the right name is to explain to the public who is who and what they are doing. In Parliament, we talked about that labelling and we couldn't decide on the right terminology. We are open to discussing the right name for it. But if the money is coming from outside the country, then "foreign" is apt. There's no stigma. Every embassy is a foreign influence, right? We have our own embassies and that is Georgian influence or Georgian interest in this or that country, and that is normal. The law does not

Continued on page 5



# MP Maka Botchorishvili on the "Foreign Agents" Bill and Georgia's Chances at EU Integration under Georgian Dream Leadership

Continued from page 4

cover that part because that is absolutely clear to everybody. We are talking about organizations here, those which function with funding from other governments, but who are supporters or implementers, or whatever we can call them, of mainly the interests of those governments or of those organizations or actors. So what's wrong with asking which interests they are serving? I mean, mostly we are talking about coinciding interests. But if we are talking about something that is against Georgia's interests, that is a different thing. I don't think that those partners who are voicing concerns have any ground to do so.

## SOME OF YOUR COLLEAGUES, INCLUDING RATI IONATAMISHVILI AND GIVI MIKANADZE, HAVE RECEIVED FUNDS FROM DONOR ORGANIZATIONS. CAN WE ASSUME THEY WERE WORKING FOR A FOREIGN INFLUENCE IN THE PAST?

Yes, and they have done many good things. I myself have had excellent cooperation with many organizations, and I hope I will continue to do so. I don't see anything negative working for an organization that is implementing foreign interests in the country, if this interest absolutely coincides with the interests of the Georgian people and Georgian state.

Many of the people working with these organizations are Georgian. They do not necessarily originate from the donor countries. The organizations hire Georgians and they work for these organizations. We are not talking about individuals with this law - that is the key here. And no individuals should have the understanding that they will be labeled, or registered anywhere. No! We are talking only about organizations, and nobody talks about the people who are working for these organizations.

## THEN WHY ARE THE HIGH OFFICIALS OF THE EU AND NATO AGAINST THIS DRAFT LAW?

Of course, it is not pleasant to hear the statements against it, especially when somebody is referring to Georgia's European future, something which is extremely sensitive for Georgian citizens. It is important to be responsible for what we say. The Prime Minister answered their concerns well, offering them the chance to present their legal opinions. Why is transparency against anything related to democracy and the European future of the country? If somebody has concerns, if somebody wants to go deeper into these discussions, if somebody wants to help, sees this as a problem for Georgia's future development, for stability, for development of Georgia's democracy; if they have any recommendations, how it can be fixed or handled, we would be happy to discuss it. But making a statement, saying that the law, which has not been studied by any of these people, is against European integration is not helpful. It fuels negativity and kills the space for discussion, and that's dangerous. It is dangerous for any democratic society not to have discussion around its issues.

## PERHAPS YOUR MPS AND THE MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS COULD TRAVEL TO THE WESTERN CAPITALS AND EXPLAIN TO THE HIGH OFFICIALS OF THE EU AND NATO WHY THERE ARE NO PROBLEMS WITH THIS LAW?

Georgian laws should be discussed in Georgian Parliament. Every sovereign country has a place where they discuss their own laws. Of course, these laws have international angles and there are plenty of international organizations that are giving assessment or recommendations to countries, and we know that the law is being discussed by the Venice Commission, who can propose legal arguments about the law. We will see what they say.

## WASN'T THE VENICE COMMISSION AGAINST



Georgian Dream MP Maka Botchorishvili

## ADOPTING THIS LAW LAST YEAR?

No, we just took it off the table, there was no discussion. But this law has already been sent to the Venice Commission. And, again, we have an open door - if someone has legal arguments how this law can be framed, any ideas are welcome. We have a need to make this process transparent. And if anybody has a better idea than registering organizations that are receiving foreign funds in one registry, if there is something else legally binding in the world to oblige organizations to make their funding transparent, let us hear it. If you see something is bad, you have to say why it's bad.

What we see around the world are registers, registries for lobbyists and this or that. We have registries for our financial declarations, and nobody is killing anybody over it, and we are not dead after we publish our financial declarations. Vice versa: we understand it is for a healthier democratic process in the country to have a more transparent political process.

## YOU SAID THAT THE PLACE WHERE SUCH THINGS SHOULD BE DISCUSSED IS PARLIAMENT. WHY DID PM KOBAKHIDZE INVITE AMBASSADORS OF DIFFERENT COUNTRIES TO TALK ABOUT IT LIVE ON TV?

They are representatives of those countries or organizations that are voicing concerns, and they are the most legitimate representatives of any opinion from those countries or organizations.

The door is open to arguments, and that is why the offer was made to ambassadors, if you have any good ideas coming from capitals or relevant organizations or relevant players, please bring them to the table and discuss them, because we are talking about transparency. We don't believe Georgia needs to be discussed in any other state, especially bad ones that have the perception about Georgia they have about Russia. We do believe that this Georgian law, which is being discussed in Georgian Parliament, is very much needed for Georgia's democracy and the democratic development of the country, but legal arguments to the reverse are welcome.

## YOU SAY NONE OF THE EU AND NATO HIGH OFFICIALS HAVE ANY ARGUMENTS, AND YET THEY CRITICIZE THIS LAW.

So far, no, we have not heard any arguments about any article of the law. What we see are only perceptions and very incorrect interpretations of the objectives of the law.

## DO YOU BELIEVE MR. BORRELL WHEN HE SAYS THIS LEGISLATION COULD COMPROMISE GEORGIA'S EU PATH?

Well, these strong statements that we hear are sensitive to both Georgian cit-

izens and officials. But we are not told why transparency can be an obstacle to European integration. Arguments are needed in this, because we, as a partner of the European Union, partner of other players in this modern world, are saying that if you have concerns, just tell us the objective grounds of your concerns. Maybe we can somehow find a solution.

We are extremely grateful to the leaders of those 27 member states who made the decision last December on Georgia's EU candidacy. They took a historic responsibility on their shoulders. I don't know whether they will be in power tomorrow or how they will end up in their own country's history, but for Georgia, these 27 leaders made history.

## 27 OR 26? AS I REMEMBER, PRIME MINISTER ORBAN LEFT THE TABLE.

Well, he is a very vocal supporter of Georgia's European integration, and I don't want to question the support we have from Hungary. In talking about Georgia and responsibility for Georgia and Georgia's development, it cannot lie on the shoulders of the 27 EU member states. The responsibility for Georgia's stability, for Georgia's better future, for Georgia's democratic development, lies on the shoulders of Georgian politicians here in this country. Just as it does in any other country.

## INCLUDING FOR GEORGIA'S EU AND NATO PATH?

Of course, that as well, but that depends a lot on the other side too. Integration is not a one-way street. That's why we need to talk and that's why it is important to open negotiations about the EU accession. We need to clearly know the conditions, not just hear statements, because we all know that the door of the EU, which is open for us, will mean full integration of Georgia after a few years, and these years should be used to talk about how we are doing that, on which conditions. We have to understand that Georgia will have its positions and the EU will have its own, and we have to work to bring these positions closer together. We are looking forward to closing this chapter of speculation, which started a long time ago and was very, very active over the last two years, seeing the questioning of Georgia's European path, which is absolutely irrelevant and is used to destabilize Georgia internally.

We want to sit down at the table and talk how we can bring Georgia to the EU as soon as possible. We know that we have lots to do at home, and we also know that the EU itself needs to prepare for the next enlargement, and I think we also deserve transparency in this process, to understand how this discussion is being handled in the EU and what we are doing on our side to access the EU.

