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FOCUS

ON TRANSPARENCY

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Razhden Kuprashvili, Head of the Anti-Corruption Bureau of Georgia

Ukraine Latest – Russia Hits Back for Kursk Incursion in Biggest Air Strike Yet

COMPILED BY TEAM GT

Russia on Monday launched one of its most significant air attacks on Ukraine to date, according to Mykola Oleshchuk, the commander of Ukraine's air force. The assault began overnight on Monday and continued into Tuesday, with Russia firing 127 missiles and 109 attack drones. Ukraine managed to shoot down 102 missiles and 99 drones, Oleshchuk reported on Telegram.

The attack targeted more than half of Ukraine's regions, causing widespread blackouts by hitting power infrastructure. The entire country was placed on an air raid alert and citizens were advised to seek shelter. At least ten people were killed and dozens were wounded.

Ukrainian air defenses shot down around 15 drones and several missiles near Kyiv alone during the attack, the head of the city's military administration says.

"Everything that flew to the capital of Ukraine was destroyed," Serhiy Popko wrote on Telegram.

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Rescue workers sifting through the ruins of a hotel following another wave of strikes in Kryvyi Rih. Source: REUTERS

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Galt & Taggart: 69.5% of Exports from Georgia Go to CIS Countries

BY MARIAM MTIVLISHVILI

Galt & Taggart noted in this week's review that 5.2% of Georgia's exports go to the European Union and 69.5% are sent to CIS countries. "5.2% of exports went to the European Union (-29.9% y/y), 69.5% to the CIS (+37.2% y/y) and 25.3% to other countries (+33.9% y/y)," they noted.

"Further, imports into Georgia rose 7.2% year-on-year to \$1.4 billion, following a 5.7% decline in the previous month. As a result, the trade deficit decreased by 7.8% year-on-year to \$735.7 million in July," the report continues.

"In July 2024, cars (+38.4% y/y), ferroalloys (+37.1x y/y), alcohol (+98.6% y/y), wine (-26.5% y/y) carbonated drinks (+103.0% y/y) were the top 5 exported goods."

ABOUT CIS

The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) is a regional organization in Eurasia established in 1991 after the Soviet Union's dissolution. It serves as a successor to the Soviet Union and aims to foster cooperation among its member states in areas such as economic, political, and military affairs. The CIS spans approximately 20.4 million square kilometers and has a population of around 240 million. Its functions include coordinating trade, finance, and security, as well as addressing cross-border crime.

Georgia was a member but withdrew in 2008 after the August war with Russia. Ukraine ceased its participation in CIS activities in 2014 following Russia's annexation of Crimea, and formally exited CIS statutory bodies in 2018. Moldova has indicated plans to gradually withdraw from the CIS framework following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

Current members include Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

Kaladze: Gov't Policy "Precisely" Targets Restoration of Territorial Integrity



Kakha Kaladze. Source: fortuna

BY TEAM GT

Kakha Kaladze, Secretary General of the ruling Georgian Dream party and Mayor of Tbilisi, stated on Wednesday that the Government's "pragmatic" policy is "precisely" focused on restoring Georgia's territorial integrity.

In a press briefing, Kaladze highlighted that one of Georgian Dream's primary goals, which aligns with the sentiments

of many Georgians, is to regain the country's territorial integrity, despite the complexities involved.

He acknowledged the challenges but remained optimistic, noting that in light of current global and regional developments, progress is possible.

Kaladze also underscored the government's commitment to fostering peaceful coexistence with the populations of the Russian-occupied regions of Tskhinvali (South Ossetia) and Abkhazia, emphasizing that efforts are ongoing in this direction.

Sky Express to Launch Athens-Tbilisi Flights Starting November 6

BY MARIAM MTIVLISHVILI

The Greek airline Sky Express is set to begin regular flights between Athens and Tbilisi starting November 6.

These flights will be operated at Tbilisi International Airport on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Saturdays, using the Airbus A320 Neo.

Established in 2005, Sky Express currently operates across 21 international routes with 23 aircraft. It claims to be the fastest growing airline company in Greece, with multiple awards received from the International Airport of Athens. Sky Express is a member of the IOGR Group of companies, a group that boasts vast experience in the areas of tourism and aviation.



Batumi Boulevard. Source: express.co.uk

A Georgian Is among Three Candidates Shortlisted for the 2024 Václav Havel Prize

BY TEAM GT

The selection panel of the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize, which rewards outstanding civil society action in defense of human rights in Europe and beyond, has announced the shortlist for the 2024 Award, and among them is a Georgian woman, Babutsa Patariaia.

Meeting in Prague, the panel - made up of independent figures from the world of human rights and chaired by the President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) Theodoros Rousopoulos - decided to shortlist the following three nominees:

BABUTSA PATARIAIA, GEORGIA

The nominee is a leading feminist activist and human rights lawyer in Georgia. She is the Director of 'Sapari', an NGO focusing on women's rights and providing support for victims of violence since 2013. She has worked for over a decade to fight against femicide, sexual vio-

lence against women, and sexual harassment.

AKIF GURBANOV, AZERBAIJAN

The nominee is a human rights defender, political activist and active member of the Azerbaijani civil society. He is the co-founder of the Institute of Democratic Initiative (IDI) and of the Third Republic Platform. He was arrested in March 2024 in a wave of arrests targeting journalists and activists in the country.

MARIA CORINA MACHADO, VENEZUELA

The nominee is a leading political figure in Venezuela engaged in denouncing human rights abuses in her country and defending democracy and the rule of law. She is the co-founder of the Venezuelan volunteer civil organization 'Súmate' for civil and political freedom, rights and citizen participation.

Announcing the panel's choice, the PACE President paid tribute to all defenders of human rights who, sometimes at the cost of their lives, stand firm to protect and promote fundamental freedoms and human rights.

"Today, more than ever, it is of paramount importance to celebrate the women and men who, by their courage, determination and strength, show us the path to freedom. Their fight is an example for all of us, and I am happy that the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize has celebrated their action since its creation eleven years ago."

The overall winner of the 2024 Prize is due to be announced at the opening of PACE's Autumn plenary session in Strasbourg on 30 September. The Václav Havel Human Rights Prize is awarded each year by PACE, in partnership with the Václav Havel Library and the Charta 77 Foundation. It consists of a sum of 60,000 euros, a trophy and a diploma.

Since its creation, the Prize has been awarded in turn to Osman Kavala (2023), Vladimir Kara-Murza (2022), Maria Kalesnikava (2021), Loujain Alhathloul (2020), jointly to Ilham Tohti and the Youth Initiative for Human Rights (2019), Oyub Titiev (2018), Murat Arslan (2017), Nadia Murad (2016), Ludmilla Alexeeva (2015), Anar Mammadli (2014) and Ales Bialiatski (2013).



The selection panel of the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize. Source: pace.coe.int

Anti-Corruption Bureau head urges int'l observer organizations to reveal grant details ahead of elections



"No to the Russian Law" Protesters. Source: Mtavari Arkhi

BY TEAM GT

On Tuesday, Razhden Kuprashvili, Head of the Anti-Corruption Bureau of Georgia, called on international observer organizations, including the US-based National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the International Republican Institute (IRI), to disclose information about the grants they issue. He stressed that transparency is vital to ensure that "funded events are

not used to support political parties" in the lead-up to the October parliamentary elections.

"In the current electoral process, the role of international monitoring organizations is crucial," Kuprashvili said. "Therefore, we urge all organizations, including the National Democratic Institute and the International Republican Institute, to ensure transparency of the grants they issue, to prevent these funds from being used to support political parties. Neutrality and objectivity are crucial for election monitoring organizations." Kuprashvili also announced that all

election subjects must submit documentation showing their financial status for the first eight months of this year by August 31. He emphasized that the Bureau is "ready to provide consultations" to political parties and assist them in meeting legal requirements ahead of the October 26 vote.

He expressed concern that a "large number" of domestic opposition parties were not fully disclosing their funding, following the Bureau's recent financial monitoring report. "Election campaigns and activities might be being funded by foreign donor organizations or other sources," Kuprashvili claimed.

The Anti-Corruption Bureau's monitoring revealed that several political parties, including European Georgia - Movement for Freedom, Yes to Europe - Strategy Aghmashenebeli, United National Movement, Girchi - More Freedom, Strong Georgia, Lelo, and Elene Khoshtaria, were failing to fully disclose their funding. Kuprashvili alleged that these funds could be being used to support NGOs affiliated with opposition parties, posing a "threat to a fair election process."

Earlier this week, Politico published an article titled, "The European Union warns Georgia not to ban opposition parties."

Politico quotes European Commission spokesman Peter Stano as saying that "Brussels is concerned about plans to ban 'Dream' opposition parties."

"Opposition parties, an active civil society and an independent media are essential to ensure the accountability of governments and the protection of democratic values," Stano said, adding that pluralism "is a central pillar of the EU accession process."



