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Europe Day 2025 in Tbilisi: A Celebration despite Political Turmoil

BY TEAM GT

On May 9, Georgia commemorates Europe Day, with a significant public event at Expo Georgia in Tbilisi set to mark over three decades of cooperation and shared values between the European Union and Georgia. This year's celebration holds particular significance as Georgia continues its path toward EU membership, reflecting on past achievements and ever hopeful for future integration.

Last year, more than 15,000 people gathered at Expo Georgia on May 9 to celebrate Europe Day as an official candidate for European Union membership. Europe Day commemorates the 1950 Schuman Declaration, the founding moment of what became the European Union. In Georgia, it serves both as a celebration and a political reaffirmation of the country's desire to deepen integration with Europe.

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Image source: eeas.europa.eu

GALT & TAGGART CREATING OPPORTUNITIES									
Markets									
As of 07-May-2025									
BONDS					STOCKS				
	Price	w/w	m/m			Price	w/w	m/m	
GEORG 04/26	96.09 (YTM 7.00%)	+0.2%	+0.7%		Lion Finance Group (LFGD LN)	GBP 63.35	+5.6%	+33.5%	
GRAIL 06/28	98.85 (YTM 9.33%)	+0.1%	+1.1%		Georgia Capital (GGCO LN)	GBP 17.94	+10.7%	+38.6%	
GEORG 9 1/2 PERP	98.78 (YTM 9.39%)	+0.3%	+0.4%		TBC Bank Group (TBCG LN)	GBP 48.60	+2.7%	+36.1%	
SILNET 01/27	100.88 (YTM 7.81%)	+0.1%	-0.5%						
TBC 8.894 PERP	96.62 (YTM 11.48%)	+0.1%	-0.2%		COMMODITIES				
						Price	w/w	m/m	
TBC 10 1/4 PERP	97.97 (YTM 9.97%)	+0.2%	-1.6%		Crude Oil, Brent (US\$/bbl)	61.12	-3.2%	-4.8%	
					Gold Spot (US\$/OZ)	3 364.50	+2.3%	+12.8%	
INDICES					CURRENCIES				
	Price	w/w	m/m			Price	w/w	m/m	
SP 500	5 631.28	+1.1%	+11.2%		USD / GEL	2,7430	-0.1%	-0.4%	
FTSE 250	20 337.00	+2.3%	+14.5%		EUR / GEL	3,1006	-0.4%	+3.2%	
DOW JONES 30	41 113.97	+1.1%	+8.3%		GBP / GEL	3,6450	-0.4%	+6.1%	
Russell 2000	1 989.66	+1.3%	+9.9%		EUR / USD	1,1301	-0.2%	+3.6%	
FTSE 100	8 559.33	+0.8%	+11.1%		GBP / USD	1,3292	-0.3%	+6.5%	

US House Passes MEGOBARI Act Targeting Georgian Officials as Washington Responds to Democratic Backsliding

BY TEAM GT

The US House of Representatives this week overwhelmingly passed the MEGOBARI Act—a landmark, bipartisan sanctions bill aimed at supporting democracy in Georgia and holding accountable those responsible for democratic backsliding and human rights abuses. The bill, whose name stands for Mobilizing and Enhancing Georgia's Options for Building Accountability, Resilience, and Independence, now awaits consideration in the Senate.

Backed by 349 lawmakers across party lines, the MEGOBARI Act targets high-level officials in the ruling Georgian Dream party, signaling growing alarm in Washington over Tbilisi's authoritarian drift and increasing alignment with Russia.

"This is a clear message to the Georgian people," said Senator Jeanne Shaheen.

"We support their efforts to preserve a democratic future. The Act provides for sanctions against those who tried to crack down on peaceful demonstrations—it has strong bipartisan support."

A TURNING POINT IN US-GEORGIA RELATIONS

First introduced by Congressman Joe Wilson and reintroduced by Reps. Steve Cohen (Democrat), Richard Hudson (Republican), and Marc Veasey (Democrat), the MEGOBARI Act reflects Washington's sharp response to Tbilisi's recent crackdowns on civil society and its increasingly anti-Western rhetoric.

Key provisions of the Act include:

- Sanctions on Georgian officials and enablers responsible for corruption, democratic erosion, and authoritarian influence.
- Suspension of aid pending a full review of US-Georgia cooperation.
- Creation of a Democracy Monitoring Task Force to assess the integrity of Georgia's future elections.
- Support for Georgian civil society

and independent media, emphasizing the US commitment to democratic values.

The bill also requires intelligence assessments on Russian and Chinese influence in Georgia and addresses sanctions evasion and transnational corruption.

ZURABISHVILI: "GEORGIA IS ENTERING ISOLATION"

Georgia's 5th President, Salome Zurbishvili, welcomed the Act as a serious but necessary step, placing full responsibility for the current crisis on Bidzina Ivanishvili, the billionaire founder of Georgian Dream.

"This is a profound political crisis. Georgia is entering isolation from its main international partners. The MEGOBARI Act shows that the world sees what Georgian Dream and Ivanishvili are doing—and it cannot continue," she declared in a statement.

"This regime deserves sanctions. A change of government is the only way forward. The moment this regime falls,



Georgians ask for US backing. Source: eurasianet. Photo by Mariam Nikuradze/oc-media.org

we will restore our friendship with America and reclaim our place in the European community."

Zurbishvili called for early elections, describing them as a peaceful and constitutional way out of the deadlock.

GEORGIAN DREAM: "HOSTILE ACT" FROM A DIVIDED AMERICA

The ruling Georgian Dream party has fiercely rejected the bill. Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze labeled it "blackmail" and called it the "DAUDZINEBELI Act" (Georgian for "hostile"). He accused US lawmakers of siding with Georgia's "radical opposition" and of interfering in the country's sovereignty.

"This is not a friendly law. It is openly hostile and will only harm US-Georgia relations," Kobakhidze said. "It reflects the struggle within America itself, between President Trump's supporters and the so-called 'deep state.'"

Speaker of Parliament Shalva Papuashvili echoed the dismissive tone, claiming the Act was "political theater" aimed at stirring briefings by opposition-aligned NGOs and creating "hysteria" within Georgian politics.

BIPARTISAN US SUPPORT "FOR THE PEOPLE OF GEORGIA"

Despite these denials, the bipartisan

support behind the bill suggests the opposite: a coordinated, values-driven move by the US to support Georgia's people, not its ruling elite.

A coalition of Georgian opposition parties and civil society organizations praised the Act, calling it "a powerful message of support for Georgia's pro-European future."

"This legislation shows the world does not accept Georgian Dream's authoritarian course," the Coalition for Change said. "With this vote, the US has taken an unprecedented step at the legislative level against an anti-democratic regime in Georgia."

WHAT'S NEXT?

The MEGOBARI Act will now proceed to the US Senate, where it is expected to receive similar bipartisan backing. If passed, it would formally trigger sanctions and implement strict conditions for future US engagement with Georgia's government.

Meanwhile, political tensions in Tbilisi continue to escalate. A large-scale protest is expected on May 9, coinciding with Europe Day celebrations and echoing last year's mass mobilization. Demonstrators are expected to march in defense of democracy, media freedom, and Georgia's pro-Western orientation.



Europe Day 2025 in Tbilisi: A Celebration despite Political Turmoil

Continued from page 1

On May 9, 1950, then-French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman proposed a radical new approach to European relations. By urging nations to pool their coal and steel production, he aimed to make future wars between them 'not merely unthinkable, but materially impossible.'

This visionary idea served as the groundwork for what would become the European Union, a political and economic alliance now spanning 27 countries and 447 million citizens. Over the past 74 years, the EU has evolved into a powerful symbol of unity, cooperation, and peace. Its mission has remained consistent in bringing nations together through shared values, mutual support, and economic and political integration.

"Since 1950, the EU has been developing, working, uniting and ensuring peace and prosperity," the European Union's institutions declare, a mission still actively pursued across Europe and beyond.

A DAY OF REFLECTION AND CELEBRATION

The 2025 Europe Day event will commence at Expo Georgia at 12:00 in Pavilion 11, offering a comprehensive exploration of the EU-Georgia partnership through exhibitions, discussions, cultural programming, and interactive experiences. Organizers emphasize that this celebration is not only a reflection on shared history but also a demonstration of how EU support continues to shape everyday lives across Georgia—from



Image source: eeas.europa.eu

innovation and youth empowerment to rural development and democratic engagement.

EVENT HIGHLIGHTS

- Team Europe Pavilion (Pavilion 6): Engage with representatives from EU Member States, learn about the EU Monitoring Mission, and discuss the European Investment Bank's role in Georgia's development.
- EU Project Space (Pavilion 11): Discover EU-funded initiatives supporting

education, employment, environmental sustainability, and social inclusion.

- EU Talk – #ERTAD (Pavilion 4): Participate in public discussions with Georgian and European leaders on how EU values are shaping Georgia's path forward.
- '10 Years in Focus' Photo Exhibition (Pavilion 3): Experience a documentary photography showcase by EU Prize for Journalism winners, capturing a decade of transformation.
- Cultural & Culinary Programming:

Enjoy interactive educational games, artisan showcases, cooking demonstrations, and regional food tastings.

