



FOCUS

ON BRITISH SUPPORT

UK Ambassador Mark Clayton on Georgia's EU prospects and the political and media polarization

PAGE 6

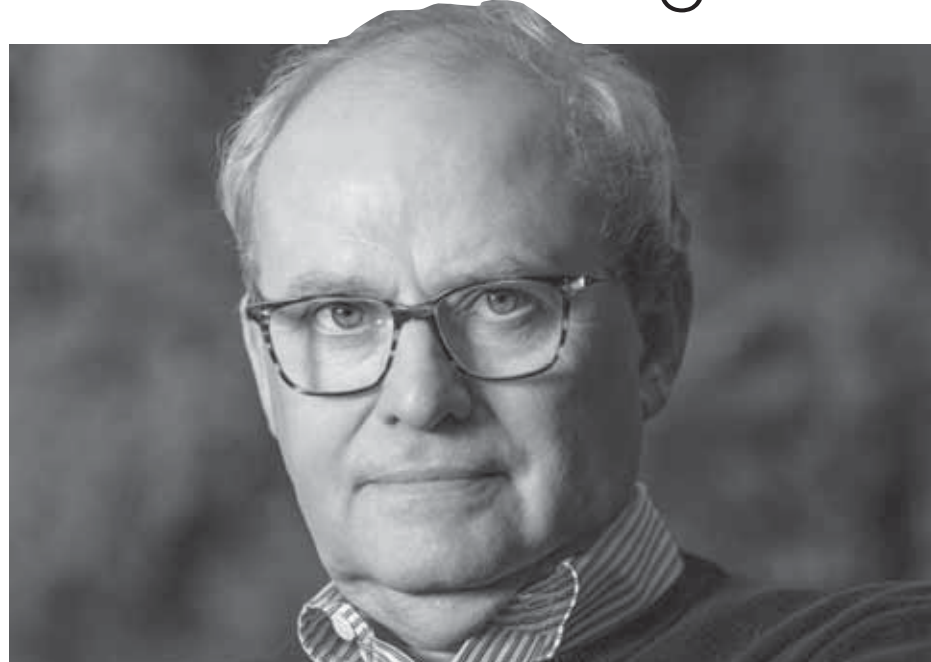
Dr. Anders Åslund on Putin's Survival and Georgia's Kremlin Leanings

INTERVIEW BY VAZHA TAVBERIDZE

In Russia, war is popular, and it's a good way of justifying increased repression. As to what will come out of the decline in GDP and standard of living, a failed, lost war, complete isolation from the West, is not easy to predict - but it's not a good situation for Putin or Russia. - says Dr. Anders Åslund, one of the world's leading experts on the Russian economy, in an interview with Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty. Åslund has served as an adviser to both the Russian (during Boris Yeltsin) and Ukrainian governments (during Leonid Kuchma) and is author of numerous books on Russia and the Post-Soviet space in general. The former Atlantic Council senior fellow is now at the Stockholm Free World Forum in a similar capacity.

We start by asking him about the Nord Stream 1 gas cutoff - For some time now a stick to beat the West with being that it was still paying for Russian oil and gas in billions, thus funding the war in Ukraine.

Continued on page 5



Dr. Anders Åslund. Image source: bruegel.org

In this week's issue...

Nord Stream 1 Resumes Gas Supplies to Germany following Maintenance

NEWS PAGE 2

Georgia's Progress this Week on Fulfilling the EU's 12-Point Recommendations

POLITICS PAGE 3

Is the Sovereignty Issue Dead or Still Alive?

POLITICS PAGE 4

International Travel Dynamics Since the Beginning of 2022

BUSINESS PAGE 7

Georgia Shifts to Sustainable Practices in Forest Management

SOCIETY PAGE 8

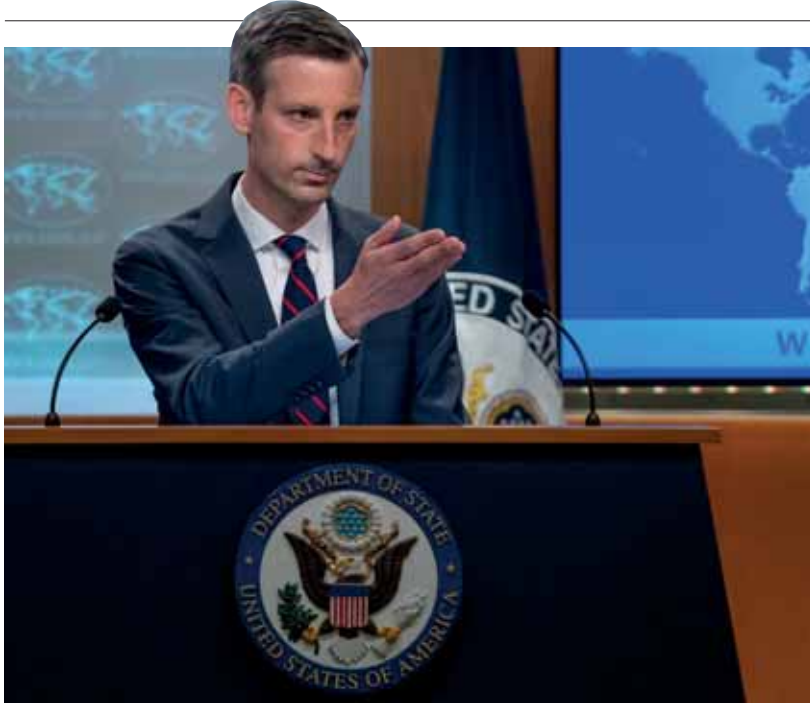
Diving Into the History and Nature of Machakhela Gorge

SOCIETY PAGE 8

Keselo Fortress and A Georgian Legend

CULTURE PAGE 11

Markets							
As of 18 Jul 2022							
	Price	w/w	m/m		Price	w/w	m/m
BONDS				STOCKS			
GRAIL 07/28	83.65 (YTM 7.47%)	-0.5%	-0.6%	Bank of Georgia (BGEO LN)	GBP 14.12	+1.9%	-4.3%
GEBGG 07/23	99.81 (YTM 6.20%)	-0.1%	+0.3%	Georgia Capital (CGEO LN)	GBP 6.13	+4.8%	+11.9%
GEOPAP 03/24	93.95 (YTM 10.23%)	-1.8%	-1.9%	TBC Bank Group (TBCG LN)	GBP 11.64	-2.3%	-11.6%
SILNET 01/27	97.88 (YTM 8.95%)	-0.0%	+0.6%				
TBC 06/24	98.87 (YTM 6.38%)	+0.2%	+0.2%	CURRENCIES			
GGU 07/25	100.31 (YTM 7.63%)	-0.2%	-0.4%	GEL / USD	2.8299	-1.6%	-3.6%
				GEL / EUR	2.8707	-0.5%	-6.8%
				GEL / GBP	3.3823	-1.0%	-5.7%
				GEL / CHF	2.8980	-1.0%	-4.2%
				GEL / RUB	0.0490	+6.2%	-3.9%
				GEL / TRY	0.1620	-2.1%	-4.4%
				GEL / AZN	1.6771	-1.2%	-3.0%
				GEL / AMD	0.0068	-2.5%	-8.8%
COMMODITIES				GEL / UAH	0.0958	-2.0%	-2.6%
Crude Oil, Brent (US\$/bbl)	106.27	-0.8%	-6.1%	EUR / USD	0.9858	-0.5%	+2.5%
Gold Spot (US\$/Oz)	1 709.22	-1.4%	-7.1%	GBP / USD	0.8366	-0.5%	+2.2%
				CHF / USD	0.9776	-0.6%	+0.8%
				RUB / USD	57.9782	-7.2%	+0.8%
				TRY / USD	17.4618	+0.5%	+0.8%
				AZN / USD	1.6935	-0.1%	-0.1%
				AMD / USD	415.2500	+1.0%	-1.7%
INDICES							
FTSE 100	7 223.24	+0.4%	+3.0%				
FTSE 250	19 015.15	+0.9%	+0.5%				
DAX	12 959.81	+1.0%	-1.3%				
DOW JONES	31 072.61	-0.3%	+0.0%				
NASDAQ	11 360.05	-0.1%	+5.2%				
MSCI EM EE	28.85	+1.6%	-4.2%				
MSCI EM	980.48	-0.1%	-2.4%				
SP 500	3 830.85	-0.6%	+4.2%				
MSCI FM	2 099.82	-1.1%	-5.3%				



Ned Price: Disinformation, Personal Attacks on Amb. Degnan Not Consistent with How Partners Communicate

Ambassador Degnan has our full support. Disinformation and personal attacks on Ambassador Degnan or her team are not consistent with how partners communicate with one another, - US State Department spokesperson Ned Price stated.

Price noted that European Council extended Georgia a European prospective status, along with a roadmap of reforms that must be implemented for Georgia to achieve full candidate status.

"We know the people of Georgia are

overwhelmingly in favor of joining the EU, and we, of course, support those aspirations. The rhetoric from some Georgian officials recently, however, seems intended to distract Georgia's citizens from that goal," Price stated.