## DO YOU THINK THAT IF THE DRAFT LAW IS ADOPTED, THE EU WILL STILL OPEN NEGOTIATIONS ON

## ACCESSION WITH GEORGIA?

I don't think we should use such things to blackmail or to talk like this with our partners. We all need to understand that European integration is not an easy process, and we need to overcome different obstacles in the coming years. It will be much easier for Georgia and much more profitable for Georgia as a country, and as a nation, to have unified positions in this process. That's how we can keep Georgia united. That's how we can keep Georgia protected within the EU, because nobody else will protect your interests if you don't do so, and that's normal. Nobody else is protecting French interests in the EU other than the French government. It is a union of 27 countries having their own interests and presenting those interests around the table, and when you want to join that club, we know this club has its own rules, and we have to adjust. That's why we need negotiations, how, when, what the timeframe of implementation is. All those countries which are members of the EU have negotiated their own European integration path. And that's what we are looking for; to have not simple statements and labels and perceptions, but very serious discussions, because Georgia's accession to the European Union is not a simple thing - is an absolutely new geopolitical reality for us, and we do have some things to talk about in this reality.

## IS IT WORTH ADOPTING THIS LAW IF IT MAY CREATE PROBLEMS FOR THE COUNTRY?

That's speculation. At the end of the day, we don't know what the main ground for the 27 member states will be for making decisions. Of course, there should be nothing that creates additional obstacles in this process. Our goal in this is transparency, to keep stability and the democratic development of the country on track, and not to let anybody deviate from this democratic development. I do think that we need to be heard in an honest way and not to have only the perceptions and irrelevant parallels with other states held up. This discussion needs to be more substance-oriented so as to make this relationship more beneficial for both sides.

## DOES THE LAW NOT STAND IN CONTRADICTION TO ARTICLE 78 OF THE CONSTITUTION WRITTEN BY PM KOBAKHIDZE HIMSELF - "THE CONSTITUTIONAL BODIES SHALL TAKE ALL MEASURES WITHIN THE SCOPE OF THEIR COMPETENCES TO ENSURE THE FULL INTEGRATION OF GEORGIA INTO THE EUROPEAN UNION AND THE NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY ORGANIZATION"?

No, it does not. You cannot simply undermine the whole intention of the Georgian government and all the work the Georgian government and Parliament have done. The government is representative of the country, and is working towards the country's European integration. Georgia's application for EU membership is not a joke, nor is all that we have done to bring the country to that very level. It wasn't easy. It involved very complicated reforms and the transformation of the country in a difficult, unsecure environment. Once 20% of your country is occupied, once you have a foreign military presence on your territory, it becomes extremely challenging to do what we are doing, and, honestly, our many partners and colleagues are impressed with what Georgia has achieved.

I'm 100% sure that, at the end of the day, everybody will understand the real objective of this law, and everybody will see that Georgia does not want to silence anybody. People will eventually understand that Georgia is not a country which can be silenced, that Georgian society is not a society which can be silenced, and that this is not a government which has the objective to silence anybody.

## IN DECEMBER, THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL GRANTED GEORGIA

## CANDIDATE STATUS ON THE UNDERSTANDING THAT IT WOULD TAKE THE STEPS SET OUT IN THE COMMISSION'S RECOMMENDATIONS. HOW MANY OF THOSE NINE RECOMMENDATIONS HAVE BEEN FULFILLED, AND WHAT ARE YOUR EXPECTATIONS FOR THIS DECEMBER?

Work on these recommendations has been done in different directions. Of course, those recommendations that are related to important topics in this relationship, like corruption and judicial reform, require constant work. What has been done so far will be assessed by the European Commission. The elections are part of those recommendations, and I believe that everything that is related to free and fair elections in this country is very important. There are many challenges that need to be tackled in this process, not to repeat what we had before, and not to lose time on the next steps needing to be taken regarding the EU and the country's development. We need to be careful and work hard on different areas and not just tick boxes.

The recommendations are related to our political life and dynamic of development, and I do believe that Georgia has done many things to make us proud, like when we talk about fighting corruption or improving the judicial system. I think these steps will be appropriately assessed. We also share challenges with the EU, for example, disinformation. If you look at the media coverage, it's very difficult to get your voice heard and to receive objective information about Georgia. The disinformation or misinformation coming from Georgia also influences that process.

We don't believe that Georgia is behind any other candidate country in having the right to enter into the process of negotiations with the EU, and I think that it is extremely important to do so as soon as possible.

## ON APRIL 29, GD HELD ONE OF THE BIGGEST RALLIES IN THE HISTORY OF MODERN GEORGIA. THE SLOGAN OF THE RALLY WAS "HOMELAND, LANGUAGE, FAITH". DO IMPLEMENTING THE NINE EU RECOMMENDATIONS CONTRADICT THESE WORDS WRITTEN BY FOUNDING FATHER OF GEORGIA, ILIA CHAVCHAVADZE.

I don't think European integration, the mother of the recommendations, can contradict or will contradict anything related to Georgian identity and Georgia. I praise these words. They are not just three words for me. It's the whole philosophy of Georgia and philosophy of what we are fighting for and what we are protecting and why we need the EU. It's key to understanding what Georgia wants and what the importance and meaning is of the EU, and why we aspire to be part of it: To protect what we cherish.

## WHAT IS IT YOUR PARTY WANTS TO PROVE, EITHER TO THE PEOPLE OF GEORGIA OR TO OUR INTERNATIONAL PARTNERS, BY ADOPTING THIS LAW?

We are not trying to prove anything; we are just addressing a challenge for our country. And we are addressing something that we think is very important: To prevent bad influence on Georgia's democratic development. And this is not a fight to prove who is strong or weak, or who is bad or good. This is just something that we think is in Georgia's interests for the better development of Georgian democracy. It is, again, only about transparency and transparency in the political process, especially when we talk about the wider political process, and decisions where we see non-governmental organizations and civil society organizations as players. That's what we are talking about, and that's very important to understand.



# Hans Gutbrod on Ivanishvili's Lonely Game



Journalist Vazha Tavberidze with Hans Gutbrod. Source: RFE/RL

INTERVIEW BY VAZHA TAVBERIDZE

**H**ans Gutbrod has been working in the Caucasus region since 1999, in diverse contexts with policy research and think tanks, among them Transparify, seeking to increase the transparency of policy research around the world, and as regional director of the Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC). Radio Free Europe/RL's Georgian Service sat down with him to discuss the Georgian Dream's latest fateful game in Georgia.

"We are in a classic crisis moment in which everything is up for grabs, and how Georgia is going to develop in the next 20 years very much depends on what's going to happen in the next 20 months," Gutbrod tells us. "What's at stake is the foreign policy of the country. Is this a country that is subservient to the whims of one single person, or is this a proper state?"

"What's very important is to have a core consensus, consensus on the European path, which, among other things, means that the country needs to be a proper state with proper institutions. People need to be held accountable, and we can't have one person suddenly decid-



Georgian Dream has not only imperiled Georgia's standing with its Western friends, but also imperiled statehood itself

ing that his personal fights with Credit Suisse or with whatever other conspiracy that he's battling with, determine everything in the country. That's what this is really about."

**WHAT DO YOU THINK HIS AND GD'S PROBLEM IS WITH THE NGOS? IT'S NOT JUST DISTRUST OR DISLIKE ANYMORE; IT SEEMS TO BE CLOSER TO RESENTMENT, BORDERING ON HATRED.**

There are ways in which Bidzina Ivanishvili is one of the most curious and remarkable figures. It would be fair to say he's probably the loneliest man in the Caucasus, in spite of all his wealth. And if you're that lonely, I'm not sure you can fundamentally understand the nature of reality, nor the fact that people may have different opinions, and that those opinions might be legitimate. Since NGO people happen to be among those who disagree with him, and maybe have their own ideas and even want to fight for them, he thinks they are simply out to get him. His thinking is "how could anyone object to anything I want to do?" It's very much a cloistered and lonely environment for him—his children move abroad, he sits in his house in Shekvetili, and I think he struggles to have an appropriate sense of what's really happening.