'UNIQUE GEORGIAN TASTE' AGROBAZAAR

As part of the Europe Day celebrations, the popular agrobazaar 'Unique Georgian Taste' will return on May 9 at Expo Georgia, near Pavilion 11, running from 12:00 to 20:00. The event will showcase niche Georgian food products, including meat and dairy goods, sweets, teas, honey, jams, sauces, and spices. Supported by the EU, Sweden, and Switzerland, all participating producers are part of FAO-led programs and have received training in food safety, business management, and labeling. Some have also received co-funding grants through the EU and Sweden's ENPARD program. This is a celebration of Georgia's rich culinary identity and a reflection of European cooperation in supporting local innovation.

A HISTORIC MOMENT FOR GEORGIA

In 2024, Georgia celebrated its first Europe Day as a candidate for European Union membership. This milestone was a testament to the country's commitment to democratic values and European integration. Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze has since expressed confidence that Georgia will achieve full EU membership by 2030, emphasizing that EU membership is Georgia's primary foreign policy priority and that the country will contribute significantly to the EU's continued success.

However, the path toward EU membership has been fraught with challenges. Last November, the Georgian government announced the suspension of EU accession talks until 2028, and rejected EU budgetary grants, citing alleged "blackmail" from European officials. This decision followed disputed parliamentary elections in October 2024, which the EU criticized as neither free nor fair. The EU had previously suspended €30 million in aid due to concerns over a controversial "foreign influence" law, which critics argued resembled Russian legislation used to stifle dissent.

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AND CIVIC PARTICIPATION

Europe Day 2025 is not only a celebration but also an opportunity for public engagement and civic participation. In addition to the events at Expo Georgia, citizens are invited to gather at Europe Square at 19:00, with marches beginning at 17:00 from several key points in Tbilisi, including the Parliament of Georgia, Marjanishvili Square, Republic Square, and Avlabari Metro Station. This collective gathering underscores Georgia's commitment to its European future and the shared values that bind it to the EU.

Europe Day 2025 in Georgia is a time to celebrate how far the country has come, the strong partnership with the European Union, and the shared hopes for the future. As Georgia moves closer to joining the EU, events like this highlight the importance of staying united, upholding democratic values, and keeping the vision of a European future alive.

Ukraine Latest: Limited Ceasefire Marred by Ongoing Strikes and Drone Activity

COMPILED BY ANA DUMBADZE

The Russia-Ukraine war saw a mixed week of symbolic gestures, renewed aggression, and escalating aerial threats, underscoring the persistent volatility on both sides of the front line.

A Russian overnight drone attack on Ukraine's capital on Sunday injured at least 11 people, including two children, and President Volodymyr Zelensky called for a real ceasefire lasting at least a month in the more than three-year-old war.

Falling debris from destroyed drones started fires at residential buildings in Kyiv's Obolonskyi and Sviatoshynskyi districts, Timur Tkachenko, head of Kyiv's military administration, said on social media. The Ukrainian military said its air defense units shot down 69 of 165 drones launched by Russia overnight. There was no immediate comment from Moscow about the attack.

In addition to Kyiv, drones attacked Cherkasy in central Ukraine, where, national television said, 15 of the 22 drones targeting the city were shot down. Emergency services said one person had been injured, with damage caused to residential buildings and civilian infrastructure.

Russia declared a three-day ceasefire beginning Wednesday night to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the defeat of Nazi Germany. The truce, which took effect at midnight Moscow time, was intended as a symbolic pause in honor of Victory Day, a major national holiday.

Ukraine, however, refused to commit to the brief ceasefire, instead proposing a 30-day halt in hostilities to allow for broader humanitarian relief. Despite Russia's unilateral announcement, fighting continued, raising questions about the sincerity and effectiveness of the ceasefire.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said in his nightly address on Wednesday that he stood by an offer to observe a 30-day ceasefire. "We are not withdrawing this proposal, which could give diplomacy a chance," Zelensky said.

Just hours after it was supposed to begin, Ukraine's air force reported that Russian aircraft launched guided bombs on the northern Sumy region early Thursday morning. While no casualties or damage were immediately reported, the incident cast a shadow over the fragile truce and reinforced Ukrainian skepticism.

Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said Moscow had never opposed a ceasefire in Ukraine, after United States envoy Keith Kellogg said Russian President Vladimir Putin may be obstructing a comprehensive peace deal.

US Vice President JD Vance said during an appearance at the Munich Security Conference that Russia was "asking for too much" in its initial offer of a peace deal.

Aside from the bombing in Sumy, Ukrainian authorities reported no additional attacks on major cities as of Thursday morning. While quieter than usual, analysts cautioned against interpreting the lull as a shift toward de-escalation.

"Pauses like this are more about optics than peace," said a senior military ana-



Firefighters attempt to extinguish a fire caused by falling Russian drone debris on May 7, 2025. Source: Ukraine's State Emergency Service/Telegram

lyst in Kyiv. "Neither side is showing signs of retreating from their long-term objectives."

Meanwhile, Russia this week reported a surge in drone activity near its capital ahead of its most symbolic national holiday. On Wednesday, Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin confirmed that Russian air defenses intercepted 12 Ukrainian drones approaching the city. The incident forced the temporary suspension of flights at four Moscow airports and nine others across the country, underscoring rising tensions as Russia prepares for its Victory Day celebrations on May 9.

Victory Day, which commemorates the Soviet Union's role in defeating Nazi

Germany in World War II, is a cornerstone of President Vladimir Putin's political calendar. The annual military parade on Red Square serves as both a patriotic spectacle and a demonstration of Russia's military strength, often used by the Kremlin to bolster national unity and project power.

This year's parade is expected to draw heightened international attention, with world leaders such as Chinese President Xi Jinping, Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, Vietnamese President Tô Lâm, and Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko among 29 leaders confirmed to attend, according to Kremlin aide Yuri Ushakov. North Korea will

reportedly send its ambassador to Moscow, while India, Nicaragua, and South Africa will be represented by senior delegations.

Tens of thousands of spectators are anticipated to line the streets of central Moscow on Friday, paying tribute to the more than 25 million Soviet soldiers and civilians who perished during World War II, in what remains Russia's most solemn and politically charged public commemoration.

Ukraine has not officially claimed responsibility for the drone operations, but such strikes have become a recurring tactic aimed at disrupting Russian infrastructure and morale.

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OP-ED. From Promise to Punishment: How Washington Turned on The Republic of Georgia

OP-ED BY LASHA KASRADZE

The scene was downtown Tbilisi. The year 2005. And the 43rd President of the United States, George W. Bush proclaimed that before the winds of freedom blew from Baghdad to Beirut, it was Georgia's Rose Revolution that inspired freedom-loving folks across the region. The president's bouts of messianic fervor were imbued with religious and philosophical undertones. With a spirit of Christian militancy, Mr. Bush espoused a teleological determinism that freedom would one day guide Georgia to its emancipation from Russian captivity. However, what stuck in the collective psyche of Georgian society since the president's visit, was not the ideological and philosophic underpinnings of his speech, but a more simplistic one-liner: "Georgia is a beacon of liberty for this region and the world".

Sharing the stage with the president, was of course his "golden boy" Mikheil Saakashvili (Misha, as he was popularly known). Young, energetic and western-educated, Saakashvili had become a useful idiot for the neoconservative elite in Washington. From Bush to Cheney, to the long line of usual suspects in the neoconservative and neoliberal think tank establishment, he was their lapdog whose purpose was to create a political environment in Georgia perpetually hostile to Russia. Anyone who questioned the wisdom of this radical and foolish policy was labeled pro-Russian, backward and anti-western in Misha's political system.

In all fairness, Saakashvili and his United National Movement (UNM) did implement some effective and necessary reforms immediately after coming to power as a result of the Rose Revolution in 2003. Police reform was perhaps his most successful achievement, along with the fight against corruption. Importantly, Saakashvili implemented tax reform, which for the first since independence allowed the Georgian government to collect taxes from its citizens, filling the coffers of the treasury. Simply put, the UNM, backed by the west, and particularly Washington, was starting to look like a poster-boy for liberal internationalism. Yet, little did they know that the fanfare would be short-lived, and Georgian society would soon face the specter of state terror which would evoke memories of the Soviet past.

Nevertheless, what made Saakashvili's government politically attractive during its first few years was the exhaustion and disenchantment that Georgians felt toward the previous government. That government, headed by the former Soviet Foreign Secretary, Eduard Shevardnadze, had fallen from grace. Once considered the savior of Georgia's statehood in the aftermath of the Georgian civil war during the early nineties, by 2003 he had all but squandered his political capital. Shevardnadze's enormous political talents and international reputation could not sustain his presidency, which oversaw a notoriously corrupt government. Even his close friend and fellow diplomat, James Baker, had to warn Shevardnadze "in no uncertain terms" that Washington would not take well to "tampering" with elections.

Even so, Baker must have felt a sense of guilt in the recesses of his soul for abandoning his friend - "Silver Fox," as Shevardnadze was often called. After all, this was the man who had played a key role in ending The Cold War. During my conversation with the former US Ambassador to the Soviet Union, Jack Matlock, Dr. Matlock alluded to what might be perceived as the intersubjective code of honor among older generations of statesmen, when he pointed out that Shevardnadze was not treated fairly, perhaps implying that Shevardnadze



Mikheil Saakashvili and George Bush, 2005. Source: History-maps

deserved more dignified treatment from his political counterparts after a lifetime of service.

And so, in 2003, a new era of politics in Georgia commenced. Having come to power as a result of the Rose Revolution, the brood of Young-Hegelians took over the project of social, cultural and economic engineering on a massive scale. To his credit, Shevardnadze did warn the public that Saakashvili was "dangerous." His warning turned out to be prescient. Saakashvili's foot soldiers, the newly-minted, soulless technocrats, would indeed pose a danger to the Georgian statehood. However, by that time it was already too late: the neo-bolshevism had arrived.