He noted that Ambassador Degnan and her team at the embassy in Tbilisi are committed to working with the people of Georgia in support of their Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

"Ambassador Degnan has our full support. Disinformation and personal attacks on Ambassador Degnan or her team are

not consistent with how partners communicate with one another, and we will continue to focus on supporting our shared goals. We have worked shoulder to shoulder for 30 years on democratic reforms, economic development, and security cooperation. This remains unchanged.

"Today, the United States is working with our allies and partners to bring an end to President Putin's war in Ukraine as quickly as possible and to secure a peaceful future for the entire region. The United States supports Georgia's sover-

eignty and its territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders, and we continue to support peaceful efforts to end Russia's occupation of 20 percent of Georgia's territory," Price said.

MP MIKHEIL SARJVELADZE RESPONDS TO PRICE'S STATEMENT

"Maybe he is not well informed or there is miscommunication again - I don't think there was an attack on the US Ambassador by any representative of the government," Georgian Dream deputy

Mikheil Sarjveladze responded to Price's statement, adding that the situation is "not as dramatic" as some journalists try to portray it.

"I don't think [his was] a correct assessment. Yesterday, before Ned Price's statement, I said that it would be good to see some clarity. I don't have the feeling that in this case there were violations of the law, especially in light of the fact that the Ambassador herself explained that there can always be disagreements and different views among friends, and that it is necessary to talk about them," he said.

Nord Stream 1 Resumes Gas Supplies to Germany following Maintenance



Pipes at the landfall facilities of the 'Nord Stream 1' gas pipeline are pictured in Lubmin, Germany. Source: REUTERS/Hannibal Hanschke

BY ANA DUMBADZE

The Russian Nord Stream 1 gas pipeline has resumed gas flowing from Russia to Germany following maintenance works.

Russian gas producer Gazprom said its supply of gas to Europe through Ukraine via the Sudzha entry point was up slightly, as Russia also resumed critical gas supplies to Europe through Germany, reopening the Nord Stream gas pipeline after 10 days of maintenance.

Gazprom has cut flows to Germany via the vital Nord Stream 1 pipeline by 40%

in recent weeks, blaming the absence of a Siemens gas turbine undergoing repairs in Canada. The German government has rejected Gazprom's explanation.

The European Union has set out emergency plans to reduce its gas use amid fears Russia could cut off its supply in winter. It proposed a voluntary target for countries to restrict usage by 15% from August until March, accusing the Kremlin of using gas exports as blackmail.

"Russia is blackmailing us. Russia is using energy as a weapon," the European Commission president, Ursula von der Leyen, said in a news conference.

Ukraine's authorities have repeatedly called on Europe to boycott energy supplies from Russia.

Russia-Ukraine War Week 20: Signs Russia Is Preparing to Annex Seized Territory



Image source: CNN via Getty Images

BY ANA DUMBADZE

The Lviv region in western Ukraine was quiet overnight, said governor Maksym Kozlytskiy on Thursday, with no air raid alerts. 229 people had arrived in the region on evacuation trains from the east of Ukraine, and 787 departed for Poland.

Oleh Synyehubov, Governor of Kharkiv, posted a message to Telegram on Thursday morning saying "The Russians are striking Kharkiv" and instructing people to stay in shelters.

He said Russian missile strikes in the eastern Ukrainian city of Kharkiv killed three people on Wednesday, a man, a woman and a 13-year-old boy.

Vitaliy Kim, Governor of the Mykolaiv region, posted a status update for his region on Thursday in which he said "villages located on the demarcation line remain under constant shelling."

Russian and separatist forces continue to attempt small scale assaults along the Donbas front line and are also closing in on Ukraine's second biggest power plant at Vuhlehirsk, reads the latest British intelligence report.

Russian forces are also likely closing in on Ukraine's second biggest power plant at Vuhlehirsk, 50km north-east of Donetsk, the UK Ministry of Defense said.

"Russia is prioritizing the capture of critical national infrastructure, such as power plants.

"However, it is probably also attempting to break through at Vuhlehirsk, as part of its efforts to regain momentum on the southern pincer of its advance towards the key cities of Kramatorsk and Sloviansk."

Russian forces destroyed two schools in the Donetsk towns of Kramatorsk and Kostiantynivka overnight Wednesday, Ukrainian officials say.

Pavlo Kyrylenko, head of the Donetsk regional military administration, shared photos of the destruction in a Telegram post.

"Russian occupiers destroyed two schools today - in Kramatorsk and Kostiantynivka," he said, adding that an industrial area in Kramatorsk was also hit.

CIA: ABOUT 15,000 RUSSIANS HAVE BEEN KILLED

Russian casualties in Ukraine so far have reached around 15,000 killed and perhaps 45,000 wounded, CIA director William Burns said.

"The latest estimates from the US intelligence community would be something in the vicinity of 15,000 (Russian forces) killed and maybe three times that wounded. So a quite significant set of losses," Burns said.

"And, the Ukrainians have suffered as

well - probably a little less than that. But still significant casualties."

Russia classifies military deaths as a state secret even in times of peace, and has not updated its official casualty figures frequently during the war. Ukraine has also said it will not be releasing the numbers of Ukrainian casualties, however, Kyiv said in June that 100 to 200 Ukrainian troops were being killed per day.

RUSSIA MAY SEEK MORE TERRITORY ALONG FRONTLINES

Russian FM Sergei Lavrov said Russia may seek more territory along the frontlines in Ukraine. "Now the geography is different," Lavrov said. "It's not just Donetsk and Luhansk, it's Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, and a number of other territories."

US officials said on Tuesday that it had seen signs Russia that is preparing to formally annex territory it has seized in Ukraine.

"Again, we've been clear that annexation by force would be a gross violation of the UN Charter, and we will not allow it to go unchallenged. We will not allow it to go unpunished," State Department spokesperson Ned Price said at a daily briefing on Wednesday.

MORE WEAPONS SUPPORT FROM US

The United States will send four more high mobility artillery rocket systems (Himars) to Ukraine, US defense secretary, Lloyd Austin, announced.

"(We) will keep finding innovative ways to sustain our long-term support for the brave men and women of the Ukrainian armed forces and we will tailor our assistance to ensure that Ukraine has the technology, the ammunition and the sheer firepower to defend itself," Austin said at the start of a virtual meeting with allies on Ukraine.

In a press conference after the meeting, Chairman of the US joint chiefs of staff general Mark Milley said Ukraine had used Himars to hit Russian command and control nodes, logistic network and air defense sites within Ukraine.

Austin said the new package would also include rounds for Multiple Launch Rocket Systems as well as artillery munitions.

The United States has provided \$8bn in security assistance since the war began, including \$2.2bn in the last month.

Georgia's Progress this Week on Fulfilling the EU's 12-Point Recommendations

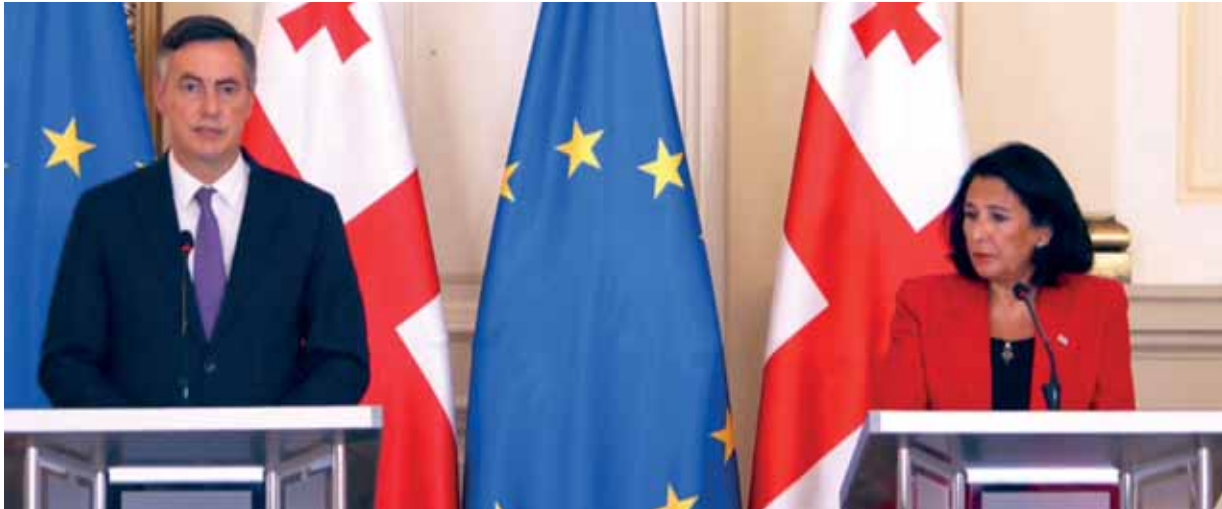


Image source: amerikishma.com

BY KETEVAN SKHIRTADZE

As part of the Council of Europe Project “Strengthening Media freedom, Internet governance and Personal data protection in Georgia,” the Committee held a two-day working meeting on Standards of Freedom of Expression and Professional Regulation of the Media: Experience of the Council of Europe and the European Union, which the Committee members and other MPs attended. Article 10 of the European Convention (freedom of expression), as well as media freedom, were the main topics of discussion.