In order to bring him to any sense of reality, and probably many people in Georgian Dream internally agree with this, is for him to actually take the post of Prime Minister. He's determining everything anyway, but isn't in any way accountable, and doesn't actually see the consequences of his actions. I think it would almost be impossible to have any normal, structured conversation with such a person, including a structured conversation about philosophy, when that person is so far removed, and so locked in.

**BUT IT WASN'T IMPOSED ON HIM, THAT'S WHAT HE CHOSE.**

Yes. And it is a tragedy for the country of Georgia. But these are things that we find described in a very illuminating way in world literature, be it in *The Great Gatsby*, or in other literary figures who isolate themselves and, in the context of absolute power, having incredible wealth,

end up doing incredible damage to themselves and especially to other people, and in this case, even to a country.

**LET'S LOOK AT SOME OF THE NARRATIVES THAT GD AND IVANISHVILI ARE RESORTING TO. ONE OF THE MORE PROMINENT ONES WOULD BE THIS "GLOBAL WAR PARTY". WHY DO PEOPLE BUY INTO IT?**

I would say some people bought into it. I would say until a week ago, you could make the argument that Bidzina Ivanishvili had rather successfully balanced Georgia in this big turbulence that includes Georgia's own situation, the war in Ukraine, the wars in Karabakh and Gaza. You could have made an argument that, "realpolitik is hard, it isn't pretty" and that Ivanishvili, like a sort of Georgian Bismarck, understood how to keep things balanced. But then he comes out and makes statements that throw it all out of the window. You need to balance China, Russia and the West? Well, the moment you throw the West off board, you're no longer balancing.

This idea that he is a wise captain in stormy seas, navigating uncharted waters, I think there were a lot of people who were willing to believe that, but then they heard that speech and suddenly saw someone who seemed obsessed with a particular vendetta, rather than with providing a course in the best interests of the country, in what is a very complicated global situation. And in this situation, it's all the more important that one doesn't divide the Georgian people; that one tries to bring people along. This is small country, in a challenging environment. And the entire thing that the Georgian Dream has been doing has not only imperiled Georgia's standing with its Western friends, but also imperiled statehood itself. And this is a very, very dangerous thing.

**IT'S AN OPEN SECRET THAT GEORGIAN DREAM DOES INDOOR POLLING. WHY HAVE THEY CHOSEN THIS MOMENT TO BRING THIS LAW BACK AND RISK EVERYTHING?**

My personal view, and this is only my view, is that Mr. Ivanishvili is terrified

of something that's going to come out that would really damage his electoral chances. And because of that huge worry, he decided that even though the polling in general was looking relatively good, as we heard from some government members, they needed to have this headache now to avoid a much bigger headache later. I don't know what that something is, people have various ideas what it could be, but he clearly seems to be worried that something will change people's perception in the same way that perception was changed in 2012 with those videos coming out. So my guess would be that there's something out there that he's very much worried about and if he really believes that he is that vulnerable, and believes that the United States and various people are ganging up on him, then the current move makes a lot of sense.

**IS THERE A DANGER THAT WHILE THE WEST IS OCCUPIED WITH UKRAINE AND IS TRYING TO NOT LET IT BE DEVoured BY RUSSIA, MEANWHILE, GEORGIA WILL BE SNATCHED AWAY?**

The really important thing at difficult times like these is that it becomes clear to people that it's very unlikely that the cavalry will arrive and save the day, that the people on the outside will rush to help, and it matters that Georgia's citizens come out; it matters that they talk to their relatives, maybe in the police, civil servants, relatives who are diplomats, and engage them and bring people along. In the end, this is a fundamental challenge, but it's also a chance to stand up for citizenship - it's a test, and largely a domestic one. It's not just about courage, it's also about having a proper and positive vision for the future. And, again, I think it's very important to see this as something that plays out over 20 months, not necessarily 20 days or 20 weeks.

**WHAT REACTION SHOULD WE REALISTICALLY EXPECT FROM THE WEST, APART FROM THE USUAL CONDEMNATION? ARE SANCTIONS PLAUSIBLE?**

For such a long time, Georgia and the West had such a good relationship. Now, for Western capitals, this is a very new



Bidzina Ivanishvili, for all of his many resources and the incredible talents that made him very rich, at this point is very tired

paradigm, to have a government that is so directly hostile, and they need time to adjust to what this means.

What should be clear, and what Georgia's decision makers should think about, is that if they behave like Belarus, they may at some point be treated like Belarus. They need to remember that, in the end, Mr. Ivanishvili, yes, his wealth is huge, but whether he will be able to stretch that wealth, to compensate for what turning into Belarus would bring, is worth thinking about.

**WHAT MOVED AND MOTIVATED THE PEOPLE WHO GATHERED EN MASSE TO SUPPORT THE GOVERNMENT ON APRIL 29TH?**

What moved them were the exact same minibuses that drove them to Tbilisi on December 15 to celebrate the candidate status, because those were largely the same people in the same minibuses, who came in and were told to wave the EU flag. In the end, this defines one of the huge weaknesses of the Georgian Dream: It appeals to certain voters at its core level, but, unlike Viktor Orban, unlike Vladimir Putin, this is not really a grounded political party with a long term vision or ideology. And I think, in the end, one of the reasons the government is so clearly worried and has for a long time seemed like they were feeling they're just about to lose is because they realize that their own support is very, very thin, and it relies on transactions.

**AS AN EX-CRRC HEAD, AND AS A PERSON WHO HAS OBSERVED EVERY GEORGIAN ELECTION SINCE 1999, WHAT DO YOU PREDICT OF THIS UPCOMING ONE?**

Well, predictions are classically difficult. Let's put it this way: I think the key to success for people that want a better vision for Georgia is not to fall for divisiveness; to make clear to citizens what the fundamental choices are that this country faces. There are the whims of a single person, or, like one gentleman from Racha said, "Opposition, position - I don't care, in the end, I want to have a state." This is the fundamental question that this is all about: "sakhelmtsipho minda." Should Georgia be a state that's respectful of its citizens? That choice needs to be put out there and needs to be put out consistently, in a way that highlights that the Georgian Dream has very little positive to offer, and that Bidzina Ivanishvili, for all of his many resources and for all the incredible talents that made him very rich, at this point is very tired. He's out of ideas, and he's out of good people that can implement ideas. If you bring that argument in a sober and honest way, then I think even neutral voters will understand that a lot is at stake for their future and the future of their children.



# Stage 3 of Sadagi School Cleanups a Success



removing the bags hidden in the hedgerows and tree trunks on the field banks. The students successfully overcame these challenges and celebrated the field and trees' liberation from debris with a small picnic.

## KAKHETI

26 schools and 720 children from the Kakheti region participated in the Georgia cleanup. On April 17 in Telavi, along with 50 students from the Merab Kostava IV Public School, our project sponsor Procredit Bank also joined us in the cleanup. Together with the school students, teacher Gvantsa Molashvili, school director Ekaterine Gigitelashvili, parents, and 20 bank employees, we cleaned the children's square and the sports complex area. The children enthusiastically participated in the cleanup and even started a competition to see who could fill more sacks.

We had an outstanding event in the Pankisi Valley, a fresh, green valley that is especially beautiful in spring, against the backdrop of snowy mountains. At the initiative of Dali Gamkhvetelashvili, a teacher at Akhmeta II Public School, we first visited Duis Public School in Pankisi. We introduced senior students from both schools to each other and engaged in a fruitful discussion about our country's ecological situation. After the meeting, we cleaned picnic areas near the Khadori Waterfall together. Fifteen-year-old Muslim Borchashvili, a student of Duis Public School, acted as an excellent guide in the Pankisi Valley. Meeting such young people who are deeply connected to their region and homeland, like Muslim, gives us hope for the future and motivates us to do more for our country and future generations.

