



FOCUS

ON THE "RUSSIAN" LAW

Self-exiled Kremlin critic
Konstantine Sonin tells us what
Georgia can expect next

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Konstantine Sonin. Source: uchicago

11 US Senators: It's a Dark Day for Georgian Democracy

It's a dark day for Georgian democracy, – reads the statement issued by 11 US Senators. The senators say that they are deeply disappointed, but they keep faith in the Georgian people who are fighting for a bright future for their country.

"This is a dark day for Georgian democracy. We are profoundly disappointed by the Georgian parliament's passage of a Russian-style foreign agents bill. This vote was cast in violation of the wishes of hundreds of thousands of Georgians who continue to peacefully protest against legislation that will not only be used to limit free speech but will hinder the advancement of democracy in Georgia. This law, which requires all organizations that receive more than 20% of their budgets from overseas to report as foreign agents, will suppress the important work of civil society in a country where funds are scarce. The passage of this law will fundamentally change Georgia's relationship with the United States and damage aspirations for European Union (EU) membership.

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BONDS		Price	w/w	m/m	COMMODITIES		Price	w/w	m/m
GRAIL 07/28	89.87 (YTM 6.88%)	-0.4%	-0.7%	Crude Oil, Brent (US\$/bbl)	82.38	-0.9%	-8.9%		
SILNET 01/27	100.59 (YTM 8.12%)	-0.5%	-0.7%	Gold Spot (US\$/OZ)	2 358.12	+1.9%	+0.6%		
TBC 06/24	99.97 (YTM 5.97%)	+0.1%	+0.2%						
STOCKS		Price	w/w	m/m	CURRENCIES		Price	w/w	m/m
Bank of Georgia (BGE LN)	GBP 47.20	+0.9%	-6.6%	GEL / USD	2,7000	+0.8%	+1.1%		
Georgia Capital (CGEO LN)	GBP 10.80	-6.2%	-17.3%	GEL / EUR	2,9213	+1.4%	+2.8%		
TBC Bank Group (TBCG LN)	GBP 29.50	+2.4%	-8.1%	GEL / GBP	3,4005	+1.5%	+2.3%		
				GEL / CHF	2,9745	+1.0%	+1.9%		
				GEL / RUB	0,0296	+1.0%	+3.5%		
				GEL / TRY	0,0836	+0.8%	+1.3%		
				GEL / AZN	1,5882	+0.8%	+1.1%		
				GEL / AMD	0,0070	+0.9%	+2.5%		
INDICES		Price	w/w	m/m					
FTSE 100	8 428.13	+1.4%	+5.4%	GEL / UAH	0,0681	-0.1%	+0.4%		
FTSE 250	20 618.52	+1.0%	+5.5%	EUR / USD	0,9243	-0.6%	-1.6%		
DAX	18 716.42	+1.6%	+4.4%	GBP / USD	0,7942	-0.7%	-1.1%		
DOW JONES	39 558.11	+1.7%	+4.1%	CHF / USD	0,9065	-0.2%	-0.8%		
NASDAQ	16 511.18	+1.1%	+2.1%	RUB / USD	91,3342	-0.2%	-2.1%		
MSCI EM EE	48.25	+1.7%	+6.1%	TRY / USD	32,2922	+0.1%	-0.2%		
MSCI EM	1 080.96	+1.2%	+3.8%	AZN / USD	1,6998	-	-0.1%		
SP 500	5 246.68	+1.1%	+2.4%	AMD / USD	388,0700	-0.0%	-1.4%		
MSCI FM	2 329.33	+0.3%	-0.2%						

Ukraine Latest: 8,000 Evacuated from Kharkiv; Russia Says Forces Advancing 'In All Directions'

COMPILED BY ANA DUMBADZE

As the war enters its 812th day, Russian air strikes on the southern Ukrainian cities of Mykolaiv and Kherson have injured at least 25 people, three of them seriously, in an attack that also damaged apartment blocks, homes, schools and a medical facility, while an attack on the Ukrainian city of Dnipro hit infrastructure, killing two civilians.

Russian forces have also taken control of two more settlements in the Kharkiv region and one in the Zaporizhia region, the Defense Ministry says, claiming Russian forces had taken the settlements of Hlyboke and Lukyantsi in the northeastern Kharkiv region, and Robotyne in the southern Zaporizhia region.

Ukraine has had to evacuate some 8,000 people from the Kharkiv region since last week, its emergency services agency says. Intense fighting rages in Vovchansk in the northeast of that region, about 5km from the border with Russia. Oleksiy Kharkivskiy, Kharkiv town's police chief, said the situation was "extremely difficult," while Ukraine's General Staff said Ukrainian troops had managed to "partially" push back some Russian infantry groups but "defensive actions" were ongoing on the town's northern and northwestern fringes.

The Russian Defense Ministry said its air force destroyed 10 long-range Ukrain-

ian missiles launched at Sevastopol in Crimea, which Moscow invaded and annexed from Ukraine in 2014. It did not say whether there was any damage.

Sri Lanka said at least 16 of its citizens had been killed fighting as mercenaries in the war in Ukraine, mostly on the Russian side.

PUTIN VISITS CHINA, BACKS CHINA'S PEACE PROPOSALS FOR UKRAINE

Russian President Vladimir Putin arrived in China on Thursday for a two-day visit, where he will hold talks with Chinese President Xi Jinping. In an interview with Chinese state news agency Xinhua ahead of the visit, he backed China's peace proposals for Ukraine.

Putin thanked China for its efforts in trying to solve the Ukraine "crisis," and said he would brief Xi on the battlefield situation, with Russia claiming that its forces are advancing in all directions in Ukraine.

Putin also noted this week that Russia's total defense and security spending may reach a little more than 8.7 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2024.

EU TO EXPAND SANCTIONS ON RUSSIAN MEDIA

European Union ambassadors agreed to expand sanctions on Russian media to four more outlets, accusing them of publishing propaganda. EU Commissioner for Values and Transparency Vera Jourova said Voice of Europe, RIA



Fighting is raging in the Kharkiv region. Photo by Roman Pilipey/AFP

Novosti, Izvestija and Rossiyskaya Gazeta would be added to the list, which already includes Sputnik and RT. Jourova said Russian funding of EU media, nongovernmental organizations and political

parties would also be banned.

US ADDS \$2BL IN MILITARY AID
US Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced \$2bn in additional military

aid for Ukraine and said Washington was rushing ammunition, armored vehicles, missiles and air defenses to the country to ensure their speedy delivery to the front line.



Organizers canceled the event after anti-LGBTQ activists disrupted the Tbilisi Pride festival on July 8, 2023. Stringer/AFP/Getty Images

Parliament Completes Public Review of Draft Law Prepared against LGBT Propaganda

BY TEAM GT

Chairman of the Parliament, Shalva Papuashvili, said the religious denominations fully support the draft law on "family values and protection of minors."

Papuashvili told journalists after the meeting with the representatives of different religious denominations, that, with this support, the work of the Public Review Commission is finally completed and the general opinions have been transferred to Parliament.

"Today, I had a meeting with the representatives of various religions, including the Georgian Orthodox Church, the Armenian Church, the Jewish community, the Yezidis, the Catholics, the

Muslim community, the Baptist Church, and the representatives of all major religions. It's about protection. We discussed the issues in detail. There is full support from religious denominations regarding this project. With this support, we will finally complete the work of the Public Review Commission and submitted to Parliament the common opinions that have been formed as a result of 11 meetings, and the position of society, regarding this law. There is full support, therefore, it is important for Parliament to continue debating this draft constitutional law in a parliamentary format," Papuashvili said.

On March 25, the executive secretary of Georgian Dream, Mamuka Mdinardze, said that they would initiate constitutional changes.

Michael Roth: We Shouldn't Help "Georgian Nightmare" to "Modify" the "Law on Foreign Agents"

We should not help the "Georgian nightmare" to "modify" the "law on foreign agents" in order to continue destroying liberal democracy, - this is how the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the German Parliament, Michael Roth, who is visiting

Georgia this week, responded to the statement of the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, in which Charles Michel noted that in a telephone conversation with the President and Prime Minister of Georgia, he reiterated his support for finding the best way to resolve the legitimate concerns of the parties.

"What we really need now from the EU and member states is clarity. Let's listen carefully to the President of Georgia, Salome Zurbishvili, the opposition and the civil society. We should not help the "Georgian nightmare" "modify" the "Foreign Agents Act" to continue destroying liberal democracy," he wrote on X.



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MEPs Call on European Council & European Commission to Review EU-Georgia Relations

BY TEAM GT

We regret the adoption of the "Foreign Agents Law" by the Parliament of Georgia. We are very disappointed that the ruling majority has ignored the concerns of human rights monitors and international partners, including the EU and the US, - noted a joint statement issued by MEPs David McAllister and Sven Mikser.

"We call on the Georgian authorities to withdraw the law before it causes a deeper division within Georgia and creates an even greater threat to the country's international status and its European future," the statement said.

The MEPs express their solidarity with the Georgian people, who, according to them, defend democratic values and hold demonstrations for the Euro-Atlantic future of their country.

"The Government of Georgia must immediately de-escalate and refrain from further use of force against peaceful protesters, opposition politicians, non-governmental organizations and independent media protesting the law." "Any violence or intimidation towards the participants of the rally is a violation of the right to peaceful protest and is therefore unacceptable," the statement said.

The MEPs say that creating a friendly environment for civil society and media freedom is the basis of any democracy and a crucial requirement for EU membership.