“The European Union and Council of Europe’s experiences in this area are instructive for us, as it relates to standards of freedom of expression and professional regulation of the media,” David Songhulashvili, Chairman of the Sector Economy and Economic Policy Committee stated. “We shall carefully evaluate the obligations set forth in the EUAA. This topic needs to be discussed as soon as possible. On the other hand, it is intriguing to observe what the best practices are in this area in the EU member states and how the legislation we are about to enact adheres to the EUAA obligations.”

The experts of the Council of Europe focused on the importance of implementing the decisions of the European Court of Human Rights at the national level and on the commitment assumed by Georgia within the framework of the Georgia-EU Association Agreement to harmonize its legislation with the EU Audiovisual Media Services Directive (EUAVMSD).

Council of Europe experts Besarion Bokhashvili, Toby Mendel and Eve Salomon, Ketevan Shengelia, head of the Georgian desk of the European Union program Creative Europe and employees of the Communications Commission participated in the working meeting together with the Georgian MPs.

PAPUASHVILI: 7 COMMITTEE MEETINGS AND 5 WORKING GROUP MEETINGS HELD IN RELATION TO 12-POINT RECOMMENDATIONS SO FAR

“It is crucial for our society to be aware of the ongoing parliamentary activity in order to avoid being misled,” Parliament Speaker Shalva Papuashvili said this week. “Following the conclusion of the spring session, seven committee meetings were held. To date, five working group meetings have been held in relation to the EU’s 12-point recommendations. The legislative process is still ongoing.”

Papuashvili also spoke about the appeal of the opposition representatives to the President of Georgia and the agenda of the extraordinary session proposed in the appeal.

“We observe that certain members of the opposition participate in the aforementioned parliamentary activity, while

others refuse to do so. By calling an extraordinary session, they aim to show that they want to work while others do not, but the reality is quite the reverse,” he stated. “How do you envision inclusivity when, on the one hand, you offer to approve ready-made draft laws, even those that go against the 12 recommendations, rather than taking part in an inclusive process that the Parliament has already begun?”

“There is nothing mentioned in the EU recommendations concerning the proposed constitutional amendments. In contrast to the 12-point recommendations from the European Commission, which urges us to elect non-judge members, the second issue, which concerns the common courts, entails, for example, the postponement of the election of the members of the Council of Justice. In other words, it goes against those 12 recommendations as it provides for the introduction of the mechanism of dismissal of judges nominated for lifetime tenure, which is prohibited by the Constitution. The third issue of common courts and the fourth issue, which deals with anti-corruption issues, are also in violation of Georgia’s Constitution. As such, the extensive nature of the 12-point recommendations necessitates specific mutual consent and cooperation. Let me use this opportunity to remind you that all of this needs parliamentary activity and labor. Therefore, to portray parliament in such a way that suggests it is not functioning and needs to do so immediately is to, to put it kindly, mislead our society,” the Speaker stated.

Papuashvili once again called on his opposition colleagues to engage in parliamentary activities.

“If there is a desire to be a participant in the European future of Georgia, this desire needs to be expressed in the parliamentary work, and I ask you to participate in this legislative activity,” the Speaker addressed the opposition.

PARLIAMENT ELABORATES ON EC’S RECOMMENDATION ON DEOLIGARCHIZATION

Shalva Papuashvili met with the representatives of the parliamentary political parties to discuss the 5th recommendation of the European Commission, which envisages the implementation of deoli-

garchization in Georgia.

The meeting also focused on the law adopted in Ukraine on deoligarchization.

“One of the 12 recommendations addresses the issue of deoligarchization in relation to Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. The guidelines in the example of Ukraine emphasize the need to put the existing law into practice because it was only put into force in May of this year despite being adopted in Ukraine last fall. We can roughly infer what would be intended in the case of our recommendation from the example of Ukraine. We can also talk about the concepts, procedures, and standards of Ukrainian law. We see that, regrettably, deoligarchization has resulted in the instrumentalization of this term in Georgian domestic politics and, as a result, further deepened the desire of radical groups to bring destruction into politics. Ukraine’s law is advantageous because it is detached from the Georgian political subjectivism. The European Union, among others, has called for the implementation of this law, which was drafted by foreign recommendations and practices detached from Georgian political subjectivism. As a result, this law can serve as a good example in order to avoid accusations that the law favors one party over another,” stated Papuashvili.

Anri Okhanashvili, the Chair of the Legal Issues Committee, claims that the European Commission’s desire to implement this law is evident from the recommendation they made to Ukraine. If the European Commission wants to implement this law in Ukraine, it stands to reason that both its adoption and its implementation in relation to Georgia should be correct.

“The Ukrainian model is composed of four elements. First, regarding an individual interfering in politics. Second, a large number of financial resources, which is calculated by multiplying the subsistence minimum by one million. Thirdly, it implies impact on the media, and fourthly, monopoly on the market. According to the Ukrainian model, a person will be classified as an oligarch and added to the special registry if three of these four criteria are met. The Ukrainian government makes this decision, which the president ultimately approves,” Okhanashvili stated.



Chairman of the Committee on Foreign Relations, David McAllister. Image source: frontnews.ge

As Alexander Elisashvili, the Chair of the political group “Citizens” stated, the Ukrainian law should not be translated directly, because there are many gaps and uncertainties.

“It is unclear how the Defense and Security Council in Ukraine determines who is an oligarch and whether to add a certain person to the registry of oligarchs. Additionally, it is absurd that government employees are prohibited from speaking with the oligarch. Who is in charge of this communication if it is secret? The Venice Commission’s conclusion would be interesting to hear. We have now decided to share our opinions. My proposal is to modify the law to better reflect Georgian reality,” Elisashvili stated.

Members of the parliamentary majority and political groups, Girchi, Citizens, and European Socialists, participated in the meeting.

The process of implementation of the recommendation established by the European Commission on deoligarchization will be led by the Legal Issues Committee.

ZURABISHVILI: WORK ON 12 POINTS SHOULD START IN BRUSSELS

The delegation of the Foreign Relations Committee of the European Parliament visiting Tbilisi met with the President of Georgia, Salome Zurbishvili.

The president stated that the visit is

and prosperous country.

“I would like to emphasize once again the position of the European Parliament: That European enlargement remains a merit-based process that requires appropriate reforms, especially in the field of democracy, rule of law, human rights, market economy and implementation of the European Union. This applies to absolutely all countries that want to join the European Union and it can be no subject to trade. Georgia is being assessed based on these merits, and Georgia’s accession to the EU depends on its meeting the Copenhagen criteria. The people of Georgia, who support Georgia’s accession to the European Union, deserve to live in peace and security, in a free, democratic and prosperous country. The European Union is inextricably linked to peace, stability and prosperity,” said the MEP.

“When we talk about Georgia, unfortunately, we always remember one word, and that is polarization,” he noted, adding that Georgia must address certain priorities in order to receive candidate status.

“The visit to Georgia is one of the parts of our mission in the South Caucasus. We will meet with representatives of the Parliament and Government of Georgia, representatives of the Georgian Dream and the opposition. Of course, we will mainly talk about Georgia’s application for EU membership. Last month’s European Council decision was a truly his-



Shalva Papuashvili, the Speaker of the Parliament. Image source: bpn.ge

taking place at a very important moment for the country, emphasizing this visit could be decisive for the European future of Georgia.

“We must understand, and perhaps this is the main thing for this country, that the European perspective, which was given to us by the European Parliament and also by the European Council, is extremely important. Sometimes we forget this and we do not see that this is a step taken from which there will be no turning back. This requires us to be worthy of this European perspective.

“It may be even more important if we are granted candidate status by the end of the year after fulfilling the main recommendations, which we call the 12 points, and on which we have to start working. This work should start in Brussels, where I expect government representatives to go to clarify some details with the Commission,” said Zurbishvili.

The delegation is led by the Chairman of the Committee on Foreign Relations, David McAllister.

DAVID MCALLISTER: EUROPEAN ENLARGEMENT REMAINS A MERIT-BASED PROCESS THAT REQUIRES APPROPRIATE REFORMS

“Georgia has reflected the goal of joining the European Union and NATO in its Constitution and this has a lot of support from the population. We, Members of European Parliament, will be happy to help and support the country’s accession,” McAllister stated.

The MEP explained that the population of Georgia, which supports Georgia’s accession to the EU, deserves to live in peace and security, in a free, democratic

and prosperous country.

“This is a recognition that the European Parliament supports the Georgian people and is ready to bring Georgia closer to the European Union, as it is a member of the European Union family. However, we believe that Georgia should address certain priorities in order to receive candidate status. These priorities were very clearly outlined in the opinion of the European Commission.

“We talked with Madam Zurbishvili about how important it is for all political forces to unite, put aside their differences, talk constructively and work to achieve one goal – to receive candidate status for European membership. Polarization is a process, a political discourse characterized by very harsh rhetoric and inability or unwillingness for people, opposing political parties, to work together. The European Union has always called on the conflicting parties to somehow reach an agreement on the basic reforms, development of democracy and strengthening of the rule of law, which are so important for Georgia. Charles Michel is also involved in this process, and this shows the great support that Georgia has from the European Council,” McAllister said.

