



Eitydas Bajarunas, Ambassador of Lithuania to Russia. Source: rferl

FOCUS

ON ENDING THE WAR

"The end of this war will be decided on the battlefield, not by diplomatic efforts." The Lithuanian Ambassador to Russia on the ongoing conflict and Russia's future

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EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW BY VAZHA TAVBERIDZE

The main opinion-makers in Italy are pacifists. They don't want to admit that if you don't provide military support, you are supporting the military of the invader, - says Ugo Poletti, an Italian journalist and founder and editor-in-chief of The Odessa Journal. He still lives in Odessa, and from there observes Russia's brutal war against Ukraine. Vazha Tavberidze spoke to Poletti from Prague.

TODAY'S NEWS IS THAT RUSSIAN FRIGATE ADMIRAL MAKAROV IS HEADING TO THE BLACK SEA FLEET. WHAT TIDINGS DOES IT BRING FOR ODESSA?

For the moment, Odessa is safe because it is well protected due to its geography. At the beginning of the war, it was in danger when the Russian army approached Mikolaiv. Had Mikolaiv not resisted, it would have been very difficult for Odessa.



Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi leaves at the end of his statement on the Ukraine crisis, in Rome, Italy, February 24, 2022. By Remo Casilli/REUTERS/Pool

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Markets							
	Price	w/w	m/m		Price	w/w	m/m
BONDS							
GRAIL 07/28	85.21 (YTM 7.03%)	+0.1%	-1.0%	Bank of Georgia (BGEO LN)	GBP 13.68	+17.9%	+11.2%
GEBGG 07/23	99.84 (YTM 6.13%)	+0.2%	-1.1%	Georgia Capital (CGEO LN)	GBP 5.69	-1.7%	-7.8%
GEOCAP 03/24	96.14 (YTM 8.46%)	-0.4%	-0.1%	TBC Bank Group (TBCG LN)	GBP 13.22	+11.8%	+8.4%
SILNET 01/27	97.54 (YTM 9.02%)	-0.1%	-0.3%	CURRENCIES			
TBC 06/24	98.98 (YTM 6.28%)	-1.9%	-3.8%	GEL / USD	2.9750	-1.7%	-2.9%
GGU 07/25	100.74 (YTM 7.48%)	-0.1%	-0.3%	GEL / EUR	3.1043	-2.8%	-6.3%
COMMODITIES				GEL / GBP	3.6634	-1.8%	-8.4%
Crude Oil, Brent (US\$/bbl)	114.24	+7.8%	+2.3%	GEL / CHF	2.9693	-2.6%	-8.6%
Gold Spot (US\$/Oz)	1 824.14	-1.6%	-7.8%	GEL / RUB	0.0463	+6.2%	+25.1%
INDICES				GEL / TRY	0.1912	-4.6%	-8.6%
FTSE 100	7 464.80	+3.4%	-2.0%	GEL / AZN	1.7505	-1.9%	-3.3%
FTSE 250	19 924.11	+3.2%	-5.7%	GEL / AMD	0.0065	+2.5%	+0.4%
DAX	13 964.38	+4.4%	-1.4%	GEL / UAH	0.1021	+2.0%	-1.8%
DOW JONES	32 223.42	-0.1%	-6.5%	EUR / USD	0.9584	+1.2%	+3.7%
NASDAQ	11 662.79	+0.3%	-12.6%	GBP / USD	0.8115	+0.1%	+6.0%
MSCI EM EE	31.39	+0.3%	-16.4%	CHF / USD	1.0023	+0.8%	+6.3%
MSCI EM	1 007.50	-0.7%	-9.5%	RUB / USD	na	na	na
SP 500	4 008.01	+0.4%	-8.8%	TRY / USD	15.5477	+3.1%	+6.2%
MSCI FM	2 304.36	-3.4%	-11.0%	AZN / USD	1.6967	+0.1%	-0.1%
				AMD / USD	454.0200	-4.2%	-3.6%



Georgia Celebrates Independence Day

BY ANA DUMBADZE

On May 26, Georgia celebrates Independence Day. This day marks the establishment of the First Democratic Republic of Georgia in 1918 and its independence from the Russian Empire.

In relation to this celebration of great value, various events are being held across the country.

On this date 104 years ago, Georgia gained independence from the Russian Empire, of which it had been a part since the early 19th century. On May 26, 1918,

at exactly 5:10 AM, the National Council of Georgia (that was renamed the Parliament of Georgia) adopted the Act of Independence that gave birth to the Democratic Republic of Georgia. Yet, the victory and the taste of freedom turned out to be short; in 1921, Georgia was invaded by the Soviet Russian army and eventually incorporated into the newly formed Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Only 70 years later, on April 9, 1991, did Georgia manage to free itself from the totalitarian system and claim back its independence.

Despite all the hardships that Georgia has undergone, the Georgian people have always strived for independence and never lost the feeling of inner freedom.



The National Council of Georgia declaring Georgia's independence

Saudi Arabia's Flyadeal Airline to Begin Operating in Georgia



BY ANA DUMBADZE

Saudi Arabian budget airline Flyadeal will begin operating regular flights to Tbilisi and Batumi from June 28.

According to the Georgian Civil Aviation Agency, the airline will operate 15 flights a week, with three Jeddah - Tbilisi flights per week, in addition to four flights from Riyadh and two from Dammam.

Flyadeal was granted the permit to operate in Georgia on Thursday, May 19.

Georgian Dream and the Opposition on the Topic of EU Candidacy

BY KETEVA SHKIRTADZE

This week, the Chair of the EU Integration Committee, Maka Botchorishvili, and the First Deputy, Levan Karumidze, met with the Head of Group 51 in the Federal Chancellery of Germany, Edgar Lenski, Director for Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Matthias Lüttenberg, and the Head of the EU Foreign Relations, Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Department, Laura Ahrens.

The parties discussed Georgia's EU membership application, the progress of the country on its EU integration path, the security challenges in the region, the Russian occupation of Georgian territories, and the creeping annexation.

Botchorishvili put an emphasis on the successful implementation of the majority of the reforms envisaged under the Association Agreement, noting that Georgia aspires to further approximate to EU standards. She underlined the importance of a clear EU membership perspective and the granting of candidate status to Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova against the background of the Russian military aggression in Ukraine, and stressed the importance of a clear political supportive message from the EU to these countries.

She thanked the German diplomats for their intact support to the democratic development and EU approximation of Georgia. The German colleagues gave a positive assessment of the EU integration steps taken by Georgia and the timely filling out-up of the Questionnaire. They reaffirmed the unwavering support of Germany to the European aspirations of the country.

GEORGIAN DREAM VS THE OPPOSITION ON THE TOPIC OF EU CANDIDACY

Chairman of the Georgian Dream, Irakli Kobakhidze, stated that they have information that "certain politicians" from the radical opposition are campaigning against Georgia's candidacy in the European Union.

"This is a given fact, which is not new. We remember the same thing about the visa liberalization. They were not successful then, and we hope their latest campaign will be just as unsuccessful," he said.

Vice-Speaker Archil Talakvadze also spoke on the topic, noting: "the public should be aware of the anti-heroes who are working against Georgia's European perspective. There was exactly the same process during the discussion of visa liberalization."

Roman Gotsiridze, a member of the United National Movement (UNM), claimed that it was the opposition who forced Garibashvili to file the EU application in the first place.

"We forced him to agree to our initiative, and as a result of pressure from the opposition, they were forced to file the application the very next day, despite the chairman of their party having said 'the situation in Ukraine is different and Georgia will file the application in 2024,'" he claimed.

LOOKING TO THE EU FOR RECOGNITION OF GEORGIA'S HISTORICAL PLACE

The Minister of Culture of Georgia, Tea Tsulukiani, this week stated that she has high hopes that Europe, the European nations, and the leaders who rule the EU, will grant Georgia what "historically and fairly belongs to it."

"I hope that they adhere to the ideology and values of the founding fathers who first created and founded the Council of Europe, the European Union that was born from the base of the Council of Europe. I hope that the current generation of European rulers will be loyal to these ideas and will grant Georgia what historically and fairly belongs to it. This historical justice not only includes



Image source: parliament.ge

the past, it is based on the present as well. We will get this status, of course, together with Moldova and Ukraine," Tsulukiani said.

GARIBASHVILI: EU MEMBERSHIP IS THE PEOPLE'S CHOICE

"More than 80% of our population support this idea that Georgia must become a part of the European family. And this is not a choice of our Government. It is a civilizational choice of the Georgian people," Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili stated during the discussion panel 'Rethinking the EU's Partnership with Its Neighborhood' held within the scope of the Economic Forum in Davos.

He noted that everything will be done to make sure that Georgia gets closer to the EU and its ultimate goal of full EU membership.

"First of all, thank you for inviting us to Davos. This is a great opportunity to talk about Georgia's aspiration to become a member of the European Union. Georgia has been a very reliable and loyal partner to the EU. This is a choice of our people. It does not belong only to the Georgian Government, but it is a choice, the civilizational choice, of the Georgian people. We share the same values and principles," the PM said. "In 2014, we signed the Association Agreement, a roadmap for our ultimate goal, fully-fledged EU membership. Since then, we have had a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) and some tangible results, such as the Visa-Free Regime, which is very important to the Georgian citizens. Then we recently submitted the official Application for EU Membership.

"Whatever brings us closer to the European Union and EU Membership is acceptable to us, because we have no alternative. We will do whatever it takes to get closer to the European Union, to get closer to our ultimate goal of fully-fledged membership," Garibashvili said.

GAKHARIA: THIS IS AN UNMISSABLE CHANCE

Giorgi Gakharia, the leader of the party "For Georgia" released a statement Wednesday regarding Georgia's application for EU membership status.

"Georgia has a historic chance to make an important step forward in the EU integration path and receive EU membership candidate status. Our country has been waiting for this chance since gaining independence and we cannot miss it," he said.

"Regardless who is in the Government or who is in the opposition, regardless who and for what reason they try to harm

the EU integration process, Georgia and the Georgian people deserve to become a full member of the European family, as our country has already paid a heavy price for its European choice," he said.

"This was the goal of our ancestors and our history. This is a guarantee to restore our territorial integrity, build our national state, and freely and democratically develop our country. Europe has no alternative.

"We should all understand that the EU integration path is not an easy one and the results will not be achieved in a day. Granting membership candidate status will be just the beginning. The path will be complex, but, it is the choice of our people and our children, and failing to get the status will return us to the past.

"Important systemic reforms should follow the granting of the status. With this status, Georgia moves to a qualitatively new level. Important steps should be taken in various directions: Improvement of the elections system, combating corruption, an independent judiciary, economic and social development, human rights protections, and consolidation of democracy are among those directions. "These reforms are not implemented for the European Union, there are implemented for Georgia, for the decent future of Georgian citizens.