Due to the unfortunate lack of trash cans in Khador, we had to transport the collected waste in the same minibus the students used for transportation. Despite the unpleasant odor of the waste, the children remained focused on cleaning the polluted environment left by others and ensured the full bags were placed in garbage bins several kilometers away.

We also cleaned the Akhtala Resort Park in Gurjaani, alongside Nino Gurashvili, a teacher at the Guram Chilashvili Gurjaani Public School No. 4, and the school's students. After the cleanup, we shared sweets and discussed the importance of cleanliness for our country. During the conversation, a girl asked why we should pick up garbage that we didn't put there in the first place. We deliberated on this issue and collectively agreed that while this garbage might not be ours, this country is ours, and it is our responsibility to care for it.

## KVEMO KARTLI

Dali Kekelidze hosted us at Shulaveri Public School, where, along with educating students, she makes a significant contribution to the village's cleanliness. The children, many of whom are members of the Ecoclub Ngamente, made presentations and drawings about the environment, talked about global warming and the interaction between humans and the environment, and discussed how they systematically clean their beautiful places. Despite occasional environmental contamination, the children do not lose their enthusiasm, and continue to clean their environment with great zeal and hope.

It was impressive to visit Maradisi village, where we met teachers Ketil Angela and Melano Bolkvadze. The schoolyard and football field were quite green and clean. Together, we tidied up the surrounding areas, picking up small waste scattered on the ground, trees, and bushes. Children enthusiastically discussed sports and living in an orderly environment. After a fun cleanup event with the kids, we played football in the field.

Maradisi Village School and the environmental



## BLOG BY THE SADAGI TEAM

**O**n April 17-19, the third stage of the joint cleaning series involving schoolchildren, teachers, and the environmental charity Sadagi took place. This stage was implemented in collaboration with partner schools of the USAID Civil Education Program and with the support of the German organization GIZ.

67 schools from four regions of Georgia, Adjara, Imereti, Kvemo Kartli, and Kakheti, participated in this cleaning stage. A total of 3,657 students and their teachers took part in the third stage of simultaneous cleanups. Overall, the number of students and teachers participating in all three stages has exceeded 6,000.

In this article, Sadagi team members share insights about the schools with which they cleaned pre-selected school areas in four regions of Georgia.

## ADJARA

Nazi Kochalidze, a civil education teacher at Tsikhisdziri School in Kobuleti municipality, is an amazing person. His students exceeded all our expectations, diligently and cheerfully arranging a huge lawn on the beach and roadside bamboo slopes. Before the cleanup, they held a performance at the entrance of Petra Castle—with smart and beautiful posters, interesting speeches, and phrases like "This country is ours!" The ethos and behavior of Tsikhisdziri students are admirable: they show passionate love for their homeland, understand the logical connection between cleanliness and economic income from tourism, and demonstrate outstanding initiative, zeal, and teamwork.

At Khelvachauri I Public School, the teenagers welcomed us with a good performance. Civic education teacher Gulnara Zakaradze instills love for the environment in her students. They showed us videos and talked about the contribution of each of us to caring for the planet. Then, as a team, they tidied up the schoolyard and surroundings.

Batumi VIII Secondary School, situated in an impressive building, engaged in the cleanup effort with warmth and energy. School director Ketevan Gvarjaladze-Gorgoshadze and civil education teacher Maka Khintibidze participated actively in cleaning the schoolyard with the children. It was gratifying to contribute to enhancing their learning environment together with the students.

## IMERETI

Eliso Jibladze, director of Kutaisi School No. 15, along with civil education teacher Natia Kalandadze and the students, decided to tidy up the field near Nikia market. The most difficult part was



club "May," established in 2017, have achieved impressive results. The club members have conducted over 150 environmental activities and were awarded a prize for their contribution to sustainable goals in 2021. They earned more than 40,000 GEL through various projects and improved the lives of their fellow villagers.

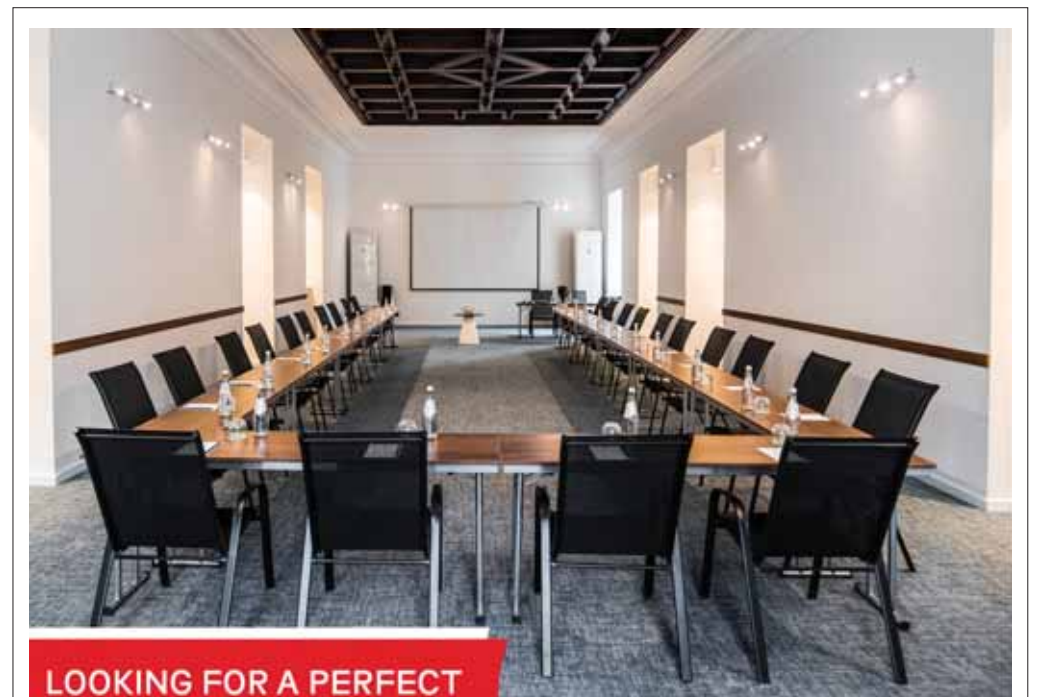
The next day, we cleaned the area near Rustavi School No. 16, where teacher Mariam Jalabadze and her students welcomed us. Mariam teaches in two schools in Rustavi, and she had just come from the second school, where the surrounding area had already been cleaned. The Sadagi team, along with teachers and students, cleaned up the school's back fields, and church yard.

The same day, we visited Krtsanisi Village Public School in Gardabani municipality. History and civic education teacher Nino Tsertsvadze and her students met us with great joy. We quickly moved into a huge forest, where glass, tins, bottles, cans, and plastic bags were scattered among the trees and

bushes. Students efficiently cleaned their favorite place, almost racing against time. We finished cleaning much earlier than planned, and the students joined hands and ran to clean the Krtsanisi cemetery as well. It was a pleasure to meet such caring and enthusiastic students and teachers.

We would like to thank the sponsors of "I Pack Georgia." Platinum supporters of the project are Procredit Bank Georgia and Diplomat-Georgia, while silver supporters include Nikora, Finburo, and Elite Electronics. Media endorsers include Palette L and Georgia Today. The number of supporters is increasing, which will enable us to involve the maximum number of schools in sorting events.

We would like to remind readers that "I Pack Georgia" was started by the joint initiative of the National Teacher Award team, its teachers, and Sadagi. The next stage of the sorting series, together with students and teachers, will be held on May 8-10 in schools across Samegrelo, Guria, Svaneti, and Racha-Lechkhumi.