“The Georgian President also made very important statements and called on all parties to unite, which is very important in Georgia at this stage. We are very encouraged by the fact that serious efforts are being made regarding the 12-point plan. The ruling party, the opposition and civil organizations have presented their plans, which proves that the candidate status is a goal shared by all,” he said.

Is the Sovereignty Issue Dead or Still Alive?

OP-ED BY NUGZAR B. RUHADZE

Going by the frequency and intensity of the grassroots-level discourse that our society is dedicating to current political problems, the overall impression is that the issue of Georgia's territorial integrity is no longer as hot as it used to be, say, 10-15 years ago. Many people I have talked to tend to apologetically suspect that the question might still be unconsciously painful, but in reality, not as scorching as it was before. Why? What happened? Has anything changed in our wounded patriotic hearts and minds?

We see hundreds of emotionally poignant speakers on TV, and thousands of animated participants in street demonstrations who, foaming at the mouth, promote the cause of the territorial integrity of other nations, seeming to have forgotten the exigencies of their own territorial wholeness. Those overexcited indoor and outdoor orators scream for the ousting of the current Georgian gov-

ernment, as if the most burning and long-standing national issue of territorial completeness no longer matters. The selfsame talking heads dictate to their credulous and naive addressees that being a candidate for membership in a couple of active, and certainly useful, western geopolitical organizations is much more important than getting back the cherished one-third of our deplorably shredded territory, lost, by the way, only because of the strong-headed pursuance of the unlikely geopolitical goals of our not so very far away past.

Generations have grown up in Georgia since those insurmountable territorial losses who are not even familiar with the problem, their indifference to the topic being an imaginable harbinger to other national tragedies that might be in store for us if we do not behave accordingly. Unbelievably, the people of Georgia and their current leaders have stopped openly, straightly and profusely talking (as they did in recent times) about the main issue of our reality, called territorial integrity. It seems the theme of Georgia's territorial integrity has lost its value. This is why the running politicians have

stopped using it in their electoral campaign. Promises of restoring the country's territorial integrity have always helped them to be elected. The worst part of this newly born nonchalance is that the old problem might be hushed with a purpose so as to not be given a chance to be exacerbated to the detriment of other goals that have become predominant on our national list of items that need to be heeded. Our western friends and well-wishers are being overly ginger about the whole thing, as if bringing back the discussion of the problem might be conducive to the collapse of what they have been building in Georgia over the last several years. I can understand them. Who needs that much headache?

I might be a little out of the swim at this time in resuscitating the forgotten dilemma, not letting sleeping dogs lie in peace, but I would rather be clear about the whole thing than at a loss. I just want to know for sure if the problem is closed or still alive, having at least a slightly felt pulse. And clear I want to be, because I need to be oriented on something true to work on, as a minor but an active partaker in our political life. There must be



The ABL in South Ossetia. Source: occupied.eastwatch.eu

others out there who need wise instruction of that content and caliber too. To be living in deliberate oblivion of the bad things in the way of our feeling good about life is of course sweet and soothing, but our being oblivious of those still-alive troubles doesn't make them vanish without trace.

So, let's hear something comforting and encouraging from our specialists thereof although they are usually very

far from infallibility. And if the nation has reconciled itself with the long-tolerated hateful status quo, knowing that for sure, I will at least have a chance to put myself together for further tactful and correct journalistic actions and deliberations. After all, we all need to walk with open eyes so as not to trip over accidental rocks and unknown pebbles on our tortuous road to the unsavory truth.

Russia in the South Caucasus: Between Omnipotence and Fragility



Russia's position in the South Caucasus is not as solid as is often presented. Image source: cepa.org

ANALYSIS BY EMIL AVDALIANI

Over the past two decades Russia in the South Caucasus has achieved much militarily, but its prestige as a power has been decreasing. This happens at the same time as the reliance on the military elements in formulating its foreign policy toward the region drastically increases. The result is a very shaky position built solely on hard power.

Russia's position in the South Caucasus is seen as solid, especially following the second Nagorno-Karabakh War of 2020, when some 2000 Russian peacekeepers were stationed in Nagorno-Karabakh. Moscow now enjoys an unparalleled influence: It has four military bases in the three South Caucasus states, leaving little space for outside powers to move in. Here, Russia's military power puts a particular constrain on NATO and US forces' ability to play an active role in the wider Black Sea region.

But beneath this seemingly powerful

position lurks long-term problems. Some are already visible, while others are likely to be forthcoming. Ultimately, Moscow's position is far from being well grounded. It is increasingly dependent on the military element and is less interested and in fact is far from being able to use other tools to maintain its position in the South Caucasus.

One of the most striking developments underlying Russia's rather unstable position is the nature of peace it has introduced, which is essentially a geopolitical peace, meaning that it is highly unstable and probably short-lived. Reasons vary, but critical here is to understand that constructing long-term peace requires genuine political willingness, prestige, and a record of untarnished leadership. Moscow is not genuinely interested in the resolution of the conflict because final resolution would limit its projection of power. Therefore, geopolitics are driving the Kremlin's thinking. Military and geo-economic considerations prevail over regional security needs. Then comes simmering tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Discord between Yerevan and Baku allows the Kremlin to uti-

lize benefits which have so far remained elusive. Tensions are a perfect tool to persuade both Armenia and Azerbaijan for the need to prolong the peacekeepers' stay, and perhaps even increase the number of Russian troops.

Russian peace is geopolitical because it views the railway revival project, announced as part of the November 2020 deal between Russia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, primarily through a military lens. It does raise the issue of restored economic connections, but the credibility of Russian hopes of beneficial trade with Armenia and Turkey through railway links are far from clear. With Turkey, it is more comfortable to trade through the Black Sea; with Armenia, the Georgian route, though at times unreliable because of weather, has nevertheless worked for decades.

Therefore, Russia is interested more in the military element of the restored railway routes. This would allow Moscow to penetrate the South Caucasus at will to mitigate the blocking power of the Caucasus range. The ability to reach Turkish and Iranian borders are at the heart of Russia's military strategy.

Another element where Russia might be losing in the longer term is Armenia. Dependent on Russia economically and militarily, Yerevan's ongoing talks with Ankara seem to be proceeding swiftly, with much bullence deriving from both sides. The Russian troops' position in Armenia will not be undermined perhaps even in the longer term, but with the opened border with Turkey, Armenia will have a new market for its products and businesses, allowing the country to diversify its economy, lessening dependence on Russia and the route through Georgia. Thus, economic and connectivity diversification equals the diminution of Russian influence in the South Caucasus. Russia is unable to prevent other powers from entering the region, and Turkey is a fine example.

But perhaps what best reflects Russia's changing position in the region is what order it might be hoping to shape for the South Caucasus. Here, some thoughts on the global processes could shed light on Moscow's thinking. As the world will likely consist of two large centers, the US and China, those will be surrounded by several closely aligned countries. The

recent Australia-UK-US tripartite alliance agreement (AUKUS) is one of Washington's steps towards this end. In addition to China and the US, Russia, India, Turkey and Iran will try to build small near-geopolitical zones along their borders. But their efforts will be largely tied to the interests of Washington or Beijing. The future world order is thus likely to be more chaotic. It will also be hierarchical, with China and America playing a leading role, and others having a lesser impact. Nevertheless, this will form the Eurasian order.

The South Caucasus will be at the center of these global changes, as the region is bordered by three major players of the Eurasian continent: Russia, Iran and Turkey, and the three countries are driven by regional ownership ideas. The new world order will lead to the establishment of a new order in the South Caucasus, which Russia is likely to pursue. Cognizant of its limits that it is impossible to create an exclusive order similar to what the Romanovs or the Soviets did before, Russia has to concede some aspects of its ambitions and carry out a more nuanced foreign policy. The order will be based on a closer cooperation with Turkey and Iran. Moscow hegemony will be recognized by Ankara and Tehran. These two powers too will have their major interests acknowledged by Moscow. The order will likely be characterized by a mixture of competition and cooperation, as was the case with these three powers elsewhere. Overall, though, red lines established by the three powers will be largely respected. Regional ownership will be a driving force minimizing disagreements and maximizing incentives to cooperate.

All in all, Russia's position in the South Caucasus is not as solid as is often presented. It is fluid, and Moscow must constantly adjust to rising challenges to prevent loss of influence. Increasingly, however, maintaining influence in the region is achieved through the creation of a larger number of military bases, a clear example of which is the deployment of Russian peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh. To many, this speaks of power, but it also betrays weakness and inability to manage problems through the prestige so inherent to any aspiring great power.

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

Dr. Anders Åslund on Putin's Survival and Georgia's Kremlin Leanings

Continued from page 1

NOW IT APPEARS WE ARE FACING A GAS CUTOFF AT THE KREMLIN'S INITIATIVE, AND GERMANY IS IN TURMOIL. WE ARE STOPPING FUNDING THE KREMLIN WAR MACHINE, SO WHY ARE WE CRYING INSTEAD OF CELEBRATING?

Well, because it's causing a lot of damage to the European economies. Europe wanted to reduce its purchases of oil and gas from Russia gradually, in order to diminish or minimize the damage to their economies, but Russia wants to maximize the damage to the European economies.

DO YOU SEE THE WEST WILLING TO PLAY ALONG?