"Membership in the European family is the only choice, making the country's development and prosperity irreversible.

"Missing this historic chance is unacceptable, and the responsibility will be on everyone - but most of all, on the Government!

"Unity and compromise are the key missing parts today harming our European perspective. Therefore, we should say no to confrontation and putting private interests above national interests: When it comes to national interests, we should learn to unite!

"Accordingly, I address the President of Georgia, the Parliament of Georgia, the Government of Georgia, political parties, non-government and civil organization, I also kindly ask our Church, to stand united, as only unity can protect the future of our children. If we cannot achieve this unity, in the coming few weeks, before the decision is made, let's at least stop blaming each other so as not to harm the process.

"If Georgia fails to get the candidate status, we all fail, but the responsibility will be on the Government. Likewise, if the status is granted, the victory will belong to everyone and utmost to those heroes who devoted their lives to Georgia's independence."



Image source: gov.ge

Supporting Georgian Farmers and Strengthening the Local Economy: Carrefour Hosts 'Georgian Days' Festival



on May 26 for visitors to taste and experience the very best of Georgia, bringing together the wider community. Jerome Akel, Country Manager of Carrefour Georgia, said: "Carrefour is dedicated to strengthening and developing its relationships with local farmers and suppliers to provide them with a bigger platform and promote sustainable practices across the region. Our 'Georgian Days' festival will showcase the rich variety of items grown and made here whilst supplying customers with products that not only taste great but benefit the environment and the local economy. The exhibition will boast an amazing calendar of events, games, tastings and surprises and we are excited for a whole



Carrefour, owned and operated by Majid Al Futtaim in Georgia, is celebrating its 10th year serving and championing Georgian communities. As part of its ongoing anniversary campaign, which will see 10 days of each month dedicated to special offers and rewards for Carrefour customers, the leading retailer will be highlighting local flavours and products in a food festival running from May 23 - 29. Well-known for its continuous support of local farmers and suppliers, Carrefour hosts its exhibition of Georgian products in the East Point, Tbilisi Mall, Kutaisi, Rustavi and Batumi Hypermarkets, as well as Carrefour supermarket in the GTC shopping centre. Customers will be able to taste distinguished, high-quality local products at a range of stands featuring meat, dairy products, sweets, many more regional delicacies. There will be special offers, surprises and games



week of immersive experiences that the whole family can enjoy." Since entering the Georgian market in 2012, Carrefour has worked with more than 800 suppliers, contributing to the local economy as well as the development of agriculture. The brand's latest initiative will showcase the benefits of buying local as part of its ongoing efforts towards becoming net positive in carbon and water by 2040. With 70 stores now in operation across Georgia and more than 3,000 local employees, Carrefour continues to actively support the community by providing customers with fresh, healthy products daily and directly from nearby farms. Customers looking to buy and support local can discover everything Georgia has to offer at Carrefour's food festival from May 23.



Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: Week 12



BY ANA DUMBADZE

As Ukraine marks three months of war, fighting continues to rage in the country's eastern Donbas region. Ukraine's President says he's willing to hold direct talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin to end the war, but won't cede territory. In the 12th week of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Volodymyr Zelensky called for continued pressure against Russia after its unprovoked war on his country. In addition, a court in Kyiv convicted a Russian soldier, sentencing him to life in prison on Monday. Vadim Shishimarin, 21, a tank commander, was found guilty for killing a 62-year-old unarmed civilian in Ukraine's northeastern Stryky region. Last week, Shishimarin pleaded guilty to the killing but said he was "acting on orders." The latest key developments in the third month of war include:

- The cities of Severodonetsk and Lysychansk in the Donbas region have come

under constant bombardment as Russia tries to encircle them.

- Fighting has reached the outskirts of Severodonetsk, a key Russian target, but a senior Ukrainian official has denied reports that a vital road linking Ukrainian-controlled areas in the east has been blocked from the rest of the country by Russian forces.
- Russia said it will allow ships to carry food out of blockaded ports if sanctions are lifted. Ukraine is a major grain producer and the West accuses the Russian military of holding hostage food supplies for millions around the world.
- President Vladimir Putin has issued an order to simplify the procedure of handing Russian citizenship to residents of Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions in Ukraine's south. Ukraine called the plan "criminal" and a violation of international law.

RUSSIA RAISES ARMY AGE LIMIT TO 50
The Russian parliament has passed a law raising the age limit for people signing up to the army to 50. It follows ongoing attempts by Russian officials to recruit more soldiers as Russian casualties in Ukraine mount.

Under current legislation, only Russians aged 18 to 40 and foreigners aged 18 to 30 can enlist as professional soldiers in the Russian military.

PUTIN'S ARMY ADVANCING IN EASTERN DONBAS REGION
Vladimir Putin's army is finally finding some success, as his forces make breakthroughs in the eastern Donbas region. Over the last few days, they have captured a number of towns and villages, forcing the Ukrainians to retreat to more defensible positions.

The Governor of Luhansk region described the numbers they were coming up against as "insane". President Zelensky told ABC News his men were outnumbered 7-to-1 in the region.

The current Russian targets are the twin cities of Severodonetsk and Lysychansk.

A senior figure in eastern Ukraine has denied reports that a vital road linking Ukrainian-controlled areas in the east has been blocked from the rest of the country by Russian forces.

"Luhansk has not been cut off," said the region's military administration head, Serhiy Haidai. He said that while the route to the south-west of Severodonetsk

had come under fire, humanitarian aid was still getting through.

"Fighting has reached the outskirts of the big city of Severodonetsk. If they capture the road to Bakhmut then the city could be surrounded. Within Severodonetsk, which is being shelled 24 hours a day, Russian forces are close enough to use mortar rounds as well as artillery and aerial bombing," Haidai told the BBC.

Six people were killed in a Russian bombardment on Tuesday, he noted on his Telegram feed.

If Russia captures the neighboring town of Lysychansk, then the whole Luhansk region will be in its hands.

UKRAINE: RUSSIA TRYING TO BLACKMAIL INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY
Ukraine's Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba has said Russia is trying to "blackmail" the international community by raising the possibility of unblocking Black Sea ports in return for a relaxation of sanctions.

The Interfax news agency cited Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Andrei Rudenko as saying Moscow is ready to provide a humanitarian corridor for vessels carrying food to leave Ukraine, in return for the lifting of some sanctions.

Ukraine's Black Sea ports have been blocked since the beginning of Russia's invasion on 24 February. More than 20 million tons of grain is currently stuck in silos in the country.

Writing on Twitter, Kuleba said, "Any foreign politician or official who thinks of accepting this game should first visit the graves of the Ukrainian children and talk to their parents."

RUSSIA: TALK OF PRISONER SWAP 'PREMATURE'
The fate of hundreds of Ukrainian fighters from the besieged steelworks in the southern city of Mariupol, who were taken to Russian-controlled areas last week, remains unclear.

It would be "premature" to consider a prisoner swap with Kyiv before Ukrainian soldiers who have surrendered stand

trial, Russia's deputy foreign minister said.

In comments reported by Russian news agency Interfax, Andrei Rudenko said Moscow would consider a prisoner swap with Kyiv after the Ukrainian fighters were "appropriately convicted and sentenced".

"Before that, all talk of an exchange is premature," he said.

It comes after Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky said late on Monday that Kyiv was ready for an exchange of prisoners and urged international allies to pressure Moscow.

THE SOUTH: ZAPORIZHZHIA BEING TARGETED
There have been Russian missile strikes on the southern city of Zaporizhzhia in what is being seen as the biggest attack on the city so far. At least one person has died and three others wounded.

The area is important because it is a major transport hub, especially for railways. It is also home to lots of heavy industry, including a steelworks and several defense companies, including the Motor Sich factory which makes engines for planes and helicopters, which the Russians claim to have hit, and a radar manufacturer.

Earlier in the conflict, many people from Mariupol made their way to the town which was, until now, thought to have been relatively safe.

Zaporizhzhia is also close to the site of a nuclear power station, Europe's biggest, on the southern bank of the Dnieper River.

RUSSIA EASES CITIZENSHIP RULES FOR RESIDENTS OF SOUTHERN UKRAINE
President Vladimir Putin has issued an order to simplify the procedure of handing Russian citizenship to residents of the Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions in Ukraine's south.

Kherson is the first and only major Ukrainian city occupied by Russia. Zaporizhzhia is still under Ukrainian control, but many surrounding areas are under Russian occupation.

The Missing Link: Politicians and Youth

BY MICHAEL GODWIN

Politicians have long been accused of their disconnect with the people. Whether due to age, social class, or distance, those in positions of political power are seen as removed from the average citizen. This is viewed to be even more so when comparing their relationship with youth. Engaging with the younger community has been an obstacle even the most savvy of political minds have been wrestling with to this day.

Georgian youth movements have long been at the forefront of socio-political activism. Opposed to heavy-handed actions by government figures, they have taken to the streets in both peaceful and at times violent protest. The most notable of this goes back to Georgia's Soviet history.

While locals need no reminder, the events that took place in March of 1956 were a turning point for much of Georgian youth culture. Students and pro-independence protests took to the square outside the building now serving as the Parliament headquarters. In response, Soviet military forces were deployed to the city as riots and protests racked the capital. On March 9, in response to the arrests of other protesters, the situation became heated, and Russian forces opened fire, killing many of the young students present.

The tragedy became a mournful but important event for the nation, particularly the younger generations hopeful for a voice. After this incident, many began to see Georgia move away from the Soviet Union. Finally, in 1991, the nation had its rebirth, with youth leading the charge. Student organizations were significantly involved in workers' rights protests across the country. Into the late 2010s, many youth organizations allied themselves with LGBTQ+ rights groups, helping fundraise and organize events.

However, these alliances did not go unnoticed by other youth organizations. As the political landscape of the 2010s began to split further, so too did many of the youth groups' allegiances. This dissection resulted in groups of opposite social, political, and ideological founda-



Former Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili speaks to supporters via video link during a December 2018 rally in Tbilisi. Source: EPA-EFE/Zurab Kurtshidze

tions coming to blows, both literally as well as figuratively.

These allegiances have been used by various political parties to either blame their opposition for misdeeds, or praise them as the product of their work in the younger communities. Seemingly little has been done to educate and develop these groups. An effort to engage these groups in a way that is meaningful, informative, and still exciting has yet to be realized.

A platform of outreach to youth organizations and communities that is neither pandering nor a weaponization of their ability to be mobilized is difficult to structure. With many politicians eager to gain the favor of their younger constituency, there is an almost inherent desire to use them as a political tool. A framework shrouded in a more academic and relaxing environment could break this mold.