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# Energy Efficient Buildings in Georgia – Where We Stand

BY KATIE RUTH DAVIES

In last week's article, I started small – delving into the topic of energy from a personal perspective to suggest what we can do financially and technically, as individuals and business owners, to make our own homes and offices more energy efficient. This week, I'm going to look at the issues facing Georgia in its energy efficiency goals – in particular, Georgia's residential buildings. In my next article, I'll go into greater detail about what the Georgian government is doing with its partners to develop Georgia's energy efficiency in line with Western standards.

Following the signing of the Association Agreement with the European Union in 2014, aligning with the EU regulatory framework became a key driver for changes in Georgia's energy sector, among them the integration of renewable energy, improving energy efficiency, promoting competitive markets, and protecting consumer rights. Tackling energy poverty has emerged as a central focus within these reforms, as it represents a major barrier in Georgia, typically characterized by households lacking access to vital energy services and products.

## GEORGIA'S ENERGY POVERTY

“One of the key issues of energy sector reform is the fight against energy poverty. The phenomenon, defined as the inability of households to access essential energy services and products, remains a major challenge in Georgia,” Tutana Kvaratskhelia, a senior energy policy analyst and energy poverty researcher at the think tank World Experience for Georgia (WEG), told GEORGIA TODAY in our March interview with her.

Energy poverty is defined as the inability to access affordable, reliable, and modern energy services for basic needs like cooking, heating, and lighting.

In Georgia, as in many post-Soviet

countries, several factors contribute to energy poverty. These include outdated and energy-inefficient building infrastructure, a sizable portion of the population experiencing social vulnerability, and the prevalence of inefficient energy technologies and limited access to clean energy alternatives.

A 2021 Energy Community Secretariat study posited that 24.6% of households in Georgia are “energy-poor,” while the draft Integrated National Energy and Climate Plan of Georgia suggests that nearly half of Georgia's population might be experiencing some form of energy poverty.

## HOW ENERGY EFFICIENT ARE GEORGIAN HOMES TODAY?

“As of July 1st 2023, all new buildings should meet minimum energy efficiency standards,” Giorgi Mukhigulishvili, Researcher in Energy and Climate Change Studies, tells us. “In parallel, old buildings must be renovated, and this renovation strategy is currently being developed by the Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development. Through it, they will set some plans and financial mechanisms to move things forward. Minimum standards already exist for walls, doors, windows, roofs, basements, etc., and refer to heat transference and heat resistance. These follow EU standards, but with local specificity in mind, as we have three different climate zones in Georgia, each with their own requirements and standards in energy efficiency.”

According to Geostat data, the majority of households in Georgia primarily depend on either individual heating facilities, such as wood stoves (81%), or a central heating system (25.6% in urban areas and 6% in rural areas). Natural gas and firewood are the primary sources of heating in Georgia. Firewood is used by 35.4% of all households for individual heating, with the majority (86.1%) of these located in rural areas.

Geostat reports that to manage the burden of high heating expenses, around 43% of Georgia's households often resort

to reducing living space during winter, heating only one room of the house. This is usually the kitchen – where the family eats, sleeps and interacts day-to-day, snuggled around the wood stove. In a 2021 Geostat survey, it was also revealed that many of those with central heating maintain household temperatures below the World Health Organization's recommended minimum of 18°C in order to reduce their energy bill.

Further, currently, most buildings in Georgia lack proper insulation, resulting in high costs for heating and other energy services, Kvaratskhelia told us. “EU directives require countries to assess the number of households living in energy poverty and to include measures to address this issue in their integrated energy and climate plans (NECPs). Georgia has already drafted its first NECP with measures to address energy poverty. These include programs to increase access to clean energy sources and technologies, financial support to the population to cover energy bills, etc.”

One of those programs is mass gasification. Over the past two decades, Georgia has had a big drive to gasify the country. But, Mukhigulishvili notes, despite energy tariffs being relatively low, with gas and electricity heavily subsidized in the residential sector, citizens newly connected to the grid at first only used gas for cooking, not heating; continuing to rely on wood stoves for that function.

“If we compare the market price of gas in the region overall, around \$300 per 1000 cubic meters, in some of Georgia's regions it is priced at just \$40 per 1000m<sup>3</sup>,” Mukhigulishvili informs us. “Yet, when they gasified the regions of the country, gas consumption did not increase as much as anticipated, as people avoided use of gas for heating, only using it for cooking. Later, because of unsustainable consumption and inaccessibility to wood, people only then installed central heating systems.”

“I always advocate for efficient stoves

being provided over gasification, especially in the high mountain regions, because, if you make a cost-benefit analysis on a national level, it is inefficient to gasify areas where families are few and often only live seasonally. It's far better to have efficient stoves available and encourage the practice of using dried fuel and briquettes,” Mukhigulishvili says.

The burning of wood in traditional, inefficient stoves is known to contribute to indoor air pollution and associated health risks. Indeed, short-term exposure to smoke from inefficient wood-burning heaters, or from the wrong (or damp) fuel burned, can aggravate asthma or worsen pre-existing heart conditions, while long-term exposure can cause heart and lung disease. This is where the right marketing comes in, and Mukhigulishvili tells us that there have been campaigns run by both the state, with donor support, and local NGOs, such as CENN, where energy efficient stoves and solar heaters were provided to a selection of families nationwide. However, he rightly points out that the number of households impacted by these campaigns is not representative of the scale of the issue.

“The good news is that local production of these energy efficient stoves has increased in recent years. Not only those big, traditional Svan stoves, but also, with UNDP and GIZ support, for example, provision of smaller more efficient stoves,” he says.

We ask Mukhigulishvili about the fuel for those stoves.

“Briquettes are a more efficient and more environmentally friendly solution, created using the waste of different kinds of biomass. Thanks to donor support, we have several production units in different regions of the country, for example in Kakheti – in Akhmeta, in Samegrelo, in Svaneti and Adjara. But because of the low cost of wood, briquettes are not yet as competitive as they should be in the Georgian market.”



The Forest Code Georgia adopted in 2020 demands sustainable practices in the forest, meaning, among other things, that forest waste is used alongside the wood that is cut, lowering the impact on the forest.

“Since the 1990s, we've noted the unsustainable manner in which citizens and businesses use our forest resources, not only for energy purposes, but also industrial,” Mukhigulishvili says. “That's why, to relieve the pressure on the forest, we're increasingly turning – and encouraging our citizens through legal reforms and education to turn to wooden biomass products, solid waste products, gasification, renewable energy resources, heat pumps, solar water heaters, energy efficient insulation materials for building exteriors and interiors, etc. And there are already suppliers of such products and services countrywide. It is now on us to develop all these resources and support their expansion.”

It is clear that, alongside government reforms and international partner support, the private sector in Georgia has a key role to play, and we will be looking into that in our next energy efficiency article.

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**Strada**  
stradacafe.ge

Mon – Sun 12:00 – 00:00

MARJANISHVILI  
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595-99-22-88

SABURTALO  
7 Sandro Euli Street  
595-99-22-77

VAKE  
11 Mosashvili Street  
595-99-22-66



# A Decade of Strada - Redefining Tbilisi's Culinary Landscape

BY KESARIA KATCHARAVA

In April 2014, Tbilisi witnessed the birth of a culinary gem, Strada, founded by three friends driven by their shared passion for good food—Vano Mkheidze, Gia Lomaia, and Temur Beridze. Despite their lack of direct involvement in the restaurant business, their love for dining out and exploring different cuisines ignited the idea of creating something unique. In a recent interview, they shared Strada's journey.

"The three of us had different experiences in the restaurant industry, but we were passionate consumers of good food for many years," says Vano Mkheidze. "Eventually, we decided to transform this emotional connection into a business venture. It was truly inspiring."

"There are two approaches in business. One is to follow directives and believe they are the truth. The other, more challenging approach is to detach oneself from personal views and analyze everything with a cold, marketing-oriented perspective," notes Gia Lomaia. "In this case, we chose the former. We believed that what we loved and enjoyed would be relevant and promising."