"We call on the European Council and



MEP David McAllister. Source: IG

the European Commission to review the EU-Georgia relations, including our political and financial support for the country. We call on the Commission to immediately give an oral assessment of how the "foreign agents" law will affect the process of Georgia's accession to the European Union, as already proposed by 12 foreign ministers," the MEPs said in a statement.

In parallel, on Thursday, the chairs of the foreign relations committees of the parliaments of the USA, the European

Union and 14 European countries issue a joint statement: "We will never abandon the Georgian people who have bravely displayed their steadfast commitment to democratic values through peaceful resistance, nor will we hesitate to hold accountable those responsible for enacting this Russian-style law and for the brutal targeting of nonviolent demonstrators, including by Bidzina Ivanishvili and his cronies. To the Georgian people, we declare: You are not alone."

11 US Senators: It's a Dark Day for Georgian Democracy

Continued from page 1


"As we warned in our letter to Prime Minister Kobakhidze, passage of this bill will require Congress to consider a shift in US policy toward Georgia to reflect the new political landscape in Georgia. As we previously cautioned, these measures may include sanctions on those responsible for undermining democracy, visa bans and reconsideration of direct US aid. As members of Congress who hold deep affection for the Georgian people and have championed strong bipartisan and bilateral ties, we will continue to support and uplift the voice of the people - 79 percent of which consistently support EU membership. And although today is a dark day, we continue to believe in the Georgian people who fight for a brighter future for their country."

Last month, Shaheen and Risch sent a bipartisan letter to the Prime Minister of Georgia following the re-introduction of this bill urging the government to reconsider it. Shaheen participated as an election monitor in Georgia with Risch in 2012. Last year, Shaheen, along with Durbin, traveled to Georgia and Romania to meet with heads of state, members of legislature and representatives from civil society to discuss the nations' bilateral relationships, as well as the geopolitical importance of the Black Sea region. Shaheen spoke out against the first introduction of the Georgia Dream's foreign agents law, noting

that it resembles laws passed in Russia. In June 2021, Shaheen led a bipartisan group of lawmakers to Eastern Europe, including Georgia and Ukraine.


In March 2021, Shaheen held a US Senate Foreign Relations Committee Subcommittee hearing on bolstering democracy in Georgia and previously introduced a bipartisan resolution reaffirming US support for a pro-democracy future for Georgia. Senator Shaheen has also successfully led bipartisan legislation in the US Senate to establish a US policy toward the Black Sea region", reads the statement, which is signed by US Senators Jeanne Shaheen, a senior member of the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee and Chair of the Europe and Regional Security Cooperation Subcommittee, Jim Risch, Ranking Member of the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, along with US Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chair Ben Cardin and US Senators Chris Coons, Dick Durbin, Roger Wicker, Tim Kaine, Richard Blumenthal, Pete Ricketts, Lindsey Graham and Thom Tillis.




The draft law "On the transparency of foreign influence" has been approved. The parliament passed the draft in the third reading with 84 votes. 30 deputies voted against. With this, the process of parliamentary consideration of the draft law has ended. The project will be submitted to the President for signature. President plans to veto, however, Georgian Dream has enough mandates in the parliament to overcome the veto.




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The name of the restaurant Xeme speaks for itself, as it means the arctic fork-tailed gull.



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A Press-Conference or a Political Faceoff?



Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze. Source: sakartvelosambebi

OP-ED BY NUGZAR B. RUHADZE

Why don't we use some civic consciousness and call a spade a spade? I am talking about the May 10th press-conference organized by Georgia's Prime Minister, the one intended to generate His Excellency's answers to questions given by the participating political

talk-show hosts of various Georgian TV stations. As simple as that!

According to the most commonly used encyclopedic definition, a press-conference is an interview given to the ladies and gentlemen of the press by a public figure, in compliance with pre-arranged appointments, in order to make an announcement or to answer the attending journalists' questions. This is the classic format of an otherwise routine interaction between the country's political spectrum and journalists (reporters,

correspondents, broadcasters, announcers, columnists, anchors, newscasters, program-hosts and other professionals of that ilk). Technically, it all looks and sounds very plain: At a press-conference, somebody leads the show, allowing the journalists to voice their questions in turn, and the respondent seeks to satisfy the mostly well-adjusted inquisitiveness of the questioning side. To compare, a political faceoff is a direct confrontation, based on a certain important argument between two people or groups, condu-

cive to sharp opposition, often in a televised debate. Both are universally practiced and entertained by the wider world, be they democracies or authoritarian regimes, in exactly the same way. In short, nothing new or special!

With these two definitions in mind, we can say the aforementioned meeting between the Georgian media and the current head of the country's executive branch was not a regular press-conference, as it was initially qualified, but a pure faceoff; a real political showdown! And not the one routinely performed by leading politicians, but here run by journalists representing definite political forces in place of the real leaders of those powers.

Apropos, I am not prepared to make a judgement as to who is right and who is wrong. My story is not about 'good-guy-bad-guy' categories, it is only about the accuracy of a press-conference per se, one of the most significant formats of our local political procedure, the fairness of the homegrown usage of the universally adopted journalistic protocol, and the helpfulness of the suggested style of government-media interaction for Sakartvelo.

No doubt, most of our watching public was flabbergasted at the egregious breach of all those constraints, but that's not the worst of the occurring problems. The main dilemma is whether these kinds of encounters between the government and media representatives should be perpetuated or disqualified. There was not even a vestige of European spirit and upbringing in what we were compelled

to witness at that dramatic soiree of political hostility. I have spent tens of years of my grownup life in the West, and I have never seen anything like it—where a political discourse between the government and a country's means of mass communication is always meant to find out where the truth lies, grab it if possible, and put it right to service the nation, which, speaking technically, should be achieved via questions and answers, as there is no other way to do a job of that kind. A political argument, even an utterly confrontational one, demands a relevant environment for it to take place in, and a pertinently applicable circumstance for the effort to yield a favorable outcome. Political competition and the battles thereof are a must in our sophisticated times, and we have seen many of those in the last thirty-odd years of political life in Georgia.

Head-to-head political clashes are a norm when there is a conflict out in the battlefield. Verbal skirmishes in the fight are OK, too. Even the kicking up of occasional rows in Parliament no longer comes as much of a surprise, as any dispute is bound to be ripe with anger and aggression. Political antagonism is also a regular form seen. But why such unbridled hostility, anger and physical resentment during those challenging quarrels? Why so much venom and contempt? This political style pushes the whole process off the main track, thus turning a customary press-conference into a political faceoff, which, most significantly, prevents the truth from being able to surface and work.

FMs of Latvia, Estonia, Iceland and Lithuania Join Protesters Against "Russian" Law

BY TEAM GT

Baiba Braže, Margus Tsahkna, Thórdís Kolbrún Reykþjórd Gylfadóttir, and Gabrielius Landsbergis, the Foreign Ministers of Latvia, Estonia, Iceland, and Lithuania, respectively, who are on an official working visit in Georgia this week, on Wednesday night joined protesters on Rustaveli Avenue to protest the "Transparency of Foreign Influence" law.

The appearance of European politicians on Rustaveli Avenue was met with applause.

They claimed that they were there to show support to and solidarity with the protesters.

After listening to speeches from the foreign ministers, the anthems of Georgia and the European Union were played. The participants in the rally chanted: "Europe!"

Within the frames of their visit to Georgia, the heads of the foreign ministries had met with President Salome Zurbishvili, Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze, as well as the Speaker of the Parliament Shalva Papuashvili, the opposition, and representatives of the non-governmental sector.

The government's press office noted their conversation with the Prime Minister focused on Georgia's European integration and the country's progress on this path.

"The Georgian Government's efforts toward drawing closer to the EU were underlined, and the role of support from international partners on this path was emphasized. The Prime Minister stated that Georgia is the leader among the candidate countries in every direction, be it democracy, the rule of law, human rights, or economic development rates, a fact that the EU should respond to with adequate steps.

"At the meeting, the Foreign Ministers expressed critical views concerning both the Law on Transparency of Foreign



Foreign Ministers of Latvia, Estonia, Iceland and Lithuania meet with PM Kobakhidze. Source: 1TV

Influence and the Law on Restricting LGBT Propaganda.

"The Head of Government explained that the Law on Transparency seeks to strengthen state sovereignty and envisages just one thing, namely the annual declaration of finances of relevant organizations. Consequently, the law will play a key role in meeting one of the main requirements of the EU by reducing polarization in Georgia," reads the statement.

"The only war party is in Moscow, it is the party that attacked Georgia in 2008," Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis said at the press conference following the above meetings.

He went on to claim that those who value freedom have an obligation to fight and win.

"The only war party there is, is in Mos-

cow. This is the party that attacked Georgia in 2008, this is the party that attacked Ukraine in 2014, and this is the party currently waging a war against Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. It is the obligation of those who value freedom to fight this party and win this war," he said.

Estonian Foreign Minister Margus Tsahkna also commented on the narrative about the "global war party," calling it a "false" direction.

"It's not a joke, it's serious, and it's the Kremlin's narrative, and even debating it here is something we don't want to do, because it's a false narrative, a false and wrong direction to be heading in," he said. "There is a great desire to join the European Union, there is a great desire to share the same values, and there is no place for Kremlin narratives in this

world."

"Visa liberalization is not a guaranteed thing," he went on to note. "If things go bad, the EU will impose sanctions," especially considering, he said, that instead of fulfilling the European Commission's required nine steps, "the Georgian government seeks to adopt the mentioned law. This is an example of a completely opposite direction, not towards the European Union, but in the direction of another city," he said.