With much of Georgia's education system still working towards the standards found in their Western counterparts, there lies an opportunity. While the commonplace subjects of reading, mathematics, and science are often covered by schools, unique subjects such as civics, law, and political science are too often left to higher education. Building a foundation of understanding for youth, particularly in middle school years, can pay

dividends for the nation.

However, the monumental task of framing these subjects in a way that is engaging and palatable to a younger audience is a common roadblock. Bring-

ing modern tools and media approaches may be able to traverse this seemingly insurmountable task. With so many younger people connected to social media, gaming, and video streaming sources online, there may still be a way to use a combination of these to reach them effectively.

After many schools and workplaces were forced to conduct their business at home remotely during the pandemic, reaching audiences digitally rose to prominence. An interesting byproduct of this has been the cultivation of a massive video creator community in the form of the "podcast." While nothing new online, they have become a popular source for entertainment and education. Developing a podcast that is both entertaining and informative could be the beginning of a new form of youth outreach.

The concept of politicians using a podcast to reach out to their constituency has seen a rise in the West, most notably in the United States. Senators and State Representatives on both sides of the political spectrum have taken to the camera to share both the inner workings of their respective sections of the gov-

ernment as well as to explain the how and why of their actions. Many times it results in a more transparent government, as well as a better understanding of what legislation is actually being proposed.

With transparency being an ongoing issue according to many observers, this may provide an opportunity for Georgia's multitude of political players to engage more with the people. Additionally, educational content for young audiences is essential to cultivate a smart and well-informed population - essential for a functional and safe democracy.

Using ancillary tools such as social media, educational games, and outdoor camps are all components that many have neglected in favor of traditional and ineffective methods. Having respect for the younger and upcoming voters is essential, particularly for politicians interested in the genuine betterment of the nation. The lessons of what the youth is capable of from the past should never be forgotten. Their immense energy should be answered with a solution that compliments this and guides it to constructive, educational, and empowering ends.



Georgian teenagers shouting slogans with a pile of captured Ministry of Internal Affairs riot shields in front of Parliament in 2019. By Vano Shlamov

Who Knows and Wants to Tell the Truth?



Image source: unrevealedfiles.com

OP-ED BY NUGZAR B. RUHADZE

Those rooting for Ukraine in this country want to hear news that names Ukraine the winner in its major conflict with Russia. Those who think that Russia is not a villain but

a fair actor want to hear war info that predicts a happy end for the Russian military machine. Both sides are wrong, because both are unjust in their biased attitude towards the situation, and there is nothing in the world that might justify their wishful thinking.

I wonder who knows the truth, and, if the truth about this war is known at all, would it make any sense if that truth is

simultaneously fed both to the fans of Russia and Ukraine in the same amount with the same content.

Listening to the young Ukrainian president's unalterably optimistic description of war developments, one might think that tomorrow morning the world will wake up to the official statement that the depleted and exhausted Russian army was completely crushed by the heroic

Ukrainian people, and the invincible troops of Ukraine are celebrating victory as the chagrined Russian generals are being severely punished by their saddened and infuriated commander-in-chief. On the other hand, giving heed to what most of the Russian media is telling the world, Ukraine's actor-turned-politician head of state is breathless, his much-talked about courageous boys never to surrender, even if they are en masse taken prisoner.

The actual physical clash between Russia and Ukraine is one thing, and the concrete information on the war is something else entirely. And it is exactly the war propaganda mechanism that creates either one impression or another. Yet, people around the globe feel out of the loop, finding themselves coming up with bungled conclusions and blindly taking sides, with no actual idea what the real war picture is. All of them agree on certain things, though, such as that Ukraine will never be the country it was before the war, and Russia will never again be loved and respected by the rest of the world as it was.

This is an overall international picture which repeats in Sakartvelo, in miniature, where the thoughts and statements preponderate more in Ukraine's favor than in Russia's. Ukrainian flags can be seen flying all over the place; people use the flag colors profusely as ornamental symbols, clothing and decorative shades, while extensively degrading all that is Russian, not trusting even the vestige of

fairly genuine information on positive developments on the Russian side of the war.

Understandably, nobody loves an aggressor, but this fact has nothing to do with fair journalistic coverage of the conflict. Why should we be afraid to call a spade a spade? In holding up the heroic deeds of the Ukrainian people in battle, and their courageous military, why can't we also mention, at least in an acceptable and politically correct measure, that the Russians have their strengths too; for instance, their staunch resistance to more than 10,000 international sanctions, their capability to continue making money in the energy market, their capacity to keep the strengthened ruble up and going, their outstanding political-economic ruse to have a lot of countries purchase their oil and gas in the Russian national currency, an unprecedented financial transaction, and, finally, the step-by-step takeover of the Ukrainian lands in the east and south of the country?

If, by some diabolical chance, Russia wins the war (which few of us want), what will happen? Are we going to take the famous ostrich pose, burying our heads in the sand and shaking our tails as if we don't know the war is over? Where is that weathered ancient journalistic motto, that facts are sacred and comments are free? Are we no longer sticking to its letter, spirit, sense and value? If not, then the meaning of journalism has gone to smithereens in this land!

Iran, the Russian Invasion of Ukraine, and a New World Order

ANALYSIS BY EMIL AVDALIANI

The Russian invasion of Ukraine is set to change the security architecture in the wider Black Sea and Europe. Repercussions will likewise be felt across the Eurasian continent, where Iran is particularly watchful as the Islamic Republic aligns with Russia on critical questions relating to the present world order, but also fears Moscow's play with separatist entities.

ANTICIPATING A NEW WORLD ORDER

For Iran the invasion of Ukraine is closely related to the very essence of the present world order. Like Russia, albeit at times with much greater rigor, Iran has been voicing its discontent at the way the international system has operated since the end of the Cold War. More broadly, Iran and Russia see the world through a strikingly similar lens, and both cherish the oncoming multipolar world where the collective West's geopolitical preponderance will finally come to an end.

Iran had its reasons to think this way. The US' unipolar moment provoked deeper fears in Tehran of imminent encirclement by American bases in Afghanistan and Iraq. Like Russia, the Islamic Republic has been viewing itself

as a separate civilization which needs to be not only acknowledged by outside players, but also be given appropriate geopolitical space for projecting its influence.

Both Russia and Iran are deeply religious about their respective spheres of influence. For Russia, it is the territories that once constituted the Soviet Empire. For Iran, it is Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. When the two former imperial powers have overlapping strategic interests, such as in the South Caucasus and the Caspian Sea, they apply the concept of regionalism. This implies blocking non-regional powers from exercising outside economic and military influence, and mostly revolves around an order dominated by the powers which border on a region.

This largely explains why for Iran, the Russian invasion of Ukraine is an opportunity which could hasten the end of the liberal world order. It also explains why Tehran has been largely toeing the Russian line of explaining the motives behind the invasion. The expansion of NATO into eastern Europe was cited as a reason sparking the Russian moves. "The root of the crisis in Ukraine is the US policies that create crisis, and Ukraine is one victim of these policies," argued Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei following the invasion.

To a certain degree, Iran's approach to Ukraine has also been influenced

by mishaps in bilateral relations, which largely began with the accidental downing of a Ukrainian jet in January 2020 by the Iranian side. Initially denying it, Tehran later admitted that the shooting down happened because of human error. The Ukrainian side contested reports provided by Iran and even accused Tehran of a premeditated "terrorist act committed against a civilian aircraft."

For Iran, the ideal scenario would have been to have a quick and effective invasion where Russia had achieved its major goals. This protracted war, however, means that the liberal order has not been in such a steep decline after all, and Russia's calls for a new era in international relations have been far from realistic. The unsuccessful war also shows Iran that the collective West has the power and ability to adjust and muster energies to defend the existing rules-based order. The sanctions imposed on Russia also highlight the West's ability to sacrifice the benefits of economic partnership with Russia. In other words, Moscow's failure in Ukraine actually strengthened the West and made it more united than it has been since the September 2001 attacks on the US.

The re-invigorated liberal order matters for Iran because of its own troubled relations with the collective West. The ongoing negotiations on the nuclear deal will be heavily impacted by how Russia's

war proceeds and how the US and the EU continue to respond to the aggression. Tehran fears that a losing Russia might use its critical position in the nuclear talks to endanger the process. Additionally, the West, in pressuring Moscow, is highly interested in reaching a deal and thus negate Russia the significant bargaining advantage it holds.

THE LIMITS OF EMBRACING RUSSIA

Despite rhetorical support for Russia, Iran is also careful not to overestimate Moscow's power. It is clear that in the longer run, the Kremlin has failed to achieve its long-term goals of safeguarding its western frontier. The imposed Western sanctions are likely to stay for a long time, and Russian economic stability, despite seeming stout, is overall illusory.

Moreover, Russia's multiplication of separatist entities (following the recognition of Luhansk and Donetsk's independence) is a highly polarizing subject in Iran. True, there has been a shift toward embracing Russia's position over Ukraine, but Tehran remains deeply committed to the "Westphalian principles" of non-intervention and territorial integrity. Russia's moves in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 are thus deeply uncomfortable developments for the Islamic Republic, which itself has struggled against potential separatism in the periph-

eries of the country.

Many in Iran also sympathize with what Ukraine is going through, as the Russian invasion evokes Iran's defeats in the early 19th century wars when the Qajars had to cede the eastern part of the South Caucasus to Russia. The invasion also hits home because of the historically deeply rooted anti-imperialist sentiment in Iran.

Therefore, similar to earlier policy, Iran is expected to largely abstain from endorsing Russia's separatist ambitions in eastern Ukraine. It will also eschew, where possible, supporting Russia in international fora. Emblematic of this policy was the March 2 meeting in the United Nations General Assembly when Iran, rather than siding with Russia, abstained from the vote which condemned Moscow's invasion.

Russia's poor military performance, and the West's ability to act unanimously, serve as good experience for the Islamic Republic as to how much pressure it can incur in case of ratcheted up Western pressure. But most of all, like China, Iran benefits from the war, as it largely represents a Western war, a conflict where Western powers fight each other and quite naturally serves as a distraction from Iran's ambitions.

Emil Avdaliani is a professor at European University and the Director of Middle East Studies at Georgian thinktank, Geocase.