## INSPIRATION

One of the key inspirations behind Strada's concept was Isaac Correa, a renowned American chef known for his innovative restaurant concepts. Lomaia reminisces about the influence of Correa: "Isaac served as our foundation. His restaurant concepts were incredibly innovative and distinct from the usual."

Strada's founders aimed to shake up Tbilisi's dining scene by creating a comfortable and inclusive environment. Mkheidze explains: "Our approach was not fine dining or excessive pretentiousness, but a comfortable atmosphere, both in terms of menu and environment."

## INNOVATION

Mkheidze, remembers that transformation of Tbilisi's dining scene: "When we arrived a decade ago, the restaurant scene in Tbilisi was quite distinct. Excluding Georgian establishments and traditional eateries, our segment, which became the Strada segment, consisted mostly of individualistic projects. These projects were often named after their owners or chefs, and customers visited as guests of the owner, reminiscent of southern Italy. However, for a city as large as Tbilisi, we felt this approach was increasingly abnormal."

"Our aim was to create restaurants that were open and accessible to everyone, without the need for special connections. We wanted to provide a comfortable atmosphere, both in terms of the menu and environment. Comfort was the essence of the experience we wanted to offer our guests. Moreover, we believed that the main area of the restaurant should be smoke-free, which was unthinkable ten years ago but crucial for creating a comfortable space. These were the principles that mattered to us."

## STRADA'S EXPANSION AND DISTINCTIVE DINING DESTINATIONS

Everything began with the opening of the first Strada on Sandro Euli Street, situated in a vibrant neighborhood. In discussing the expansion, Mkheidze reflects on the unique character of each location, shaped by its surroundings and architectural heritage.

"Each location has its own character, shaped by its surroundings and the building itself," he explains.

The journey of expansion began with a second location opened on Marjanishvili Street in 2015.

"We didn't deliberately seek a place on the right bank, just as when we opened the first location, we didn't restrict ourselves to the traditional Vake-Vere center. The search was for quality spaces, a less conventional approach given the trend of converting apartments into commercial spaces."

After extensive searching, a gem was discovered at Marjanishvili St. 5. Negotiations were lengthy, but the team saw the potential of the space.

"Everything that followed wasn't exactly part of our plan," Mkheidze adds. "But we could see that this location had significant growth potential."

The space, a former Soviet printing plant established in the 1930s as the Printing Word Combine, a branch of The Soviet Ministry of Book Printing, greatly influenced the design.

"Rooms Design Studio, our partner in designing Strada, really showed how much emphasis can come from the character of the space itself rather than just the initial concept," Mkheidze says.

In 2018, Strada Vake opened on Mosashvili Street, drawing attention for its unconventional corner location and cozy terrace. "All three Strada locations have different designs and atmospheres," Mkheidze reflects. "But we hoped to create a common thread among them."

## UNEXPECTED ADDITIONS: KOREAN CUISINE

Gia Lomaia sheds light on the choice to add Korean cuisine.

"The inclusion of Korean cuisine on our menu was entirely spontaneous," he begins. "To be honest, Isaac himself didn't agree with this approach."

Unlike markets in America and the West, where cuisine-specific restaurants are common, the post-Soviet market in Georgia expects variety from establishments.

"Here, if there's an interesting establishment, consumers expect it to offer a variety, including sushi, Korean, and pizza," Lomaia explains.

While the market is evolving with the emergence of authentic Korean and Japanese restaurants, the decision for Strada was justified.

"Our guests are highly satisfied," Lomaia notes.

The decision also stemmed from personal preference.

"Korean cuisine was also a personal preference of ours," Lomaia reveals. "We were big fans of Korean food."

Drawing on their two-decade-long appreciation for Korean cuisine, they leveraged personal connections to master the specific culinary style.

"We've been frequenting Korean restaurants for twenty years," Lomaia shares. "As Korean cuisine is very specific, it was challenging for our staff to master it. We asked a chef from Korea to join us, and he stayed with us for a year."

## THE EVOLUTION OF STRADA'S MENU

Strada's menu is a dynamic reflection of its commitment to innovation and quality.

Gia Lomaia and Vano Mkheidze discuss the dynamic process of managing Strada's menu, which is both creative and meticulous.

"The menu is constantly evolving; it's a continuous process," Lomaia explains. "There's a core selection that's very popular and remains untouched, but we introduce changes regularly. We experiment, observe reactions, sometimes dishes stay, sometimes they go. It's an ongoing process."

Mkheidze adds another layer to this process, emphasizing the importance of maintaining quality.

"Managing the menu is not just a creative process; it's also a matter of maintaining the highest quality, which is crucial for our guests," he notes. "In Strada's case, with three restaurants and 40 cooks across them, maintaining quality is the backbone of our ten-year success."

He elucidates the complexities of maintaining quality across multiple locations, highlighting the enterprise aspect of the process.

"Adding a dish to Strada is very complex," Mkheidze says. "Our stability in this market for so many years relies on maintaining this quality. Therefore, every new addition to the menu undergoes rigorous testing to ensure that it meets our high standards consistently across all our locations. This is the challenge that sets Strada apart from many other restaurants."

## MAINTAINING EXCELLENCE

Gia Lomaia and Vano Mkheidze reveal the intricacies of maintaining quality control at Strada, emphasizing the daily challenges and the importance of guest feedback.

"This is the toughest aspect of our job, a daily test, a daily control," Lomaia begins. "One of the challenges is that the quality of ingredients can be inconsistent; suppliers don't always have a steady stock. We have to improvise while maintaining our main principle: quality. It's quite a challenge."

Mkheidze adds to this, highlighting the significance of loyal guests in quality



control. "Our most effective quality control mechanism is our loyal guests," he explains. "Many of them visit us 3-4 times a week. They have their favorite dishes, and they're very sensitive to even the slightest changes. We intervene in processes repeatedly because our guests' feedback is crucial to us. They show loyalty to Strada, and this acts as our test mechanism, catching almost all errors, which, despite our efforts, still occur."

Lomaia then touches on the challenges of maintaining quality in a non-mechanized environment.

"Mistakes happen because we're a completely non-mechanized enterprise, reliant on human hands. Unintentional mistakes occur, but the worst is when we don't react appropriately to our own mistakes. Every complaint or feedback becomes the subject of detailed discussion, and we take that very seriously. It's quite challenging psychologically, but it's a good strategy in the long run."

## CELEBRATING TEN YEARS

"The main achievements in these ten years are our team and our guests," Mkheidze asserts. "Today, Strada has a team of over two hundred people. It's a fantastic team, especially considering the turnover rate in our field. Many of our employees start here as their first job at a young age and later move on. But there's a core group that has been with us for many years. They're like family to us, and they're the most valuable asset to our brand. They enable us to achieve our second major milestone: our guests."

"Perhaps the most significant thing in these ten years is that many of our guests don't see Strada merely as a place to eat; they see it as a promise. When they come here, they expect quality food, a friendly atmosphere, and excellent service. They know that, no matter what happens, Strada will deliver on that promise."

## STRADA'S MESSAGE OF GRATITUDE AND COMMITMENT

In sharing their message with the team and guests, Gia Lomaia and Vano Mkheidze express gratitude and reaffirm Strada's commitment to consistency and quality.

Mkheidze emphasizes his appreciation for the loyalty and resilience shown by both the team and the guests. "That's our promise, and we want to say a big thank you to both our team and our guests," he acknowledges. "During Covid, apart from the financial and infrastructural challenges, the most heartening moment for us was the first day we reopened and saw a full house. We had anticipated changes in customer behavior, but seeing our team and restaurant full on that first day was incredibly rewarding. For this, we're truly grateful to our team and our guests."

"We can guarantee that our approach

will never change," Lomaia asserts. "We've weathered the storm of Covid, which was an existential crisis, without compromising on any principle. We'll stay true to our promises, and our guests will continue to get what they come to Strada for."