With the passage of time, nothing has encapsulated the shallowness of describing Saakashvili's Georgia as a beacon of liberty, more in the minds of Georgian citizens than the political terror they had to endure under the government of Mikheil Saakashvili and his UNM. An inseparable part of this project was the draconian economic policy, which had to be brought into strict alignment with politics. A much harsher neoliberal economic policy had already been implemented in Russia and had played a key role in bringing post-Soviet Russia's economy to its knees; Moscow was put at the mercy of Washington—something Russia's elites have, quite understandably, yet to forget.

Once the UNM created its political and economic vision, it was time to sell it to Georgian society. With political sensationalism, the Orwellian assault on language and meaning followed. For example, the neoliberal economic project became replete with words and phrases such as "libertarianism," "free markets," and "Ayn Rand." At the time, the majority of Georgians did not have a clear idea of the philosophic and intellectual origins of these words, let alone an understanding of the type of economic transformation they were meant to describe. In other words, the economy that was forced upon Georgian society had little to do with the principles of free markets, open competition or libertarianism. Instead, the directive was to simply shove democracy promotion and neoliberal economics down their throats.

Shortly after coming to power, Saakashvili invited Kakha Bendukidze, who had made his fortune in Moscow, to head Georgia's economy. Bendukidze embarked on an indoctrination campaign to force the ideas of market fundamentalism and privatization on Georgia. His mantra was 'everything is for sale', except Georgia's consciousness. Under his

leadership, major strategic economic assets were sold off to none other than Russia. This was a deeply disturbing and puzzling economic policy, which Georgian society staunchly resisted, but ultimately was no match for the combination of terror and western support deployed by the government. Here was a government whose political image was ostentatiously pro-western, which on a daily basis stirred up hatred against Russia. Yet, ironically, it was perfectly willing to sell off economic assets of strategic importance to Moscow. All this was done under the banner of libertarianism and free markets.

This ideology descended into its inevitable absurdity when Bendukidze and Saakashvili proposed the sale of the strategic energy pipeline to Gazprom—the Russian energy giant. Recognizing that such a move would potentially jeopardize the decades-long political and economic investment in Georgia's energy transport projects from Washington, it took the US State Department's involvement to stop the proposal from moving forward. Michael Mann, who was in charge of the Caspian Sea energy issues at the time, had to publicly warn against such moves on part of Saakashvili's government. In addition to this highly questionable economic policy, there was another foolish proposal to sell off Georgia's strategic railway system to Russian companies, which also failed to materialize.

In the final analyses, it has become clear that the neoliberal and laissez-faire economic gospel produced very little, if any, long-term sustainable industrialization and/or modernization of the Georgian state. In one of his many criticisms of this plan, a well-known scholar on the region, Stephen Jones, recalls that this period in Georgia was marked by "political schizophrenia" instead of economic prosperity.

FROM THE 'FREEDOM AGENDA' TO THE IMPOSITION OF SANCTIONS

The extraordinary damage to Georgia did not occur solely because of the failure of neoliberal economics. It was primarily a failure of politics, of the so-called "freedom agenda" that was packaged up and sold to Georgia under false pretenses. The "beacon of liberty" soon turned into a state terror that Saakashvili unleashed on his own people.

The first documented signs of state terror started to appear when the current ruling party, the Georgian Dream (GD), defeated the UNM in the 2012 elections. Recognized by the West as a

"democratic moment", a peaceful transfer of power occurred in Tbilisi. However, almost immediately after the elections, illusions of peaceful coexistence between the UNM and GD started to shatter. Georgia faced a fundamental question: Would the GD government mount a successful political and legal campaign to prosecute the members of the UNM for allegations of egregious violations of human rights, property rights and economic crimes? It was understood, however, that the challenge was how to persuade Washington that not only did these crimes occur, but that the GD was morally obligated to deliver justice to the families of the victims. It became clear soon after the elections that forming a statewide "truth commission" would be categorically opposed in Washington. When Bidzina Ivanishvili, the founder of GD, met with the US Assistant Secretary of State Philip Gordon, Gordon warned him against "selective prosecutions" unless Ivanishvili wanted to see Georgia's prospects of joining Euro-Atlantic institutions dwindle.

And yet, a few years later, Washington did show a certain flexibility to GD, when it acquiesced to eventual arrests of the most well-known and notorious ministers of Saakashvili's regime for abuses of power. For example, Bacho Akhalia, who held the positions of the minister of defense and state intelligence chief, was sentenced to over seven years in prison. Another feared minister of the interior, Ivane Merabishvili was also sentenced to over four years for abuse of power and financial crimes.

But perhaps most shockingly, the Georgian court arrested and sentenced Saakashvili himself for abuse of power, for ordering the beating of a Georgian citizen, businessman and opposition figure. What made this perplexing for Georgian citizens was that GD had repeatedly tried to extradite Saakashvili from Kyiv, Ukraine, but had failed. Saakashvili returned on his own volition, only for GD to arrest him. So far, this strange incident has been explained in Georgia as yet another in a series of erratic behaviors by the former president, who is determined to cause another revolution and make a comeback. If so, this was a major miscalculation on Saakashvili's part. He and his supporters must have forgotten that UNM's crimes were still fresh in the collective memory of Georgian society, who could not fathom the idea of Saakashvili's return to power, which in their minds would certainly mean the return of terror.

In any event, he sneaked back into the

country in the back of a truck.

Saakashvili is currently serving his time in a "jail cell" (under house arrest) with nurses hovering over him to make sure GD does not face trumped up accusations from extremist parties in Europe that they are slowly killing the former president under appalling conditions. In other words, GD does not want to turn Saakashvili into another "pro-western martyr" like Sergei Magnitsky.

Eventually, when the European Court of Human Rights, "confirming that the trial was fair," ruled that "there were no human rights or health grounds to release Saakashvili," the extremist opposition parties, along with their European counterparts, had no choice but to acquiesce to the hard facts about their one-time hero.

Under Saakashvili's reign there was a structure of systemic abuse. Shortly after winning the election in 2012, GD revealed hundreds, if not thousands of secret, illegal tapes that contained compromising materials on Georgian citizens, including horrific videos of rape and physical abuse, which the previous government used in Soviet-style interrogations against its opponents.

Arguably, the most damaging incident, and the one which is believed to have sealed the fate of Saakashvili and his UNM during the 2012 elections, was the prison abuse video taken in a notorious prison on the outskirts of Tbilisi: Gldani Prison, which has earned a coveted place on the list of the worst prisons in the world – a list which also includes the prison at Guantanamo Bay.

The horrific scenes of institutionalized abuse of power would also regularly manifest in the streets of Tbilisi. The death of a young bank employee, Sandro Girgvliani, is still remembered in Georgia as a symbol of state terror under UNM. After a verbal altercation with high officials from the Ministry of the Interior in a local restaurant, Girgvliani was taken outside of Tbilisi and killed. There were also said to be signs of torture on Girgvliani's body. This event galvanized the population, with protesters demanding the arrest of those responsible for the crime. However, after arresting those who were directly responsible for the killing, Saakashvili pardoned them with an early release. They had also been given "extremely favorable treatment" while in prison.

Eventually, the family of Girgvliani mounted a legal case in the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. The court issued a scathing report and expressed shock on "how the different branches of state power...acted in concert in preventing justice from being done." It determined that the government "failed to consider credible allegations of complicity." This tragic incident has become a permanent reminder to Georgian society of the hypocrisies of Washington's "Freedom agenda" during the Saakashvili era.

Yet, Saakashvili's regime continued to present to the Georgian public and to its Western partners a façade. The reality, however, was quite different. For example, while administrative, law enforcement, or "technical institutions" functioned effectively, the WEF's Global Competitiveness Report consistently showed that in terms of "judicial independence," Georgia was "in the 95th place, a lowly 131st place when it comes to 'property rights,' and in 141st place with regard to 'effectiveness of anti-monopoly policy.'" The UNM's program of state extended to the business community and private sector. According to the transparency international report, owners of businesses were constantly terrorized by the government, which used the federal prosecutor's office as a tool of extortion.

Neither did the Western ideology of limited government trickle down to the populace under Saakashvili.

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“Georgia is now where Belarus was in 2020... It’s crucial you don’t repeat our mistakes”



INTERVIEW BY VAZHA TAVBERIDZE

Pavel Latushko, one of the leading figures of the Belarusian opposition, former Minister of Culture under the Lukashenko regime, and former Ambassador to France says it is crucial that Georgia not repeat Belarus’ mistakes. Today, he is wanted by the Lukashenko regime on charges of “attempting to seize power,” alongside Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. If he were to return to Belarus, Latushko would face an 18-year prison sentence. He currently serves as the representative for foreign affairs of the Belarusian democratic forces in exile.

In an interview with Radio Free Europe’s Georgian service, Latushko draws stark parallels between today’s Georgia and Belarus in 2020, describes life under a regime where even a single “Facebook like” can land you in prison, and warns that Georgia is on track to share Belarus’s fate — unless it acts now. Vazha Tavberidze spoke to him in Strasbourg during the spring session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

MANY OBSERVERS ARE DRAWING PARALLELS BETWEEN WHAT HAPPENED AND IS STILL HAPPENING IN BELARUS, AND THE CURRENT SITUATION IN GEORGIA. HOW JUSTIFIED DO YOU THINK THOSE COMPARISONS ARE?