Source: interpressnews

Georgian PM Highlights Record-Low Unemployment and Strong Economic Growth at Government Meeting

BY TEAM GT

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze on Monday celebrated the country's "historic low" unemployment rate, and highlighted "significant achievements" in economic growth.

During a government meeting, he noted that Georgia stands out in both regional and European contexts due to its strong economic performance. The National

Statistics Office of Georgia reported a decrease in the unemployment rate to 13.7% from 16.7% last year, attributing the decline to robust economic growth. Over the past three years, Georgia has experienced an average growth rate of 9.7%, with a projected 9% growth rate for the current year.

Kobakhidze emphasized that this economic growth has been the primary driver in reducing unemployment and creating 60,000 new jobs. He also pointed out that a growing workforce has increased state revenue, allowing the government to launch new projects and expand existing ones.

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Ukraine Latest – Russia Hits Back for Kursk Incursion in Biggest Air Strike Yet



Families with children were ordered to leave Pokrovsk as the Russians advance. Source: REUTERS/Thomas Peter

Continued from page 1

Later in the day, a Russian missile struck a civilian infrastructure building in Kryvyi Rih, an eastern city, resulting in one woman's death and leaving five others presumed missing, according to local military administration head Oleksandr Vilkul.

Russia confirmed it had targeted Ukraine's energy infrastructure—a long-standing tactic—and claimed all its objectives were achieved. The barrage of missiles and drones was described by Oleshchuk as "the most massive aerial attack."

In a related incident, Poland reported that an "object" entered its territory during the attack. Army spokesman Jacek Goryszewski indicated that it was likely a drone, given the object's trajectory and speed, as quoted by Reuters.

NATO spokesperson Farah Dakhllallah condemned the attacks, stating that breaches of NATO airspace by Russia were "irresponsible and potentially dangerous."

Previously, a December attack, which involved 158 missiles and drones, was considered the largest. However, Monday's strikes were intended not only to disrupt Ukraine's energy supply, but also to undermine Ukrainian morale. This comes as Ukrainians were buoyed by recent successful incursions into Russian territory in the Kursk region.

Russia's message with this latest assault was clear: despite recent Ukrainian successes, Moscow can still inflict significant suffering on the Ukrainian population and remind Western capitals of its enduring military capability.

"We will undoubtedly respond to Russia for this and all other attacks. Crimes

against humanity cannot go unpunished," President Volodymyr Zelensky responded in a post on social media.

US President Joe Biden was also among those who condemned Russia's strikes on Ukraine.

"I condemn, in the strongest possible terms, Russia's continued war against Ukraine and its efforts to plunge the Ukrainian people into darkness," Biden said in a post on X. "Russia will never succeed in Ukraine, and the spirit of the Ukrainian people will never be broken."

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg also voiced support.

"In the wake of the latest Russian assault, allies today reaffirmed they are stepping up their military aid to Ukraine," he said. "We must continue to provide Ukraine with the equipment and munitions it needs to defend itself against Russia's invasion. This is vital for Ukraine's ability to stay in the fight."

ZELENSKY PLEAS FOR INCREASED WESTERN SUPPORT FOLLOWING LATEST RUSSIAN STRIKES

President Volodymyr Zelensky has used the latest deadly Russian barrage to underscore the urgent need for greater Western support for Ukraine.

Zelensky is calling for two main forms of support. First, he urges British, American, and other Western partners to grant permission for Ukraine to use long-range Western-made weapons that would enable strikes on ammunition stores, planes, and airfields deeper inside Russia, which Zelensky believes would mitigate Moscow's ability to terrorize Ukrainian cities.

Second, he emphasizes the need for a

more coordinated effort to counter the Russian missiles and drones that are targeting civilians and damaging Ukrainian energy infrastructure. He pointed to the example of Israel, which received substantial aid to intercept the majority of a massive Iranian and proxy missile barrage in April, as a model for how Ukraine could be better supported.

RUSSIA: CEASEFIRE NEGOTIATIONS NO LONGER RELEVANT

A Russian government spokesman has stated that ceasefire negotiations with Ukraine are no longer under consideration. Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov told reporters that the "topic of negotiations with Ukraine has pretty much lost its relevance."

Peskov also indicated that Russia is responding to Ukraine's recent incursion into the Kursk region.

UKRAINE IN RUSSIA'S KURSK REGION

Ukraine launched its cross-border attack into the Kursk region on August 6, and since then, has claimed control over more than 1,000 square kilometers of Russian land.

Approximately 10,000 elite Ukrainian troops breached the poorly defended border, seizing more ground in a few days than Russia has gained in Ukraine this year. As the fighting has intensified, tens of thousands of Russian civilians have been evacuated.

President Zelensky stated that the Kursk operation aimed to capture Russian soldiers, leading to a prisoner swap on Saturday - in exchange for 115 Ukrainians, the same number of Russians were released.

Zelensky also described the operation as a preventative measure to deter Russian attacks on Ukraine's bordering Sumy region. He also mentioned there are other undisclosed objectives associated with the operation, and said it is part of a "victory plan" that he will present to US President Joe Biden next month and will show to both US presidential candidates, Kamala Harris and Donald Trump.

UKRAINIAN DRONES HIT OIL DEPOTS IN RUSSIA'S ROSTOV, KIROV OBLASTS

On August 28, Ukrainian drones operated by military intelligence struck oil depots in Russia's Rostov and Kirov oblasts. The attack on Kirov Oblast, approximately 1,200 kilometers from the Ukraine border, resulted in a fire at two oil tanks. Russian air defenses shot down two drones, while claiming that three others had "crashed" near the Zenit oil facility in Kotelnich, causing a fire. No casualties or significant damages were

reported, according to Kirov Oblast Governor Alexander Sokolov.

"The Zenit oil depot is a facility of the enemy military-industrial complex and provides fuel to the Russian occupation forces," a source told the BBC.

SITUATION IN POKROVSK "TENSE"

The situation in Pokrovsk, a key mining city in eastern Ukraine's Donetsk region, is increasingly tense as Russia advances towards it. Moscow views capturing Pokrovsk as crucial for annexing the entire Donbas region. President Zelensky has described the situation near Pokrovsk as "difficult" amid preparations for a potential Russian offensive.

'YOUR FREEDOM IS OUR FREEDOM, SAYS VON DER LEYEN

In a video message celebrating Ukrainian Independence Day on August 24, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen declared, "Your freedom is our freedom, your security is our security."

She emphasized that Europe will always stand by Ukraine because, as she put it, "Ukraine is Europe." Von der Leyen also highlighted the rapid progress Ukraine is making toward joining the European Union.

"The EU has been with Ukraine from day one, and we will continue to stand by you for as long as it takes," she assured.

The day before Ukrainian National Day, a 30-meter Ukrainian flag was displayed on the esplanade of the European Parliament in Brussels. The flag was subsequently raised in front of the Berlaymont, the headquarters of the European Commission, which was illuminated in blue and yellow.

WAR 'GETTING CLOSER' FOR THE RUSSIAN PUBLIC

Nina Krushcheva, a professor of International Affairs at The New School in New York City, spoke to the BBC's Radio 4 from Moscow, giving insight on how Russians on the ground are being increasingly impacted by the war, particularly in Kursk following the Ukrainian incursion. She pointed out that "the goods are fewer, the prices are higher, and there is much more military rhetoric coming out of everywhere."

Regarding President Putin, Krushcheva described him as "slightly frozen" since the Ukrainian incursion. She recalled an early appearance he made after the incursion, where he was seen reading from "little pieces of paper," which was atypical for him. Krushcheva noted that Putin's difficulty in pronouncing the words was unusual, given his reputation as a skilled speaker, making the situation "a bit confusing."

She also mentioned that Putin has been known to take time to formulate his responses when faced with unexpected developments.

Steve Rosenberg, the BBC's Russia Editor, in a video report noted that "No one anticipated that Russia's border would be breached. There's a palpable sense of fatigue, and the prevailing sentiment is a desire for peace. Yet, there is no unified perspective on how to achieve it."

He reports that some Russians echo the state media's call for "peace on Russia's terms," essentially demanding Ukraine's complete surrender. Others, he says, hope for negotiations between Moscow and Kyiv to find a resolution to the conflict.

Officially, the Kremlin continues to refer to its actions in Ukraine as a "special military operation" and describes the current activities in the Kursk region as a "counter-terrorism operation." Yet, for many ordinary Russians, the situation is simply referred to as "war."

INDIA READY TO HELP FIND PEACE, MODI TELLS UKRAINE

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi made a historic visit to Ukraine last week, telling President Volodymyr Zelensky that he is ready to take a personal role in seeking peace. Modi's visit follows a period of tension, as Zelensky had previously criticized him for hugging Russian President Vladimir Putin during a trip to Moscow on a day when Russian strikes, including one on Kyiv's largest children's hospital, resulted in over 40 deaths.