Lomaia adds a note on their response to challenges during Covid, highlighting their dedication to improving the guest experience. "During Covid, we took the opportunity to renovate our hall, illustrating our readiness to invest in our guests' comfort. Despite the challenges, our guests missed Strada emotionally, not just as a place to eat."

## ORO BY STRADA

Oro stands out with its focus on Georgian cuisine, a departure from Strada's offerings of European and Pan-Asian dishes. Vano Mkheidze and Gia Lomaia discuss the expansion of Strada's sister restaurant, Oro, emphasizing the commitment to quality and authenticity.

"We've just opened two new facilities, and, interestingly, they're both next door to existing Strada locations. We see this as a synergy rather than competition, as each serves different purposes. One is on Marjanishvili, next to Strada, while the other adjoins Strada on Sandro Euli. Oro promises authentic cuisine in a quality environment, filling a gap we saw in the market. We're focusing on maintaining high standards and preserving authentic tastes, which is essential to us."

Lomaia delves into the challenges of maintaining authenticity, particularly with adjika. "Our struggle now is with the complexity of spices," he admits. "They come in July-August, and we go to great lengths to ensure their quality. Thankfully modern technologies have proven to be compatible with our kitchen."

He admits that "maintaining the taste of childhood is crucial to us, as many guests have commented that it takes them back to their childhood."

Mkheidze concludes by highlighting the difference in concept development between Strada and Oro. "Unlike Strada, where the concept was already established, we had to build the concept for Oro from scratch," he explains. "Our focus is on maintaining consistency and quality across all Oro locations, ensuring that the standards we set today will remain the same in ten years' time."

## A DECADE OF CULINARY EXCELLENCE

As Strada reflects on its journey over the past decade, one thing is clear: Its commitment to passion, innovation, and excellence has set it apart in Tbilisi's culinary landscape. As they embark on the next chapter of their culinary adventure, one thing remains certain: Strada will continue to delight diners with its unique blend of flavors and unwavering dedication to quality.





# How War Veterans Can Be Useful for Their Country, Instead of Being a Social Problem

BLOG BY UGO POLETTI, CHIEF EDITOR, THE ODESSA JOURNAL

**P**icture this: A brisk walk along the seashore, wind roaring in your ears, uncomfortable weather. But for your companion, a kite surfer, it's pure ecstasy. That's the kind of perspective we need when we talk about harnessing the potential of war veterans. This is an unavoidable topic for Ukrainian society.

Reintegration of veterans is no longer just a talking point in boardrooms or at ministry round tables. It's the buzz on social media, with civilians sharing stories of interaction with veterans, particularly those battling mental health demons from their war experiences. It's a conversation not just for the elite, but for every individual who cares about Ukrainian society.

But let's be realistic: Reintegration isn't a walk in the park. It's about reshaping lives, finding new roles, and embracing opportunities beyond the status quo. Ukraine's surge in militarization, due to the Russian invasion, isn't just a phase; it's a strategic shift in Ukrainian capabilities, highlighting the need for skilled professionals with combat experience.

There are many difficulties faced by the veteran, their employer, family and others in the process of reintegration. Especially if reintegration is understood as a return to the status quo, a return to a past life, to a past position. This is a difficult path, and borrowing the best world practices is a useful thing. This is a search for a new job, and more importantly, a new role in society, already taking into account the veteran's combat experience.

There are a number of professions where a veteran is the most obvious candidate. From instructors in first aid and tactical medicine to leaders in defense industries, their potential is limitless. Let's examine the example of an instructor in first aid and tactical medicine. There are millions of citizens needing lifesaving skills, and who better to teach



them than those who have faced life and death situations first-hand?

How many citizens should know how to stop the bleeding? Almost every adult who can witness a road accident, household injury, not to mention a missile attack. These are millions of people, without exaggeration, not counting the need for instructors of the Defense Forces of Ukraine, private manufacturing companies, hotels and restaurants. Based on the Western standards of first aid training, which advise retraining in first aid every year or every 2-3 years, we understand that Ukraine needs at least thousands of instructors.

That's where initiatives like the Ukrainian charitable foundation PULSE come in. PULSE became the biggest training organization for tactical medicine. Team-

ing up with the Renaissance Foundation, they're blazing a trail, training veterans to become the next generation of lifesavers and leaders in pre-medical care and tactical medicine.

So, let's not just talk about reintegration; let's embrace it as a societal duty, a chance to empower those who have risked it all for a common goal. It's not just a path backward; it's a leap forward into a future filled with endless possibilities. These are not just challenges; they are opportunities waiting to be seized.

Reintegration of veterans is society's duty to people who risked everything they had, who lost a lot for a common goal. This is a difficult path, in which it is worth studying all possible experience. But this is not necessarily the way back,

on the last day before the service. Sometimes it is a step forward. These are opportunities, as shown by some personal stories.

## THE STORY OF ANDRIY

Andriy Balyuk was a man who tried various professions, in recent years working as an air conditioner installer in Poland. But when the clouds of war gathered over Ukraine, he felt the call of duty and returned to his homeland to join the Armed Forces. There, he went through various positions, from a rifleman to combat medic, and then became a combat lifesaver.

Returning to civilian life was challenging for Andriy. His brother, who also served, is officially considered missing in action but is actually in captivity. It was during this time that Andriy felt a great responsibility to his family. Suppressing his emotions, he tried to find a peaceful profession, but soon realized it was not his path. In the first month after his return, he fell into a spiral of alcohol, succumbing to heavy thoughts and losing faith in himself.

However, fate brought him a new opportunity. Even during his service, he had thought about becoming an instructor. His wife helped him find a job at PULSE, where he became an instructor in tactical medicine. Andriy has been working there for three months now.

## THE STORY OF OLEKSANDR

Oleksandr Kovalchuk is a man with an impressive military and civilian career, who has faced many trials and challenges in his life. Before the war, he worked in a managerial position at a pharmaceutical company, and later opened his own clinic in Odessa. However, when the war broke out, he felt a sense of duty and joined the Armed Forces.

In the Ukrainian Armed Forces, Oleksandr was the head of the evacuation department, where he managed operations to evacuate the wounded from the battlefield. For the past seven months, he has not been rotated out and has been constantly under fire. As a result of these dangerous conditions, he sustained seri-

ous injuries, including damage to his eardrums.

After completing his service in the Armed Forces, he was discharged to care for his father, who required special attention due to disability. He knew that his war experience and psychological difficulties could make his adaptation to civilian life difficult, but he considered it normal, understanding that many people around him do not know the horrors he experienced.

Currently, Oleksandr works as an instructor one week per month, helping other veterans adapt to civilian life and overcome psychological difficulties.

## THE STORY OF MISHA

Misha has a long and complex story. He was a masseur. Massage for Misha was not just about working with muscles; it was about restoring energy and harmony. But life is unpredictable and the war changed everything. Misha became a combat medic, helping those who found themselves in the fiery depths of war, his heart filled with the desire to help, protect, save.

Of course, the war left its scars. War traumas became an integral part of life. Returning to peaceful life was difficult. Massage, which was once just a job, now reminded him of the pain and fear of war. Clients, as if reading his thoughts, felt his past and refused his services. It was like a battle with the police where you couldn't win. So Misha sought new horizons.

And then PULSE opened up - not just a job, but a new chance. A chance to help people without dwelling on their past experiences. Being a tactical medic instructor is more than just a job. It's his way of continuing to help, protect, save. His hands now heal wounds. And although the past will always be a part of him, he is ready to move on, opening a new chapter in his life.