"The main message is that the Government of Georgia cannot adequately appreciate that we have already decided on Georgia's path to the European Union, through visa liberalization and many other aspects. These things are not guaranteed. Of course, if things go from bad to worse, my position is clear – the EU can introduce sanctions. But this is not

what the Georgian people want. My message was very clear, these things are not guaranteed and the responsibility lies with the Georgian government, not the Georgian people," said Tsahkna.

"With this law, the path to the European Union is not only more difficult, but there is no path at all," Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis commented.

"We came here with a very clear message that we support people. 86% of the population of Georgia, who want to be a part of the European Union, should understand that the European Union is with them. That was one message.

"The second message is to the government: We cannot be deceived that the law, which is still being passed, it has passed the third reading and now awaits the veto of the president – we cannot be deceived that this law has anything to do with transparency, even though it is presented in such a form.

"It is clear to the colleagues in our countries why so many representatives of civil society call it the 'Russian law,' and today we know for sure that this law is against civil institutions, non-governmental organizations that oppose government policies. This law can be used to silence these institutions and goes against the most basic, fundamental principles of democracy on which the European Union stands.

"I can't believe that countries like ours – Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia – could have joined the European Union if we had had such a law as that currently being considered in Georgia. So our message is very clear: the path to the EU is not just more difficult with this law, there is no path, and it is painful for me to say these words, but they have to be said.

"I hope the government got the message. They still have a chance to simply let this law go, as they did in 2023, after a presidential veto. Then we can sit down together with the institutions of the European Union, together with our representatives, and really work to advance Georgia on the Euro-Atlantic path," said Landsbergis.

Konstantin Sonin - The Georgian Government Is Playing with Fire



Konstantin Sonin. Source: amnonews

INTERVIEW BY VAZHA TAVBERIDZE

Self-exiled Kremlin critic, economist Konstantin Sonin was a senior official at the Moscow-based Higher School of Economics and New Economic School. Since 2015, Sonin has been a professor at the University of Chicago. As he has lived through the Russian version of the new law Georgia's ruling party are set on introducing, RFE/RL's Georgian Service sat down with him to pick through the details.

"This is by no means a purely Georgian phenomenon, or Russian, for that matter. All undemocratic governments are prone to try and blame outside forces, foreigners, for their own shortcomings," he tells us. "The government is great, it's the foreigners that are to blame, the foreign influence is trying to undo all our good work.' The government blames the opposition, saying 'they oppose us not because we aren't performing well, or even because they disagree with us, no - they oppose us because they are being paid by 'others,' by foreigners, Americans, aliens, extraterrestrials,' you name it. This was the favorite tactic of Zimbabwean dictator Robert Mugabe: He blamed America for everything. Nobody knew or cared much about Zimbabwe or Mugabe in Washington, but he was blaming them for everything nonetheless. Georgian Dream, in a sense, are typical of people in power. Even in democratic countries, politicians will sometimes bring up foreign influence as an excuse. It is very deep rooted.

"Georgian Dream is pushing for this law because that's best the way to entrench

Over these last 30 years, Georgian civil society has built up very strong resistance to encroachments on civil society rights

Unlike Russia, Georgia has a lot more democratic institutions and very strong democratic traditions

themselves in power, and to claim that the opposition is against them not because they are corrupt and performing badly, but because there's some foreign influence that is impeding their 'glorious' path towards progress. Putin in Russia has been extremely successful with this tactic, to the extent that, right now, in



Source: FB

Russia, they call some of the most important contemporary writers Russia has - Dmitry Glukhovsky and Boris Akunin, 'agents.' Obviously, there is no basis for it, they aren't agents; Putin just wants to silence his critics. Georgian Dream seems to be trying to do the same."

WHAT WOULD THE NEXT LOGICAL STEP BE IN THIS, IF THE RUSSIAN EXPERIENCE IS ANYTHING TO GO BY?

Unlike Russia, I think that Georgia actually has a lot more democratic institutions and very strong democratic traditions.

They will try to use this law to harass opposition, civil society, media. I'm pretty sure they do not care about foreign influence at all. They will obviously use this law as leverage in the upcoming elections. If they are able to curtail opposition activity, they will probably win not only the majority, but even the constitutional majority, and will try to change the constitution to further entrench themselves. If we go by the Hungarian example, as Orban also seems to be a big influence here, then next will come the media and media ownership, basically, silencing all kinds of independent media. This would be a natural next step.

RIGHT NOW WE SEEM TO BE AT AN IMPASSE - PEOPLE ARE NOT WILLING TO BUDGE AND THE GOVERNMENT IS NOT WILLING TO BACK DOWN. WHAT NEXT, AGAIN, IF WE TAKE THE RUSSIAN EXPERIENCE INTO ACCOUNT?

Over these last 30 years, Georgian civil society has built up very strong resistance when it comes to encroaching on civil society rights. One way it could escalate is that the government does something stupid, for example, as Yanukovich did in Ukraine in 2014, when he decided that if he just shoots people, they will disperse and he will claim victory. The second he did that, he immediately lost all support, including of police and the special services. So in this stalemate, I think the government is playing with fire. If they dare to go and shoot at people, I imagine even those who are on the fence, trying to remain neutral, will speak out against them.

Why would the Georgian security services or police want to be run by Russians? They wouldn't tolerate it, even if the government were to give such an order

IF PEOPLE VOTE THEM OUT IN OCTOBER, WILL THEY RELINQUISH THE REINS, WITH SO MUCH NOW TO LOSE?

It is a common fear in young democracies, isn't it? But, in many countries, the governments come to stay in power, and then they lose and have to vacate the seat. In Brazil, there were a lot of expectations about President Bolsonaro, that he would stay even if he lost. He lost, by a very thin margin. And I am pretty sure he would have liked nothing better than to stay, but the army and the police said: "You've lost, this is a democracy, you have to go."

THAT'S ONE SCENARIO. BUT CIVIL SOCIETY AND PROTESTERS FEAR THIS COULD TURN INTO A BELARUS MODEL FOR GEORGIA, EVEN IF GEORGIAN DREAM LOSE AT THE ELECTIONS. HOW BIG IS THE DANGER OF THAT?

I think there is such a risk. Tsikhanouskaya won the elections, but was denied. The protests were huge. But Georgia isn't Belarus - in Georgia, if there were protests of that size, that would easily topple whoever is in government.

LUKASHENKO RELIED ON RUSSIAN GUNS AND TANKS

TO REMAIN IN POWER. AND THE FEAR IS WE COULD SEE A REPEAT OF THAT IN GEORGIA.

I can imagine that Ivanishvili could take money or advice from Russia, but can you imagine Russian people coming to state TV channels or to Georgian police forces and giving them orders and directives, as it was in Belarus?

I think Georgian people would be far less tolerant to such things than people in Belarus were. Belarus never had experience of democracy. So their security, police and so on are far more cohesive with their Russian counterparts. In Georgia, it's a different picture. Why would Georgian security services, police, or the army want to be run by Russians? I don't think they would tolerate that, even if the government were to give such an order.

WHAT DID PUTIN HAVE TO SHOW FOR HIS TWO-PLUS YEAR WAR CAMPAIGN ON HIS INAUGURATION AND MAY 9TH PARADE?

In his inauguration speech, Putin mentioned the war, or, as he calls it, "special military operation," and proceeded to say that it was Russia that got attacked by Ukraine in February 2022, and not vice versa, as absurd as that may seem. I think that he understands, somewhere in the back of his mind, maybe subconsciously, that there's no chance for him to survive in power if Russia recognizes that the war is lost, which means that he has only one other option: To push forward. He desperately needs an exit strategy, but doesn't dare to voice it aloud, to say that we do need to get out of this war somehow. And every day he pushes forward with the war, it worsens his strategic situation.

AND THE RECENT KREMLIN RESHUFFLE? MOST NOTABLY, LONG-SERVING DEFENSE MINISTER SHOIGU BEING REPLACED BY A TECHNICRAT WITH NO MILITARY EXPERIENCE TO SPEAK OF, ANDREI BELOUSOV.

I think that Putin is unhappy with how the war is going and wanted to replace Shoigu. Still, Putin is so paranoid about losing power that he considers only 100% loyal those uncharismatic people with no political base of their own in any position of authority. Belousov was selected for his loyalty and lack of charisma.

WHAT ABOUT PUTIN'S DOMESTIC STANDING? HE HAS TAKEN ALL RIVALS OFF THE BOARD- SURVIVED PRIGOZHIN, GOT RID OF NAVALNY. CAN HE STOP LOOKING OVER HIS SHOULDER?

At the moment, he does have the loyalty of his police, secret services and the army. But if tomorrow there is an announcement that says the Security Council had gathered and decided to put comrade Putin into a retirement home, will people rush to the streets and demand that Putin is brought back? Absolutely not. So his hold on power seems strong until it suddenly isn't anymore.

WITH THAT IN MIND, DO YOU SEE HIM SERVING HIS TENURE TO THE END, ALL THESE LONG 6 YEARS?

He will stay in power until his death or until he is dismissed and put under house arrest. I am not a medical professor privy to his health situation, and I dearly hope that there are still some patriotic people around him who would remove him from power, but if I had to bet, I would say he will die on the throne. And once he is no longer there, we'll see an immediate relief. It's not that everything will change overnight for the better, but it will be a chance for positive development, to make steps in the right direction.

Will Armenia Leapfrog Georgia to EU Accession?



EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan met in Brussels for a three-way summit. Photo by Johanna Geron/AFP via Getty Images

ANALYSIS BY SAAHIL MENON

Though initially sparked by the resurfacing of a “foreign agents bill” that was believed to have been shelved more than a year prior following fierce public backlash, the ongoing demonstrations in Georgia are the culmination of an ever widening gulf between the country’s ruling class and its disenfranchised masses. In a bid to rationalise this legislation’s necessity, billionaire patron and founder of Georgian Dream (GD), Bidzina Ivanishvili, delivered an inflammatory, anti-Western tirade last month that practically amounted to a war cry and made plain the dystopian future he envisions for his native land.

The de facto father of the nation’s stratospheric ascent to Tbilisi’s corridors of power since his 2003 homecoming is attributable to the fortune he amassed in post-USSR Moscow during the 1990s. While it is no secret that he remains beholden to the Russian Federation, reducing Georgia to a wholly-owned subsidiary of an existing occupier was a bridge too far for the irrepressible “Erasmus” generation. The unprecedented crowds that have paralysed parts of the capital are therefore unlikely to fizzle out anytime soon, notwithstanding unwarranted police brutality or the plain-clothed goons hired by GD to rough up peaceful protesters.

What started off as mild sympathy towards Russia in the aftermath of its “special military operation” has metastasised into a borderline fetish for Kremlin-inspired governance. Ivanishvili’s alarmism regarding the national security threat posed by overseas-funded NGOs and independent media outlets is somewhat ironic, seeing as he and his functionaries are arguably the biggest purveyors of malign foreign interests. Former Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili played a pivotal role in launching the Sino-Georgian Strategic Partnership earlier this year, just as the Collective West is trying to de-risk and decouple from the People’s Republic. Much like the Hungarians and Serbs, the Georgians have fallen hook, line and sinker for Beijing’s “sugar daddy” diplomacy, which is tacitly passed off as “win-win” cooperation by BRI-focused Chinese President Xi Jinping. It is worth recalling that Garibashvili was part of a CCP-devised “revolving door” strategy which saw him land a cushy advisory role on the board of CEFC China Energy in 2018 and parachuted back into frontline politics three years later to do the bidding of his paymasters.

Meanwhile, the current incumbent Irakli Kobakhidze appears content to serve as a mouthpiece for the ultranationalist wing of United Russia and echo their sensationalist talking points on Ukraine, as well as the culture wars, militant wokery and fifth columns accelerating Europe’s demise. As for commander-in-chief Salome Zurbashvili, she routinely makes it out to seem as

though the Georgian Presidency is ceremonial and that the buck does not stop with her when it comes to the wholesale “Russification” of local society. Her condemnation of the transparency law and the token veto she has pledged to exercise after its official adoption by Parliament are pure theater. Had Zurbashvili been sincere about heeding the will of the people and wanting Georgia to join the so-called “European Family,” she would have used her executive authority to pardon incarcerated ex-President Mikheil Saakashvili. Needless to say, Georgia’s EU candidacy is no fait accompli, and risks ending up in a Turkey-esque deep-freeze should an already ailing Saakashvili suffer the same fate as deceased Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny. Unless Brussels and Washington tighten the noose around the necks of Tbilisi’s compromised leadership via targeted individual sanctions, GD will continue to go rogue and foist one rude awakening after the other upon ordinary citizens.

On that note, the Eurocrats bear some degree of culpability for Georgia’s Eurasian pivot and not doing enough to cut the one-man oligarchy it is captured by down to size. Window dressing initiatives like Air Schengen and refugee burden-sharing not only undermine the value proposition of being in the EU, but also lay bare its two-tier membership policy and the different set of standards newer entrants are held to. The fact that Romania and Bulgaria had to settle for “partial” admission into the world’s largest border-

less travel zone after a 13-year wait is emblematic of the second-class treatment peripheral member states are extended. Worse still, the bloc readily endorsing Austria’s watered-down “Schengen lite” proposal for Bucharest and Sofia without any pushback shows that there is limited political will for expanded free movement, despite statements to the contrary by its top brass. European Commission Head Ursula Von der Leyen is particularly notorious for speaking out of both sides of her mouth on this issue - having repeatedly hinted at the EU’s desire to build on its 2004 eastward enlargement, yet simultaneously obstructed the yellow brick road to Brussels with steep, and often impracticable demands for existing candidates to fulfil.

At the same time, Albania’s recent migration pact with Italy sets a dangerous precedent, as it could encourage fellow Mediterranean jurisdictions to pile on and sub-contract their asylum woes to the Western Balkans or South Caucasus. For a tourism-dependent economy like Georgia, it does not make business sense to forgo the steady revenue stream generated from affluent Middle Eastern and CIS vacationers by aligning their entry requirements with those of the EU or potentially becoming a regional “Rwanda” amid the Israel-Hamas conflict. Tbilisi is instead seeking to position itself as the nerve centre of the “multipolar world order” Putin salivates over and has interestingly tied up with the Asian Development Bank (ADB) to nurture this ambition. Kobakhidze even announced plans to construct a new international airport near the Vaziani Military Base with a less Europe-

centric flight network and the capacity to accommodate 19 million passengers - a sizeable chunk of which are expected to be from the BRICS+ nations and other key emerging markets.

Neighboring Armenia, by contrast, has found itself on a collision course with Moscow over the past couple of years, and has emerged far more amenable to EU membership as a result. Whether it means getting rid of Russian boots on the ground, putting its Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) participation and funding on ice, or signing up to the International Criminal Court (ICC) mere weeks after an arrest warrant was issued for Putin, there are tell-tale signs of Yerevan looking to break into the European fold at any cost. Aside from the laudable baby steps taken by Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan to emancipate Armenia from the Kremlin’s long arm, his administration is pursuing a values-based foreign policy agenda in sync with Western expectations. As the Georgian government presses ahead with frantic “speed-dating” overtures vis-à-vis authoritarian regimes in the Global South, Yerevan is bolstering its engagement with like-minded democracies such as France, Greece and even India. Equally praiseworthy is Armenia’s determination to leave no stone unturned in establishing a modus vivendi with Azerbaijan. Pashinyan’s deeply unpopular decision to cede four villages to Baku could, with the passage of time, prove to be a diplomatic masterstroke if lasting peace along the border is secured and Armenia deservedly supplants Georgia as the Transcaucasian frontrunner for EU accession.



Source: apa.az

BUSINESS

Financial Fluctuations Seen in Troubled Georgia



Source: trend

BY TEAM GT

On Wednesday, following Tuesday’s announcement by the government that is was going ahead with the law on Transparency of Foreign Influence, the share prices of Georgian companies fell sharply on the

London Stock Exchange. By 2pm, the share price of Bank of Georgia Group PLC had decreased by 13% and TBC Bank Group PLC by 10%.

On Thursday, the National Bank sold 60,000,000 US dollars at the foreign exchange auction.

“At the foreign exchange auction of the National Bank of Georgia held on May 16, 2024, NBG sold 60,000,000 USD. The average weighted exchange rate was 2.7580.”

Natia Turnava and Lasha Khutsishvili Participate in the Economic and Financial Roundtable Dialogue of the EU

Georgia, as a candidate country for the European Union, took part in the economic and financial dialogue of the European Union and partner countries for the first time this year.

Minister of Finance Lasha Khutsishvili, Deputy Minister of Finance Ekaterine Guntsadze, Head of International Relations Department of the National Bank of Georgia Giorgi Edilashvili and Acting President of the National Bank of Georgia

Natia Turnava participated in the dialogue.

After the meeting, conclusions will be published that summarize the evaluation of the Economic Reform Program (ERP) prepared by Georgia and other candidate countries.



On Some Peculiarities of Modern Economic Security

ANALYSIS BY VICTOR KIPIANI,
GEOCASE CHAIRMAN

The 1886 short story 'How Much Land Does a Man Need?' was written by the famous Russian writer Leo Tolstoy. The main character of the story, a poor peasant, dreams of becoming a landowner. In response to this dream, fate puts him to the test. He buys a plot of land with borrowed money and then sells it for a profit. With the proceeds, he buys other plots of land, but even this is not enough for him, and he turns his attention to the land of a neighboring community. And there he is given this condition: In exchange for a small amount of money, they will give him as much land as he can walk in a day so that he can return before sunset. He agrees and sets out on his journey. However, the farther he goes, therefore gaining more land for himself, he cannot get enough. Meanwhile, the sun has shifted to the west and the peasant grows weary. He turns and hurries back, but fatigue does its work. The main character of the story is sweats; his heartbeat gets faster and faster. Although he reaches the neighboring community before sunset, and the head of the community, on seeing him, shouts that he has acquired a lot of land, the words instantly lose their meaning, because the main character of the story falls down and dies. The neighboring community has no choice but to dig a small grave for the peasant. "This is all the land," concludes the author of the story, "that a man needs."

The general moral of this tale is less relevant to us in this case. It is much more interesting to analyze this small work from an economic point of view; in particular, to see it through the prism of "behavioral economics." Accordingly, it is possible to relate the character's seemingly understandable economic motive in making decisions of economic content with moralistic considerations, including considerations of sufficiency, reasonable distribution, and necessary balance. The presence or absence of these and other limitations in economic thinking, as well as their quality, laid the groundwork for the institutionalization of various schools. And the endless struggle between these schools has left the economic community with the writings of many outstanding economists, among them Maynard Keynes, Milton Friedman and others.

We decided to cite this particular story as an introduction (a rather unusual one) to the main topic.