Modi's first stop was Ukraine's history museum, where he viewed an exhibition commemorating the 570 Ukrainian children reported killed since Russia's full-scale invasion began in February 2022. Both leaders participated in placing soft toys at a makeshift shrine, with Modi later expressing his grief over the "martyred" children.

Modi posted an image on social media of himself with his arm around Zelensky, accompanied by a message expressing condolences to the families of the deceased children. He also offered to facilitate peace talks, underscoring that only dialogue and diplomacy could end the conflict.

Despite Modi's assurances of support, India has not condemned Russia's invasion and continues to bolster Moscow's war economy, recently surpassing China as the largest importer of Russian oil amid Western sanctions. During their discussions, Modi and Zelensky addressed Ukraine's ongoing military actions in Russian territory, though specifics of the conversation remain undisclosed.

India participated in a Ukraine-led peace summit in Switzerland in June, where Russia was excluded. Zelensky invited Modi to endorse a joint communique emphasizing Ukraine's territorial integrity, which Modi later echoed. Both leaders released a joint statement pledging to enhance defense and trade relations between their countries, marking the visit as a significant moment in their diplomatic relations.

HERITAGE UNDER ATTACK: UKRAINIANS REVIVE INTEREST IN CULTURE

The Russian invasion has severely damaged Ukraine's cultural heritage, with 432 sites hit since February 2022, including 139 religious sites and 31 museums. The Hryhoriy Skovoroda National Literary Memorial Museum, hit by a missile in May 2022, saw only the philosopher's statue survive. This destruction, alongside Russian theft and repurposing of Ukrainian cultural artifacts, has intensified a national cultural revival.

Despite the loss, Ukrainians are increasingly valuing their cultural heritage. The destruction has sparked a "Ukrainian cultural boom," with new plays, performances, and renewed interest in cultural traditions. The head of UNESCO's Ukraine desk, Chiara Dezzi Bardschi, told the BBC that culture is crucial for community resilience and healing.

"What I've seen is communities really asking for culture and their cultural centres. They recognize its importance for the community and they need it for their resilience. Culture is very important for healing trauma," she said.

Indeed, volunteers have played a crucial role in this, providing not just essential supplies but also musical instruments. UK-based musician Irina Gould, in conversation with the BBC, noted that music offers children emotional relief, transporting them away from the sounds of war and into a world of beauty and happiness.

Ukrainian Acting Culture Minister Rostyslav Karandeyev has accused Russia of targeting symbols of Ukrainian identity.

The cultural resurgence offers a beacon of hope and unity amidst the devastation.

Source: The BBC



Workers salvage a sculpture of Hryhoriy Skovoroda from his destroyed museum in May 2022. Sergey Bobok/AFP

"Putin is caught like a rabbit in the headlights" – Col. (ret) Philip Ingram MBE Ukraine's Kursk and Belgorod Incursions



Col. (ret) Philip Ingram.
Source: russiancouncil

INTERVIEW BY VAZHA TAVBERIDZE

Col. (ret) Philip Ingram, former UK military intelligence officer and NATO planner, sat down with Radio Free Europe/RL's Georgia Service last week to discuss Ukraine's bold move and Russia's response.

WHAT ARE UKRAINE'S STRATEGIC AIMS WHEN IT COMES TO THE KURSK AND BELGOROD INCURSIONS? WHAT DOES IT WANT TO ACHIEVE?

I'm obviously making a few assumptions in analyzing it, but I'm doing so from someone who has planned these sorts of operations on numerous occasions. Ukraine had real difficulty in achieving any success in the east. They were almost forced into a counteroffensive last year, before they had the capability to do anything that would push the Russians back, because the Russian defenses are stronger than any defensive lines that we've seen in any conflict ever, even defensive lines in the Second World War.

So, instead of continuing to fight against a brick wall that is not moving, or, in fact, a brick wall that is advancing slowly further into Ukraine, Kyiv decided the only way to wrestle the initiative back was to attack into Kursk. I think they've been planning this for some time, because we saw a couple of incursions into the Belgorod region by the Russian Legion last year.

They attacked into Kursk for a number of reasons. The first and foremost is to capture Russian territory, because what that did was two things. One, embarrassed Vladimir Putin hugely, made him seem weak to his inner circle, made him seem weaker than he's been saying he is to his international supporters, particularly Xi Jin Ping in China, Kim Jong Un in North Korea and Ayatollah in Iran. And a second piece of math is that it brought the reality of what is going on in Ukraine to the Russians, and it is indeed something that Vladimir Putin has put an enormous effort into keeping away from the Russian people, through controlling the information domain and what they're saying.

Now that there are Ukrainian troops on Russian soil and there are 200,000 estimated displaced individuals going into other Russian cities, the information can't be kept out of the discussions that are going on amongst the population. So that further weakened Putin's position.

The next strategic aim was to say to the West: "See? We have crossed one of Vladimir Putin's strongest red lines and he does nothing. And therefore, if we've

crossed one of his strongest red lines by physically invading Russia, which he has said in the past, or at least severely hinted at, would lead to a nuclear option, then he's not going to do anything. So, international community, please give us the greenlight to use the weapons that you've given us against military targets further inside Russia, because if he's not going to respond to this red line, he's not going to respond to any of the others." And that negotiation is still ongoing.

The next goal is to capture and hold some territory that could be used for barter should the conditions be set for negotiations at some stage in the future. If you look at the size of territory that's currently controlled, and the potential with the attack into Belgorod, Ukraine could capture a significant part of Russian territory. It won't be quite the same, but you're getting close to the square kilometer-ish area that the Russians have seized in Ukraine in the east. And that would give Ukraine a very strong negotiating position. It continues to weaken Putin and the longer the Ukrainians stay in there, the weaker he will be.

The final objective, and we heard this from General Syrskiy, is to try and get the Russians to move some of their troops away from both the reserve forces and some of those that are engaged, to have to deal with the Ukrainian incursions, thereby weakening their attacks in the east and their ability to take territory.

I think the Ukrainians have achieved everything apart from that last objective. There are no indications to suggest that the Russians are moving significant numbers of troops around. At the moment, there are indications to suggest that some are being moved around, but not enough to weaken the Russian attacks in the east.

AS A FORMER MILITARY INTELLIGENCE OFFICER, HOW WOULD YOU RATE THESE TWO INCURSIONS, PLANNING-WISE? DO YOU THINK THIS HAPPENED WITH A GREENLIGHT OR WITHOUT?

I was a military intelligence officer for most of my career, I spent a lot of my time in planning, and I think the Ukrainians have shown that they are masterful planners. I take my hat off to them. They keep surprising me with their ingenuity, with the level of detail that they go into, with their operational security. And that's why we don't know much about what's going on in Belgorod at the moment. And with that operational security, I don't think they formally briefed anyone in the West that this is what they were

going to do. I suspect, informally, they will have one or two trusted individuals that they will have talked to elements of it about, but not necessarily given the whole plan away to.

Operational security is critical in all of this. You only get one opportunity and surprise, and the Ukrainians have executed that perfectly. It's a bold move, but a very intriguing and well-calculated one too. I think when planners in the West saw it, they will have had this wry smile on their face going, "ah, yes, you've caught us out again. Brilliant. Well done, Ukraine!"

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE? PRESIDENT ZELENSKY SAID IT'S ALL PART OF A BIG PLAN. CAN I ASK YOU TO SPECULATE WHAT THAT GRAND PLAN MIGHT BE?

We've seen reporting that President Zelensky is going to present his plan to win to President Biden in the United States within the next month. And therefore I think that's what the plan is. I think the plan was to wrestle the initiative back again, which they have done, to embarrass Putin domestically and internationally, and to show that yet another red line has been crossed. I think Zelensky will give a very detailed and impassioned plan to Biden and ask him to take the gloves off and let the Ukrainians push for victory.

Biden is being very careful, not because he doesn't want Ukraine to push for victory, but because there are people whispering to him that there could be much larger implications, that there's no answer that will come out of this conflict that is going to be brilliant for world stability if it's not very carefully handled.

THERE WILL BE A DEADLINE ATTACHED TO THIS PLAN, CONSIDERING THAT THERE IS A TIME LIMIT ATTACHED TO PRESIDENT BIDEN'S TENURE AS PRESIDENT, RIGHT?

Yes, there is. There are always political time windows. And I think this is what President Zelensky will be looking at. The devil he knows rather than the devil he doesn't, as we say. He knows Joe Biden. He's been working with Joe Biden and knows what his limits are and how to influence him. He doesn't know Kamala Harris, and he has a perception of Donald Trump that may be right or may be wrong. But what he doesn't want to do is to have to go back and start all over again, building relationships up. So that gives a degree of pressure to get things done in a specific time window.

And we've got the winter coming in. The weather will restrict movement for heavy armor. It will change the tactics that have to be used. It will allow the Russians some time to recover some of their capability. The Ukrainians, if they retain the initiative, will use the winter to prepare for a bigger counteroffensive coming in sometime next year, whenever they can get the proper air cover, now that they're starting to get the elusive F-16s in and are flying them.