Frankly, I don't think the West has much of a choice, because Russia has proven itself completely unreliable. Whenever Putin opens his mouth, he lies. So when he now, for example, says that "we haven't seen anything yet in the war in Ukraine," that, au contraire, means that Russia is exhausted. He hasn't got a clue what to do next. Never believe anything until the Kremlin has denied it. And never believe anything that Putin has said, because if he says something, he means the opposite. I don't think Putin has any relevant concept of reality; he is just trying to raise the stakes, hoping that factor will turn the war around in Ukraine. In all probability, he thinks he will still win somehow, but he doesn't know how. He thinks that the West is weak and will give in in one way or another.

WILL IT?

No, no. That's what he thinks. And I don't think the West can do that. We haven't seen a serious crisis for the West; this is a completely new situation in that regard. That situation arose on the 24th of February, and the West is holding together. We are seeing Ukrainian flags all over the West, and whoever is hesitant, as happened with Scholz and Macron, is being told by the public to get back into line - and they are.

WHAT'S ON THE HORIZON REGARDING SANCTIONS?

What we're seeing is that the sanctions are gradually tightening. And there's also an increasing discussion going on regarding the various forms of evasion of sanctions. Since 2014, we've not seen any easing of sanctions, and this year, we have really seen very substantial sanctions come in, one after another.

DID THEY HAVE THE INTENDED IMPACT? HOW ARE THE RUSSIANS COPING?

We can say that the financial sanctions have not brought the Russian financial system to its knees, but these wild swings of the Ruble exchange rate - that's no stabilization. It's bad. Russian inflation is 17-18%, officially, which is bad. And the Russian economy is seeing a gradual decline. The consensus now seems to be that there will be a decline of 10% this year. It's getting worse by the month. And we've seen in the last couple of months that imports from countries with sanctions have fallen by 60%; from countries without sanctions by 40%. So in total, imports have been cut by about



Georgia now seems to be very much in cohorts with the Kremlin



President Putin. Source: Alexey



Russia is now swimming in oil incomes, which they cannot use to buy arms or more technology

half. Russia is now swimming in oil incomes, which they cannot use to buy arms or more technology.

HOW MUCH OF A SYMBOLIC STEP IS, FOR EXAMPLE, THE RENAMING OF MCDONALDS IN RUSSIA? IS IT A SIGN OF THINGS TO COME?

[chuckles] They say that the big problem is that they can't produce French fries in the proper fashion. So they can try it, but it's likely not to develop very well: There may well be food, but the quality of that food will decline.

AS A POST-SOVIET CHILD, I REMEMBER LOTS OF CHEAP AND LOW QUALITY CLONES OF WESTERN PRODUCTS MANUFACTURED IN RUSSIA. SHOULD WE EXPECT THEIR RETURN?

Of course. Remember that Pepsi Cola was produced in Russia. The Soviet Union had a license from 1959, but it was not considered to be the real thing. Pepsi thought they had cornered the Russian market, but when the Soviet Union collapsed, Coca Cola gained twice the sales in Russia, because Russians identified Coca Cola as the real thing, as it was not in Russia before.

As time passes, more and more goods will become unavailable as imported stocks dwindle and imported parts fail to be sufficient for continued production. And I presume that the 1/3 of Russians, who are western-oriented, inclined towards democracy, will blame the Kremlin, but quietly. The third that are Putin loyalists will blame the West, and the remaining third will swing back and forth, depending on the situation.

WE OFTEN HEAR THAT THE ONLY ACCEPTABLE WAY OUT OF THIS FOR THE WEST IS VICTORY FOR UKRAINE AND DEFEAT FOR RUSSIA. WHAT'S AT STAKE FOR RUSSIA IF IT GIVES IN AND IS DEFEATED?

The natural thing would be for Putin to fall thanks to the war in Ukraine, because the initiative was entirely his, and he has clearly been commanding the war personally. Therefore, he would naturally be considered guilty. And the question is, how severe the authoritarianism is in Russia - is it so severe that Putin could stay in power even after such a massive failure? I doubt it. I think that Putin is likely to be offstaged after this, but Putin has shown himself to be very good at surviving before.

What is much cited now is [former Russian acting PM] E.T. Gaidar's book, "Collapse of an Empire: Lessons for Modern Russia" (2006), where he predicted that if Russia restarted its imperial ambitions, clearly referring to Putin, Russia would collapse as a state. He didn't specify how, but clearly there is a risk that regional tensions will increase sharply, in particular in the Northern Caucasus.

AND WHAT IF THERE'S NO OUTRIGHT VICTORY FOR PUTIN IN UKRAINE, BUT HE MANAGES TO GET AWAY WITH SOME TERRITORIES. WHAT HAPPENS THEN?

Well, there will be severe Ukrainian

guerrilla warfare. Remember that the Ukrainian Resistance Army kept fighting until 1955, even under Stalin, and the current Russian occupation of vast areas in southern Ukraine does not look easy to hold on to. We're already seeing that the Ukrainians have organized guerilla warfare, so I think that Russia will be in a terrible situation if its troops stay in Ukraine.

WHAT ABOUT THE SITUATION INSIDE RUSSIA? WILL WE SEE THE "CRIMEA IS OURS" HYSTERIA REPEATED?

We have seen in the opinion polls conducted by the Levada Center that the approval of Putin went to 88% in 2008, after the Georgian war. In March 2014, again 88%. And recently it was up to 83%, but has fallen by about 10 percentage points already. So war is popular, and it's a good way of justifying increased repression. But as to what will come out of the decline in GDP and standard of living, a failed, lost war, complete isolation from the West, is not easy to predict - but it's not a good situation for Putin or Russia.

HOW MUCH IS UKRAINE'S BEING TRULY INDEPENDENT AND ABLE TO MAKE ITS OWN DECISIONS AN EXISTENTIAL THREAT TO PUTIN'S RUSSIA AND ITS STABILITY?

It's a threat to Putin because he needs to justify his repression and waging war. Without war, it really doesn't have any justification, because he's not doing anything for his country; he's not developing it in any relevant regard, not even its military forces, as we now know. The economy has been stagnant since 2014, there's been no modernization. And he has sharply isolated Russia from the world. It's really into Kim Jong-Un's company now: He hasn't done anything good for his people, so why should anybody in their right mind support him?

WHAT IMPACT IS THIS GOING TO HAVE ON COUNTRIES LIKE GEORGIA?

You have two alternative scenarios. One is that Russia wins in some regard and then I think Moldova, most of all will be in danger, because Georgia now seems to be very much in cohorts with the Kremlin, for example, with trade, being a transit line from Turkey to Russia of products that are not fully legitimate.

THE GEORGIAN GOVERNMENT VEHEMENTLY DENIES THAT CLAIM, SAYING THEY ARE MONITORING ALL THE ROUTES. WHAT FACTS DO YOU HAVE TO SUPPORT YOUR COMMENT?

I'm just saying that this is widely reported. This is not my specialty. And of course, the current Georgian regime has outrageously imprisoned the former president Mikhail Saakashvili, and is very much pursuing media control. The Georgian government does not appear very democratic. And that, of course, resulted in Georgia not being granted EU candidate status by the European Union last month.

And after Moldova and Georgia is Belarus, which is now in effect under Kremlin control. If Putin falls, then Ukraine would be free, Moldova would not be attacked by Russia, and I presume that Lukashenko would fall in short order. These are the three countries that are most obviously touched by the outcome in Ukraine.



I think that Putin is likely to be offstaged after this

Ambassador Mark Clayton on Georgia's EU and NATO Ambitions and the Political Polarization



EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW BY
EREKLE POLADISHVILI

The UK allocated £5 million for Georgia so that the country can protect itself from Russian cyber-attacks. Its people chose to leave the very Union the Georgians currently aspire to join. It's media environment can be said to be exemplary, while Georgia's citizens still struggle to find fair and balanced reporting. These topics and more are what GEORGIA TODAY met with UK Ambassador to Georgia Mark Clayton to discuss.

"The five million pounds support for Georgia, that we announced just a couple of weeks ago during the NATO summit, is actually an expansion and a continuation of long-standing program that we have working with Georgia on cyber security," he tells us. "I'm really pleased we're able to announce that expansion. It's certainly a priority area of work of this embassy, and that will continue, I'm absolutely confident, for the foreseeable future."

The Ambassador notes that the five million pounds for cyber security comes against the backdrop of a large and expanding relationship on defense and security that covers defense capability, building and training on both the NATO and UK bilateral channels.

"We also have an extensive relationship in Georgia on countering disinformation, which is really important in the current times," he says. "We work intensively with the Georgian government and with civil society on tackling Georgia's protracted conflicts. There are large programs and a lot of engagement on political reform and democratic institution building, governance in particular, where we're supporting the growth of Georgia's civil service sector. And then there's an important economic and trade relationship. I put in that sphere the work that the British Council does to support

the creative industry, to support cultural ties with the UK and Georgia and, critically, of course, the work that they do in English language training as an investment in Georgia's future, an investment in the next generation, and an investment in Georgia's economy - better levels of English for everyone will help Georgia's continued integration into the wider European economy, and that's a positive thing.