I think the developments in Georgia could very well follow the same scenario as in Belarus. We’re already seeing some familiar patterns.

Over the past four and a half years, more than 600,000 Belarusians have been forced to leave the country. The reason is the atmosphere of fear, terror, and repression cultivated by the Lukashenko regime, especially since 2020. People are not leaving by choice. And the regime doesn’t stop at the border: it continues to persecute them even abroad.

In the geopolitical context, we have to understand that Russia has set itself a goal: the de facto restoration of the Soviet Union. The methods may vary, but the strategic objective is clear. This is evident in the aggression against Ukraine, which refused to bow to Moscow and is paying a heavy price for that decision.

Belarus plays a key role in this strategy. Lukashenko is a pro-Kremlin leader who has always dreamed of making it big in the Kremlin, but he has been outplayed and, as a result, Belarus is now fully dependent on Russia. Yes, formally the country exists, it’s on the map, it’s a member of the UN. But its internal sovereignty is limited, its external sovereignty has been lost, and its military sovereignty has been liquidated. That’s the reality of today’s Belarus.

And in Georgia, we also see the influence of pro-Russian forces. Moldova lives under constant threat of interference. Armenia could easily be the next target. I am certain that Kazakhstan is also at risk. If a country fails to build an effective strategy of resistance, then it will face a scenario like Belarus or Georgia, or perhaps even worse.

BUT WHAT DO YOU DO IN COUNTRIES LIKE BELARUS OR GEORGIA, WHERE SOCIETY IS TOLD “EITHER YOU’RE WITH US, OR YOU ARE WITH THE WEST AND THEN IT’S WAR”? WILL THE EU, WHICH IS NOT A “HARDCORE” GEOPOLITICAL PLAYER, REALLY INTERVENE?

If Georgians want a glimpse of their potential future, they should look at Belarus. As I mentioned, our internal sovereignty is partially lost, our external sovereignty is completely lost, and our military has been sold off, rented out, pawned. Lukashenko supports the war against Ukraine not for Belarus’s interests, but for the Kremlin’s.

How do we resist? There are different tools. In Belarus’s case, sanctions. Strong, crushing sanctions. Sanctions that don’t just apply pressure but knock the regime off its feet. International justice mechanisms are also key. We’ve been fighting for five years to launch proceedings in the International Criminal Court, to invoke universal jurisdiction. Because when a criminal remains in power with impunity, people lose faith in democracy.

Georgia, as I see it, is currently in the 2020 phase that Belarus went through. It’s crucial not to repeat our mistakes. You must not stop. Every day, the regime grows stronger, through repression, fear, and apathy.

You still have freedom of speech, opposition parties, independent media. We no longer do. All opposition structures have been dismantled, the media operates from abroad and has been declared extremist. Watching it is a criminal offense. We live in totalitarianism. And if nothing changes, Georgia will find itself in the same place.

WAS THERE A MOMENT IN 2020 WHEN THINGS IN BELARUS COULD HAVE TURNED OUT DIFFERENTLY? WHEN CHANGE WAS WITHIN REACH?

I don’t shy away from responsibility. Perhaps we should have been braver, more decisive. We stopped one step short of the finish line. Do you remember when Lukashenko was running around with a rifle, without a magazine, while a plane waited on standby? That was our chance. We should have surrounded his palace and seen it through to the end.

The second chance came at the start of the war, but then Lukashenko didn’t make the mistake, he didn’t send the army into Ukraine — not out of sympathy, but because, according to KGB intel, 40% of troops were ready to disobey the order. That could’ve caused a split in the army and a new power crisis. He understood that. And of course, he also knew he could count on Russia.

AND NOW? WHAT’S YOUR STRATEGY FOR SHAKING HIS REGIME?

The situation is much more difficult now. But I remain optimistic. We have to use every legal instrument available. The elites must get a clear signal: support Lukashenko and you’re heading for The Hague. The first arrest warrant must be issued for him personally. His place is before an international tribunal, for aggression, for the deportation of Ukrainian children, for crimes against human-

ity in Belarus.

It won’t bring immediate results, but it will start to shake the foundations. Sanctions must target the regime’s economic base. But at the same time, we must not isolate society. Belarus must not become another North Korea. We have to maintain communication channels and support independent media. Russian propaganda is actively trying to reshape Belarusian identity, and that’s something we must resist at all costs.

IN YOUR VIEW, HOW CLOSE ARE BELARUSIANS TO ACCEPTING A “UNION” WITH RUSSIA IF PUTIN AND LUKASHENKO DECLARE IT?

This is where sociology matters. Over the last four years, 96–97% of Belarusians consistently express a desire to live in an independent state.

BUT HOW FAR ARE THEY WILLING TO GO TO ENSURE THAT STATE REMAINS INDEPENDENT?

That’s a question of motivation. Our task is to give people the motivation to fight for independence. But today, it’s impossible to take to the streets. Even a “like” on the wrong post can land you in prison. The public lives in a state of anticipation, anger, apathy, and withdrawal from political life.

AND IF LUKASHENKO SAYS THERE’S NO OTHER CHOICE, ONLY UNIFICATION WITH RUSSIA?

Society would vote against it. He would have to falsify the results on a massive scale. But this is no longer about handing himself another term; this is a question of historic proportions, a matter of national survival. And the people understand that.

WHAT IF HE TRIES TO GO AHEAD WITHOUT A REFERENDUM?

He’d still have to change the Constitution. And that requires a referendum. Of course, Lukashenko isn’t eternal. But building a strategy around the idea that “one day he’ll just go” is a mistake. We don’t stop. Our team has been working 24/7 for over four and a half years without a single day off.

We must be ready for a transition. Like in Poland, through a roundtable, through negotiations among the elites. But Lukashenko himself will never come to the negotiating table. And those around him won’t dare until he’s gone.

AND IF HE IS GONE?

Then there’s a real opportunity. Any new leader, as long as he’s not pro-Russian, would be a potential window for change; a chance for dialogue with Europe.

I know these people. I’ve been a minister, an ambassador, I’ve spoken to the elites personally. Believe me, they’re all counting the days until he’s gone. They keep their fingers crossed behind their backs. And he knows it. He even recently said: “You’re all just waiting for me to die.” He’s right. Everyone is tired. Everyone wants a normal life, one without fear, without repression, with the ability to travel to Europe, to build homes, to move forward.

BUT THEN WE RUN INTO THE RUSSIA PROBLEM. LUKASHENKO MAY GO, BUT RUSSIA WILL REMAIN. AND IT WILL WANT A ‘SECOND LUKASHENKO.’

Without a doubt. Russia will try to control the situation. But history can create openings. Right now, the regime is cemented. As long as Lukashenko is strong and in control, everything is under lock. But as soon as he weakens or leaves the stage, there’s a chance.

He wants to pass power to his son Nikolai, but that, too, could be a trigger. Yes, the main risk is Moscow. But that’s exactly why we must invest in society. It may sound lofty or abstract, but we have no other path. Only through the people.

US Embassy Lifts Bomb Threat Warning in Tbilisi after False Alarm, Georgian Security Agency Responds with Rebuke



Galleria Mall on Liberty Square. Source: veziri

BY TEAM GT

The United States Embassy in Tbilisi has lifted a bomb threat warning it issued Wednesday evening for three major shopping malls in the Georgian capital, following confirmation from Georgian authorities that no explosives were found. The episode prompted a sharp response from Georgia’s State Security Service (SSSG), which urged foreign diplomatic missions to coordinate more closely with local agencies before issuing public alerts.

On May 7, the US Embassy in Georgia issued a public security alert warning its citizens of a potential bomb threat at three shopping centers in Tbilisi: East Point, Galleria Tbilisi, and Tbilisi Mall. The embassy advised Americans to avoid the locations until further notice. The advisory, published on the Embassy’s official website, triggered heightened public concern and drew immediate attention from both Georgian media and authorities.

Later that evening, Georgia’s State Security Service (SSSG) responded to the alert, stating that relevant security units were actively investigating what they described as “another false alarm.”

In its statement, the agency emphasized that “the security of citizens is [the State Security] Service’s top priority,” and called on diplomatic missions to “respect security services, show more responsibility, and refrain from spreading statements that are not in agreement with the relevant agencies.”

On Thursday, the US Embassy issued an updated statement confirming that Georgian law enforcement had completed its investigation and found no explosive devices at any of the three locations.

“Following the May 7 security alert issued by the US Embassy, Georgian law enforcement authorities informed the Embassy last night that no explosive devices were found... The Regional Security Office has rescinded its recommendation for Embassy staff to avoid those areas,” the statement read.

While lifting the alert, the Embassy encouraged American citizens to continue monitoring local news and remain aware of their surroundings.

Despite the resolution, the incident highlighted tensions between the US diplomatic mission and Georgian authorities over the handling and communication of public security threats. The SSSG reiterated its call for coordination, warning against what it sees as “unilateral and potentially alarmist messaging by foreign embassies.”

Irakli Kobakhidze Elected Chairman of Georgian Dream, Replaces Garibashvili



Bidzina Ivanishvili and Irakli Kobakhidze. Source: FB

BY TEAM GT

Irakli Kobakhidze has been elected as the Chairman of the Georgian Dream ruling political party. He replaced Irakli Garibashvili in this position. Kobakhidze will now serve simultaneously as both the Prime

Minister and the Chairman of Georgian Dream.