ON CERTAIN TRENDS IN THE GLOBAL ECONOMY

At the very beginning of this chapter, we offer the reader this characterization: What is happening in the global economic system today is not the result of an orientation toward prudent judgment and cooperation, but rather of a "policy" of economic influence dictated by brute force and material constraints. Various sources refer to this policy as "Phase four globalization," "the new Bretton Woods system," and other exotic names. However, in our view, today's relations have little to do with systematicity and even less to do with globalization. Moreover, as we have said in the recent past, today we are even in the conditions of a kind of "first world economic war."

The requirement of objectivity makes it necessary to note the moderate optimism of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for the current year. In order not to overload this article with individual numerical parameters, let us sum

it up by saying that the IMF indicates that the world economy is "particularly resilient" and that, despite a series of crises (pandemic, record inflation, unusually high interest rates, protracted conflicts, etc.), it turned out it has still been possible to move it into a "soft landing" mode. The IMF also refers to the promising functioning of a number of system-forming national economic systems (USA, China, India, Brazil, etc.). However, despite the short-term economic "upswing", according to the assessment of the IMF, there are also signs of their "downswing" on the near horizon of economic processes, which is connected with global geopolitical processes and increased competition (and in some places competition "without rules") in industrial policy between leading countries, and arm-twisting in trade relations.

Yet, in terms of the overall picture, it should be emphasized that the liberalization of business relations globally has not had the desired effect - the establishment of such an order of relations in trade and business on the basis of coincidence of interests, which would prevent systemic conflicts or wars. Accompanying symptoms of the aforementioned economic warfare around the world should also be considered:

- (a) The crisis of economics based only on the interests of corporate capital, on so-called capitalist democracy;
- (b) The inability of global economic institutions to properly manage current processes, and;
- (c) The resurgence of economic nationalism.

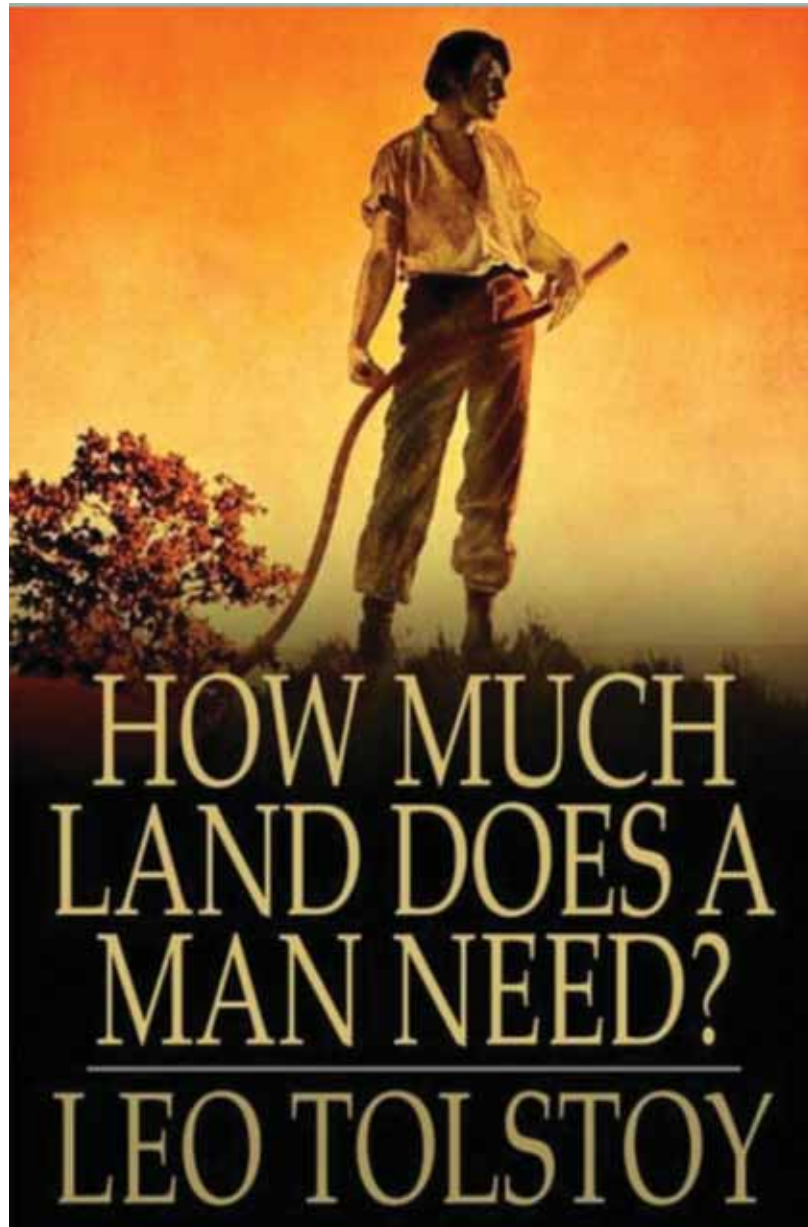
Together, these three factors have made it extremely difficult to synchronize the world's economies and to allocate the time and resources necessary to effectively overcome existing contradictions.

Along with all other possible negative phenomena, the economic policy devoid of rationality and cooperation, its unmanageability on a global scale, and self-isolation, have exacerbated another extremely dangerous syndrome - the so-called "enemy from within". Instead of searching for and investigating objective causes, the "obstruction and sabotage" of both internal and external origin were identified as the source of inequality and social imbalance caused by the vices of economic governance. This approach was considered politically more "safe" and "acceptable" than critically evaluating oneself and looking for the real reasons in one's own political workings.

It is also worth noting that calls for a global renewal of the economic order, especially after the dysfunction caused in 2008, have never subsided. However, two things have usually been missing to realize these calls: Actionable ideas and courageous leaders. Given the absence of these two, the assertion of populism and radicalism in the domestic political process of a number of countries, the close convergence of geopolitics and economics, and the revealing of deep problems as a result of renewed Russian aggression in Ukraine, have turned the following issues into central problems: How ready is an economy based only on capital and corporatism for new challenges? Does it have enough will and desire to rebuild in time? And in case of negative answers to the first two questions: How and by what means can we all continue to develop and coexist in the conditions of the created economic and social disorder?

THE "DAVOSIZATION" OF ECONOMIC THINKING

In modern conditions, one of the flawed features of politics in general, including economic politics, is its detachment from



The cover of Leo Tolstoy's book. Source: kobo.com

reality, its fulfillment with a look in a "crooked mirror". The corresponding result is here, before our eyes, in our daily lives.

As we have mentioned, even the global economy has been unable to escape this crooked approach. This problem can be conditionally called "Davos disease" - that is, a situation when, in order to talk about overcoming global challenges, a certain representative forum (say, in Davos) gathers people who in many ways personally contributed to the creation of these challenges. One visible manifestation of this flawed approach is the significant disconnection between the corporate world and the inclusive development agenda. Such a disconnection, in turn, creates fertile ground for social upheaval, which ultimately undermines the foundations of security, including social integrity and cohesion.

It is clear that "Davosization" in its modern version will find its explanation, which has for many years been linked to the impressive economic effect of the so-called Washington Consensus in the world economy. At some point, however, the reins of the process were lost in this regard as well, the proper focus dispersed, and the capacity for critical evaluation diminished. The result was a single and universal standard for all categories of the economy - whether developed or developing - the essence of which was an excessive focus on profit at the expense of social cohesion and resilience. Later, this standard was transformed into extremely dangerous forms for global and national security, such as populism, radicalism, and extremism.

Thus, since the 2004 meeting that Samuel Huntington called "The Men of Davos," the pressing economic and at the same time national security issue is

still finding the right balance between the role of the state and market deregulation. The proper answer to this question is likely to be one of taming cheap populism and irresponsible nationalism, which threaten the balance of the global system more than wars, and instead of the stability of international relations based on the so-called "four freedoms" (freedom of movement of goods, movement of people, movement of services and capital), will lead to deeper fragmentation and disintegration.

"WORLD ECONOMIC WAR I"

"World Economic War I" is entering a new phase of confrontation between the geographic centers. The outcome of this confrontation will largely depend on:

- (a) Control of financial flows;
- (b) Access to modern technologies;
- (c) Control of information (including personal information) data traffic over transmission cables;
- (d) Advancement in the field of intellectual property.

We mentioned the changing face of military conflict, and today we can also speak equally of the new character of economic rivalry. It is a given when, for instance, currency is no longer just a means of payment, energy is no longer just for industrial development, and food supply is no longer characterized only by the characteristics of commodity-trading transactions - each, together with other instruments of economic influence, will be used for the tasks of dominating global relations, spatial influence and imposing their own geopolitical will.

When considered on a practical level, the dividing line of global rivalry today is between the United States and the People's Republic of China. The relative

advantage at this stage is on the side of the US, which, briefly speaking, can be explained by several circumstances. One of them is the status of the US dollar as the world's currency. Besides, settlements in dollars are made using bank deposits in the same currency, which essentially means that virtually every bank in the world must have access to the US Federal Reserve system. As a result, a problem-free relationship with this system is a prerequisite for normal business relations with the rest of the world. Related to the same topic is the fact that after the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001, the famous SWIFT system shares data with the US authorities. Given the above, the excitement over promoting another currency as an alternative to the US dollar is unsurprising.

The situation with data transmission cables is also very interesting. In particular, when some cable crosses US territory, the flow of transmitted information is "doubled" with the help of a special appliance: One flow continues to the final recipient of information, and the other one heads to the relevant US agencies. This and related topics (including domestic law prohibitions on the transfer of personal data on national security grounds) relate to a new type of challenge in today's global economy: Digital sovereignty. The role of technology companies with "quasi-sovereignty" in global processes, a powerful new category of international relations, should also be noted here.