Eitydydas Bajarunas, Lithuanian Ambassador to Russia: The End of this War Will Be Decided on the Battlefield in Ukraine, Not by Diplomacy

INTERVIEW BY VAZHA TAVBERIDZE

Before the war, there was this wishful thinking that one day democratic changes would come to Russia and the Russians will understand the benefits of basic freedoms such as free election or free media, or free, non-corrupt business-making... Before the war, we were always reminding Russia that there was an alternative path to take. Now, with Russia having crossed so many red lines, it is very difficult to imagine the West dealing with this government again in a "business as usual" mode. - Lithuanian Ambassador to Russia Eitydydas Bajarunas said in an interview with Radio Free Europe's Georgian Service. He remained in Moscow until April and left Russia after the events now known as the "Bucha Massacre". Vazha Tavberidze reached out to Ambassador Bajarunas from Prague to discuss the war in Ukraine and what the overarching western policy should be for Putin to taste defeat.

HOW HAVE THE LAST THREE MONTHS BEEN FOR YOU?

Being Lithuanian Ambassador to Russia is always challenging. When, at the end of 2019, I was proposed to continue my duties there, I accepted without any strong sympathy. Even before the war, this would be a challenging task for any diplomat, but for a Lithuanian diplomat it is probably the toughest assignment you can get. When I assumed my duties back in 2020, I never thought I would see Russia waging an open war against Ukraine. Sure, President Putin had already started his long journey leading to the war with constitutional changes, and curtailing whatever freedoms remained there in Russia, and it didn't promise any kind of brighter future for Russia. But back then, it was still hard to imagine that instead of their usual tactics of hybrid warfare, which Russia was and is very capable of and which was working so effectively on some of our Western friends (who were saying, that yes, it's not good, but we still need to engage Russia, talk to them and work towards a policy of appeasement), Russia would opt for an outright war. But then, two months prior to February 24, Russia started dishing out threats and ultimatums, and then the night of the 24th it

crossed all lines - and it dramatically changed what it meant to be a Western ambassador and a diplomat based in Russia. To wake up in a country that is waging war against its neighbor, that's a challenge not only on professional level, but for the life, security and well-being of you and your personnel. Of course, as a diplomat, you should never view anything as "mission impossible", but we soon realized that there was very little, if any, room left for diplomatic maneuvers.

Of course, some Western leaders are still calling and talking with Putin, and there is still some very limited political engagement, but it has become clear that it's a situation which will be decided on the battlefield, as hard as this might be to acknowledge as a diplomat. Russia put Lithuania on the list of the "unfriendly countries". And then, at the beginning of April, after the discovery of the "Bucha Massacre", Lithuania decided that the appropriate reaction to this, on a diplomatic level, would be to lower the Russian diplomatic representation in Vilnius to a below ambassadorial level, to a Charge d'Affaires level, and close Russia's Consulate General in Klaipeda. I was recalled to Vilnius and am currently awaiting our government's decision regarding my future.

I WANT TO ASK ABOUT THE EVE OF THE MAY 9 PARADE WHEN THE RUSSIAN AMBASSADOR IN POLAND WAS DOUSED IN RED PAINT. IS THAT A CAUSE FOR CONCERN FOR YOU THAT RUSSIANS MIGHT RETALIATE IN KIND AGAINST YOU / YOUR COLLEAGUES WHO ARE STILL IN RUSSIA?

I will have to be a little restrictive in my response to this, I'm afraid, because while I am personally now safely in Vilnius, there are still my fellow diplomats, both Lithuanian and from other EU and NATO countries, in Moscow doing an important job. Diplomats, in any country, have immunity, which stems from the Vienna Diplomatic Convention. On May 8th, a day before this military parade in Moscow, there were demonstrations in the front of the various NATO and EU [countries'] embassies in Moscow, including in Lithuania, and of course, I imagine the feelings of Lithuanian diplomats staying in Moscow, considering they are in a country that is "in the mood for war". There were constant threats issued by email and phone.



Lithuania Ambassador to Russia Eitydydas Bajarunas. By Mikhail Metzel/TASS

YOU MIGHT WANT TO REMAIN DIPLOMATIC, BUT YOUR COUNTRY CERTAINLY ISN'T, BECAUSE THEY RECENTLY BECAME THE FIRST PARLIAMENT TO DESIGNATE RUSSIA A TERRORIST COUNTRY AND ITS ACTIONS IN UKRAINE AS GENOCIDE. WHAT'S YOUR PERSPECTIVE ON THAT?

Let us start with the matter of genocide. It's a decision of the parliament. As a political entity, representing the people of Lithuania, it is free to express whatever it thinks. I definitely support the argumentation of this resolution. Every day, new evidence emerges of Russian war crimes and we should look to the future, the future when Ukraine will win and when we, the international community, will have to assess and deliver judgment on crimes committed by Russian forces during this war. It is also a signal to Russia that in the era of information, while you may misuse information against us in the West, information is also there to be used against you. Every single crime committed by Russia will be recorded; it won't disappear, it will be investigated.

THAT FUTURE YOU MENTIONED, WHERE IS RUSSIA'S PLACE IN IT?

It's a difficult issue to contemplate on at this point, because, before the war, there was this wishful thinking that one day democratic changes would come to Russia and the Russians will understand the benefits of basic freedoms such as free election or free media, or free, non-corruption-based business-making; that they will understand that all this is much more preferable to living under a totalitarian regime. Before the war, there was

this kind of optimistic thinking and I think we never fully abandoned it, we were always reminding Russia that there was an alternative path to take compared to what they'd chosen. Nevertheless, after the war, with Russia having crossed so many red lines, it's very difficult to imagine the West dealing with this government again in a "business as usual" mode.

As for Russian society, especially the part that strongly supports President Putin and his government - after years of masterful brainwashing by their leaders and state television channels, they now view themselves as goodies and all the rest as baddies: Ukraine is fascist, the EU / NATO are decaying and enemies of Russia. It's them versus us for them; the world split into two, with no in-between. This is further reinforced by the narrative of WWII victory introduced as solely an achievement of Russia, disregarding other actors completely. In Russia, May 9 is not about remembering the countless dead that perished during the war, but more dedicated to the glory of the Russian military mind and military prowess. But in a way it is also natural when you remember that President Putin came to power with the Second Chechen War and continues this streak of military invasions to this day, be it in Georgia, Crimea or Syria. His philosophy is based very much on this macho image of a president in charge of a militarized country.

WHAT IS THE END GOAL OF PUTIN'S ONGOING MILITARY EFFORTS IN UKRAINE?

On the morning of February 24, Putin was clear with his goals: Denazification, demilitarization, and so on. Now, after

two months of fighting, these goals have disappeared. He used his speech on May 9 more to find excuses why the goals hadn't been achieved. But it is clear that Russia will still continue waging war, and there is no signal that Russia is willing to deviate from that path. This is the sad conclusion from the May 9 speech, which also means that the West should continue supporting Ukraine to the very end.

ON THE WESTERN SUPPORT - HOW UNWAVERING DO YOU THINK IT WILL BE OVER A LONGER PERIOD?

As I mentioned, as sad as it is, it is inevitable that the end of this war will be decided on the battlefield in Ukraine, not by diplomatic efforts. That is why continuous military support from the West is tremendously important. And it's good that, one by one, countries are coming up with solid military shipments to Ukraine, which, by Lithuanian appetite, is a bit late, but better late than never.

Western cohesion and commitment will play a decisive role in the outcome of this war. So far, we are positive that the continuous sanctions policy is on, there are now discussions (and some disagreements) on the sixth package, but in the end, we will come to a good solution on this.

When it comes to Russian energy, for Lithuania it is easy, because we have an alternative gas and oil supply and we can easily switch to it. For some other countries, this will take much longer. But what is important is that while some countries have the technical reasoning to try and postpone, or re-schedule, agreeing to this, no country is against it politically. This is what Putin has achieved, even on the energy issue: the countries may say "Yes, after one month, after one year," but they are refusing Russian energy and it is a strong signal to Putin, and I am sure he is listening, that even his closest friends in NATO and EU have agreed that this is a decision they need to take.

And then there is [the need to] cripple public support for Putin in Russia. It hasn't happened yet, but with the sanctions, with the economy struggling, with more information coming out of Russia's military failures in Ukraine, with more body bags arriving in Russia, it will start to change. Not immediately, but it will, and this is why we in the West need to exercise strategic patience.

An Italian View from Odessa: TOJ Founder Ugo Poletti on the Russian Invasion and the Italians' Reluctance to Respond

Continued from page 1

We also know the Russian army retreated to the Kherson area and now the Ukrainian army is in a strong enough position not to allow them to advance. From the sea, we feared the threat of potential invasion. But if they were thinking of launching an amphibious assault to land troops on the beach, it is too late for that now, as the perimeter is well protected. I don't think they had such plans, though, because they thought they'd defeat the Ukrainians in a few days. Odessa was not supposed to be conquered but rather taken in a peaceful way. What's disturbing is that we still get attacked with ship missiles sometimes, and this is a real danger for the city. We have decent protection with our anti-aircraft system, but it's not enough to block them all. Most of the missiles hit infrastructure and military objects outside the city, but in the city, they hit residential buildings and there have been some victims.

I WOULD LIKE TO DISCUSS ITALY'S STANCE ON THIS WAR. WHAT CAN BE SAID IN THIS REGARD?

Italy used to have a very good relationship with Russia. Italy respects Russian culture a lot. I myself studied Russian because I used to read Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. I loved Russian culture and I still do. The economic relationship between Italy and Russia is very strong, too, because there are Italian investments, not only in the energy and financial markets, but also Russians used to be very good customers of our furniture, fashion design, all kinds of production. Changing this direction of foreign affairs was both tough and unexpected. It was difficult for my country to switch. Our prime minister, Mr. Draghi, someone with a very strong personality who deserves a lot of respect from the European leaders and United States, made this decision [to switch direction]. He was very brave to do so, and the majority of the government supported him.

It was clear that Russia was an aggressor: from the international law perspective, nobody could stand on the side of Mr. Putin. They needed an especially strong, sharp response, and they will pay a lot for this, because not only will a lot of businessmen lose the market, but also Italy and Germany are two European countries highly dependent on Russian



Smoke rises after an attack by the Russian army in Odessa, on April 3. By Bulent Kilic / AFP

gas, so Russia can blackmail us and play with it in a very wise way. At the same time, we know that Russians need to sell this gas, so it's a mutual dependence. Italy decided after only a few days which side was the right side, and now their policy is very clear.

I REMEMBER THE ITALIAN PM SAYING THAT TALKING TO PUTIN "IS A WASTE OF TIME." HOW MUCH IS THIS THE STANCE OF THE ITALIAN GOV'T AS OPPOSED TO THE STANCE OF ITALIAN SOCIETY? WHAT DO AVERAGE ITALIANS THINK?