Kobakhidze has assumed the position of party chairman for the second time.

The position of Georgian Dream party chairman became vacant after Irakli Garibashvili announced his decision to leave both the party and politics. Garibashvili made the official statement on April 25.

Grand Opening of Costa Coffee Georgia: New Premium Coffee Experience in the Heart of Tbilisi

BY TEAM GT

Costa Coffee, one of the United Kingdom's most iconic coffeehouse brands, is expanding its presence in Georgia with the launch of a new official store in Tbilisi. Located at 10 Ilia Chavchavadze Avenue, the store will open to the public on May 16. An official opening ceremony will be held on May 15, bringing together representatives from Costa Coffee and its partner companies to celebrate this significant milestone.

The arrival of Costa Coffee in Georgia is spearheaded by Capulus Georgia, the

brand's exclusive representative in the country. This launch reflects Costa Coffee's long-term strategy to deliver premium coffee experiences to the Georgian market, while establishing itself as a trusted and consistent presence in the region's growing café culture.

The Tbilisi launch marks the beginning of a broader market entry plan. The store on Chavchavadze Avenue will serve as the flagship location for Costa Coffee in Georgia, offering a full menu of high-quality beverages and food items, with an emphasis on the brand's signature Mocha Italia blend—a hallmark of Costa Coffee's global identity. Designed to accommodate both everyday customers and coffee enthusiasts, the store aims to provide an inviting environment that

supports the brand's commitment to quality and service.

Costa Coffee's expansion into Georgia comes at a time when the country's coffee sector is experiencing significant growth. Consumer demand for reliable, high-standard coffee experiences has created an opportunity for well-established international brands to enter the market. By focusing on consistency, product excellence, and community engagement, Costa Coffee intends to contribute meaningfully to the development of Georgia's modern coffee culture.

The opening event on May 15 will bring together company representatives and business partners, underscoring the collaborative effort behind the brand's launch. In addition to celebrating the

store opening, the event will serve as a platform to introduce Costa Coffee's offering to the Georgian audience, highlighting the values and standards that define the company's global reputation.

Further expansion is already underway. Costa Coffee has announced the upcoming opening of two more stores in Tbilisi in the summer of 2025. The second location is scheduled to open in June at Axis Towers, situated in the Vake district. A third store will follow later in the summer at 14 Aleksandre Kazbegi Avenue. These developments are part of a wider growth strategy that aims to establish Costa Coffee as a key player in Georgia's retail coffee market, with a particular focus on urban centers and high-footfall areas.

Globally, Costa Coffee is known for its

expertly handcrafted beverages, curated food options, and focus on creating inclusive and comfortable spaces for guests. Since its founding in 1971, the brand has expanded across more than 40 countries and continues to serve millions of customers with an emphasis on product quality and operational excellence.

With this expansion, Costa Coffee is taking a strategic step into the Georgian market. The brand's introduction marks not only the arrival of a major international coffee chain but also a renewed emphasis on premium coffee experiences tailored to local preferences. As operations begin, Costa Coffee looks forward to engaging with Georgian consumers and contributing to the city's dynamic hospitality landscape.

COSTA COFFEE

POLITICS

OP-ED. From Promise to Punishment: How Washington Turned on The Republic of Georgia

Continued from page 4

Saakashvili's intellectually unimpressive admiration of Reagan might have been expected, given his government's promotion of John Galt or Margaret Thatcher as exemplars of freedom and personal responsibility. However, here, too, Saakashvili, along with his patrons in Washington, thought the abuse and betrayal of these ideas was an insignificant matter in the grand scheme of things; a small nation, in a primitive state of admiration for all things American, could be used as a laboratory of experiments for these ideas, with little to no concern for failed methods of delivering and putting them into practice.

And fail they did. Misha's infamous "zero tolerance" policy was eerily similar to that of Reagan's war on drugs policy. Even worse, it was heavily based on 1984 Soviet law, which allowed the state to keep alleged criminals in jail for ninety days on the sole basis of police testimony. When enacted in 2006, almost overnight the entire population of Georgia became guilty on the basis of the state's say-so: "with more than 99 percent of criminal cases brought to court ending with a conviction." The following quote describes accurately disturbing signs of autocracy at work: "transforming the public's attitude towards crime, decreasing the crime rate to a minimum, and eradicating impunity by reacting to every single crime,

including minor [ones]."

In order to maintain control of this draconian system, a creative legal mechanism was concocted, which introduced the practice of "plea bargaining" which was used to generate revenue for the state, letting alleged criminals off the hook with a fine and an admission of guilt. Plea bargaining generated over fifty million dollars in the first nine months of 2009 alone. As predicted, this new law led to excessive use of force, which in turn resulted in increased deaths in police custody.

According to a Carnegie Endowment report, 73 arrests between 2005-2006 resulted in 25 deaths—and the majority of the victims were unarmed. Accord-

ing to Gevin Slade, an expert on criminal justice, Saakashvili's government borrowed heavily from both the US and Russian prison systems, and adopted some of the worst aspects of each state's penal law. As a result of these policies, the population of Georgia saw drastic increases in the number of prisoners between 2004 and 2012. Georgia became the country with "the highest per capita prison population in Europe, with 514 prisoners per 100,000 citizens, and the sixth highest out of 221 prison systems in the world." For a small country of just about 4 million people, this was a shocking statistic. Still more, during the last six years of UNM's rule, 653 prisoners died in Georgian jails. By comparison,

"in 2009, the average prison mortality rate in Europe was 28.9 to 10,000 inmates, while Georgia's rate was 71.6 the third highest in Europe".

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Giorgi (Lasha) Kasradze is an international relations analyst with a focus on the states of the former Soviet Union. He concentrates on the South Caucasus and the Black Sea regional affairs. As a keen observer of regional affairs, he has discussed conflicting geopolitical interests between the West and regional powers. Lasha has shared his analyses on the geopolitical podcast of the Stratfor/Rene company- a geopolitical analysis firm as well on YouTube platforms.



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BIST: A Unique International Educational Experience in Tbilisi



Principal of BIST, Robert Snowden with a pupil. Source: BIST

BY KESARIA KATCHARAVA

The British International School of Tbilisi (BIST) is renowned for offering a first-class holistic education. With over 520 students hailing from more than 50 different countries, BIST creates a diverse and multicultural environment where students grow academically, socially, and emotionally. As the principal of BIST since August 2024, Robert Snowden brings over 20 years of experience in education and has played an instrumental role in continuing the school's legacy of excellence. BIST offers a curriculum grounded in global and UK educational standards, including the prestigious Cambridge International programmes, IGCSEs, and A-Levels.

The school's state-of-the-art facilities, including an Innovation Centre, performing arts spaces, and an expansive sports and recreation complex, foster creativity and a healthy, active lifestyle for students. Situated next to Lisi Lake, the school's beautiful surroundings offer unique learning opportunities that many urban schools simply cannot provide.

ROBERT SNOWDEN'S JOURNEY TO BIST: WHY GEORGIA?

When asked about his decision to move to Georgia and pursue a career in education, Robert Snowden described the opportunity as one that allowed him to contribute to an international educational community in a uniquely dynamic setting. "I was drawn to Georgia by the opportunity to contribute to an international educational community in a country with a fascinating blend of ancient history and modern dynamism," he shared. The country's cultural richness and stunning landscapes further solidified his decision, offering a rare combination of inspiration and opportunity.

What surprised him most after his arrival was the remarkable hospitality and sense of community among the Georgian people. "What has surprised me most since arriving is the deep sense of hospitality and community among the Georgian people. Their genuine warmth, coupled with their respect for education and eagerness to embrace global perspectives, has been incredibly inspiring,"

he said. The strong emphasis on education in Georgian families has also deeply resonated with him. "Georgian families place great value on learning, and their commitment to excellence has made my work here deeply rewarding."

A COMPARISON OF EDUCATION SYSTEMS

Having worked in both the UK and internationally, Robert brings a wealth of experience to understanding the differences between the British and Georgian education systems. "Education in Georgia and the British international curriculum differ significantly in structure, teaching style, and academic focus," he noted. While the Georgian system is more centralized and exam-driven, focusing on theoretical knowledge and teacher-led instruction, the British curriculum offers a student-centered approach that emphasizes creativity, critical thinking, and a balanced academic experience.

"The British international curriculum, such as the Cambridge Pathway offered at BIST, promotes inquiry-based, student-centred learning, fostering critical thinking, creativity, and a balanced approach that includes both coursework and examinations," Robert explained. This system allows greater flexibility in subject choices, promotes extracurricular activities, and prepares students for top universities worldwide. "The international approach fosters independence, creativity, and global awareness, offering students in Georgia a unique educational experience within an evolving academic landscape," he added.

BIST'S UNIQUE EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY

When asked what distinguishes BIST from other international schools in Tbilisi and the region, Robert pointed to its dedication to individualised learning, promoting cross-cultural awareness, and building strong community connections. "Our emphasis on personalised learning, intercultural understanding, and community involvement creates a nurturing yet academically challenging environment," he noted, highlighting the school's commitment to fostering both personal growth and academic excellence.

The qualifications and experience of BIST's teaching staff also stand out. "Our teachers are all experienced, UK or equivalent-qualified professionals. They

are also native English speakers, which ensures our students make rapid progress in developing fluency in English," he shared. Moreover, the school's location near Lisi Lake enhances the overall educational experience. "The school's location near Lisi Lake also allows for unique outdoor learning experiences, which many urban schools can't offer," Robert explained, pointing out how the natural surroundings provide students with opportunities for outdoor education that help build resilience and creativity.