HOW LONG CAN UKRAINE SUSTAIN THE KURSK AND BELGOROD OPERATIONS? AND, CONVERSELY, HOW LONG CAN RUSSIA TOLERATE IT UNTIL SOMETHING GIVES WAY DOMESTICALLY?

The Ukrainians seem to be in it for the long term, because they're bringing more of their civilian personnel in to deal with local security and other local issues. And they'll also calculate how long they can sustain it, because logistics will dictate the timelines for everything. I think the Ukrainians have no problems with continuing to resupply what they need in Kursk, and potentially Belgorod, for as long as it takes. They can dig in for the long term.

EVEN AS RUSSIA ADVANCES IN THE EAST, SLOW THOUGH THAT ADVANCE MIGHT BE?

Russian activity in the East and across the front line will always dictate whether the situation stays the same. In British military planning terms, we have an infamous question, which is "Question Four," which you ask every time you run the planning cycle. Question Four is – "has the situation changed?" And if the situation has changed, you don't continue with the same plan; you bring out either a new plan – a sequel of the old one, or you do something different. Because if the situation's changed and you're running with the same plan, then you're going to fail. The Ukrainians have been trained in that level of planning from the West. They also have the experience of the Russian staff approaches to planning. So they can bring the two together and work that very well indeed. And they will have calculated that. So if things change significantly for the worse in the east, and this is what I think Putin is trying to do, then the Ukrainians might withdraw from Kursk and go around to reinforce that. Or they might do something different. I suspect they'll do something different, something less foreseeable.

From a Russian sustainability perspective, I'd say Putin is caught like a rabbit

in the headlights. He doesn't know where to turn. There hasn't been a decisive move from him in any way, shape or form with regard to this. He's trying to bluff it out at the moment, even to himself – He thinks it's like a little thorn in the side. He's not recognizing the real difficulties that could come from it. And this is where I think the Ukrainians will have planned their next actions.

LET'S ALSO TALK ABOUT THE POTENTIAL WESTERN RESPONSE AS IT SEES ALL OF THIS UNFOLD. WILL IT PROMPT THE WEST TO PROVIDE MORE HELP TO UKRAINE, OR, ON THE CONTRARY, WILL IT SHACKLE THE WEST WITH FEARS OF ESCALATION?

I think that the risk of escalation is something that is holding President Biden and Chancellor Scholz of Germany back. In Europe, the UK and France want to take the shackles off. I don't think it's going to shackle decision making any more than it shackles them at the moment.

WITH THAT IN MIND, DO YOU THINK WE WILL SEE A GREENLIGHT FOR THE USE OF LONG RANGE MISSILES ON RUSSIAN SOIL? AND WILL WE SEE MORE F-16S DELIVERED?

They will come when they're needed. There are very interesting comments that have come from Zelensky in the last few weeks and days. The first was when he moved into Kursk, he turned around and said that this was Ukraine creating a buffer zone. He used exactly the same language that Putin had used to suggest his attack into Kharkiv and the attack in the east were dictated by the need to create a buffer zone. And that was, I think, a rude hand gesture from Zelensky to Putin. But, more interesting from the long-range attack perspective, Zelensky said that Ukraine had successfully tested its own ballistic missile. It has a range of at least 700 kilometers and therefore can hit Moscow. That's a good alternative to have, because if and when the West gives Ukraine the authorization to use Western long range missiles on the Russian soil, it will put forward very strong caveats, for example, that Western weapons are only to be used against military targets and not against economic targets: so, no targeting factories, oil refineries, cities and other populous areas. But yes, you can target airfields and military headquarters and military logistic depots and everything else. I think that's weeks, if not days, away.



The road to Kursk. Source: Russian Defense Ministry/apnews

Patriarchate Weighs Government Proposal to Declare Orthodoxy as State Religion

BY TEAM GT

This week, the Patriarchate confirmed that the government has proposed declaring Orthodoxy as the state religion. Andria Jaghmaidze, head of the Public Relations Service of the Patriarchate, indicated that the Church is currently debating how to formulate the proposal and is expected to make a decision soon. Jaghmaidze noted that while the government's proposal aims to enhance the Church's role and status, the specific wording—whether to declare Orthodoxy as the state religion—may not be as crucial as finding a formulation that supports the proposal's intent.

"Recently, the government has shown a strong commitment to protecting national values and traditions, pursuing a policy of peace, and supporting the Church," Jaghmaidze said. "In this context, we should view the proposal as an effort to further strengthen the Church's role and status."

A meeting has been set by the Patriarchate and government today, August 29, to discuss the issue further.

In contrast, Archbishop Zenon Iarajuli expressed concerns about the implications of such a declaration. He argues that designating the Orthodox Church



Andria Jaghmaidze, head of the Public Relations Service of the Patriarchate. Source: newshub

as the state religion could lead to its institutional subordination to the government, which may undermine the Church's independence and contribute to its institutional destruction.

"Declaring the Orthodox Church as the state religion in Georgia would effectively subordinate the Church to the state government," Reverend Zenon wrote. "The Church's current independence from the state is crucial, especially during crises and political upheavals where the state's influence may wane. Therefore, making the Church a state religion is misguided."

He then suggested that this initiative

might be part of a broader agenda by a hostile foreign power or a precursor to authoritarianism, potentially compromising Georgia's democratic principles and the Church's autonomy.

Eastern Orthodox Christianity was the state religion for most of Georgia's history until 1921, when the country, after declaring independence from Russia in 1918, was taken over by the Red Army during the Soviet invasion and incorporated into the Soviet Union.

The current Constitution of Georgia recognizes the Georgian Orthodox Church's significant historical role while ensuring its independence from the state.



The Holy Trinity Cathedral, Tbilisi. Photo by Arman

The relationship between the government and the Church is further regulated by the 2002 Concordat.

Calls to make Orthodox Christianity the 'state religion' have surfaced repeatedly since Georgia gained independence from the Soviet Union, appearing particularly heated during election cam-

paigns or arising from fringe conservative groups.

The Church is widely regarded as a key ally of the government, especially following Georgian Dream's recent conservative shift and its commitment to restrict advocacy for LGBTQ+ rights—an agenda that the Church openly supported.

SOCIETY

C'est La Vie - A Strange Dichotomy

OP-ED BY NUGZAR B. RUHADZE

Home now, in my familiar little Saqartvelo, I can reflect on a somewhat surreal summer spent in and around Moscow, Russia. Like any other big city, Moscow looks different at night compared to the daytime, and while this itself is a dichotomy of a kind, the actual national-level dichotomy in Russia runs much deeper and is certainly socio-politically more haunting.

New York looks impressive both when the stars are twinkling in the sky and when the sun is at its zenith, but the same description would not fit into an

attempt to portray Moscow. Strolling along the spacious downtown streets of Russia's capital, I wanted to stay there longer, because it looked truly gorgeous. Many capitals of the world have impressed me, each in their special way, and Moscow definitely has its own urban immensity and personality, but more so at night. I am decidedly saying 'at night,' because I had a bird's eye daytime view of the city from a 92nd floor observation platform, and, frankly, I was a little frustrated because my eyes hit a massive, faceless, architecturally plain and unsystematic, gloomy and infrastructurally confusing urban settlement, one which I had no desire to continue watching from above longer than I did. Yet, at night, the picture was totally turned when I found

myself slap-bang in the middle of the richly and colorfully illuminated city of Moskva; every corner of it enticing me magnetically, luring me into the depths of evening life, where lavishly organized entertainment and palate-savvy gratification are both well-provided for, if not painfully expensive (though products in regular grocery stores are rather cheap - they tell me the government has frozen the prices on everyday staples).

Moscow life has changed an unrecognizable amount. One of the most noticeable Russian dichotomies which attracts attention are the signs in Moscow, almost half of which are in English. Again, to compare Moskva with New York, sporadic Russian-language signs would attract the eye, but only in Brooklyn,

nowhere else. Cyrillic store signs in America? That would be crazy to imagine. Does this mean anything? Most likely, yes - it means Russians have not forfeited their post-Perestroika penchant for westernization. Suffice it to mention that I couldn't see anyone in the street whose apparel was not Western.

Speaking about the Russian dichotomized lifestyle, I could not really help noticing that there are two drastically varying Russias out there: life-enjoying and war-suffering. Let's elucidate: part of the country is in the battlefield with all those warfare attributes in place: the military machine is rolling at full speed, boots on the ground, soldiers and volunteers getting killed every step of the way, and throngs of refugees seeking

alternative homes in which to settle, even temporarily. The other part of the nation is doing business as usual, money is being made, schools routinely pressing on with their regular schedules and academic programs, eateries full of people, stores packed with consumers, the pleasure industry at full swing and the entertainment kingdom doing its due without anything getting in its way. While the devastating rockets are swishing by their ears almost every instant of the day, alongside the perfidious drones with lethal weapons hovering over their heads, the happy Russian rank-and-file is watching the international festival of military music, hosted by their famous Red Square, or enjoying the international cinematic week with full houses, taken by applause and cheers. The "special military operation" could not even hold back the prestigious SMP Russian car racing, or put a stop to the super match between the popular Russian football teams of Zenith and Spartak.