Public opinion immediately sympathizes with the refugees. Italians proved to be very generous at hosting refugees, but when they have to speak about topics like defense and military affairs, there is a very strong embarrassment, because the main opinion-makers in Italy are pacifists. They don't want to admit that if you don't provide military support, you are supporting the military of the invader. It's kind of shocking for Italians and hard to accept that war could be a necessity and defenders have the right to defend themselves. It's something very unusual as a topic for Italian debates.

THAT THE DEFENDER HAS THE RIGHT TO DEFEND IS SHOCKING FOR ITALIANS?

This idea that a country sometimes has to take up arms to defend itself is something that is absent in Italian culture today. Historically, we defended ourselves during World War 2, when the Germans took control of northern Italy, so we were partisans. Can you imagine, even the

Association of Italian Partisans was against sending weapons [to Ukraine]? Are you partisans or not? Yes, you were partisans last century, but now you don't sympathize with the partisans of this century? I don't share this view. I said on television, "Look, I am here [in Ukraine], watching as the fathers of families, colleagues, people, friends of mine, go to war to defend their country. They deserve respect, it's a matter of dignity. We have to understand that we did the same when we unified Italy."

THAT'S A VERY INTERESTING POINT. IS THERE ALSO A FEELING THAT WHATEVER HAPPENS IN RUSSIA OR UKRAINE IS NONE OF THEIR BUSINESS?

Fortunately, no. This war is very close to Italy. When you see refugees coming to your country, you understand that you are touched by this war. Secondly, when you hear the government talk about the gas price increase for next winter, you understand that this war is affecting you and that taking a position cannot be avoided. Finally, the food emergency due to the grains blocked in Ukrainian ports affects Italy, because we need wheat for pasta. Italy cannot produce enough wheat for its pasta. At the same time, they have started debating that there is a starving population in North Africa, which will kick off heavier migration to Italy. So, now Italy understands this war is their concern too and they need to say something.

I'VE SEEN SEVERAL ITALIAN POLITICIANS PUSHING THE NARRATIVE THAT ITALY DOESN'T NEED TO TAKE A POSITION ON THE WAR, THAT IT'S NOT SOMETHING THEY NEED TO BE INVOLVED IN, THIS WEST-EAST DIVISION.

The debate is very tough at the moment, because some people are asking, "why should we support Ukraine?" Nobody says we should support Russia, thank God. A minority chooses the moral approach: "These are poor people, defending themselves, so let's help them." Then there are others saying we ought to support them because we are a NATO member, "NATO decided to support Ukraine and we are a loyal and fair member of this alliance." But even this group is not in the majority. The majority is asking whether we can support Ukrainians without weapons. This is some 50% of Italians. They were taught that wars in Europe were not possible anymore. Speaking about weapons with them is very difficult, as they come out with silly things, like, "let's send them weapons that are not so powerful." Excuse me. If you want this country to survive and people to be free, they need strong weapons to face a very well-equipped enemy. If you send just guns and not artillery, it's not serious support. So, sometimes the debates are very silly, and I am sorry for my country. Some other European

countries, like Poland or Finland, know what defending themselves means, because they have experience dealing with Russia. Italy is a spoiled country, because our citizens don't feel that they are in danger. The protection ensured by NATO and Americans created spoiled people, I am sad to say. They don't realize that without the Americans, all of them would need to be trained, like they do in Switzerland or Israel, where everyone must complete military service. The education in Italy hasn't provided this sense that a country needs protection and diplomacy doesn't always work. Unfortunately, half of Italians believe that diplomacy and dialogue can always prevail, but now there is proof that this is not true.

Then there are some people, some opinion-makers, that I don't respect at all, Russian propaganda supporters, who say that if we want the war to end quickly, the Ukrainians should surrender immediately. In the first week of the war, they said it was certain that Russia would win. Some cynically suggested not giving any weapons to Ukrainians if their defeat was inevitable, and the sooner the better. Now, everyone understands that Russia is likely to be defeated. They already lost in tactical terms, because being stopped is already a defeat for them.

GERMANY AND ITALY TOLD THEIR COMPANIES THEY COULD OPEN RUBLE ACCOUNTS TO KEEP BUYING RUSSIAN GAS WITHOUT BREACHING SANCTIONS AGAINST MOSCOW, FOLLOWING DISCUSSIONS WITH THE EU. WHAT MESSAGE DOES THAT SEND ABOUT THE CELEBRATED EU UNITY?

The EU has not yet received enough power and support from member countries in terms of foreign policy. Notwithstanding this, surprisingly, almost all Europe, except Hungary and Austria, which are definitely pro-Russian countries, have supported Ukraine. Germany's hesitance comes from its difficult position, because while it is a big sponsor of European values, they also have their economic plans, and they depend on the gas supply from Russia. I would like to see Europe like a federation, like the United States, with a one-line foreign policy. That would be a dream. But in reality, when they were deciding on the powers of the EU, they agreed on only economic powers to create an efficient

internal market. As far as defense is concerned, there is no European army, and foreign affairs remain an area of national sovereignty. So, we cannot expect unity in Europe in such a moment of crisis until all countries give more power to Brussels to make decisions. But even in this case, Europe is divided into countries such as Poland, Scandinavian and Baltic countries, which are fiercely against Russia. Then there are two or three pro-Russian countries, and lazy countries, like Italy, who don't feel the danger. So, it's difficult to reach a consensus. But let's celebrate the EU, because thanks to it, we haven't faced wars on the continent since the Second World War.

ON APRIL 18, PM DRAGHI VERY PROUDLY CLAIMED THAT "ITALY CAN GET BY WITHOUT RUSSIAN GAS." WHAT HAS CHANGED?

I think it's a very brave statement. In fact, it is possible, because Italy was self-sufficient in terms of energy a few years ago. The economists say we can get complete independence in two years, not before. I know they immediately started reactivating relations with other sources, and we will probably need to make investments. For example, it's possible to double the supply from Algeria, but more investments are needed to drill there. It was a strategic mistake not to foresee and prepare for the situation in advance. The last 20 years, our leaders didn't have a long term vision and that was a strategic mistake.

THERE WAS A MEMORABLE QUOTE FROM MR. DRAGHI ABOUT MAKING A CHOICE BETWEEN BEING A LITTLE COLD IN THE WINTER AND HELPING DEMOCRACY AND FREEDOM. WHICH ONE IS THE ITALIAN PEOPLE MORE LIKELY TO OPT FOR?

From one side, I see that my country is very generous to host refugees, but I believe that governments, of Italy and other countries, in the end have to understand their people want warm houses, that this is a population that calculates how much of their salaries they spend on bills. You need to put the values on the table but not forget about the principles. At the same time, unfortunately, there are also families which don't earn enough money and will have to suffer higher bills.

Governments should learn the lesson. The moment you give one country the possibility to be an exclusive supplier, you are creating a big problem for yourself in future. Some European countries wisely did not accept such a proposal and are now in a better position. It was a mistake [for Italy] not to plan for the long run.

MANY HAVE ALREADY DISMISSED ITALY'S FOUR-POINT PEACE PLAN AS A MINSK AGREEMENT 3.0 OR BUDAPEST MEMORANDUM 2.0. WHAT'S YOUR TAKE?

The former agreements have become mere pieces of paper, because the situation has changed dramatically. Before, eight years ago, Ukraine was a very fragile country. But this war has changed everything, it has unified Ukraine. So everything has to be re-negotiated. Where, before, Kyiv in a sense was obliged to follow the advice of the West, now Ukrainians are buoyed and so convinced of their eventual victory that it will be very tough for them to accept any sort of [territorial] concessions to the enemy. They have paid a blood price for it and they are not going to be keen to give up any of the values they stand for, including their territories. Everything needs to be re-started from zero.



Ugo Poletti, Editor-in-Chief, The Odessa Journal

Italians proved to be very generous at hosting refugees, but when they have to speak about topics like defense and military affairs, they get embarrassed, because the main opinion-makers in Italy are pacifists

Tobacco Harm Reduction: Challenges and Opportunities in the 21st Century

BY MARIAM MTIVLISHVILI

An international conference organized by Knowledge Action.Change (K.A.C) and the Health Research Union (HRU) was held on May 23 in Radisson Blu Iveria. The main theme of the conference was "Tobacco Harm Reduction: Challenges and Opportunities in the 21st Century."

For decades, the damage caused by tobacco use has united public health and tobacco control experts around one common goal: to end the tobacco pandemic.

In order to accelerate the process of reducing tobacco harm, the number of health care institutions and health experts around the world is increasing daily, changing their agendas and discussing science-based solutions in the focus of discussion, because they believe that only science has the ability to bring about positive change and accelerate progress.

That is why this international conference had one main goal: to promote a dialogue based on scientific facts and a



detailed analysis of international approaches, and to inform the audience about the recent international achievements of the tobacco harm reduction strategy and its capabilities to integrate them into our lifestyles and effective public health system.

The conference consisted of two panels, which discussed the following topics:

- The concept of harm reduction and human rights;
- Harm reduction strategy practice in Georgia;
- Tobacco harm reduction - Interna-

tional experience and opportunity for public health;

- Scientific foundations of tobacco harm reduction;
- Proportional risk reduction based on harm reduction and scientific evidence;
- A brief overview of tobacco control

legislation in Georgia;

- Harm reduction strategy and Georgia tobacco control strategy;

- How can we accelerate the progress of tobacco harm reduction in Georgia? - A prohibitive legislative framework or a readiness for a progressive agenda?

"I think it is very important to have such discussions and exchange views on such an important issue as reducing the harm of tobacco," said Health and Social Policy Expert, George (Gigi) Tsereteli. "In my report, I discussed this topic on the example of Georgia and tried to talk about all of it thoroughly. In our daily lives, our goal is to minimize any kind of harm. I recall that an active discussion started in 2000-2004, when we got the first legislative note, which started to prepare the ground for substitution therapy in the country. At first there were a number of questions about this, however, after analyzing the issue, we realized how necessary it was. It is noteworthy that the non-governmental sector was also involved in this process, as it is in other countries. A clear example of this is Portugal, which clearly shows how to properly plan harm reduction programs."

GFA and EOS Data Analytics Partner to Benefit Georgian Farmers



Brijesh Thoppil (left) of EOS Data Analytics and Ani Zurabashvili (right) of Georgian Farmers' Association. Images Courtesy of EOS Data Analytics

INTERVIEW BY MICHAEL GODWIN

Georgia's agricultural scene has long been a backbone of its economic strength. From local agro-bazaars to a booming agri-tourism and winemaking industry, Georgia has maintained a well-earned "green thumb." As new technologies become available to the hard-working farming communities of the country, a new partnership sets out to advance the efficiency of these small businesses.