FOSTERING GROWTH IN EVERY STUDENT

BIST places significant emphasis on both academic success and personal development. Robert described the school's approach to supporting students as holistic, integrating both academic instruction and emotional well-being. "We believe in the importance of holistic education, focusing on both academic and personal development," he said. The school tailors its approach to meet individual student needs, using informal assessments to provide early intervention where necessary. "Our teachers are highly skilled in using ongoing informal assessments to identify gaps early and provide additional support where needed," Robert explained.

In addition to academics, BIST is committed to fostering strong pastoral care. "Our pastoral care system, school counsellors, and strong teacher-student relationships ensure every child feels heard, valued, and safe," he noted. The school's comprehensive support systems aim to ensure that students not only thrive academically but also develop emotionally and socially.

EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES, A WELL-ROUNDED EDUCATION

Extracurricular activities play a central role in student life at BIST. Robert mentioned how the school's sports clubs, including football, swimming, basketball, and tennis, are highly popular among students. "We also have a strong tradition of sporting achievement, both locally and internationally, and our sports clubs are always popular," he said. Professional coaches also contribute to the sports programmes, providing additional expertise in disciplines such as Taekwondo.

In addition to sports, BIST offers a wide range of creative clubs. "We also offer a wide range of creative clubs, including drama, ballet, individual music lessons, and arts," Robert shared. These creative pursuits are an essential part of the school's approach to developing well-rounded students. Further, the school's partnerships with UCMA and Builtits give students the opportunity to compete internationally, achieving success in a variety of competitions. "We also have an excellent partnership with UCMA and Builtits, who run their program in our school, with our students competing and succeeding in international competitions," Robert said.

GUIDING STUDENTS THROUGH TRANSITIONS AND CAREER CHOICES

As students near graduation, BIST ensures that they are supported in making key decisions about their future. "Our Sixth Form team is supported by University Guidance Counsellors who meet individually with students to discuss and support applications to university," Robert said. The school hosts university fairs and workshops that give students the chance to meet directly with representatives from top universities. "We hold events in school, including local and international universities, so our students have the opportunity to speak directly with universities."

Additionally, BIST incorporates career guidance into the secondary curriculum.



The school building. Source: BIST

"Career guidance is part of our programme within Secondary, including CV writing and interview skills," Robert shared. Work experience opportunities in Year 10 and Year 12 provide valuable insights into different professions. "We also support students with work experience in Year 10 & 12, providing them the opportunity to try first-hand what it is like to work in certain professions," he explained.

BUILDING A SENSE OF BELONGING AND INCLUSIVITY AT BIST

BIST takes pride in its diverse, multicultural environment, and Robert emphasized that the school's focus on inclusion is one of its key strengths. "We celebrate diversity through assemblies, curriculum content, and cultural events," he said. The school integrates themes of diversity, equality, and inclusion into everyday learning, ensuring that students feel respected and valued. "The variety of cultures within our student body itself is a daily lesson in inclusion, empathy, and belonging to a global community," Robert noted.

The British approach to education, with its focus on Diversity, Equality, Inclusion, Justice, and Belonging (DEIJB), forms the foundation of the school's values. "We model inclusivity in every classroom and ensure all voices are respected and represented in school life," Robert explained, reinforcing the importance of respect and mutual understanding among students.

OUTDOOR LEARNING AND ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION AT BIST

BIST's location next to Lisi Lake provides an invaluable resource for outdoor learning. "Our proximity to Lisi Lake allows for regular excursions into nature, and our Outdoor Learning programme helps our students develop outdoor skills, confidence, and creativity," Robert shared. The school integrates the natural surroundings into its curriculum, from science trips to orienteering and cross-country running. "We also use the local area to prepare for our Duke of Edinburgh Award programme, including hiking and camping," Robert explained.

BIST is also committed to environmental sustainability, with annual tree-planting initiatives at Lisi Lake as part of the

school's environmental education efforts. "Our commitment to environmental sustainability also includes our annual tree-planting at the lake, where we have planted over 1,000 trees over the years," he added, ensuring that students develop an awareness of their role in preserving the environment.

CREATIVITY AND THE ARTS

Robert highlighted the important role that the creative and performing arts play at BIST. "Creative and Performing Arts are integral to our ethos," he said. Art, music, and drama are taught by specialists, and students' work is celebrated through exhibitions and performances. "Students' work is celebrated through exhibitions and performances," Robert said. The school also offers extra-curricular opportunities such as music lessons and drama clubs, providing students with the chance to develop their artistic skills further.

Through BIST's affiliation with COBIS, students have the opportunity to participate in international competitions, showcasing their creativity on a global stage. "Being part of COBIS also allows our students to enter international competitions where they can demonstrate their skills and creativity," Robert noted.

ROBERT SNOWDEN'S VISION FOR BIST

Looking ahead, Robert envisions BIST continuing to grow and strengthen its community. "My vision is to ensure we continue to strengthen our community, nurturing confident, compassionate, and globally minded learners. I want BIST to be officially recognised as achieving world-class standards of excellence in all areas of learning, student outcomes, as well as personal development and wellbeing," he shared.

He highlighted plans to further develop the school's facilities, aiming to create more opportunities and enriching experiences for students. BIST's future will see students excelling at prestigious universities, including the UK's top institutions and Ivy League schools in the US. "Through developing initiatives such as the Model United Nations and debating tournaments, our students will be empowered and thoughtful leaders with the confidence and passion to make a positive difference and shape the future," he concluded.



Flora's Turn

BLOG BY TONY HANMER

Now, I'm no botanist, but I am aware that a square meter of land in any wilderness has a mega-lot going on in it. Down to the microscopic level (which perhaps is a topic all its own, beyond my scope at present). Aside from the fauna (animal kingdom) and mycelia (mushrooms and other fungi), the flora (vegetable kingdom). Dighomi Meadows, the large area

near our apartment on the edge of Tbilisi, is no exception.

Flax? Those blue flowers currently in bloom. The world's earliest surviving textile sample to date is from this plant, a piece found in a cave near Kutaisi which dates to about 35,000 years ago. Wow, not just a pretty face (This recent portrait of my wife is with local flax, the flower nearest her claiming sharp focus while I let her be slightly softened).

Poppies are currently appearing everywhere too at the moment, their large pure scarlet or smaller pink blossoms standing out with eye-popping intensity.

Anna, who runs the Dighomi Meadows NGO, also pointed out wild asparagus, edible straight from picked or cookable too, on our recent garbage cleanup run, as I mentioned in my article last week. Aspens, various evergreen trees, and so much more. The irises I also mentioned last time. There are probably 10 more green leafy things growing right here that my wife knows how to turn into pkhali, boiled veggie paste with crushed walnuts, vinegar and coriander, another Georgian staple.

All part of the local life cycle, feeding each other and eating each other too.



Photo by the author

Insects consume the vegetation, and in turn are eaten by the small silent bats which we saw flitting about for the first time on our twilight walk today. Woodpeckers rear chicks in the trees; so do many other birds, in various kinds of nests. Water birds make their homes in the reeds and rushes which line the many ponds in this area. Ducks, herons and others. Water mammals too, nutria in the same ponds and river otters in the banks and islands of the Mtkvari. Stick around, make a blind from which to observe (once the fauna are used to it) and life will nonchalantly reveal itself all around you.

The flora depend on various types of soil from which to grow, from sandy to clayey, which we have here, the latter so moist that puddles will form almost wherever you dig. Now, as everything greens up, the riot of existence is in full party mode. Later, like all over Tbilisi and in the warm lowlands of the whole country, summer's heat will turn much of this to drab yellow or brown, and it'll quieten down a bit. But for now it's still been sweater weather here, sometimes; and Ushguli even had snow a couple of days ago as I write this, no great surprise. So the tug o'war between winter and spring

is still ongoing, until the latter decisively, greenly wins out, as it always does.

My advice is: get out into the city's many parks, the Botanical Gardens in Tbilisi's old city, around Lisi or Turtle Lake, or Tbilisi Sea, and everywhere else while it IS still green. There is so much here to refresh the soul; even if (as is the case in our Meadows) there is garbage mixed in with it. The green and flowers win. Left to their own devices, they will reclaim everything anyway (look what is still being discovered by lidar deep in South America's jungles, whole cities under the vegetation!). Sometimes even the noise of the city, not to mention the industrialized look of it, can just disappear in the flora. You get more oxygen, and give carbon dioxide back. Everybody wins. Don't wait.

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



Photo by the author

CULTURE

The Return of the Oracle: Eliso Virsaladze in Tbilisi and the Ritual of Cultural Memory

BY IVAN NECHAEV

There are concerts that entertain. There are concerts that inform. Then there are concerts like Eliso Virsaladze's May 4th return to the Tbilisi State Conservatoire — events so weighted with cultural meaning, interpretative depth, and sonic intelligence that the usual vocabulary fails. Not merely a performance, this was a séance — Chopin channeled through the disciplined metaphysics of an artist whose every phrase seems to speak from the other side of time.

With the Grand Hall sold out weeks in advance, the evening was shaped as much by expectation as execution. But expectation, in Virsaladze's case, is not hype — it is trust. The audience came not for sentimentality, but for musical judgment. And what they received was a traversal of Chopin so uncompromisingly analytical, so stripped of decorative excess, that even silence — her patient, trembling rests — became a form of critique.