And finally, here goes the strangest among the dichotic findings of the day: the Russians are attacking Ukrainian forces on Ukrainian soil, and at exactly the same time, they are taking bombs and bullets from Ukraine's martial powers on their own territory, the two frontlines being equally exhaustive and destructive. It is surreal; the situation carrying a weird theatrical streak that tends to wax more phantasmagoric than the plots of one of those science fiction opuses. When back to senses again, one wonders if this kind of clear and present duality is possible at all. And the creepiest part of the whole story is that years will pass and, as if nothing much happened, today's vested enemies will make it up and start active fruitful cooperation again, to the benefit of all those who are today at each other's throats. And they will formally pay routine homage to the dead and missing in action, sarcastically justifying this terrible human misfortune with the household French cliché - c'est la vie.

A view of Moscow. Photo by markklimyuk9000



Exploring Georgia's Hidden Gems

BLOG BY TATJANA MONTIK

During my 14 years in Georgia, I've explored many regions, but Lechkhumi and Lower Svaneti hold a special place in my heart. The promise of lush green mountains like Khvamli, cascading rivers like Tskhenistsqali, and majestic peaks has always captivated me. I also appreciate that these regions are less travelled, allowing for a more authentic and peaceful experience.

Imagine hiking through alpine meadows, with the legendary Tskhenistsqali river winding its way through the valley below. From the summit, the world stretches out before you, a breathtaking panorama of nature's beauty. With every step, you feel a sense of freedom and adventure that's hard to find anywhere else.

Many infrastructure improvements have made vacations in Lechkhumi and Lower Svaneti easier and more comfortable. These projects include new roads and bridges. For instance, there is a new road leading to the legendary Mount Khvamli, starting from the picturesque village of Okrakhushi in Lechkhumi. Additionally, you can find a new road leading to the Green Lake in Kulbaki village, where you can enjoy fresh fish from the ponds in a very pleasant restaurant.

Lower Svaneti is an amazing place, where the harsh beauty of the mountains is softened by the warmth of human settlements. Unlike its more famous neighbor, Upper Svaneti, with its majestic towers and harsh climate, Lower Svaneti captivates with its gentle landscapes, gardens bathed in sunlight, and cozy villages. Here, among the green meadows and forests, you can find old stone houses, many of which are unfortunately abandoned, but some have preserved their original beauty and have even been decorated with elegant wooden balconies, reminiscent of Tbilisi's charm.

I always felt a certain guilt when I left Lower Svaneti to go to more famous and popular places. After all, this part of Svaneti, like a younger sister, often remains in the shadow of its famous relative. But it is in this peace and quiet that you can truly feel the soul of Georgia.

Lower Svaneti is not only majestic mountains, dense forests, and rushing rivers, but also a treasure trove of cultural heritage. Many ancient churches, painted by unknown talented masters, hold the secrets of the past.

We embarked on a journey to the forgotten balneological resort of Muashi. Nestled at 1300 meters above sea level, amidst a pristine spruce forest, we discovered a meadow dotted with mineral springs. One such spring, near a cluster of abandoned houses, offered crystal-clear, cool, and slightly effervescent



Zagaro Pass. Photo by the author

water. Locals spoke of other hidden springs perfect for bathing, but we were unable to find them.

Faced with a difficult choice, we stood at a crossroads: venture to the abandoned village of Zeskho and the enigmatic lake beyond, or return to the enchanting embrace of Upper Svaneti. The image of standing on the lakeshore, gazing out at the vast landscapes of Svaneti and Racha, filled us with anticipation.

However, the allure of Upper Svaneti proved too strong, and we reluctantly postponed our visit to Zeskho. While disappointed, we knew that our adventures were far from over.

UPPER SVANETI AND ITS MOUNTAIN PASSES

The South Svanetian road is a legendary journey from Lower to Upper Svaneti, crossing the 2616-meter-high Zagaro Pass. Once a popular tourist route in Soviet times, the road has seen better days.

In autumn 2019, my Berlin friends and I embarked on an unforgettable adventure to Ushguli, the heart of Svaneti. However, the perilous condition of the road almost claimed my car. Construction work had turned sections of the road into a treacherous obstacle course, testing our driving skills to the limit. It took us nearly an entire day to navigate this challenging route.

Reaching Ushguli at sunset, I was captivated by the breathtaking views of the snow-capped peaks of the Greater Caucasus. Yet, I couldn't help but imagine the vibrant alpine meadows in full bloom during the summer, as the autumn sun had scorched much of the vegetation.

The newly upgraded South Svaneti road transformed our latest journey to Ushguli. The smooth asphalt drive was

a stark contrast to the rugged, untamed beauty of the mountains. After following the tranquil Tskhenistsqali gorge for some time, the road began its ascent. Pausing at a towering stone pyramid, we, along with a German couple in a massive campervan, took in the stunning panorama of Mount Ailama (4546 m) and the glacial-fed Koruldashi River. It was a powerful reminder of how quickly civilization can give way to the pristine beauty of nature.

The moraine and glacier loomed before us like colossal sentinels. Their sheer size and beauty captivated my son, who immediately expressed a desire to get up close to the glacier's glistening surface. Though it seemed within arm's reach, the reality was a challenging trek through a turbulent river and dense forest. It would take at least three to four hours to reach Ailama.

The road to the pass was still under construction, with a gravel surface that had been washed away in places by mountain streams and heavy machinery. Despite the unfinished sections, ordinary cars could navigate the road with relative ease. While our progress was slowed by frequent detours around slow-moving trucks, the overall journey was incredibly rewarding.

The challenges of the road were quickly forgotten as we were enveloped by the breathtaking beauty of the surrounding landscape. The thunderous mountain rivers, towering cliffs, and deep gorges created a sense of perfect harmony with the natural world. The forest soon gave way to alpine meadows dotted with gnarled birch trees, silent sentinels of nature's ancient magic. My son loved the ever-changing views and begged to explore the mountains on foot. His eyes sparkled with excitement. Was it the

invigorating mountain air or the energy of the mountains that filled him with such joy? Whatever it was, his enthusiasm was contagious, and I found myself smiling and longing to join him in his adventure. But I had to keep in mind that we could easily get lost in the mountains.

Even though the wildflowers were past their peak, the alpine meadows were still a feast for the eyes. The colorful blooms that lined the road made the journey feel like a celebration. Each bend in the road revealed new and breathtaking scenery. When we saw the first horses grazing by the roadside, we knew that we were close to reaching the legendary village of Ushguli, the highest permanently inhabited settlement in Europe at 2200 meters above sea level.

USHGULI TODAY

Ushguli is a place where contented cows graze lazily against the backdrop of ancient Svan towers and the majestic, snow-capped peaks of Shkhara. But the tranquil scene is disrupted by the hustle and bustle of construction. The village, with its three distinct parts, is undergoing a rapid transformation, as if trying to compress a thousand years of development into a decade. While this modernization is necessary, there's a concern that Ushguli might lose its unique character in the process. The jarring contrast between the traditional stone houses, many of which are UNESCO-protected, and the new, plastic-framed windows is a prime example of this.

Despite everything, my son was thrilled by Ushguli. He hadn't expected to see "such civilization" amidst the stunning medieval panorama of the village with its monumental towers.

Moreover, there was a Babel-like confusion and multilingual chaos: in addi-

tion to Georgian, you could hear English, Spanish, and even Japanese, as well as Hebrew, mixed with Russian, at every turn.

We took a break to enjoy the views of Shkhara from the terrace of a colourful cafe and at the same time refresh ourselves with a couple of slices of watermelon and melon. Incidentally, we paid a price for this feast that was comparable to Manhattan! It became clear to us then that tourism had become the main source of income for local residents.

GETTING CLOSER TO THE ROOTS. KALA COMMUNITY, HOTEL PHEVBEI

We decided to base ourselves in the village of Kala, in Upper Svaneti, as it offered easy access to the Latpari Pass trail, our hiking destination for the next day.

Nestled in a gorge, the Kala community is located six kilometers from Ushguli. Our hotel, Phevebi (which means "Roots" in Georgian), was perched high on a mountainside. Just above the hotel, a new hiking trail was being developed, connecting Kala to the village of Adishi, famous for its glacier. The four-hour trek to Adishi would require crossing a turbulent river, but locals were said to be on hand to assist tourists by ferrying them across on horseback.

Before dinner, we decided to take a short hike to stretch our legs after the journey. In Svaneti, nature and history are so intertwined that you feel their re-energized simply by stepping outside. A ten-minute hike above the village rewarded us with stunning panoramic views. The Church of Saints Qvirike and Ivilte, perched on a nearby mount, seemed almost within reach. It is considered one of the most sacred sites in the region.