\*Written by Ugo Poletti on contents offered by PULSE, Ukrainian charity organization, based in Odessa, an authorized training center focused on tactical medicine. <https://www.pulse.charity/en>

## CULTURE

# Gaining N Dimensions

BLOG BY TONY HANMER

**I**'ve been saying to my friends in Georgia, now that we're back home, "For a country with only two dimensions, the Netherlands sure has a lot of depth." I refer, of course, to the Low Countries' lack of almost and height, in the sense of mountains. But this is made up for with other amazing things.

Following a few hours' dazed walk through the magnificent and huge Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, the next day we decamped to The Hague, to a place which for me is the most important place in the entire Netherlands: The Escher Museum, in the former palace of the country's Queen Mother. I have loved M. C. Escher's graphic work since I was a boy, but never seen any of it in the originals. Until now.

Once we arrived in the city which hosts the embassies of the world to The Netherlands, we still had to find the museum. Fittingly, even with a map and frequent questions to people on the street, it proved somewhat elusive for a while. I was wondering if we must pass through a 4th dimension to get there... which would be exactly right for a place celebrating an artist whose works frequently seem to do just this. Finally, we arrived

at the celebrated doorway, and I entered a dream.

Escher had demonstrated his talent as a draftsman long before he began playing with tessellations (tilings) and 2D works of impossible 3D spaces. His earlier drawings and lithographic prints, of landscapes for example, show this. He was also, like me, only an amateur mathematician, although math and geometry eventually became more and more important in his work.

He also produced many exquisite examples of what is rightly called wood engraving as a print kind, for the hair-thin fineness of its lines. Some of these pieces are only in black ink on white paper; others require several colors, all perfectly aligned or registered. These prints remind me of my own screen printing from ages 18 to 22, in Canada, involving up to 8



colors. If not perfectly registered, they will give you a mess. Get them right, and it's magic.

And he played with perspective in dazzling ways. Quite a few of his pieces would simply be impossible to achieve in our regular 3D space. Liquid from a waterfall flows back up to the top of the fall. Columns at the back of a building gradually swap places halfway through with those in front. Stairs and floors run in all directions, with people calmly ascending and descending and otherwise traversing them as if gravity had, not no meaning, but many different meanings all at once. Windows on walls, floor and ceilings all show different views of... the same scene. Ants explore a Möbius band, from outside to inside and back again.

Everything I was seeing was original, prints or drawings, signed by the man's own hand. Some pieces, although I have several books of his work, I had never seen before. Others were like old friends met face to face for the first time after a lifetime of long-distance letters. I think my wife also understood me in a whole new way after we came out.

The top floor of the Palace features some interactive works. Like a tilted room in which two people being photographed in the back corners appear one much larger than the other, giant and child. There are mirrored spheres, pieces which change as you walk past them, a



wall-size video which includes a dizzying zoom into a 3D version of the famous Mandelbrot Set fractal, and more.

Of all the things and places in The Netherlands, aside from the dear friends we saw, Escher's museum meant the most to me. It's only fitting, I think too, that the online recreational mathematics magazine which first published my own piece on infinite tessellation finds was also Dutch.

What's left? Rotterdam... Utrecht... the other islands... many more lovely villages and towns. The Van Gogh Museum, to which tickets were all gone for our time. A meeting with elderly Theo Janssen, most important living artist of the coun-

try in my view, who makes wondrous PVC-pipe Strandbeest creatures powered by the wind, and walks them along the country's beaches each summer. Netherlands, you still have plenty of dimensions with which to surprise and delight.

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



# Champion Karateka Luka Khvedeliani on the Benefits of Georgian Karate for Georgia's Youth



INTERVIEW BY KATIE RUTH DAVIES

**L**uka Khvedeliani won gold for Georgia in the senior male -67kg kumite category at the Sofia Open Karate Tournament in April. He is one of many Georgian sportspeople who have won for their home country of late. GEORGIA TODAY sat down with him to find out what inspires him and his hopes for Georgian karate looking ahead. "I started training in karate when I was 7 years old," Khvedeliani tells us. "To tell the truth, it was not my initiative, it was my father's decision, because he was a karateka himself. But he made the right choice, and today karate is the biggest part of my life, and, despite all the dif-

iculties, it is still my sport and it always will be.

## WHAT CHALLENGES HAVE YOU FACED ON THE WAY?

There were a lot of difficulties and challenges: Financial, injuries. There are a thousand factors and obstacles when you take up a sport professionally, but I have been strong and learned from childhood, maybe it was in my character, that I always had to fight for my goals, and that no obstacle could stop me. Plus, with the help of friends and relatives, I don't think anything is insurmountable. I am grateful to the Lord for everything I have.

## TELL US ABOUT YOUR RECENT WIN IN SOFIA. HOW DID YOU DO IT AND WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO

## YOU PERSONALLY, AND TO GEORGIAN KARATE OVERALL?

The competition held in Bulgaria was a very prestigious and principled tournament, and I'm very happy that I managed to win, and to do so in quite difficult battles. If not for my relatives and sponsors, I wouldn't have been able to participate in this competition, so thanks to them! I am at my best when I'm standing on the podium with my country's flag above me!

## WHAT CHALLENGES HAS GEORGIAN KARATE FACED OVER THE YEARS?

I will hold back from answering this question, if you don't mind. I will just

say that I wish karate fair and dignified progress in Georgia.

## TELL US ABOUT YOUNG GEORGIANS' MOTIVATION TO STUDY KARATE, AND THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE COUNTRY'S YOUNG KARATEKAS SO FAR.

Studying karate is a wise choice for young people, because karate forms a child as a person; karate raises disciplined and healthy young people both physically and mentally. At the same time, they learn good self-defense.

We have many champions among us. Just in my club Kalasi, there are many champions training, winners of interna-

tional tournaments, European and world champions in style karate. Of course, this alone is great motivation for a child to start training in karate. Such athletes are examples of a healthy lifestyle.

## WHAT DEVELOPMENT IS STILL NEEDED IN GEORGIAN KARATE? WHAT ARE YOUR HOPES FOR THE FUTURE?

In the future, I would like to see more successes and even better results in Georgian karate. I advise young people who have taken up karate to train hard, so as to become stronger physically and spiritually. This will create a healthy future generation, which is something Georgia very much needs!



Khvicha Kvaratskhelia. Source: sportall.ge

# Paolo Barjija on the Future of Napoli and Khvicha Kvaratskhelia

**T**ransfer expert Paolo Barjija shared insights on the future of the Napoli club and Khvicha Kvaratskhelia on Radio Capri's program Bordo-campo.

"It appears Napoli will start the new season under the guidance of Stefano Pioli. From my sources, it's clear Antonio Conte had no intention of joining Napoli. As an alternative, Fiorentina's coach Vincenzo Italiano is being considered. While there's chatter about Gian Piero Gasperini, he's likely to extend his contract with Atalanta. Pioli currently earns a salary of 4 million euros per season at

Milan, and is unlikely to accept less at Napoli," Barjija opined.

"Conte's interest also continues. While Milan is moving, Napoli fans want a new leader, yet this alone won't resolve all the issues.

"Napoli can't afford to repeat past mistakes before the upcoming season. The president must exercise caution to avoid mistakes. Whether Aurelio De Laurentiis has learned from previous missteps remains unclear. Luciano Spalletti was left to manage alone, despite having capable staff. This stemmed from a poor coaching decision last summer. Hopefully, the new sporting director, Giovanni

Mana, will fare better than his predecessor, Mauro Meluso. Talks of bringing in Romelu Lukaku as a replacement for Victor Osimen are circulating, but unnecessary spending should be avoided. Priority lies in securing three defenders, a central striker, and a midfielder to replace Piotr Zielinski.

"Regarding Khvicha Kvaratskhelia, it's unclear if he intends to extend his contract. In my view, selling may be the best option. It's a complex matter requiring careful consideration—whether to offload now or retain a dissatisfied player in the event of contract non-renewal," he said.



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**I am Georgian and therefore I am European**

Zurab Zhvania, Council of Europe, 1999