For now, the US also has an advantage in the intellectual property arena, which, inter alia, extends to modern technology: Semiconductors.

This and other considerations explain efforts to advance another settlement currency as an alternative to the dollar, the scandal surrounding China's Huawei, making industrial espionage the "norm," etc.

That is why today, more than ever, "economic security" and "economically secure country" are categories of equal importance and relevance, regardless of the scale and characteristics of a country and its economic system.

"DEMOCRATIC ECONOMICS" - A NEW CATEGORY OF SECURITY

At first glance, "democratic economics" may seem strange. However, apart from the factor of the interconnectedness of economics and politics, without sound, fair and equal economic opportunities, political stability and national security are virtually impossible to achieve. This is the lesson of global processes; the same lesson should serve us Georgians a necessary favor for building our own security on the right economic formation.

Accordingly, the reservation of the requirement of "democracy" to the economy in general, and to the market economy in particular, is not accidental. It has been pointed out many times, here and in other publications, that declining incomes of citizens, poverty and contemporary general cultural changes create a strong basis for growing inequalities and threats in society. This development is accompanied by a hundredfold increased risk for countries where, in the context of a deficit of political dialogue and institutional development, and even more so in an unfriendly geopolitical environment, national security is particularly vulnerable.

As to vulnerability, we would note that the exceptional "weakness" of a country at such times is the erosion of its state institutions. One of the unfavorable symptoms of the same process is the alienation of citizens, hopelessness,

Continued on page 9

Investing in Georgia's East-West Highway – the Country's Key Trade and Transport Artery

BY KATIE RUTH DAVIES

Georgia's East-West Highway carries over 60% of Georgia's transit trade and cargo transit, as well as accommodating citizen and tourism flow. It is also celebrated as an asset to the country's unique geographic location that helps connect Central Asia with Europe and East Asia.

Funding for the project has been provided by three main international donors: The Asian Development Bank (ADB), the World Bank (WB), and the European Investment Bank (EIB), while construction has been undertaken by various Chinese companies. The cost of constructing the highway was set at approximately GEL 3 billion (EUR 1 billion), and after experiencing significant delays, it is now slated for completion by the end of 2026.

The Asian Development Bank in particular helped improve four sections of the 410km (Tbilisi to Sarpi) East-West Highway, investing \$300 mln for the Khevi-Ubisa section, \$278 mln for the Zestaponi-Shorapani-Argveta section, \$115 mln for the Kobuleti Bypass and \$114 mln for the Batumi Bypass.

WHAT IS THE EAST-WEST HIGHWAY?

The Georgian S1 route (Georgian: ბ1, also known as Tbilisi-Senaki-Leselidze and the East-West Highway), is a "road of international importance" with a registered length of 542.7 kilometers, making it the longest Georgian highway route. It runs from Tbilisi via Mtskheta, Gori, Khashuri, Zestaponi, Kutaisi, Samtredia, Ureki, Kobuleti to Batumi then Sarpi on the Black Sea coast. It also veers north via Senaki, Zugdidi, Sukhumi and Gagra to the border with Russia at Leselidze, in the northwestern tip of the country. After crossing the Georgia-Russia border in breakaway Abkhazia, the highway continues to Sochi and Krasnodar as the A147. It is part of the European E60, E97 and E117 routes, and Asian Highways AH5, AH81 and AH82, and connects with six other S-routes.

The road reaches its highest point of 910m above sea level at the southern portal of the Rikoti Tunnel, which opened in 1982 as the longest vehicular tunnel entirely within Georgia, at 1,722 m.

THE EAST-WEST HIGHWAY REVAMP

Since 2006, significant progress has been made within the East-West Highway (EWH) project, an initiative launched in 2005 to upgrade Georgia's transportation infrastructure, seeking to realign and enhance the road to expressway or motorway standards and to improve operations and maintenance of the road network, as well as provide for better road safety. The ultimate aim is to establish a 455-kilometer east-west transport corridor across Georgia that links Azerbaijan and Armenia with Turkey. By upgrading sections of the E60 and E70 highways, particularly the Poti-Tbilisi-Red Bridge and Poti-Batumi-Sarpi routes, and by bypassing cities and towns, Georgia seeks to solidify its role as a pivotal transport hub in the South Caucasus region.

The project encompasses redesigning key segments of several Georgian highways, including the S1, S2, S4, S7 and S12, and turning them into grade-separated highways. While most of the East-West Highway was planned as a 2x2 expressway, some sections have been upgraded to grade-separated, two-lane highways with median separation and hard shoulders, as seen in the Kobuleti and Batumi bypasses.

The most difficult stretch of the old route spans over 50 kilometers and wound through the rugged and narrow Rikoti Pass, packed with challenging mountainous terrain. Prior to this project, the road



was known for its bottlenecks, and too many lost their lives and cars to accidents caused by impatience, reckless drivers and wandering livestock.

Construction of the new highway in the Rikoti section was divided into four, with each segment treated as an independent project with its own environmental impact assessment, and with funding divided between the aforementioned financial institutions.

In September 2018, the ADB-funded, four-lane, 12-km road between Khevi and Ubisa was opened with 38 new bridges and 20 new tunnels to connect East and West Georgia through the Rikoti Pass. The road was built according to international standards, enabling safer travel, and shortening the road between the borders of the country.

In November 2019, a 14.7 km, dual two-lane carriageway, partly on a new alignment, between Shorapani and Argveta made it easier for vehicles to traverse the mountainous terrain, ravines, and river crossings in the area. At the end of April this year, the 9km Zestaponi part of this section was opened. Both were funded by ADB.

Two more sections of the Kobuleti Bypass, which was completed in 2019, have helped reduce traffic jams in Kobuleti resort and improve road safety and air quality, and work on the Batumi Bypass is well on its way to a year-end completion.

ADB notes that "The project will improve operations and maintenance of the road network, as well as road safety. Further, the project's focus on a climate resilient design will contribute to mainstreaming the sustainability of Georgia's road network."

WHAT DID THE LOCALS THINK?

As the saying goes, "You can't make an omelet without breaking eggs." Naturally, rerouting segments, adding width, blasting through mountains and traversing rivers has meant that the environment, wildlife and citizens have all suffered.

Those who lost land and houses to the planning committee were of course compensated, while the birds, insects and other nature-dwellers have simply had to find alternative shelter away from the dust and noise for the time being.

"Local people were mostly supportive, having received compensation," Mzia Giorgobiani, Deputy Minister of Regional Development and Infrastructure, tells GEORGIA TODAY. "There were some cases where they did not wish to be relocated, but ultimately the compensation persuaded them and, indeed, as I remember, we only had one big challenge from a gentleman living on the Kobuleti Bypass route, which was resolved through the court."

As for the wildlife and greenery, Giorgobiani promises that, "For every tree cut, around three equivalent, native trees will be planted in parallel to the finishing works. Interestingly, while the legislation was not new with regards environmental impact and protection of the environment, and the activities are under

the regulation of the donors [ADB, World Bank, EIB], in respect of the environment, Georgian legislation turned out to be much stricter."

Further moves to placate the local people who now have a massive highway running past their windows included adding or reconstructing kindergartens and local civil service center buildings to improve overall education and connectivity standards.

Those, like me, who remember the "old road" will not only recall the rich green depths of the forests and fields we passed on the way, but will also remember the plethora of small business, through which villagers on the route scraped a reasonable income by selling seasonal fruit and vegetables (I can still picture the corn steaming in roadside pots), year-round produce like honey, sweet cinnamon bread ("nazuki") and coffee, and local crafts – baskets, wooden cutting boards, ceramics and the like.

We asked Deputy Minister Giorgobiani and Levan Kupatashvili, Deputy Chairman of the Roads Department, what would happen to these local businesses.

"The honey, pottery and woodcrafting businesses, alongside those locals selling corn, nazuki and so on, will be able to relocate to four specially built stop-and-shop areas in the Rikoti zone, with safe, off-road parking, and a water supply," Giorgobiani tells us. "We are interested in the road safety side as well as supporting local income, and these stop-and-shops will be very nice for everyone!"

"There were three popular places along the Rikoti route in particular," Kupatashvili notes. "The 'nazuki section' in Surami, Shrosha for pottery and qvevri (wine amphora), and Zestaponi for coffee. We have included all three of these places in the ['stop-and-shop'] project. The first two are in the final stages and Zestaponi is in the preparation stage. A fourth has been added at the road interchange. Once constructed, the municipality will take over care and maintenance, alongside the locals using the spaces to sell their goods."

THE CHALLENGES THEY FACED

While overall celebrated as a beacon of progress and grandeur, the EWH project has at times been overshadowed by controversy. Public opinion has fluctuated, with the worst of the negativity fueled by frequent landslides and the resulting road closures, and the collapse of newly erected structures being touted by media as a potential threat to safety and welfare.

Challenges, such as the brief disruption caused by the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, and the Covid-19 restrictions (delaying material deliveries and slowing down the workforce), also naturally impacted the project's timeline. Although earlier political commitments aimed for completion by 2020, construction on crucial sections is ongoing, with the remaining S1 segments slated for completion by 2026.

In February last year, the bridge over



the Rioni river on the Japana-Samtredia stretch of the highway under construction collapsed under a truck. The Roads Department blamed the rising waters of the Rioni River, which damaged the 8th pier of the bridge. Thankfully, no one was injured in the incident.