We spent the night in a charming stone house that had been lovingly converted into a hotel. The fresh scent of wood permeated every room, from the walls to the stairs. Our hostess welcomed us and invited us to choose our favourite room. Every detail, from the intricately folded towels to the cozy reading nook in the living room, showed that the hosts had put a lot of thought and care into creating a welcoming space.

We feasted on a delicious meal of chicken, salads, fried potatoes with tkemali sauce, and cheese. But it was the chvishtari, Svan cornbread, that stole the show. These savory pastries are the perfect fuel for long hikes.

The story of Phevebi Hotel is one of passion and perseverance. Natalie, the owner, had long dreamed of creating a special place in her homeland. After years of working in the Italian hospitality industry, she returned to Svaneti to turn her dream into reality. With determination and hard work, she transformed her family's abandoned house, damaged by an avalanche in 1987, into a welcoming hotel. Imagine renovating a house in a remote area with limited resources – it's truly remarkable! Natalie's story is a testament to the power of human spirit.



Ushguli. Photo by the author



Ushguli. Photo by the author

'Back to School Starts at Carrefour' - Everything for School Under One Roof

The large chain of Carrefour hypermarkets and supermarkets, which is represented by the company 'Majid Al Futtaim' in Georgia, is celebrating the start of the new school year with a range of special offers and activities designed to support students and parents. From August 21 to September 17, Carrefour stores nationwide will offer a wide selection of stationery and school supplies all in one place, with a focus on affordability.

As part of the back-to-school campaign, Carrefour is hosting a drawing competition for children aged 5-13. Participants are invited to "Draw your school, bring your drawing to any Carrefour branch, and get a chance to win exciting prizes." A total of 36 winners will be selected, each receiving a school bag filled with stationary items. The top two winners will receive additional prizes: the 1st place

winner will get an iPad, and the 2nd place winner will receive a Bluetooth speaker. Renowned artist Zaliko Sulakauri will also share his top picks. The competition runs until September 11, with winners announced on September 12.

In addition to the competition, Carrefour is offering special discounts on a variety of school supplies, including school bags, lunch boxes, stationery, electronics and other essential items for the school year.

Majid Al Futtaim Retail continues to enhance the shopping experience by providing a wide range of high-quality products at competitive prices, with the convenience of self-service checkouts and online shopping options. Carrefour's mission is to deliver a seamless shopping experience and create memorable moments for customers every day.

For more information, visit your nearest Carrefour store or check online.



Adishi at Last. Part 1: Getting There



Adishi. Photo by the author

BLOG BY TONY HANMER

Whether trekking groups from one particular company, Poland-based 'Barents,' numerous times every summer. Usually it's 16 people with

a Polish and a local guide, flying into either Kutaisi or Batumi and then getting a minivan up to us together. They have supper; breakfast next morning and a pack lunch; put their big luggage in the van; and hike to each new guest house with a light day-pack. Typically, they start at our place and go just past Ushguli over a period of a few days, 99% of it on hiking trails, not roads. It's a well-

established route in general, and these people have it down to a fine art.

Two summers ago, my wife bit the bullet and joined the trek for several days, beating me to the village of Adishi in the process and showing that she can get herself into long-distance gear when required. This year, I asked the Polish guide, by now a regular and friend, which day of the route he thought was the most spectacular.

"Adishi to Kala," he said without hesitation. "The views you'll get..." I asked if I might join in for the night before, that day and maybe the night after as well. Sure, he said. Park your car in Kala where we'll come out, get yourself to Adishi via Ipari, and we'll be ready for you. Finally, after 25 years in Georgia and Svaneti, it was time for me to see Adishi village, which had never been on my route.

The night before, I dug around a bit into the ball of my left foot after a shower, using a needle. I had stepped on a thorn while clearing some horribly spiky trees on our property, more than a week earlier; and while I hadn't found anything left in my foot, it was still giving me some discomfort, even after a hot salt water bath, something I had learned from my parents decades ago. So, more probing. There! A bit of pus, and the 3mm tip of the thorn emerged, hardly visible but clearly the source of the nagging wrongness. I've learned that getting rid of such intruders, or a splinter, is best done by the victim, who can feel their own level of pain and cope accordingly. Another salt bath for disinfection, and I would be good to go; otherwise, not at all.

The next morning, I packed, intending also to spend a night or two above Ushguli on my own after the trek. So I would take both the day pack and some things, like a sleeping bag, mattress and tarp, to leave in the car for that second leg. Parking near the top end of Kala, the last village before Ushguli, I then walked down through the village seeking a car to take me the 20-odd km back down to Ipari.

It took 10 cars not stopping over half an hour before the 11th one did let me in, at the bottom end of Kala: a private car, a young man showing his mother Svaneti for the first time, although he had been here often. He had been born the same year I first visited Georgia, 25 years ago. They dropped me at the sign

for 9 km to Adishi, went on their way, and I started on this final leg, hoping to flag down another car there in the middle of the afternoon.

That was not to be: I had to walk the whole 9 km of gravel road, with not one car appearing in my direction at all, let alone stopping. I walked quickly to get there as soon as possible, doing the distance in two hours with my light day pack. Finally, just as Adishi emerged, so did a Mercedes city car, useless to me by then. At least I was there, feeling a bit of pain at the tops of my legs from the stiff pace, but there I was. I joined a

few members of my next day's trekking group for a quick look around the village before sunset.

To be continued...

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



Adishi. Photo by the author

One Caucasus Festival Bridges Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia



Witek Hebanowski and Irakli Mikiani speaking at the 2023 One Caucasus Festival. Source: FB

BY SHELBI R. ANKIEWICZ

The One Caucasus Festival annually brings together Armenians, Azerbaijanis, and Georgians through volunteer programs, collaborations, workshops, music, and more, to make progressive steps within the region.

Established in 2014 and celebrating its tenth anniversary, One Caucasus is a four-day festival and NGO (non-governmental organization) in Georgia. In late August each year, in Tserakvi village in the Kvemo-Kartli region, musicians, educators, artists, and others come from around the world to participate in this event.

The Program Director and Initiator of OneCaucasus, Witek Hebanowski, started a festival in Poland around 20 years ago called "Transcaucasia." He describes it as a modern-day "Woodstock" and tells GEORGIA TODAY that his Caucasian friends who attended the event started questioning why they didn't have something similar in their region to bring

people together. Once the point had been raised, a team of people from at least seven countries brainstormed who the main audience would be for the One Caucasus festival.

Hebanowski says it was decided that the festival would target the youth of the region, and then the only thing left was to determine what type of Caucasus they wanted to display.

"[We wondered] do we want to present the Caucasus now? Or maybe create some kind of vision of the Caucasus and how it will work?" Hebanowski notes. "The first person who reacted was an Armenian curator, who said, 'You got it.' For me, that was the green light, because I wouldn't dare to start such a project if it didn't come from Azerbaijani, Armenian, and Georgian curators."

The festival was held this year from August 24 to 27. There were 48 musicians in attendance, including 21 who were Georgian, 11 Armenian/Azerbaijani, and 16 international bands. In addition to the music, there were other projects and art galleries that people could view during the festival to learn more about the Caucasus region.

Since the festival is free of charge, Hebanowski said they do a large call for volunteers every year, from artists to educators, filmmakers, and more, to help put together and create content for the fest. According to Hebanowski, volunteers are split into workshop groups comprising people of different nationalities and trades, who are then sent to remote villages throughout the Caucasus to teach children skills. He said these could be different things such as how to edit movies or how to take photographs.

Once the volunteer groups are in the villages, Hebanowski told us they give the children a map of their village. This allows them to discover more about where they live, such as the history of the streets, people living in the area, monuments, etc., so they find their home more interesting. During this time with the volunteers, all the villages create something that is put on display at the One Caucasus Festival.

One product this year, Hebanowski says, was a trailer for a superhero and Harry Potter movie from an Azerbaijani village. The animation was voiced over by the children and had various parodies that were collected into one piece. After the post-production was completed by the One Caucasus team, the video was shown to the festival's audience.

This year, the festival had a space known as the Gallery of Modern Art, (GoMA) which was full of tablets. Each displayed a different project curated by the various villages so people could look across borders, see what is being produced around the Caucasus, and learn about the areas. Another collaborative part of the festival looking across borders is to create mixes between different musicians.

According to Hebanowski, there were at least 10 collaborations between musicians from various countries. What he found most amazing was that the audience didn't notice different bands on one track;

rather, they thought it was one group.

Hebanowski told GEORGIA TODAY that he is glad that their team is comprised of people from the Caucasus, but notes that things have gotten harder in recent years.