GEORGIA IS ON ITS WAY TO GETTING EU CANDIDACY STATUS. BUT THE UNION WE WANT TO JOIN SAW THE UK LEAVING TWO YEARS AGO. WHAT WOULD YOU, AS A REPRESENTATIVE OF THAT COUNTRY, ADVISE US TO DO?

Well, it's not my position to advise Georgia to do anything. But what I would say is that there is a fundamental, really important principle at stake here, which is the very basic principle of democracy. The British people voted in a referendum and said that they wanted to leave the European Union, and that's what we've done. As far as I'm aware, opinion polls in Georgia say consistently that the Georgian people want to join the European Union and NATO. Every major political party out there says their goals are to support that wish and move towards the EU and NATO membership. So, then, the question is - if you're serious about respecting that democratic will and serious about democracy, the job of the political class and Georgia's leadership is to do everything they can to work towards that goal. The EU has been really clear in setting out what steps Georgia needs to take to meet that goal, and the UK will continue to support Georgia in doing so.

BRITISH PEOPLE DECIDED TO LEAVE AFTER SOME YEARS' EXPERIENCE OF BEING IN THE EU. THE QUESTION IS, FOR THOSE WHO HAVE NEVER BEEN IN THE UNION, WHAT SHOULD

WE BE AWARE OF OR CAREFUL ABOUT WHEN IT COMES TO BEING AN EU MEMBER?

There's nothing to be careful about. The European Union is an organization which very clearly defines expectations, rules and procedures. They are very clear. They are set up in a hierarchy, they are set up in the Copenhagen criteria. Georgian people say they want to join the EU, and the job of Georgian politicians right across the spectrum is to work together to that goal and to get Georgia on track to meet those criteria - That's the key challenge.

THE WAR IN UKRAINE CHANGED EUROPEAN ARCHITECTURE ONCE AND PERHAPS FOR ALL. THE TRILATERAL ALLIANCE IDEA IS NO LONGER THE SUBJECT OF DISCUSSION. WHAT CHALLENGES DO WE FACE RIGHT NOW, AND MIGHT WE SEE SOME OTHER "ALLIANCE" INITIATIVES COMING FROM THE UK?

The trilateral alliance, as you call it, has had, probably, undue attention here in Georgia. The UK, together with Poland and Ukraine, established a memorandum of understanding on cooperation and security matters. It was an aspiration to capture a really strong relationship that we already enjoyed with both Poland and Ukraine on security issues and defense. That memorandum is in action right now to support Ukraine while it's under attack from Russia. I think the whole issue of the alliance has become a bit overblown locally. I agree that Russia's unprovoked attack on Ukraine has completely upturned European and, in fact, global security. The UK, along with a whole bunch of allies and partners, is really very clear - We will continue to support Ukraine in defense of its sovereignty and territorial integrity, and we will do so until Russia fails.

When it comes to the wider European security architecture, I think we're also

very clear. NATO, along with the UK, will always remain the bedrock of European security. It's a sign of both: how catastrophic Putin's miscalculation has been but also how important NATO is for European security. As a result of the invasion, we've actually seen as the alliance getting stronger, you've got more commitments for troops in defense material to the alliance, you've got a committed resolute alliance which, in a way, is stronger than ever. Critically, you've had Sweden and Finland joining, so the alliance has become stronger.

But I think, my government is also really clear that European security doesn't stop at the borders of the alliance. The Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary have been really clear that we have to do more to support countries which aren't in NATO but which are at the risk of aggression and threat from Russia. They explicitly named Georgia in that list, alongside Moldova and the Western Balkans. At the NATO summit a few weeks ago, the alliance agreed a new package of support for Georgia, and the priorities in the future will see us making sure that the UK is playing its part in delivering that package, building on the really comprehensive package of support that the UK's already giving on defense.

IN THE PAST FEW MONTHS, WE'VE SEEN AN UNPRECEDENTED POLARIZATION BETWEEN PARTIES IN GEORGIA. TELL US YOUR OPINION ON THAT AND WHAT WAYS THERE MIGHT BE OUT OF THIS DEADLOCK.

I've said this before: Georgia is not unique in having a polarized society. There are societies all around the world polarized on different social issues. For me, the challenge for Georgia is not polarization - It's personalization. There is a really clear task, and I feel really strongly about it: The Georgian people said they want the European Union and NATO membership. Every single party out there says

they want the European Union and NATO membership. So, the task is for the political elite to stop squabbling and actually work together to deliver the common goal the people said they want and, when it comes to EU membership, to meet that list of actions to take.

As far as I can see, participants spend more time accusing each other of polarization than actually cracking on with the job in hand, and I feel very strongly that the recent attacking of Georgia's greatest allies and partners, the criticism in the media that we've seen of the US, which Georgia regularly names as a strategic partner, criticism of the European Union, claiming that the EU and US want to drag Georgia into a war, is a total distraction from the job in hand.

I really hope that in the future, as well as stopping attacking each other, Georgian politicians will also stop attacking their foreigner partners and crack on with doing what the people have asked of them.

WHAT WILL BE THE REACTION IF THIS ATTACK ON OUR WESTERN PARTNERS CONTINUES?

There is shortage of good will and support to Georgia, and the UK, alongside our allies and partners, is working hard to support Georgia on its Euro Atlantic path. It makes it harder for all of us to defend Georgia and to support Georgia, persuade our leadership at home to support Georgia, when those sorts of attacks continue. So, I would very much hope that they end soon and, as I said, that those across the political spectrum set to tackling the job in hand.

WHILE THE OPPOSITION IS ANTIPATHETIC TOWARDS SOME OF THE MEDIA, THE RULING PARTY HAS AN AGGRESSIVE ATTITUDE TOWARDS CRITICAL TV CHANNELS. HOW TO SOLVE THIS PROBLEM?

Georgia has certainly got a rich and varied media landscape, but I hesitate to call much of it independent, and it's certainly a very different landscape to the one operating in UK, where standards of public service broadcasting are extremely high and all outlets, no matter what their backgrounds are, are obliged by law to actually present a fair and accurate picture of the truth. So, I think, certainly over the time I've been here in Georgia, it's very clear to me that the Georgian media landscape operates very differently to the UK.

Work needs to be done to make progress on the EU and NATO membership, and the situation in the world doesn't make that easy. The conflict in Ukraine and Russia's unprovoked attack on Ukraine continues. The economic consequences of that are becoming very acute. There are plenty of problems to be dealt with. What the Georgian public deserves is an honest, open and transparent discussion and debate with the political leadership that allows them to understand what's going on and to critique what the government and the political leadership across the board are doing.

The media is a key vehicle for getting those messages across and getting that information out there. The fracturing of the media landscape which reflects the polarization we talked about earlier is not helpful in that regard. I would encourage all politicians to take advantage of all the channels that are open to them to get the point across and engage in principle debate rather than personalized attacks on their opponents.

Georgia Shifts to Sustainable Practices in Forest Management

With support from Japan, UNDP builds and equips Business Service Yards in Mtskheta municipality to protect forests from illegal logging



Visiting Mtskheta municipality together with Ambassador of Japan Imamura Akira to find out how forestry reform helps protect Georgia's forests. Photo by Nino Zedginidze/UNDP

Three Business Service Yards to be established in Mtskheta municipality serve as an alternative to illegal logging and offer people easy access to firewood used for heating and other daily needs. Once fully operational, they will supply around 43,000 people with wood biomass and sustainably harvested timber.

With US\$920,000 in funding from Japan, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) assists the National Forestry Agency (NFA) of Georgia's Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture to build, develop and improve Business Service Yards and ensure that they provide quality services to local communities.

By the end of 2022, UNDP will help the NFA to build and equip a Business Service Yard in the village Jighaura and equip two more Business Services Yards in the villages Dzegvi and Qyemo Lisi with all-terrain vehicles and firefighting tools. UNDP will also train foresters in sustainable forest management, distribute energy-efficient stoves to the most vulnerable families and organize an information campaign to let people know why forest protection is so important.

The Japan and UNDP support is part of a broader effort to promote Georgia's ongoing forestry reform and help the country achieve its far-reaching climate goals.

On 15 July, Ambassador of Japan to Georgia Imamura Akira, Deputy Minis-

ter of Environmental Protection and Agriculture Kakha Kakabadze, UNDP Deputy Resident Representative in Georgia Anna Chernyshova, Acting Head of the National Forestry Agency Davit Aladashvili and Mtskheta Municipality Mayor Dimitry Zurabishvili visited the newly opened Business Service Yard in the village Bodorna to see how this new model contributes to the progress of forestry reform.

"The Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture already established forty-three Business Service Yards across Georgia. This initiative is part of the ongoing forestry reform which aims to ensure sustainable development of the forestry sector and replace social logging with environment-friendly practices," Deputy Minister Kakabadze said.

"Georgians and Japanese share a deep cultural connection to forests. Japan made sustainable forest management a national priority and achieved impressive results in sustaining and conserving its woodlands. We are happy to share this experience with Georgia, help safeguard fragile forest ecosystems and assist people to explore green energy solutions for sustainable livelihoods," Ambassador Imamura said.

"75 percent of Georgia's population still rely on firewood for their heating needs. Unsustainable harvesting threatens forests and increases greenhouse gas emissions. UNDP welcomes the adoption of the new Forest Code which provides a clear vision of how to reduce illegal logging and manage forests sustainably. To support this national effort, we provide practical assistance to the National Forestry Agency and local communities and help introduce greener,

healthier and more sustainable solutions in everyday life," Chernyshova said.