Last year, landslides severely disrupted cross-country travel, caused by snow-melt shifting earth on the slopes near a World Bank-funded section of the highway. On March 30, 2023, authorities were forced to shut down the route due to the ongoing landslide activity. Despite efforts to implement detours, the alternate routes struggled to accommodate the increased traffic flow, resulting in traffic jams and delays. Local and international experts were called in and the affected section was adjusted and the route reopened.

Locals have also grown increasingly worried about the Rikotula River, long known for its floods and flash floods. Some areas of construction have narrowed the riverbed, and waste rock sites are affecting river flow, increasing the risk of destructive mudflows. Hydrologist Nika Tsitelashvili told bankwatch.org that the environmental impact assessment and hydrological reports lack current data and hydrological modelling, and locals are still waiting for their concerns to be properly addressed.

Aside from international-standard materials and construction, site safety and cleanup, and extremely thorough environmental impact assessments before, during and after, communication is key. All too often, a failure to communicate or correctly explain plans and projects with the people on the ground who will be most affected, as well as with wider society, leads to misinformed criticism, anger, and moves to put a spanner in the works.

The Roads Department claims it conducted 78 individual and group meetings among construction-affected communities on the 50-kilometer Rikoti route in 2023 alone.

"People have at times been focused on the message 'it's bad for nature,' 'the tunnel collapsed due to shoddy workmanship,' or 'they are using rusted steel for the bridges' [ed.: It is international-standard corten steel], rather than recognizing that this project is good for our economy," Kupatashvili points out. "The message wasn't always given clearly, and media are naturally attracted to the scandals."

Older travelers will also remember the infamous cows that drivers had to dodge, which local farmers let wander onto the high-speed road at grazing time, causing no end to the risk of accidents.

"Wandering cows were a regular problem on the highway," Kupatashvili agrees. "But with World Bank financing, a huge campaign was run, and fences were installed along the main sections of the highway. Unfortunately, cows can still enter the road network via the intersections, but nothing can be done about that from our side. At least they keep the median looking tidy!" he jokes.

LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL

With 96 bridges, 51 tunnels, over 6000 tons of steel, at least a million cubic meters of reinforced concrete, half a million square meters of protection (and that just in the Rikoti section of the revamped East-West Highway) – the monster project is inching ever closure to completion.

Within the Rikoti section, just the other side of the 1982 tunnel remains to be completed before cleanup, finishing and greening works can begin. Beyond that is the easier Kutaisi to Ureki section to finalize, and the next bottleneck: Batumi.

"Within the next two years, it will all be done," Kupatashvili claims. "The worst is over. Khashuri was the biggest bottleneck – we tackled that first, then the Rikoti section, now this, the Zestaponi section [a 9km section with 17 bridges and 10 tunnels which opened at the end of April], which would see, even in the off-season, an hour long traffic jam to get through. The new road in this section shaves some 15-20 minutes of the journey time. Overall, we're feeling comfortable. We're not expecting any more surprises."

Of the now-completed ADB-funded Rikoti sections of the EWH, Kupatashvili says: "Experts predicted it would take five years, our minister said two, we agreed on three, and got it done in four."

In March, Minister of Regional Development and Infrastructure Irakli Karseladze announced that the Batumi Bypass, the next big obstacle, is well on track to being finished this year.

"Despite numerous challenges, the Batumi bypass road, our most demanding project, undergoing construction in difficult geological conditions, will be opened for the season. This is crucial for Batumi," Karseladze told cbw.

The Batumi Bypass project, which will divert heavy traffic from Batumi and help boost trade and tourism, is a joint effort between the Roads Department of Georgia's Ministry of Regional Development and Infrastructure, funded by a 329,630,734 GEL loan from the Asian Development Bank, and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

It involves constructing a 14 km dual-lane asphalt-concrete road, along with 20 bridge crossings and 5 tunnels.

With modern infrastructure, the huge East-West Highway projects are enabling safer travel and shorter travel times, with highway sections that divert heavy traffic from Georgian towns for fast transit movement and better health for residents. Sacrifices have had to be made, and not everyone is happy, but we can only hope that the outcomes will, as the government and investors claim, put the discomfort firmly in the past and contribute to a bright, better connected and economically stronger Georgia in the future.

This article was inspired by the Asian Development Bank (ADB)'s April media tour for journalists based in Georgia, to the East-West Highway Khevi-Ubisa Section and Shorapani-Argveta Section.

On Some Peculiarities of Modern Economic Security

Continued from page 7

sometimes aggression and a general loss of trust in institutions. The entry into the deepest phase of the national state security crisis is the consequential continuation of the loss of trust. Such a crisis is an excellent opportunity for internal or external destructive forces to deepen the created cracks by "soft" or "hard power" and - if not on paper, at least in deed - put an end to statehood.

THE ODDITIES OF "ECONOMIC MODERNISM"

Among the oddities of "economic modernism," is the "de-growth economy" debate, which is no less counterproductive than "Davosization," especially for developing economies.

To summarize briefly, the mentioned process is taking place in the name of a very noble goal - care for the environment. In particular, its leaders argue that the growth of gross domestic product is directly related to the growth of carbon dioxide emissions and, consequently, to the social status and quality of human life. Thus, "opponents of economic growth," while referring to climate degradation as a social problem, at the same time demand a reorganization of the world's economic and social order. At the same time, the relationship of the "rich North" to the "poor South" and the risks posed by this "inequality" to global security are emphasized.

This trend or approach originates from the 1972 Club of Rome report, which, along with the correlation between economic growth and the sufficiency of economic resources to achieve it, referred to the "danger" that rapid economic growth for one or more generations would adversely affect the social position of future generations. The essence of that report was that infinite growth in a resource-constrained environment is both impossible and dangerous. The ideological basis of the uncontrolled "anti-growth economy" or its analogs is difficult to discern, and ranges from

"Greens" to "Socialists."

However, the main driving force behind the mainstream economic view is still the following:

(a) The right balance between government regulation and market self-regulation;

(b) Finding free spaces in the context of a "consumer culture", and;

(c) A new social contract between the state and society, and between employer and employee.

Otherwise, without a market economy based on openness and social accountability, cooperation and co-participation, the progress of the state will be under the pressure of constant fluctuations and cataclysms, and the realization of a real development agenda will become impossible.

Moreover, these and other concepts point directly or indirectly to the excessive threats posed by the violation of social equality, which threatens security not only within specific countries but also globally.

On the Priority of the Georgian Case

In a domestic process, the source of the crisis can be twofold: it can come gradually from the system itself, or it can be the result of the destruction of that system. In the Georgia context, both bring equally dire results, although there is a certain difference: it is possible in principle to contain the crisis developing inside the system, but the destruction of the system itself, its erosion can develop so quickly that collapse becomes almost inevitable.

This danger inherent in a vulnerable and malfunctioning system - the destruction of the system itself - must be taken into account in assessing both overall national security and its main component, economic security.

Taking all of the above into account, in the context of effective structuring of Georgia's economic security, we will present together some previous opinions. It is clear that each of them needs further elaboration in professional circles. In any case, we believe that discussions on



Illustration to "How Much Land Does a Man Need?" by Leo Tolstoy. 'Pahom's Death'. Painting by Plastov Arkady, 1952. Watercolour on paper. 64 x 87 cm

these and other measures should begin immediately in order to strengthen the economic stability and self-sufficiency of our country and its competitiveness. In particular, extraordinary resources should be directed to:

- Integrate with developed economies to the highest possible degree. This is important both for the qualitative content of trade and financial relations and for the introduction of advanced technologies and knowledge in the country.

- Expansion and diversification of the export market. It is a fact that sticking to one particular market is very risky for national security. Accordingly, the full development of the state requires more space and choice. Among other practical mechanisms, this goal is achieved through free trade agreements and membership in trade alliances.

Given the growing economic nationalism and bias in today's world, we should also take care of:

- Not only quantitative but also qualitative indicators of investment. Given the global and regional threats, it is un-

acceptable for our country to assess an investment as desirable just because it is about money. Today, we are definitely required to be meticulous about the investment resource, its origin and purpose. Accordingly, the legislative initiative of the mechanism of so-called "screening" for studying investment projects or proposals will be very timely. It should also be noted that many developed economic systems use this mechanism today.

- Investment in the country's intellectual security by the state. Without proper "intellectual self-sufficiency" (which, along with other factors, is unthinkable in light of the outflow of valuable people from Georgia), it is hypocritical to talk about our potential for competitiveness.

We believe that together with the above views, the agenda should necessarily include such issues as:

- Giving due place to economic security in the national security doctrine of Georgia. There is no doubt that national security cannot be imagined separately from economic self-sufficiency.

- Institutional strengthening of the economic security direction in the format of the National Security Council. Possible options include the creation of a separate Economic Security Council or its institutionalization within the National Security Council itself. In addition, it is possible to discuss the expediency of introducing the position of the Minister of Economic Security with appropriate competence and responsibilities in the Government of Georgia.

- From the point of view of Georgia's economic security, placing the main concern on continuous monitoring of risks and threats and their unbiased analysis - irrespective of the institutional solution. We would periodically reflect the results of this process in a document on economic threats. Along with other topical issues, such document would assess short-, medium- and long-term risks to the country's economic security, as well as practical recommendations for their minimization and proper management.

- Implementation of legislation ensuring economic security, such as Georgia's Law on Economic Security, as a complementary measure. Such a special law would address issues such as (1) The coordination of government agencies during crises; (2) The realignment of one supply and delivery system into another on a global or regional scale; (3) Reducing overdependence on one foreign economic system; (4) Promoting modern innovation in critical sectors.