"We are happy to have a team, especially working with Armenians and Azerbaijanis. One Caucasus has offered many training sessions on the power of mediation and negotiation regarding how to solve the Karabakh problem, and in One Caucasus there's the practice of working together," Hebanowski says. "We now have Armenian bands who wanted to go onstage with Azerbaijani bands, but the problem was that because the border was closed with Azerbaijan, we lost the biggest metropolitan audience."

In 2019, more people came to the festival from Baku than from Tbilisi, though the primary audience is the local Armenian, Azerbaijani, and Georgian residents. When the One Caucasus team was searching for a place to hold the festival, they wanted to find somewhere easily accessible and close to all three Caucasian borders. Hebanowski said they were shocked when they found Marneuli, just north of Tserakvi, because it was a "complete kaleidoscope of the Caucasus," with Azerbaijanis, Sunni and Shia, Armenians, and Georgians.

Irakli Mikiani is the founder of the One Caucasus NGO. He said that this year's festival was the biggest festival they have had, however, it didn't come without caveats. He said it took them a while to secure confirmation of the festival, and that One Caucasus is always associated with numerous topics and issues that people face daily. Even though they often hit these roadblocks, Mikiani said the team has learned to make light of the situation and push through, because the festival "simply must happen."

Between the festival and the NGO, work is happening year-round. In three locations each year, there is a program

led to promote architecture. Groups of volunteers go where the government is willing to invest, and they coordinate with the local people to develop architectural ideas that the community wants to implement.

Hebanowski also says that every year a volunteer construction team builds platforms for the festival - including a cinema, furniture, signs, the GoMA, and more, while other teams are sent to villages in the Caucasus to build small houses dedicated to integrating games and inspiring youth.

Looking forward, the team says they are focused on the next two years and reaching out to big-name artists, so people around the globe can support the One Caucasus cause and turn Tserakvi into a place where people meet.

"We see that after war there is this need. It is very important to us to use One Caucasus as a place where Armenians and Azerbaijanis can meet as human beings, not enemies," says Hebanowski. "We see this need amongst young people."

According to the team, everyone has a One Caucasus story. They aim to take small steps that will make a difference rather than take on something larger than themselves.



One Caucasus Logo for its tenth anniversary. Source: FB



Photo by the author

REVIEW BY IVAN NECHAEV

'Hard by a Great Forest' by Leo Vardiashvili: Unraveling the Georgian Landscape

a living archive of the nation's history. Vardiashvili's use of these settings creates a narrative space where the past and present collide, reflecting the enduring impact of historical events on contemporary life. The architecture and streets of Tbilisi are described with precision, capturing the essence of the city as a place where history is ever-present, influencing the characters' thoughts and actions.

A DAN BROWN-ESQUE NARRATIVE: ARCHITECTURAL MYSTERIES IN THE HEART OF TBILISI

In 'Hard by a Great Forest,' the reader is drawn into a narrative structure that mirrors the architectural detective adventures familiar to fans of Dan Brown. Vardiashvili employs a similar method of unraveling a mystery that is intricately linked to the history and architecture of Tbilisi. The protagonist's journey through the city is marked by discoveries of hidden meanings within its structures, leading to a deeper understanding of the city's—and by extension, the nation's—secrets.

This approach allows Vardiashvili to explore Tbilisi's architectural landmarks, such as Narikala Fortress and the courtyards of Sololaki, not just as physical entities, but as repositories of cultural memory. The narrative unfolds like a puzzle, where each piece of architecture reveals a clue to understanding the broader historical and cultural context. Unlike the often sensationalist tone of

Brown's novels, Vardiashvili's treatment of these elements is more reflective, using the city's architecture as a means to explore the complex relationship between history, memory, and identity.

SENTIMENTALITY AND LOSS: THE KHALED HOSSEINI CONNECTION

The emotional depth of 'Hard by a Great Forest' is another significant aspect that demands attention. Vardiashvili's exploration of themes such as memory, loss, and identity bears a resemblance to the sentimentality found in the works of Khaled Hosseini. The novel is rich in emotional nuance, with characters that are deeply affected by the weight of their pasts and the changing realities of their present lives.

The sentimental tone of the novel is not merely a narrative device but is crucial to understanding the characters' motivations and the broader cultural implications of their stories. Much like Hosseini, Vardiashvili uses sentimentality to highlight the personal dimensions of larger historical narratives. The generational tensions depicted in the novel, where older characters grapple with the traumas of the Soviet era, while younger characters face the uncertainties of post-Soviet life, resonate with readers on a deeply emotional level.

Vardiashvili's prose is marked by a lyrical quality that enhances this emotional resonance. His attention to detail in depicting the inner lives of his char-

acters allows for a profound exploration of the themes of love, loss, and the search for meaning. This emotional depth, combined with the novel's intricate narrative structure, positions 'Hard by a Great Forest' as a work that is both culturally specific and universally relatable.

MEMORY, HISTORY, AND IDENTITY: THEMATIC CONVERGENCE

At the heart of 'Hard by a Great Forest' is an exploration of memory—both individual and collective—and its role in shaping identity. The novel's title itself alludes to the dense, often impenetrable nature of memory, represented by the "great forest." The characters' journeys through these metaphorical and literal landscapes are reflective of their struggles to reconcile with their pasts and understand their identities within the broader context of Georgian history.

The interplay between memory and history is a recurring theme in the novel, with Vardiashvili using the setting of Tbilisi and its surrounding landscapes as a physical manifestation of these abstract concepts. The city becomes a space where history is constantly being reinterpreted and renegotiated, and where the characters must confront the remnants of the past that continue to shape their present. Vardiashvili's portrayal of this dynamic is both subtle and profound, offering a nuanced commentary on the ways in which history is lived and remembered.

The novel also engages with the concept of identity, particularly in relation to place. The characters' connection to the Georgian landscape is integral to their sense of self, with the city of Tbilisi serving as a reflection of their internal states. Vardiashvili's exploration of this theme is deeply rooted in the Georgian literary tradition, yet it also speaks to broader, more universal concerns about the nature of identity and belonging.

'Hard by a Great Forest' is a novel that demands careful reading and thoughtful reflection. Leo Vardiashvili's use of the Georgian setting, combined with his intricate narrative structure and emotional depth, makes this work a significant contribution to contemporary Georgian literature. The novel's exploration of memory, history, and identity is both culturally specific and broadly resonant, offering insights that are relevant not only to readers familiar with Georgia but to anyone interested in the complexities of the human experience.

Through its detailed depiction of Tbilisi's architecture and landscapes, its emotionally charged narrative, and its thematic richness, 'Hard by a Great Forest' stands as a work that is both a product of its cultural context and a meaningful exploration of universal themes. Vardiashvili's novel is a testament to the power of literature to capture the nuances of a place and its people, and to offer readers a window into the intricate web of memory and identity that defines the human condition.

Art as Survival, Art as Revolution: Artbeat Gallery's Group Exhibition 'The Color of Pomegranates'

BY IVAN NECHAEV

The exhibition *Color of Pomegranates* at Gallery Artbeat in Tbilisi is a visual symphony that delves into the intricate and often painful intersections of history, identity, and politics. Drawing from a diverse array of local and international artists, the show emerges as a potent reflection of contemporary Georgian society, where art is not just a form of expression, but a battleground for ideological warfare. The exhibition's title is a direct homage to Sergei Parajanov's cinematic masterpiece, yet it is equally a profound commentary on the ongoing struggles faced by the LGBTQ+ community in Georgia. In a country where gender politics are as complex and contentious as the social fabric itself, *Color of Pomegranates* becomes a vivid and visceral narrative of resistance, identity, and the relentless pursuit of freedom.

RESONANCES OF PARAJANOV: CINEMATIC ECHOES IN CONTEMPORARY ART

Sergei Parajanov's *The Color of Pomegranates* (1969) is not merely a cinematic influence, but a symbolic and political touchstone for this exhibition. Parajanov, an artist persecuted by Soviet authorities for his homosexuality, serves as a spiritual guide for many of the works displayed. His story of censorship and oppression underlines the exhibition's broader themes of marginalization and resistance. Parajanov's influence is felt most strongly in the works that grapple with the tension between public and private identities, and the ongoing struggle for visibility in a society that often demands conformity.

The exhibition itself stands as a testament to the resilience of queer art, echoing Parajanov's defiant spirit. By invoking his legacy, the artists featured in *Color of Pomegranates* are not only paying homage to a pioneer but also asserting their place in a cultural dialogue that has too often sought to silence them.

ART AS POLITICAL WEAPONRY: THE ROLE OF LGBTQ+ NARRATIVES IN GEORGIAN SOCIETY

The artists in this exhibition do not shy away from the political realities of their context. The recent adoption of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation in Georgia, particularly the draft law On Family Values and Protection of Minors, serves as a stark backdrop to the exhibition. This law, supported by multiple parliamentary committees, is a direct assault on the rights and freedoms of the LGBTQ+ community. It is within this fraught political landscape that the artists in *Color of Pomegranates* operate, using their work as both shield and sword in the ongoing fight for equality and recognition.