The program opened with the Polonaise-Fantaisie in A-flat major, Op. 61, a late and structurally elusive work that often resists clarity. In Virsaladze's hands, it did not "unfold" — it unraveled, like memory itself. Her approach was neither romantic nor abstract. It was architectural: she gave space for every harmonic modulation to breathe, but without letting the fantasia spiral into formlessness.

The bass line was articulated with a near-pedantic clarity — each pedal tone

and chromatic slip felt chiselled. Her rubato was controlled, almost introverted: no indulgent swoons, but hesitant pauses that seemed to ask, "Can music still bear the weight of dignity?" It could, and it did. The opening's descent into thematic fog was rendered not as dream but as philosophical doubt — like a voice speaking itself into disappearance, then clawing its way back with trills and resistance.

Then came the Sonata No. 3 in B minor, Op. 58 — a monument of Romantic sonata form, frequently overplayed as a vehicle for brilliance. Virsaladze brought none of that. She approached it instead like a thinker returning to an ancient, damaged manuscript: restoring it, not embellishing it.

The Allegro maestoso was a lesson in controlled eruption. Virsaladze attacked the octaves with deliberate aggression, but immediately pulled back — a dialectic of force and fragility. The second theme did not "sing" in the usual way, but rather hovered — ironic, questioning, unresolved. Her articulation of the descending minor sixths felt not ornamental but confessional.

In the Scherzo, she played with nervous urgency — not playful, but anxious, nearly sarcastic. A kind of haunted dance, where the hands chase each other like twin voices in an unfinished fugue. The Largo, however, was the night's centre of gravity. This was no lullaby: it was a prayer said through clenched teeth. Her voicing of inner harmonies turned the melody into a shadow of itself, each note dipped in grief.

The Finale came not as resolution but as protest. Virsaladze's tempo was slightly



Photo by the author

held back — Presto non tanto taken seriously — allowing the harmonic friction to seethe. The final cadence did not announce victory, but necessity.

In the Nocturne in C-sharp minor, Op. 27 No. 1, Virsaladze played the opening motif as if afraid of waking someone — herself, perhaps. The left-hand triplets, often flowing like water, here felt burdened, resisted — time lagging behind itself. She reminded us that Chopin's nocturnes are not just songs of night, but meditations on isolation.

The Nocturne in D-flat major, Op. 27 No. 2, often smothered by prettiness in lesser hands, was rendered with chastity

and suspicion. Her dynamics barely rose above mezzo-forte. It was a whisper of elegance, not a cry of passion. Where others shimmer, she questions. And by doing so, she dignifies.

Then came the sequence of seven Mazurkas, Op. 30 No. 4 in C-sharp minor was built from silence — each dance fragment arriving late, like a half-forgotten ritual. The G-sharp minor that followed felt subversive in its asymmetry: she accented the wrong beats, blurred the bar lines, turning rhythmic instability into a political act. The D major was brighter but never innocent — each repeat of the theme slightly deformed,

as though remembering itself through trauma.

The final triptych — Op. 59 Nos. 1-3 — unfolded as a collapsing triptych: A minor, A-flat major, F-sharp minor. Together, they mapped an emotional terrain that rejected catharsis. No. 1 in A minor was brittle and halting; No. 2 in A-flat pulsed with dislocated charm; and No. 3 in F-sharp minor closed the set not in triumph, but in grim endurance. A circular motion that refused resolution — echoing Virsaladze's entire artistic ethos.

Virsaladze uses the piano like a scalpel, not a mirror. Her tone is never glossy. She does not indulge in resonance for its own sake. The Steinway she played on — responsive but restrained — became an instrument of incision. Her legato is rigorous; her pedaling economical. When she uses the sustain pedal, it's as punctuation, not perfume.

This was not a recital of flamboyant gestures or performative charisma. There were no bows milked for applause, no expressive facial grimaces. In fact, her stillness bordered on the ascetic. But in that restraint was moral force. Virsaladze plays Chopin not as entertainment, but as testimony — to loss, to endurance, to the stubborn persistence of clarity in an age of noise.

In our current era of cultural acceleration, where interpretation is often flattened into "content," Virsaladze's approach is radical. She does not interpret Chopin — she interrogates him. In a sold-out hall, she played as if she were alone. And in doing so, she challenges the listener to interrogate themselves.

Merab Kopaleishvili in the Context of Contemporary Georgian Art



Artist Merab Kopaleishvili with Mzia Chikhradze

BY KESARIA KATCHARAVA

Merab Kopaleishvili is a notable figure in contemporary Georgian art. His work explores visual language, symbolism, and cultural heritage. Though rooted in Georgia, his art goes beyond national and stylistic boundaries, connecting with global and postmodern ideas. This interview with Mzia Chikhradze, PhD, Senior Research fellow at the G. Chubinashvili National Research Center for Georgian Art History and Heritage Preservation, Adjunct Professor at Free University of Tbilisi, looks at the key visual and conceptual elements of his work, highlighting what makes it stand out in Georgia and appeal to audiences abroad.

WHAT VISUAL AND CONCEPTUAL FEATURES ARE MOST CHARACTERISTIC OF HIS WORKS?

When discussing Merab Kopaleishvili's art, it is important to consider the environment in which he creates and the context in which his work emerged.

At first glance, his art may resemble

folk or naive art. However, postmodernism offers such a wide range of possibilities that it welcomes alternative artistic languages. This diversity is a defining feature of contemporary art.

Merab Kopaleishvili received an academic education, graduating from the Tbilisi State Academy of Fine Arts, and is well-versed in the principles of art, color, and painting. Nevertheless, he deliberately chooses to work in a naive visual language.

Why naive art? Take, for example, the French and Russian avant-garde artists, who deliberately turned away from academic painting and embraced simplification and primitivism. The French looked to Oceanian and African art—so-called “tribal art”—while the Russians drew inspiration from medieval iconography, folk prints (lubok), children's drawings, and folklore. Primitive artistic language allowed for strong emotional expression and transformed simple forms into powerful means of communication. Through this style, the artist can create a direct emotional connection with the viewer. From an art historical perspective, this made perfect sense—and proved effective—at the beginning of the 20th century. The same can be said about Merab Kopaleishvili's work.

Kopaleishvili is not simply trying to express raw emotion through naive sim-

cerity, or to have a direct emotional impact on the viewer. Rather, he is interested in exploring deeper layers of meaning. His visual language is enriched with symbols, and his works are open to interpretation. Once again, this reflects a postmodern approach—his art doesn't offer a single, fixed meaning. Instead, each viewer is free to discover their own interpretation, depending on their intellectual and emotional readiness.

Viewed through the lens of semiotics, his use of symbols allows him to turn artistic forms into signs. For instance, in one of his works, he paints a chair. But it is not just a chair—there is symbolic meaning embedded in it. The chair becomes a universal image, a stand-in for the world he seeks to portray. This layering of meaning, and the transformation of a simple object into a significant symbol, is a key feature of his work—and one of the things that makes it so compelling. This is what gives Kopaleishvili's art a distinct and meaningful place within contemporary Georgian art, which itself forms part of the larger context of modern Western art.

WHAT DISTINGUISHES HIS PAINTING—IN FORM, COLOR, TEXTURE—AND HOW DOES IT RELATE TO GLOBAL ARTISTIC DISCOURSES?



The distinctive feature of his artistic language is its simplicity—he intentionally uses simplified forms to convey meaning. In his work, form, color, and line are not treated as separate elements. What matters is that these elements come together into a generalized image, and it's this conceptual generalization that gives his art its power.

Take, for example, *The Tale of the Roe*—the deer that was killed. This isn't just an image of a deer lying among flowers. There is a pool of blood—a red mark—that transforms the scene. The level of abstraction and symbolism is so strong that the image becomes one of universal pain and sorrow. The red spot is striking, even disturbing—it pierces the viewer emotionally. It's no longer just about a deer or daisies. The red mark appears to spread into the flowers, turning them into a symbol of collective grief. It becomes a representation of death itself.

On the formal side—his visual “language”—he often uses mixed media. In his paintings, collage is frequently integrated. For instance, the meadow of daisies might be painted in such a way that it's hard to tell whether it was done entirely with paint or with collage elements. As you look closer, you realize that the artist created such texture. The same goes for the chair: from a distance, it may look like a painted cloth texture, but upon closer inspection, you find that it includes actual fabric attached using collage techniques. This creates a kind of visual play—a shifting between reality and image, between imitation and the real. This playful dynamic animates the surface of his work. It pulls the viewer in, encouraging observation and recognition. This element of playfulness is

also a hallmark of contemporary art. His visual language—expressive, layered, and self-aware—fits clearly within the postmodern and global artistic context.

HOW CAN AN INTERNATIONAL AUDIENCE PERCEIVE HIS WORK? WHAT UNIQUE QUALITIES OR INNER STRENGTH DOES HIS ART POSSESS THAT CAN TRANSCEND BORDERS AND ATTRACT GLOBAL ATTENTION?

He fits seamlessly into the diverse and layered landscape of postmodern art. But there's also an additional dimension to consider—his background. Georgia, while home to many talented artists known in Europe, still remains somewhat unexplored for much of the international art world. For many, it retains a sense of the unfamiliar or even the exotic. Within this context, Kopaleishvili stands out as an artist who leaves a profound mark through his work. In his art, we can trace echoes of Georgian folklore, medieval iconography, Pirosmiani's influence, tombstone carvings, and traditional engraving. He weaves all of these elements into a distinctive visual language. At the same time, he is a deeply thoughtful and intellectual artist, with a strong foundation in literature and art history—something that clearly informs his work.