EOS Data Analytics has announced a new partnership with the Georgian Farmers' Association (GFA). The companies have pledged to pursue the goal of introducing Georgian farmers to satellite-driven precision agriculture tools to enhance agricultural operations and product quality. EOS Data Analytics is a global provider of AI-powered satellite imagery analytics and has been working with satellite imagery in a broad range of applications since 2015.

Since 2012, GFA has worked with Georgian farmers and agribusinesses in a multitude of roles, including net-

working, capacity building, and navigating government policy. Over 5,000 farmers have grown from their services to elevate their quality of life, become flourishing businesses, and overall enhance the nation's agricultural sector.

GEORGIA TODAY sat down with Brijesh Thoppil, Director of Strategic Partnerships at EOS Data Analytics, and Ani Zurabashvili, Head of the Service Department at GFA to discuss the new partnership and what's in store for the farmers in Georgia's lush fields.

EOS DATA ANALYTICS HAS A WIDE VARIETY OF APPLICATIONS, BUT WHAT ABOUT THE CROP ROTATION APPLICATION MAKES IT LUCRATIVE FOR GEORGIAN FARMERS?

Brijesh: That's a great question. Our main focus is in the agricultural sector, as it is the oldest industry in the world which requires a digital transformation. These are changing the patterns in the agricultural sector and farmers are not able to get proper insights. They see the requirement for such a platform using available technologies.

I would say we're not short of competition in the sector, but when we look at the different solutions, I would say ours is quite comprehensive. We integrate satellite data, weather, and agronomic insights and the potential outcomes, and all this technology is controlled with the help of AI and machine learning algorithms.

The key benefits for the farmers and stakeholders come in the form of increased productivity and reduced loss of product. That is where valuable partners like GFA come into action. They are able to transfer knowledge about the platform to the farmers.

Ani: That's why we were interested in this product. It solves real time problems that are faced by farmers who may not know the status of their crops or have access to forecasts. The farmers are able to apply these solutions to their model, which makes it overall more profitable. We have the resources to train these farmers and transmit this knowledge.

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THIS TECHNOLOGY WILL SURELY PROVE A SIGNIFICANT LEARNING CURVE FOR

FARMING COMMUNITIES. HOW DO YOU INTEND TO TACKLE THIS?

Ani: We provide not only access to the platform but also thorough training. In addition, we also deliver monthly and yearly reports to the farmers so they can use this in their planning. Overall, our focus is to transmit full knowledge so they can use the data to help with farm management. We're focusing on this very seriously.

Brijesh: In our partnership with GFA, we aim to bring them a digital agricultural platform along with the training support. We provide regular training sessions to our partner's team members to make them not only experts of the platform, but also to understand the industry and learning materials.

The most important next step is the collection of data from the farmers themselves. This data is input into the platform, then everything else is done by the platform itself. With this, it will deliver statuses and farm conditions.

WHAT IS THE TIMELINE FOR INTRODUCTION TO THE GEORGIAN FARMING COMMUNITY?

Ani: Since we have already launched the product, we are now focusing on regional level meetings. We've opened new regional offices that will mobilize the farmers and present the platform to them. From big farmers to smaller farmers, we aim to give them that knowledge and transmit the information from Brijesh and EOS Data Analytics.

Also, we are looking seriously at long-term collaboration. This includes government and financial elements, as well as other related agribusinesses. First, we'll get a feel for the market and then make plans from there.

Brijesh: We're also capable of delivering complex and custom projects which may arise when GFA engages with government institutions in Georgia. If any project requires complex solutions for these types of clients, we are able to deliver this.

WHAT ARE THE SIGNIFICANT ROADBLOCKS AND OBSTACLES YOU BOTH ANTICIPATE ENCOUNTERING IN THIS PROJECT?

Brijesh: For us as a product company, the single biggest challenge is the lack of expertise in the agriculture industry,

or the delay in technology adoption. This mostly happens in developing economies where there is a lack of skilled people to understand, interpret, and manage the data to help the farmers. This is why our partnership with GFA is so important, as they have experience in agriculture.

We have almost completed the first phase of training for the team members of GFA, and there will be several more training sessions planned across quarters. They are able to understand it quickly because of their expertise in the agriculture sector and their close relationship with the farmers. While the lack of technology know-how may be a roadblock, we will be able to overcome it in due time.

Ani: Introducing a new product is a challenge itself, especially a digital product. In the Georgian agricultural sector there is a tradition-driven attitude and this is a challenge. However, we are happy to be the pathfinder in bringing this tool to Georgian farmers. As Brijesh mentioned, we do have the resources to assist, instruct, and help them understand this comprehensive data.

WHAT DOES THE EOSDA AND GFA PARTNERSHIP HOLD IN THE FUTURE FOR THE AGRICULTURAL SCENE IN GEORGIA?

Ani: Since the new development in satellite imagery is making farmers shift their practices to smart agriculture, we believe this partnership will be long-term and unlock more opportunities. There are many more potential goals and projects.

Brijesh: We are in this partnership with GFA and Ani's team for the long term. Our goal is to bring sustainable practices to Georgia's agriculture industry. We also want to provide opportunities for farmers to improve their income and socio-economic conditions.

Personally, I also believe that the partnership will bring forward many other stakeholders that will share their information and experience of digital agriculture technology. This will enable more collaboration with a wider agricultural supply chain. There are other industry players that could play a part in Georgia's agricultural sector. In other regions, we see partnerships even with the telecom sector that promote sustainable agricultural practices.

Caritas Czech Republic Handed Over Family-Type Homes to the State Care Agency



BY NINA KOPALEISHVILI

Caritas Czech Republic has been addressing the disability issue since its mission's establishment in Georgia. In 2020, our organization launched four-year project that aims to contribute to the deinstitutionalization of large boarding institutions by supporting the Government of Georgia with various legislative initiatives and helping persons with disabilities (PwDs) in starting an independent life. One of the main successes of the project so far was the handover of two family-type homes to the State Care Agency that are intended for setting up small residential services for the beneficiaries currently living in large boarding homes. In the following year and half, additional four houses will be completed and given to State Care Agency.

Within the framework of the Czech Development Agency-funded project „Way to Home: Development of Adult Alternative Social Services in Georgia“, Caritas Czech Republic handed over two

family-type homes to the Agency for State Care and Assistance for the Victims of Human Trafficking. The procurement, rehabilitation and handover of these houses is a part of Caritas Czech Republic's contribution to the deinstitutionalization process in Georgia meaning the provision of the relevant legislative initiatives as well as community-based homes and services for persons with disabilities (PwDs) living under the state care.

Petr Mikyska, Ambassador of the Czech Republic to Georgia, who participated in the houses handover ceremony, noted that supporting vulnerable and marginalized groups is one of the main priorities of the Czech Development Cooperation to support in Georgia:

“It is the directive of the OECD efforts, of Council of Europe recommendations, it is the part of the commitments of the governments, and I am happy that we are fulfilling these commitments as well. Now we are witnessing the handover of two houses to the State Care Agency. I am very impressed with how fast the construction process went and with the quality of the results. Thus, congratulations to Caritas Czech Republic's team

for this good work and I am sure next time I will be happy to see the beneficiaries living here integrated into the society.”

Although the deinstitutionalization process in Georgia began in 2010-2011, it is still an ongoing process due to its complexity. In 2020, Caritas Czech Republic's experts in the field, in close cooperation with Czech colleagues and project partners, identified the main areas of work, assessed the needs and interests of the beneficiaries. Afterward, our team of experts worked on the deinstitutionalization strategy and an action plan to support the Government of Georgia aiming to help the beneficiaries to start independent living in new services.

Meri Maglaperidze, Director of State Care Agency notes that the deinstitutionalization process is as a part of the State Care Agency's social politics in which Caritas Czech Republic contributed a lot:

“Houses handover is a very important stage of the project as well as the prior preparation works, including working on the deinstitutionalization strategy and an action plan as well as assessment of the beneficiaries and their prepara-



tion for an individual living. With the financial support of the Czech Development Agency, now the beneficiaries can live in family-type homes and make independent decisions”.

Within the framework of the project, eventually, the lives of 112 adult persons with disabilities will be changed – stepwise, according to their individual needs and will.

Tamila Barkalaia, Deputy Minister of Health of Georgia expressed her gratitude to the Official Development Assistance of Czech Republic:

“Caritas Czech Republic and the Government of Georgia have been partnering for years and carried out important projects in support of Georgia's social protection and healthcare. This project is very important as there are two large

of palliative care assistance. Except for direct beneficiaries, the project targeted policymakers, NGOs and experts working in this sector. Within the framework of the initiative, project experts worked on the legal framework for LTC (concept papers, operational standards, review of relevant legislation, licensing conditions) and capacity-building of professional staff to establish new children's LTC center at Zhvania Children's hospital of Tbilisi State Medical University (TSMU). The second component of the project included the renovation and equipping of a multi-sensory room Snoezelen at the Children's hospice where at least 25 beneficiaries receive therapies annually.

In 2019-2021, another very important project was carried out thanks to the financial support from the Czech Devel-



opment Agency (CzechAid), aiming at expanding and improving the services for people with ASD, as well as professional strengthening of specialists working in the field. Our organization carried out activities with a total budget of up to 255 000 Euros, in close cooperation with Ilia State University's Child Development Institute and the Georgian Academy of Childhood Disability. The project was elaborated together with the Ministry of Health of Georgia, considering the priorities of the Government of Georgia in the mentioned sector.

This material was prepared in the scope of the project financed within the Official Development Assistance of the Czech Republic and implemented through the partnership between Czech Development Agency and Caritas Czech Republic.

DISABILITY ISSUE IS ONE OF THE FLAGSHIPS OF CARITAS CZECH REPUBLIC'S WORK

Since 2015, Caritas Czech Republic has been supporting the efforts of Government of Georgia to reform the social protection and healthcare systems. Thus, the implementation of the Czech Development Agency-funded project is a part of Caritas Czech Republic's broader contribution to the improvement of the country's social care system.

In 2017-2021, with the financial support of the Czech Development Agency (CzechAid), Caritas Czech Republic worked on the development of the long-term care (LTC) services for children in need



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The ISET Policy Institute (ISET-PI, www.iset-pi.ge) is an independent think-tank associated with the International School of Economics at TSU (ISET). Our blog carries economic analysis of current events and policies in Georgia and the South Caucasus region ranging from agriculture, to economic growth, energy, labor markets and the nexus of economics, culture and religion. Thought-provoking and fun to read, our blog posts are written by international faculty teaching at ISET and recent graduates representing the new generation of Georgian, Azerbaijani and Armenian economists.