David Apakidze's work is a striking example of this intersection of art and activism. His exploration of queer identities within the framework of Georgian Orthodox iconography is not just a reclamation of cultural symbols but a direct challenge to the conservative forces that seek to erase queer existence from the national narrative. By queering these sacred images, Apakidze forces a confrontation with the deeply ingrained homophobia that pervades both religious and social spheres in Georgia.

Similarly, Andro Dadiani's work is a



Photo by the author



Photo by the author



Photo by the author



Photo by the author

raw and unfiltered commentary on the social issues that plague contemporary Georgia, from homophobia to religious fanaticism. His use of homoerotic imagery is not merely provocative but deeply personal, reflecting the repressed nature of his own existence in a society that refuses to acknowledge his identity. The anonymity and masks that shroud Dadiani's life are mirrored in his art, creating a powerful narrative of survival in the face of relentless oppression.

THE POLITICS OF GENDER FLUIDITY: MARIKA KOCHIASHVILI AND RENE MATIC

Gender identity and its fluidity form a central theme in the works of artists like Marika Kochiashvili and Rene Matic. Kochiashvili's sculptures and photographs explore the blurred lines of the gender binary, challenging the rigid norms that have shaped representations of female sexuality in the South Caucasus. Her work is a celebration of fluidity, a visual language that embraces the complexity of gender and the beauty of androgyny. The androgynous figurines in her sculptures are intimate, depicting sex scenes that are tender yet charged with a quiet defiance. They stand as a bold statement against the conservative forces that seek to impose a singular, heteronormative narrative on society.

Rene Matic's work, on the other hand, draws from the rich cultural tapestry of British working-class culture, blending it with the vibrancy of queer identities. Her exploration of queer intimacies within the context of Northern soul and Ska movements is both an homage to the past and a reclamation of space for marginalized identities. Matic's art is a powerful reminder that queer culture is not a modern phenomenon but has deep roots in the social and cultural movements of the past.

BEYOND BORDERS: THE TRANSNATIONAL VOICES OF GABY SAHAR AND GIORGI MIMINOSHVILI

The exhibition's transnational dimension is further enriched by the works of Gaby Sahhar and Giorgi Miminoshvili, both of whom engage with themes of migration, identity, and the politics of space. Sahhar's work, which spans painting, video, and installation, is a poignant exploration of Palestinian identity within the context of displacement and fragmentation. By centering queer expression within this geopolitical framework, Sahhar draws parallels between the struggles of the LGBTQ+ community and the broader issues of border politics and censorship.

Miminoshvili's work, grounded in the political realities of contemporary Georgia, also engages with the concept of space, particularly the idea of 'non-places'—spaces devoid of identity, such as rented apartments or dormitories. His series, which utilizes the format of postage stamps, is a meditation on the commodification of space and its impact on

identity formation in the context of migration. Through his art, Miminoshvili connects the dots between personal and political, illustrating how the global and the local, the public and the private, are inextricably linked.

HANNAH QUINLAN & ROSIE HASTINGS: QUEER DANCE AS RESISTANCE

In a society where public spaces are often contested and policed, the act of queer dance becomes an act of resistance. Hannah Quinlan and Rosie Hastings capture this dynamic in their film *Everything Is Folly In This World That Does Not Give Us Pleasure* (2021), which portrays queer dance as a bridge between the alienated individual and the broader LGBTQ+ community. The film's title, borrowed from Verdi's *La Traviata*, underscores the hedonistic joy and defiance inherent in queer dance—a space where pleasure is both a form of resistance and a claim to existence in a world that often denies it.

HISTORICAL ECHOES: ALEX MARGO ARDEN'S RECONSTRUCTION OF QUEER HISTORIES

Alex Margo Arden's work is a meticulous reconstruction of queer histories, specifically the trials of Kenneth Halliwell and Joe Orton in the late 1950s and early 1960s. By retracing the steps of these historical figures, Arden not only brings their stories to the fore, but also draws attention to the broader cultural and legal frameworks that have historically oppressed queer individuals. Her collages, composed of materials from the same era, serve as both an homage and a critique, highlighting the ways in which queer lives have been marginalized and erased from mainstream history.

Color of Pomegranates is not just an exhibition; it is a manifesto. It is a declaration of the right to exist, to love, and to create in a world that too often seeks to suppress these fundamental freedoms. Through their work, the artists in this exhibition challenge the status quo, offering a powerful critique of the social and political forces that continue to oppress the LGBTQ+ community in Georgia and beyond. But more than that, they offer a vision of a world where art is not just a form of resistance but a means of survival, a way to carve out space in a hostile world, and a tool for imagining a more just and inclusive future.

In the face of rising homophobia, censorship, and violence, *Color of Pomegranates* stands as a testament to the enduring power of art. It is a reminder that art can be both a mirror and a hammer—a way to reflect the world as it is, and a tool to shape it into something better. As the exhibition continues to run until September 8, 2024, it invites viewers to engage with these critical issues, to reflect on the challenges faced by the LGBTQ+ community, and to consider the role that art can play in the ongoing struggle for justice and equality.



Photo by the author



Photo by the author

UK's Dance Informa Interviews Ballet Soloist Nino Samadashvili ahead of London Tour

BY TEAM GT

On August 28, the State Ballet of Georgia opened the first of 15 performances of Swan Lake at the London Coliseum, marking the company's debut in London. Under the leadership of Artistic Director Nina Ananiashvili, the performance will feature Nino Samadashvili in the demanding dual role of Odette/Odile.

In an exclusive interview with Dance Informa, Samadashvili discussed her development as a dancer, her experiences working with renowned prima ballerina Ananiashvili, and her excitement about the State Ballet of Georgia's first performance in London.

"Samadashvili joined the ballet company of the Tbilisi Opera and Ballet State Theater as a Ballet Artist in 2011, was promoted to Soloist in 2014, and then to Leading Soloist in 2016," writes Melody McTier Thomason. "But her journey to State Ballet of Georgia began at age 12."

McTier Thomason quotes the Tbilisi soloist as she details her amazing journey into the theater.

"My family heard that Nina was coming back to Georgia and was going to be the new director of State Ballet of Georgia and the school," says Samadashvili. "Originally, my family had thought about taking me out of Georgia to train, but when they heard Nina was coming back, they decided I should stay. At 17 years old, I was not yet in the company, but Nina wanted to take me with the com-



The State Ballet of Georgia's 'Swan Lake'. Source: State Ballet of Georgia

pany on a tour in Italy. They were doing Frederick Ashton's Birthday Offering, and Nina chose me to do one of the variations. Once I finished training at the school, I joined the company."

Swan Lake was Samadashvili's first big role.

"I was about 20 or 21 when I first danced Odette/Odile, and even then, I wasn't sure if I was quite ready," she tells Dance

Informa. "Swan Lake is more than technical skill; you need to be emotionally ready for the role. They're two very different characters with contrasting styles and emotions."

Of London, she says, "I feel a big responsibility for my country, because we're showing our face to the cultural center of ballet. For me, it's a dream to perform there."

SPORTS

Liverpool FC Signs Mamardashvili

BY TEAM GT

Liverpool Football Club officially announced on Tuesday that they have reached an agreement to sign Giorgi Mamardashvili, the Georgian national football team's goalkeeper, from Spanish club Valencia.

Mamardashvili is set to join Liverpool for the Premier League 2025-26 season,

pending a work permit and international clearance.

"We have reached an agreement for the transfer of Giorgi Mamardashvili, subject to a work permit and international clearance - with the Valencia goalkeeper set to move to Anfield ahead of the 2025-26 season," Liverpool FC stated on Twitter.

The 23-year-old will continue with Valencia for the remainder of the current season before making his move to Liverpool next summer. Liverpool praised

Mamardashvili's "impressive" performances at UEFA Euro 2024, where he played a key role in helping Georgia advance to the round of 16 on their tournament debut. His 21 saves during the group stage were the joint-most by any goalkeeper in the history of the tournament.

Since his transfer from Dinamo Tbilisi to Valencia in 2021, Mamardashvili has made 102 appearances for the La Liga side, keeping 31 clean sheets. He has also earned 21 caps for Georgia.



Giorgi Mamardashvili. Source: Valencia CF



Khvicha Kvaratskhelia. Source: football365.com

Liverpool Set to Outpace Barcelona in €75 Million "Race" for Kvaratskhelia

BY TEAM GT

Liverpool are reportedly leading the race over Barcelona to sign Georgian native Napoli winger Khvicha Kvaratskhelia before the transfer deadline. New Liverpool manager Arne Slot is

prioritizing the Georgian international to strengthen the team's attack, despite not needing major changes to the squad.

With an offer of over €75 million, Liverpool are hoping to secure Kvaratskhelia, potentially outmaneuvering Barcelona, who also have a strong interest in the player. This move could significantly bolster Liverpool's chances of competing at the top of the Premier League.



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