GEORGIA'S FORESTS AND FORESTRY REFORM

Georgia's lush forests cover over 43 percent of the country's territory and provide millions of people with a source of livelihood, clean water, fresh air and disaster protection. Forests capture greenhouse gas emissions and counter harmful effects of climate change. Nevertheless, this priceless natural resource is threatened by excessive use, illegal logging and wildfires. Almost three-quarters of Georgia's population, especially people living in rural areas, still rely on firewood for heating and other needs. Unsustainable timber consumption reaches 2.4 million cubic meters a year, which costs Georgia around GEL446 million annually. Wildfires destroy and damage thousands of hectares of forest every year.

The adoption of Georgia's new Forestry Code in 2020 marked the launch of forestry reform aimed at promoting sustainable forest management and reducing the risk of illegal logging and wildfires.

In 2021, Georgia adopted the National Climate Change Strategy and updated its Nationally Determined Contributions to the Paris Agreement. According to this ambitious Climate Promise, by 2030, Georgia will unconditionally reduce greenhouse gas emissions to 35 percent below the 1990 baseline level and will increase forest carbon capture capacity by 10 percent from the 2015 levels.

UNDP closely works with the national institutions and international donors (the European Union, Sweden and Switzerland) to help Georgia achieve its climate goals. The new partnership with Japan contributes to this work and supports Georgia's transition to sustainable and climate-friendly forest management.



Diving Into the History and Nature of Machakhela Gorge



A brand-new exhibition hall opened its doors to visitors in the heart of Machakhela National Park. Photo by Irakli Dzeladze/UNDP

A brand-new exhibition hall opened its doors to visitors in the heart of Machakhela National Park.

The exhibition hall helps navigate the rich history of the Machakhela Gorge and dive into its unique nature. Impressive collections include samples of minerals and geological formations,

dummies of rare mushrooms and plants, historic artefacts, and colourful installations showcasing how the Gorge's environmental, economic and social landscapes have been developing over centuries. Interactive virtual tours help tourists select their routes and enjoy the unforgettable Machakhela experience to the fullest.

The exhibition hall was established by the Agency of Protected Areas of Georgia's Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture with support from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The Georgian National Museum designed and planned its premises and the non-governmental Association of Mtirala and Machakhela Pro-

TECTED AREAS' Friends contributed with expertise and technical support.

Deputy Minister of Environmental Protection and Agriculture Iuri Nozadze, UNDP Deputy Resident Representative Anna Chernyshova, Chairperson of the Agency of Protected Areas David Iosebashvili, and Minister of Agriculture of the Ajara Autonomous Republic Zaza Shavadze visited Machakhela National Park on 19 July to join the first visitors to the exhibition hall.

"Thanks to UNDP support, we arranged a modern exhibition hall at the visitors' center of Machakhela National Park. This great space meets the demands of people of any age and helps visitors to experience the Machakheli Gorge. It increases touristic interest in the region, which has a positive impact on the local communities' livelihoods," said Deputy Minister Nozadze.

"Georgia's spectacular protected areas are so much more than just beautiful scenery. They preserve the history and culture and tell stories of the people's

everyday lives through generations. We should treasure this natural and cultural historic heritage, ensuring that Machakhela National Park and other protected areas continue serving people and the planet," said Chernyshova.

Together with Mtirala and Kintrishi in Georgia and Turkey's bordering Jamili Biosphere Reserve, Machakhela National Park is the latest in a chain of protected areas created to conserve the unique Colchic rainforests, safeguarded by the UNESCO World Heritage List.

Machakhela National Park absorbs thousands of tons of greenhouse gas emissions each month while providing livelihoods for over 3,000 households.

UNDP and the Global Environment Facility have been supporting Machakhela National Park since its establishment in 2012. This assistance is focused on ensuring the sustainable management of the protected area, improving biodiversity monitoring, and building sustainable economic and social opportunities for local communities.



Tushetian Cheese: A Tradition Continued



Sheepskin sacks filled with cheese being cured. Photo by Mike Godwin

BY MICHAEL GODWIN

For many, cheese is an unquestionable addition to the evening dinner table. Many others consider it a welcome ingredient for soups, salads, sandwiches, and a multitude of other options. Regardless of the form in which one prefers to consume this historical creation, its unique connection to the mountainous region of Tusheti is extensive.

Tushetian cheese is a formidable variant made by a formidable people in some of the most punishing territory of the region. Its notorious smell is enough for locals to easily identify its presence, and the strong taste is either adored or abhorred by those who taste it.

In one remote farm, accessible only by horse during most of the year, they make their cheese in the traditional way. Unchanged through centuries, this method involves techniques that many would not recognize. The brutal realities of life in the wild mountains of this region are incorporated in the process, as traditional methods are not for the faint of heart.

To attend this cheesemaking event, one needs a capable steed, a hardy saddle, and some skill at horsemanship- and so the first stop is a stables. Along with a pairing with a suitable mount, the owners of the horse farm briefly school the new riders in the fundamental skills of riding.

With this completed, the journey through the steep mountain pass begins. Some of this journey takes the adventurer along paths no wider than that of the horse's own hoof. The way winds through a steep valley with only a river

at its lowest point to break the natural silence. It's not until almost an hour into the journey that the pathway lowers into the valley and levels to the nearby terrain. It then opens into a vast plain.

The plain has a multitude of livestock, docile and grazing as the riders approach the camp. The construction alludes to the nomadic lifestyle these hearty men live: Timber frames and tarpaulin coverings cover the complex of buildings used as habitation, storage, and cooking structures that make up the camp.

For four months of the year, these men come out with their flocks of sheep and cattle to raise them and make their prized cheese. Bringing with them everything they need, they live in this wilderness, surrounded by mountains, old towers, ancient village ruins, and grassland valleys. In preparation for dinner, they bring a lamb for slaughter for the incoming guests.

The meat is piled into a pot, mixed with their own homemade wine, and set over a fire. Meanwhile, the cheesemaking process begins in another special portion of the camp's buildings. One man, the designated cheese expert, stands over a barrel of white liquid. It is here the journey begins.

First, he mixes the enzymes together in the liquid, forming a solid piece that is the early formation of cheese. This is repeatedly stirred and the excess fluid is removed. The solids are set into a basket lined with cheesecloth and squeezed so as to remove any excess moisture. The removed liquid is often separated, fermented and drunk as a form of beverage similar to that of the Central Asian Koumiss.

Meanwhile, the aforementioned slaughtered sheep's skin is trimmed of its excess hair, then inverted and stitched closed



A cheese master mixes the enzymes in with the fluids to create the necessary solids at the camp. Photo by Mike Godwin



The sheepskin being inflated by hand by the farmer. Photo by Mike Godwin

to form a sack. The trimmer then blows into the sack, inflating it and clearing it of any imperfections. After washing the sheepskin in the white cheese fluid, the firm cheese is loaded into the sheepskin. These loaded sheepskins are stored to allow the cheese to cure and set before being sold at a later date.

Returning to the cooking section of the structures, the men begin to indulge in the roasted lamb and wine. Along with the voyagers, the afternoon consists of shared stories huddled around the fire. Cheese, wine, and roasted meat fill the

aroma of the small tarpaulin structures as rain gently peppers the exterior. Upon the end of the festivities, the visitors bid farewell to their hosts, and mount their rides once again.

Leaving these semi-nomadic ranchers, one can only imagine the life they lead. Staying true to a centuries-old tradition, they are some of the last remnants of a life long forgotten. Separated from civilization by miles of dangerous and often impassable roads, these mountaineers are a unique link to the region's history and traditions.



Cheese is loaded into the sheepskins to cure over several weeks. Photo by Mike Godwin



Travelers embark on the journey into the mountains to visit the remote farm settlement. Photo by Mike Godwin



CH-USA: Etseri, Svaneti

BLOG BY TONY HANMER

Our two Swiss café building workers have been joined now by a young American friend and his bride of a year (for whom I performed the wedding ceremony) to do more in that building. Work continues apace!

The stairs, wide, solid and plane-smooth, will be covered by a peaked roof, on which the Swiss are now at work. They know that winters here offer a lot of both snow and wind, and are building accordingly. Josh, meanwhile, is using his height to finish the wood-slat ceiling, standing on a high platform especially built for this. I am cutting and taking him all the pieces he needs, a few at a time. He, like the others, brought all his own tools, all battery-powered. While this is a very convenient system, we are noticing that here batteries which should take two hours to recharge

take about four, and feel free to blame this on the rampant bitcoin mining still happening around us.

I try not to get dazzled by the veils of clouds swirling and spiraling across the Mountain Wall which is our café's main view, but satisfy myself with a few photos when not busy. I never tire of this sight, in any season or weather.

Guests come and go, rarely for more than our standard package of supper, a night, breakfast and pack lunch as they trek through Svaneti on guided tours. Once we have to ask the Swiss pair to give up their two rooms and overnight in the café, being completely full.