The Impact of COVID-19 on Tobacco Consumption in Georgia



Image source: krisanapong detraphiphat / Getty Images

BLOG BY GIORGI MZHAVANADZE

As mentioned in our previous blog, excessive tobacco consumption is an important public health policy issue. According to estimates by the World Health Organization (WHO), 32% of the adult population in Georgia smoked tobacco in 2019 (WHO, 2021). The prevalence of smoking in men was 56.9% - the fourth in the world and first in Europe. The rate of tobacco smoking was recorded to be eight times lower in women (7.1%), which likely does not reflect the real picture; for example, one study based on nicotine tests revealed that smoking prevalence among women was 12.2%. In essence, increased smoking rates cause higher mortality and morbidity costs in Georgia. According to UNDP, 11,400 people die annually from tobacco-related diseases in the country, while the total associated economic costs account for 2.4% of GDP.

In March 2020, COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic, followed by strict containment measures in most countries, including Georgia. The lockdowns imposed and the introduction of social distancing radically changed people's daily lives and their consumer behavior. The purpose of this blog is thus to analyze the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on smoking in Georgia.

Table 1. Excise tax on tobacco products

Product	Quantity	Jan-2016		Jan-2017		Jan-2019		Nov-2019	
		Sp	Ad	Sp	Ad	Sp	Ad	Sp	Ad
Cigarette (filtered)	20 cigarettes	1.1	10	1.7	10	1.7	30		
Cigarette (non-filtered)	20 cigarettes	0.3	10	0.6	10	1.7	10	1.7	30
Fine tobacco	1 kg		25		35				60

Source: Tax Code of Georgia

Table 2. Smoking prevalence in Georgia (%)

Source	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
STEPS 2016 (WHO)	31.0	---	---	---	---	---
TNS 2019 (NCDC 2019)	---	---	---	30.7	---	---
Public Support Study on Banning Smoking in Taxis (NCDC 2020)	---	---	---	---	28.2	---
Perceptions of Alternative Tobacco Products in Georgia (Mzhavanadze 2021b)	---	---	---	---	---	27.2
GeoStat, Integrated Household Survey (Mzhavanadze 2021b)	33.4	28.4	27.0	26.2	---	---

Source: GeoStat, Mzhavanadze, 2021a, Mzhavanadze 2021b, NCDC 2019, NCDC 2020, WHO

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON SMOKING BEHAVIOR: INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE

According to the literature, the impact of COVID-19 on tobacco consumption varies across countries. For example, according to a study conducted in the Netherlands, 67.7% of smokers reported that the number of cigarettes they consume has not changed since the beginning of the pandemic, while 18.5% smoke less, and 13.8% smoke more. Another survey conducted among American adolescents showed that in 51.7% of cases, smokers' behavior remained unchanged, 20.7% reduced and 27.6% increased smoking. Similar, equally unclear, impacts were observed in Belgium and Australia.

However, in some countries, the beginning of the pandemic was marked with a notable increase in intensity among current smokers. For example, one study

in Poland found that 45.2% of users were smoking more during periods of lockdown. In New Zealand, an online panel survey from a demographically representative sample found that 45% of smokers increased and only 16% decreased the habit during the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown, with no changes observed in the remaining 39%. Correspondingly, according to a survey conducted in Italy, 30% of smokers had on average 5.6 more cigarettes per day, with only 18% reporting less smoking on average, by 4.1 cigarettes per day.

The existing research also evaluates the impact of COVID-19 on smoking cessation. Of Dutch smokers, 33.8% stated they are more motivated to quit smoking because of COVID-19. Notably, these smokers consider COVID-19 to be a serious health risk, more specifically, they believe smokers have a higher risk of infection and that the disease causes more severe complications among smokers. However, in America, the fear of COVID-19-induced health complications, in turn, reduced the likelihood of quitting smoking, and was in actuality positively associated with an increase in smoking according to recent empirical evidence. The international experience

therefore highlights that the fear of COVID-19 may push some smokers to reduce smoking or motivate them to give up, conversely however, deteriorating mental health (stress, depression) may actually encourage smoking in others.

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON TOBACCO USE IN GEORGIA

To reduce the health and economic damage associated with smoking, Georgia implemented radical changes in tobacco control policy in recent years. In 2018, the country introduced a ban on: a) smoking in public places; b) the advertisement of tobacco products, tobacco accessories, and devices intended for tobacco use; and c) sponsorship of tobacco companies. In addition, the size of health warnings on packaging increased from 30% to 65%, and large, graphic pictorial health warnings on packaging became mandatory.

Concurrently, the excise tax on tobacco products has been gradually increasing since 2017. According to the Tax Code

chased on the legal market, reveal a different picture. Although consumption of filtered and non-filtered cigarettes decreased from 465 million packs in 2016 to 216 million packs by 2019, cigarette consumption rose once again during the pandemic and reached 291 million packs in 2021.

A fall in the prevalence of smoking (Table 2) and growth in cigarette consumption (Figure 1) during the pandemic indicates that while some smokers do give up, others started to smoke even more. Figure 2 shows the average number of pre-rolled cigarettes consumed daily by smokers. According to our estimates, among those who continued to smoke during the pandemic, the number of cigarettes consumed per day increased by 52.2 percent in 2021 compared to 2019. Nevertheless, this still remains lower than 2016-2018.

CONCLUSION

Our descriptive analysis identifies that the number of smokers in Georgia

FIGURE 1. QUANTITY OF ISSUED EXCISE STAMPS FOR CIGARETTE PACKS (MILLION)



of Georgia, excise tax consists of two components: (1) specific (SP), expressed as a fixed amount per cigarette pack; and ad valorem (AD), expressed as a percentage of the product's retail price. Table 1 below presents the timeline, from 2016 to date, of the changes in excise tax on certain tobacco products (in GEL for SP and percentage for AD).

Assessing the effects of the implemented legislative and tax changes on tobacco consumption is difficult as there is a lack of detailed data on smoking behavior in Georgia. Table 2 summarizes the statistics from various sources on the number of smokers in the country, calculated as the share of smokers in the total population. The table identifies that the prevalence of smoking has a declining trend, which might be the result of the policies implemented. This trend was also maintained during the pandemic: in 2020, smoking prevalence in Georgia declined by 2.5 percentage points, while in 2021 it declined by a further 1 percentage point.

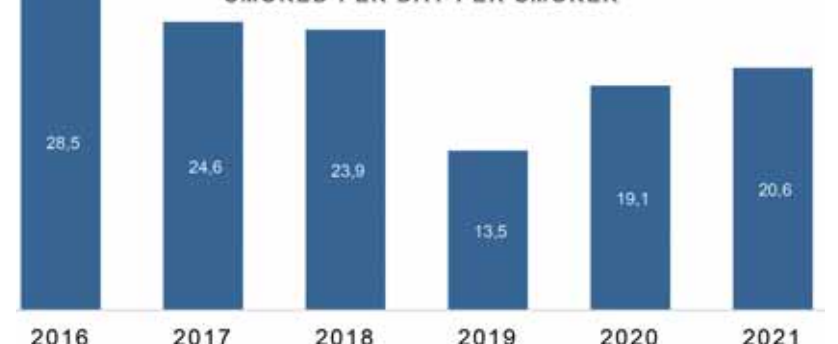
However, statistics from the Ministry of Finance regarding excise stamps, which can be used as an indicator for the number of packs of cigarettes pur-

decreased during the COVID-19 pandemic. The literature suggests this may be due to smokers aiming to reduce the additional risk of developing a serious illness from COVID-19. This is paired with the significant legislative and tax changes implemented in Georgia before the pandemic, which seek to reduce the prevalence of smoking. Considering these factors, it is difficult to determine the exact cause of the reduction in the number of smokers between 2020 and 2021.

Conversely though, the number of cigarettes consumed per day during the pandemic has increased, probably due to a deterioration in mental health - the increased likelihood of stress and depression. Consequently, during the pandemic and in the post-pandemic period, it is important to take further proactive measures to ensure state support for both mental health and the cessation of smoking.

*** This research [PHDF-21-740] has been supported by Shota Rustaveli National Science Foundation of Georgia (SRNSFG).

FIGURE 2. THE AVERAGE NUMBER OF CIGARETTES SMOKED PER DAY PER SMOKER



Wall of Infinite Faces: Svaneti

BLOG BY TONY HANMER

Well, not infinite, this being a natural phenomenon and not a purely mathematical one; but too many to count with any ease, if at all.

My wife and I were recently in Mestia on various odd jobs, enjoying the new freedom afforded by our next vehicle, four months after losing the last one in the garage fire of January. This car comes all by donations from very kind friends across the world, and we are extremely grateful.

Once I had dropped Lali off to start what she needed to do, I was free for some time to scout out new photos in and around the town. I took off towards Ushguli on the main road, from which soon after exiting Mestia are offered views of Ushba...if the Mountain is playing.

What I got was a single few seconds' glance at Ushba's south peak, nothing more. But the opening in the swirling clouds spiraled straight to that point, and gave me a view I had never seen before, so I took the shot, abstract and minimal as it was.

Despite it being mid-May, there had been new snow on the heights of much of Upper Svaneti. The "wall" beside Ushba was no exception, most prettily picked out in just a thin veil of white, with all its complete verticals free of snow. So the effect was strikingly high-contrast. With spring coming through



below and winter dominating above, I took several photos, intending to reduce it all to black and white as is my current habit with most of my work, concentrating on the form and lighting instead of hues. Later, in other locations, I got some new angles on watchtower groupings from locations I'd not visited before, and called it a day photo-wise.

It has been happening rather often of late that only upon editing my work do I find something new and startling which had not been obvious when I took the photo. That day was in this vein. That snow-sprinkled mountain wall, up close in detail, now revealed something new.

It may be my own tendency to start seeing faces everywhere in these moun-

tains, after the first such sighting last year. This has led to a "feedback loop" in which photos and writing inspire each other, and prompt me to write stories about what these faces and figures are for, in Svaneti, set in the distant past. I seem to be writing new things, not retelling existing legends, although the things I am seeing are visible to everyone,

sometimes named by them and given some minimal backstory.

My thesis is becoming this: that Svaneti has an uncountable horde of images of beings which might live as short a life as the change in a cloud pattern, or as long as geology itself, or anywhere in between these extremes. Some appear benevolent, others malevolent, some perhaps quite inscrutable. The longer-lived ones, especially, impress themselves on eyes and minds which are both fortunate and receptive enough to notice them. This might sometimes be a conscious noticing, but it might also sometimes be an unconscious one. From this very impressing emerged the original "pagan" or animistic religion of the Svans, its origins lost in ancient history but its existence not giving way to Orthodox Christianity in anything more than a formal sense, the two coexisting side by side somewhat in mutual animosity.