The past century has been a virtually endless struggle between democracy and authoritarianism. Today, this confrontation has gained new strength and transformed into new forms and methods. Due to this and other circumstances, the renewal of the Georgian state should manifest itself in its transformation into a "project state" - it should be concerned about the transformation of society, lead its own citizens to realize its development agenda, and not only govern its society and citizens.

SOCIETY

Parliament Completes Public Review of Draft Law Prepared against LGBT Propaganda

Continued from page 2

Mdinardze noted that the draft constitutional law "On Family Values and Protection of Minors" consists of 8 points:

1. Based on the legislation, only such a relationship similar to marriage can be regulated, which provides for the union of a man and a woman who are at least 18 years old.

2. Adoption or foster care of a minor is allowed only by married spouses or heterosexual persons in accordance with the Constitution and legislation of Georgia.

3. Any medical intervention related to the change of human sex is prohibited.

4. The document issued by the state or local self-government indicates only the female or male gender that corresponds to their genetic data.

5. Any decision of a public authority or a private person that directly or indirectly restricts the use of concepts defined by gender is invalid.

6. Gatherings aimed at promoting same-sex family or intimate relationships, incest, adoption or foster care of a minor by a same-sex couple or a non-heterosexual person, medical intervention related to gender reassignment, or the non-use of gender-specific concepts are prohibited.

7. It is prohibited to distribute work,

program or other material with such content which is aimed at promoting same-sex family or intimate relationships, incest, adoption or foster care of a minor by a same-sex couple or a non-heterosexual person, medical intervention related to sex change or the non-use of gender-specific concepts.

8. It is prohibited to provide information in the educational process of a public or private educational institution that is aimed at promoting same-sex family or intimate relationships, incest, adoption or foster care of a minor by a same-sex couple or a non-heterosexual person, medical intervention related to sex change, or the non-use of gender-specific concepts.

At the same time, Mdinardze said he does not rule out the possibility of banning Pride outright.

Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatovic, was among those who condemned the proposed changes.

"I am concerned about the present political discourse in Georgia, as illustrated by the announcement made by the Georgian Dream Party of their initiative to amend the Constitution and to adopt a new constitutional law on 'Protection of Family Values and Underaged Persons,'" Mijatovic told the Council in March. "It is reflective of the entrenched



Pride in 2019. Source: civil.ge

harmful stereotypes and prejudice against LGBTI people which still prevail in segments of Georgian society, including some politicians, and is capable of hav-

ing a strong, negative impact on the human rights, safety and well-being of LGBTI people and defenders of their rights."

During Thursday's presentation, Mamuka Mdinardze repeated that the task of Georgian Dream is to protect family values and minors.

Must You Show Me This?



BLOG BY TONY HANMER

Back in Svaneti now: I came up to host a young couple from the Netherlands who wanted to stay a week in our guest house in Etseri. Lali had other important things keeping her at the other end of the country, so they're enjoying my cooking: Not very Georgian, but also not bad. No complaints so far, and enough compliments.

They've hiked around the village, tried horses (first time ever for him), spent a day in Mestia. They've also met a few local people, and we were invited firmly to lunch by a former school colleague, so they've experienced some real Georgian hospitality too. Seen the oldest

church in the village, ruined St Barbara's near Ladreri (mistakenly mis-signposted the first and second time: First it was Ladreri, now it's Landleri!). Been accompanied by dogs a few times en route, but no incidents: They're ready, with walking sticks. We even, finally, saw magnificent Ushba from one high viewpoint not far from the house.

I also took them for a drive to a picnic lunch above Mazeri, the top of Becho village. Here, just on the other side of the Dollar River, sits the Hiker's Inn, much deserving of success. It's far past electricity, but they've made everything out of rustic wood. There's an icy swimming pool and next to it a fish pool too, plus a sauna, wood-fired, to restore your blue skin to sweating. The path continues towards the Georgian border and a magnificent waterfall. We walked in that

direction a bit.

There had been new light snow on the vertical faces around us. Here, Ushba has vanished from view, even on clear days, which this wasn't. But the sights gave me plenty to photograph anyway, some of it obvious, other parts revealing themselves once I opened the photos on my laptop later.

That thin snow is the best at giving dramatic definition to mountain faces, increasing the contrast greatly. Here were more monstrous faces, even some composed of smaller ones, enough to give one a shudder. Does no one else see these things? I wondered. More material for my Svan short story collection, which I hope to see published this year.

Most of the faces I see are serious or terrifying, in features and expressions. Few are cartoonish or funny. They are a good reminder, I think, that one can die in quite a few ways in the mountains. Weather can change suddenly. Rocks can fall on you. These are not kind places, though they are awe-inspiring. One treads carefully, prepares well, remains alert, makes backup plans. Full, sunny summer is one thing, but now is still a season when snow can return.

Though I sometimes gasp with shock at what the mountains show me, I wouldn't give up what I see for anything. Having been seeing Svaneti for nearly half of my life now, and living in it since 2007, I am only in these last few years being granted such visions. Call it the "affliction" of pareidolia (the seeing of patterns in



nature's randomness). I just call it pure joy, mixed with a dash of fear. Strange, powerful combination, very fitting for the grandeur that is all of Georgia's varied mountains. If you have not seen them up close and in detail, the effort is so much worth it.

Tony Hanmer has lived in Georgia since

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



Kolga Introduces 2024 Tbilisi Photo Festival with World Renowned Photographer Paolo Pellegrin

BY SHELBI R. ANKIEWICZ

Kolga, already a photography institution in Georgia, kicked off its 2024 Tbilisi Photo Festival with an awards ceremony on May 14. The following day, it launched its first exhibition of the week created by works from the world-renowned Italian photographer Paolo Pellegrin.

Kolga has held annual exhibitions in Georgia's capital since 2002, showcasing photos from both local and foreign photographers. Documenter, photographer and educator Dina Oganova curated the first exhibition of the 2024 week, Paolo Pellegrin Family Album & Sakartvelo, at the Georgian Museum of Fine Arts. Oganova has worked with Kolga before, and tells GEORGIA TODAY how important the institution is for the Caucasus.

"We have another festival in Tbilisi, but Georgia is the only place in the region where you can feel the atmosphere of photography for a whole week," she says. "May in Tbilisi is very special, because the whole city is full of photography."

Oganova first started out with Kolga as a participant in the annual photo competition a few years ago. She said she was a competitor, then she made her way to being a curator, then a jury member of this year's awards. Oganova said she's been doing photography since she was a young girl.

She and Pellegrin met around 10 years ago when he was working on a photography project (currently on display at the exhibition) in Georgia. The photog-

rapher said she loved his work and found his photos inspiring. From the time she met him, she tells us, she dreamed of curating an exhibition that showed "His Georgia, and my Georgia."

She reached out to Pellegrin, and they decided to launch the exhibition. His displays are divided in two, one focusing on his family, the other on the dedication to religion in Georgia. Pellegrin, a member of Magnum Photos, the largest photo agency in the world, has been a photographer for over 40 years, and said his original interest was to create humanistic photos.

To him, this included photos of people, events and history, and the creation of records, documents or things that stay and form a memory. This led to him covering many conflicts around the world from the mid-90s onward, including the Balkans, Middle East, Africa, Ukraine, and Palestine. His new exhibition with Kolga portrays his family during COVID-19, when no one knew what would happen in the world.

"Photography has the capacity to make the specific coincide with the universal. It can become a metaphor," said Pellegrin. "For me, it was about my family, but there's also a sense of something larger with the moments and moods that probably many other families around the world felt."

Pellegrin said he was shooting in Australia when COVID-19 broke out, and when he came home, he and his wife saw it as an opportunity to get away to the mountains for two months with their girls and document life. This is the first time the photos have been exhibited, and Oganova thought it was important



Kolga Tbilisi Photo Awards Ceremony in 2023. Source: FB

to show this side of Pellegrin, outside of his traditional work.

Pellegrin said that if COVID-19 had never happened, he isn't sure he would ever have photographed his life and family.

"We are very thankful Paolo could come, spend some days with us, and open this exhibition himself," Oganova notes.

Kolga has been up and running for 23 years, and holds events that put modern and historical photographs on show. Aside from offering an exhibition, Oganova tells us Kolga also has a big focus on education. During the Tbilisi Photo Festival week, there are various lecturers and workshops that people of all experiences can join, free of charge, to learn more about different aspects of photography.

The goal of Kolga, according to its website, is to connect international photos with old and new photographic positions in Georgia. The festival is open to locals, but several foreigners also tend to participate. There is also an annual competition for people to send in submissions for the award.

This year, the categories consisted of documentary series, reportage, a con-

ceptual photo project, best one-shot/single image, and mobile photo/one-shot. The winners were announced at the Kolga Tbilisi Photo opening night awards ceremony and judged by six jurors from Georgia, Germany, and the United States.

The first exhibition of the week launched on May 15, but there are 15 total, with the last launching on Sunday. All the displays are free to attend and will last approximately two weeks before closing. They will also be held in different locations, found on Kolga's Facebook page.

The festival is special to many people, Oganova explains, and she foresees it continuing for many years.

"Kolga is 23 years old already, as a festival. We hope it will go on and on and never stop. It's a very important event in Georgia, especially for photography lovers," Oganova says.



Pellegrin and the Italian ambassador to Georgia at the exhibition night on May 15. Source: FB



Visitors browsing the Paolo Pellegrin Family Album & Sakartvelo exhibition. Source: FB



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Reg. # 06/4-309



I am Georgian and therefore I am European

Zurab Zhvania, Council of Europe, 1999