This cultural depth, combined with a national aesthetic rooted in Georgian tradition, gives his art a richness that resonates beyond local borders. His work has already received positive attention abroad, generating both interest and strong sales. That response is a reflection of how many dimensions his art brings together—and why it has the power to speak to a global audience.



Whispering through Cataclysms: The Pulse of Giya Kancheli, between Prayer and Protest

BY IVAN NECHAEV

On the evening of May 1st, the Georgian Philharmonic Orchestra Auditorium was enveloped in a soundscape at once fragile and searing. Mezzo-soprano Natalia Kutateladze, violist Giorgi Zagareli, and pianist Nikoloz Rachveli did not merely perform works by Giya Kancheli—they communed with the ghosts of a fractured century. The concert, celebrating what would have been the 90th anniversary of Georgia's most internationally revered composer, became less a musical event than a rite of cultural archeology.

But what exactly are we unearthing when we listen to Kancheli's chamber music today? How do his muted climaxes and spiritual stillness speak to a current society struggling to narrate its own past? Why does Kancheli, whose music hovers between prayer and protest, still strike a nerve in 2025?

THE QUIET VIOLENCE OF RESTRAINT: KANCHELI'S SOUND AS POLITICAL GESTURE

In an age of omnipresent noise, Kancheli's music dares to whisper. His chamber pieces are studies in radical restraint, where long stretches of silence or near-silence rupture suddenly with bursts of melodic anguish. Ethnomusicologist Caroline Bithell, writing on music and trauma, has argued that "silence is not the absence of sound, but the presence of repression and memory." Kancheli, perhaps more than any other post-Soviet composer, understood this.

Kancheli's silences are not neutral. They recall the forced quiet of life under Soviet rule. His use of near-static harmonies and slow temporal flow can be read as a refusal of the bombast and teleology associated with Soviet musical ideology. In his music, nothing progresses; everything lingers. As political theorist Michel Foucault might say, Kancheli rewrites the dominant discourse not through contradiction, but through evasion.

BETWEEN MONASTERY AND MOURNING: SPIRITUALITY AS RESISTANCE

Kancheli often dismissed interpretations of his work as "religious," preferring the



Photo by the author

term "spiritual." This distinction is key. Where religion can imply institutionalized dogma, spirituality in his music suggests something looser, more personal—a striving for metaphysical clarity in a world mired in historical opacity.

Georgia's relationship with spirituality is deeply tied to its cultural identity. As a country that converted to Christianity in the 4th century and later resisted both Ottoman and Soviet secularism, the nation has always blurred the lines between music, mysticism, and memory. In this way, Kancheli's chamber music becomes a form of what anthropologist Victor Turner calls liminality: a threshold state between rupture and reintegration, where new cultural meanings can be formed. He resists narrative closure. His cadences often avoid finality, deferring resolution as if refusing to betray the complexity of history with easy catharsis.

THE CHAMBER AS A CHAMBER: ARCHITECTURE OF MEMORY

The chamber music form, with its intimacy and spatial closeness, lends itself to the kind of psychic excavation Kancheli performs. One is reminded of Freud's

Wunderblock—his metaphor for memory as a palimpsest where nothing is ever fully erased. Kancheli's sparse textures and recurring motifs feel precisely like such traces—layered, repressed, but insistently returning.

Philosopher Walter Benjamin once described history as "a constellation of dangers," suggesting that the past is never safely past. Kancheli's music embodies this danger. When Rachveli's piano interrupts a texture of near-stasis with sudden dissonance or irony, it's not simply a musical event—it's the eruption of repressed cultural trauma. His performances show how the concert hall can become a courtroom, a chapel, or a crypt.

FROM THE POST-SOVIET TO THE POST-HUMAN

Why does Kancheli still matter in 2025? Because his music offers a rare antidote to both the flattening optimism of late-capitalist aesthetics and the algorithmic predictability of AI-generated compositions. In a world where music increasingly becomes either entertainment or sonic wallpaper, Kancheli's work insists on slowness, reflection, and emotional ambiguity.

His music is unquantifiable in a data-driven era. It does not yield easily to analysis, playlisting, or virality. This is its power. As theorist Byung-Chul Han notes in *The Scent of Time*, our age suffers from a "temporal crisis" in which acceleration has replaced depth. Kancheli resists this. His music is time reclaimed, grief examined, memory extended.

THE ENSEMBLE DYNAMIC: A SHARED VULNERABILITY

Mezzo-soprano Natalia Kutateladze did not sing over Kancheli's textures—she emerged from within them. Her vocal presence was defined less by projection than by absorption: her tone floated, receded, and reappeared like a memory recalled in fragments. In pieces where Kancheli incorporates wordless vocal lines or sparse texts, Kutateladze used the human voice as a fragile medium of vulnerability. Kutateladze's nuanced control of breath and silence gave shape to the in-between spaces in Kancheli's music—the places where meaning evaporates just as it begins to form. At times, she was barely audible, and yet it was in these moments that the emotional weight of the performance was most profound.

Her restraint became its own kind of testimony.

Giorgi Zagareli's performance on viola was the emotional backbone of the evening. The viola, often overlooked in orchestral settings, becomes in Kancheli's chamber music a voice of understated authority. Its range—earthy, melancholic, and inward—perfectly suits the composer's introspective aesthetic. Zagareli played with a tone that was neither romantic nor clinical. Instead, he approached the score as an archaeologist might approach an ancient text—carefully, attentively, always aware of what lies beneath the surface. His handling of Kancheli's slow arcs and sudden dynamic shifts was exemplary. He did not dramatize or explain the music; he allowed it to speak for itself, and in doing so, rendered it all the more haunting.

Nikoloz Rachveli, both pianist and artistic director of the evening, acted as the concert's dramaturge—not just in shaping the program, but in embodying the philosophical tension within each piece. Rachveli's pianism is marked by an unusual clarity of thought. He understands that in Kancheli's world, the piano is not a vehicle of virtuosic brilliance but a conduit for time itself. His touch was crystalline, controlled, never excessive. In passages where the piano functions as a heartbeat or tolling bell, Rachveli created sonic environments rather than musical arguments. His sense of temporal space—when to let the note linger, when to let it vanish—showed his profound understanding of Kancheli's vision.

At the very end of the evening, as if to seal the concert with a moment of cultural grace, the audience was gifted a surprise that transcended the program. From the front row, the legendary Nani Bregvadze was invited to the stage. With a quiet, magnetic dignity, she stepped into the light and sang "Ak aris"—a song woven deeply into the collective Georgian memory. Her voice, aged yet unwavering, carried the weight of generations. It was not a performance but a benediction.

The hall rose in a spontaneous standing ovation. This was not simply applause for a beloved artist—it was a gesture of recognition, of shared memory, of gratitude. In that moment, Bregvadze's voice became a living echo of Kancheli's own spirit: tender, sorrowful, enduring. The concert closed not with a finale, but with a song that felt like a return—to roots, to silence, to home.

LISTENING AS ETHICAL PRACTICE

The concert on May 1st was not just a tribute; it was a test. Could we, as listeners, sustain attention through the silences, the subtleties, the slow-burning tensions of Kancheli's language? Could we accept ambiguity, embrace stillness, and bear witness to a culture's wounds without demanding resolution?

To listen to Kancheli in 2025 is to practice a kind of ethical listening. It is to affirm that history, pain, and transcendence are not commodities to be consumed, but experiences to be endured and shared. In a cultural moment increasingly dominated by acceleration, distraction, and the flattening of affect, Kancheli's music stands as a monument of resistance. Not a loud one, but a resonant one—built from whispers, pauses, and the brave refusal to forget.



Photo by the author

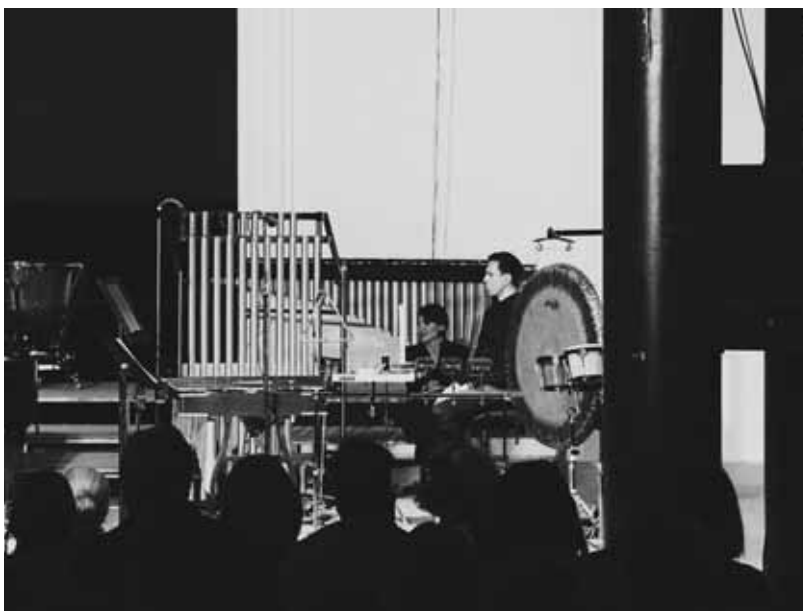


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