Below is a link to a full-size copy of my recent photo of the wall I have described above. I leave it to you, reader, to see what I see, or not. Zoom in and explore, and you might just find that, while looking, you are also being observed BACK. <https://tinyurl.com/FacesSvaneti>

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 nearly 2000 members, at www.facebook.com/groups/SvanetiRenaissance/. He and his wife also run their own guest house in Etsveri: www.facebook.com/hanmer.house.svaneti



Rehabilitation of Merab Kostava Memorial House-Museum to Start

Tbilisi Mayor Kakha Kaladze said that City Hall is starting rehabilitation works at the Merab Kostava Memorial House-Museum.

The Merab Kostava Memorial House-Museum was established in 1991 on the initiative of the first President of Georgia, Zviad Gamsakhurdia. The museum

is located at NI Zandukeli Street, where the Georgian national hero was born and worked until the end of his life.

"Within the project, as a result of the works, the authenticity of the house-museum will be maintained, the infrastructure will be renewed. The works will continue for 18 months," Kaladze said.

Supporting Sustainable Development in the Ajara Autonomous Republic

The Ajara Autonomous Republic (Ajara AR) is one of Georgia's most vibrant and fast-growing regions where speedy economic growth benefits from the environmental and social agenda. The European Union and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) have been supporting the Ajara AR for over a decade, assisting to promote strong, open and transparent regional governance and achieve sustainable rural development. The EU and UNDP support has also focused on piloting innovative approaches to development and creating enabling space for people and nature.

UNDP Resident Representative in Georgia Nick Beresford visited the Ajara Autonomous Republic on 18-20 May to launch new initiatives under the EU and UNDP-supported projects.

The UNDP Head met with the Chairperson of the Ajara AR Government Tornike Rizhvadze, Chairperson of the Ajara AR Supreme Council David Gabaidze, Batumi City Mayor Archil Chiqovani and representatives of municipal authorities, the private sector and local communities.

Beresford attended a public launch of the Ajara AR Supreme Council's Strategy for Institutional Development and Communication, prepared with the EU and UNDP support.

He also signed a trilateral statement of intent with the Batumi City Hall and the Batumi Technopark of Georgia's Innovation and Technology Agency (GITA) aimed at promoting new businesses and developing a startup ecosystem in Batumi. This initiative is part of the EU and UNDP support for Georgian municipalities in designing municipal transformation portfolios.

At the meeting with the Batumi Mayor, Beresford discussed emerging opportunities to promote sustainable waste management practices at the municipal level, explored by the UNDP's Accelerator Lab in Georgia.

The visit continued in the Machakhela National Park and the highland villages where Beresford checked on the progress of rural development and ecosystem conservation projects rolled out with assistance from the EU, UNDP and the Ajara AR Government.

The EU and UNDP support for the Ajara Autonomous Republic draws on the resources made available by several nationwide EU-funded initiatives, including the 'European Neighbourhood Programme for Agriculture and Rural Development' (ENPARD), the 'Mayors for Economic Growth' (M4EG), and the 'Assistance to Parliamentary Democracy in Georgia'.



Batumi's beachfront from the air. Image: IgorZh/Shutterstock

Khinkali: A Primer for the Uninitiated and the Curious



Khinkali being handmade in Georgia with its famous pleated knot on top to close the creation. By Kelsey Petrie

BY MICHAEL GODWIN

Few visitors to Georgia go their entire stay without encountering this jewel that adorns virtually every restaurant menu. For locals, it's a part of life and an important component of spending time with family and friends at a local restaurant. Many have their specific preferences, only going to consume this dish at certain restaurants. Like many region-specific cuisines, people become vehemently loyal to a specific style. This little ingredient-filled dough dumpling-like treat is in virtually any shop, market, restaurant, and local stomach you can find. The fillings are various.

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The task for a newcomer to enjoy this meat-and-broth bubble without covering either yourself or the table is daunting at first

These include the common minced meat mix, potato, mushrooms, and herb and cheese blend, and even the more unusual seafood variation. Regardless of which you grow most fond of, the history is even longer than the list of ingredient combinations.

Khinkali are supposed to have made their way from Mongolia sometime around the 13th century. This is due in part to the location of Georgia at the heart of the Silk Road trading route, but also since the Mongols had a knack for finding unique places to conquer. According to legends surrounding the food, the Mongols would wrap the beef in dough to make it easier to carry in their kit, since carrying beef in your pockets is generally thought to be a bad idea when on horseback for long periods of time.

Constructing these delectable creations is a rather simple process, but requires a certain amount of practice and needs to be done perfectly. From a dough mixture that varies by region and restaurant, a small circle is cut and rolled to a reasonable thickness and diameter. From a bowl with the desired mixture inside, a spoonful is scooped and set in the center. The dumpling is then wrapped in the ubiquitous pleated style.

Consumption being a simple process of depositing the assembled khinkali into hot water, they made a hearty meal when on the campaign trail. In Georgia, their origin is contested, and said to come from the mountainous regions of the north. Originally filled with a pork filling, their warm broth-filled centers and high fat and protein content is praised in the harsh winters and difficult terrain. Khinkali that are not consumed immediately

are often fried in oil as a follow-up meal.

One of the more entertaining things, surely, as a local, is the interesting attempts newcomers make at eating these. The task for a newcomer, to enjoy this meat-and-broth bubble without covering either yourself or the table, is daunting at first. It's generally correctly done by grabbing them by the "head" or knot of dough, holding that downward, and biting into the pocket to get at the juices. With the most common Khinkali being the beef mince mix, the cooking naturally creates a pocket of cooked beef and juices.

Don't be alarmed when seeing some-

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The Mongols would wrap the beef in dough to make it easier to carry in their kit

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It is unlikely you will make very many friends by claiming that khinkali is not truly rooted in Georgian history and culture

one audibly sucking these juices out at the first bite: those juices are not only immensely flavorful, but traditionally highly valued, so much so that it is not uncommon to see grown adults drinking these juices out of the plate they just finished using. Upon finishing one, another is quickly seized and prepared, many giving them a light dusting of ground pepper and sometimes salt.

The knot, however, is not eaten. It is said to be kept on the plate as a sign to all of how many you are capable of eating, a testament to your manhood or womanhood, though some Georgians have laughed this off as a tourist trick to get them to eat and buy more. If you're enjoying it, then that's all that matters, right?

The concept of filling a dough pocket with meats or cheeses is not particularly unique to the South Caucasus. From Chinese baozi to the Russian pelmeni and Eastern European pierogi, this idea is something that is commonplace the world over. However, it is unlikely you will make very many friends by claiming that khinkali is not truly rooted in Georgian history and culture. Regardless of the exact history, today it is without a doubt that the little pouch of special ingredients will remain a hallmark of any visit to the Jewel of the South Caucasus.



Khinkali are often topped with freshly ground pepper, though sometimes salt, paprika, or herbs are used as well. By Aleksey Suvorov/Alamy



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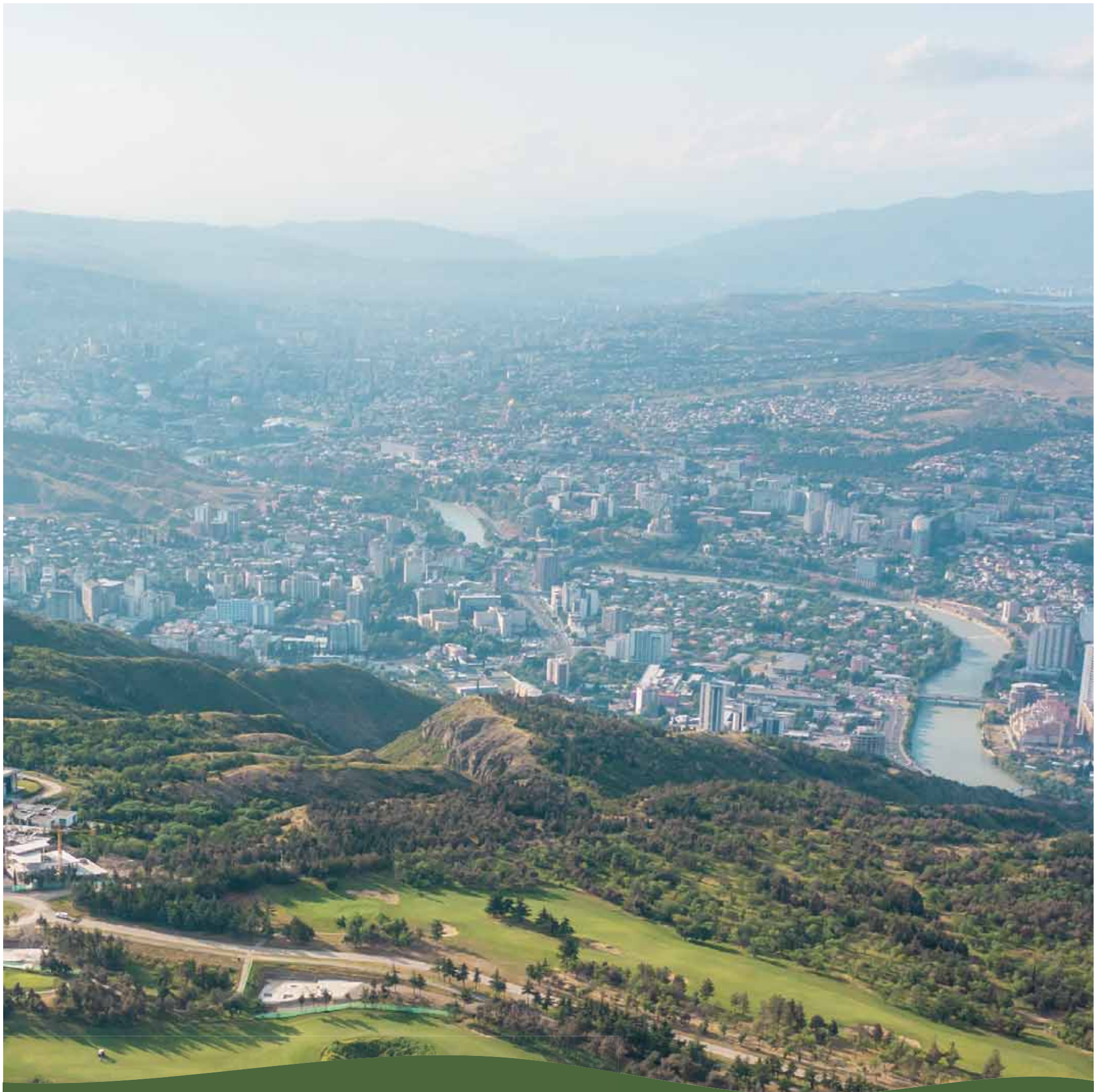
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