We will need to both insect-spray and then varnish the ceiling, first covering the now finished laminate floor with plastic first. The Swiss completed what earlier workers had to leave on a tight schedule, working indoors on the floor when the outside sun got too hot for them. It's now been a couple of cooler, wet or foggy days, much more pleasant to toil outside in.

They asked me to buy some walnut oil with which to finish the wood of the staircase, as I had some business in Batumi overnight. This was the closest place I might find it, and indeed a Goodwill supermarket sold me all it had: 5 bottles of 1/3L at over 20 GEL each, virgin pressed! The stuff's not cheap, and it's half of what I will need, but it's a start. Just slather it on (catching all precious runoff) and rub it in with a rag. Nothing else is needed, they say, and should know, having come from a similar climate to our own. I wish I could get a cheaper locally made version, given all the walnuts Svaneti and Georgia in general grow, but this I have not found. Zugdidi does not yet, to my knowledge, have a large enough supermarket to offer such exotica.

Six sets of triangular beams have now been bolted and screwed together at a suitable pitch to let snow run off them. Welded support structures are also in place to hold up the roof, cemented deep into the ground. The only thing we lack



to finish the thing is its shallow A-shaped center parts, covering the two sides of the roof along its top edge; but these are available from as close as Mestia, some 30 km away. The men all brought circular saws, but these have blades too small for some of the thicknesses of wood required; initially they cut through with a handsaw, then we give them our new, as-yet unassembled chainsaw to speed this up where prettiness of cut is not critical. They must still wait a couple of hours for some petrol and machine oil to arrive from Mestia, but busy themselves otherwise in the meantime.

I collect every scrap of off-cut wood, of any suitable size down to the smallest, and put them in empty woven plastic 50-kg flour bags: our future supply of firewood for the big Svan stove, to supplement what the electric heaters produce. All renovation work here produces such useful waste, as experience has shown, and 60 bags full of such scraps

is a few months of daily heat! It's all either dry or able to dry out over months in such air-permeable bags. All off-cuts which are too long or thick for the stove, I can of course always shorten or split.

At least now we have something to show, after a week's measuring and cutting and assembling. Another three days and our current workers must return home; but they have worked hard and well, and we are so grateful. Swiss-made, American-made, and so on, bit by bit, the café is taking shape.

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 Etseri: www.facebook.com/hanmer.house.svaneti



Keselo Fortress and A Georgian Legend



BY MICHAEL GODWIN

There's something about old castles and fortifications that elicit a variety of emotions. These immense structures connect us to a past mostly only seen in history books and movies. The ability to see the places our ancestors lived, dined, slept, fought, and potentially died in is an incredible experience.

Georgia is home to an extensive portfolio of these old fortifications. Some have lost their former glory, crumbling to only a vague reminder of a forgotten bastion of empires of yesteryear. However, some have maintained their presence or been restored by the benevolence of generous organizations. One of these, buried in the northeastern high mountains of Tusheti, looms over the town that once called it home in times of invasion.

Keselo Fortress is a castle nestled in the northern part of the Greater Caucasus Mountains, only 8.84 km (5.49 mi) from the Russo-Georgian border. Across this border sits Chechnya and Dagestan, with the historic Georgian winemaking region of Kakheti to the south. The area is isolated from the rest of Georgia during the late fall, winter, and early spring months by impassable mountain roads and heavy snowfall.

The town of Omalo, with a full-time population of less than 50 people, is nestled around the base of this castle. Its inhabitants, the early Tush people, are believed to be an amalgamation of Kakhetian and Ingusheti. These people, over centuries, made the mountains their

home due to the safety and natural defenses they afforded them.

With the introduction of Christianity in the early 4th century AD, many of those that held onto their pagan beliefs used the mountains as a refuge. In fact, this region of Georgia was one of the last to convert to Christianity sometime around the mid-18th century. Omalo would have been a haven for those seeking to continue their ancient beliefs.

Keselo Fortress itself was estimated to have been built in its current configuration around the Mongol invasions in the 1230s, with a total of 13 towers. When raiding forces were detected, the local population of Omalo would abandon their village and flee into the fortress complex. Bringing only valuable items and limited livestock, they would store these in the lower levels of the towers. Women, children, and other non-combatants would settle in the mid-levels, and the fighting men of the village would then fill the top levels of the towers with bows, and later firelock muskets called "Tbilisuri Dambacha" or "Machakhela," at the ready. These muskets were of a unique design specific to the region, with a narrow buttstock. The men would fire upon the raiders, who would have difficulty generating casualties among the entrenched defenders.

These towers, built of locally sourced slate/shale rock could easily take the brunt of the enemy's weapons. Ideally, the raiders would then only take what they could, while likely suffering casualties in the process before being forced away by the fire from the towers. The residents would then begin the rebuilding of their village.

One particular story illustrates an inter-

esting example of this defense model. In one legend, the defenders of the Keselo Fortress defeated a large Dagestani raiding party with one shot. In the legend, a Dagestani raiding party had come to pillage and rampage through the Tush people's land, taking valuable grain and livestock. When approaching Omalo, the locals fled to the castle according to their traditions.

For days, the Dagestani troops raided the village, taking food, wine, and beer for their own. The troops took to staying in the village, occasionally exchanging fire with the defenders and having raucous drinking parties in their occupied village. Finally, in an effort to draw out the defenders or make them abandon their lands, the Dagestani warlord took to a hilltop opposite the castle on the other side of the village. He stood atop this hill making boastful statements, taunting the defenders and daring them to take the field against him.

One of the defenders called to a friend who was known to be an exceptionally good shot with his Machakhela musket. He instructed him to use a double charge of gunpowder when loading, and take careful aim at the warlord atop the hill. The man aimed and fired, striking and killing the warlord almost instantly. As was Dagestani traditional belief at the time, if a warlord was killed, it was seen as the worst possible omen. The raiding party promptly left, taking their fallen leader with them. The people of Omalo had virtually saved the Tush people from ruin.

While a legend is typically born of some truth, this one deserves due scrutiny, particularly with regards to the ballistics behind this legendary kill. The Machakhela muskets, like many of the

time, were not known for exceptional accuracy, unlike those models made in Western arms factories for specific Light Foot or "Ranging" companies.

These units were specifically trained, exponentially more than regular line infantry units, to shoot with near-unrivaled accuracy. This precision is taught through weapons handling and careful construction of the ammunition.

The Machakhela musket was not a "standard" musket like Western ones. Such famed weapons as Great Britain's "Brown Bess" Land Pattern Musket, the Prussian Potzdam Musket, or France's Charleville Musket, were all factory made. These had exact standards and were made to a specific measurement. But Machakhela muskets were each unique to their owner. Made in Tbilisi or other urban centers where foundries were available, each musket often reflected the family history of the owner. Very little was made to an exact standard, instead made to the desires of the individual ordering the piece.

As a result, while it's possible that the musket the Omalo shooter held could have delivered that precise low, it's less likely than if it had come from a Western sharpshooter. Then, there's the distance covered. The straight line distance between the tower the shot most likely came from and the hill the warlord would have stood on is 270 meters (886 ft). This is a considerable distance for an accurate shot to be made with a firelock like a Machakhela.

The maximum distance of a musket overall is often over 1,000 meters, so the target is well within range, but the "effective range" has to be considered here. The muskets of this time were smoothbore, meaning they had no

grooves inside the barrel. These grooves, or rifling, exponentially increase the accuracy. Without them, the realistic range of hitting the intended target is much lower.

Most military doctrine of the time places the effective range of these weapons around 150 meters. It is at this distance that a musket could realistically be expected to hit within a 50 centimeter (20 inch) circle. However, this is not definitive. There are several historical instances of hitting targets as far as 300 meters, something termed to be "within musket-shot." These historical instances stress the importance of careful cartridge construction.

With this analysis, we come to a reasonable conclusion of the probability of the legend. It can be within realistic probability that, with a well-cared-for musket, carefully constructed cartridge, and decent experience firing at longer ranges, the Omalo shooter could have lethally hit a man-sized target at 275 meters. It is the author's personal assessment, having fired smoothbore muskets himself, that the shooter would have approximately a 65% chance of a hit. This is assuming the above three attributes are true, there is no interference (such as heavy wind), and the target was not moving.

Yet, whether this legend is true or not is immaterial to the beauty and history of the region. This, combined with the unique food, drink, and incredible flora, make it a must see for any visitor to Georgia. So much of the country has impressive windows into the past. Tusheti offers an almost untouched look into these hearty mountain people's way of life and their traditions that continue to this day.



PUBLISHER & GM
George Sharashidze

COMMERCIAL DEPARTMENT
Commercial Director:
Iva Merabishvili
Marketing Manager:
Natalia Chikvaidze

EDITORIAL DEPARTMENT:
Editor-In-Chief:
Katie Ruth Davies

Journalists:
Ana Dumbadze,
Vazha Tavberidze,
Tony Hanmer,
Emil Avdaliani,
Nugzar B. Ruhadze,
Michael Godwin,
Ketevan Skhirtladze,
Mariam Mtvilishvili,
Erekle Poladishvili

Photographer:
Aleksi Serov

Website Manager/Editor:
Katie Ruth Davies

Layout:
Misha Mchedlishvili

Webmaster:
Sergey Gevenov

Circulation Managers:
David Kerdikashvili,
David Djandjgava

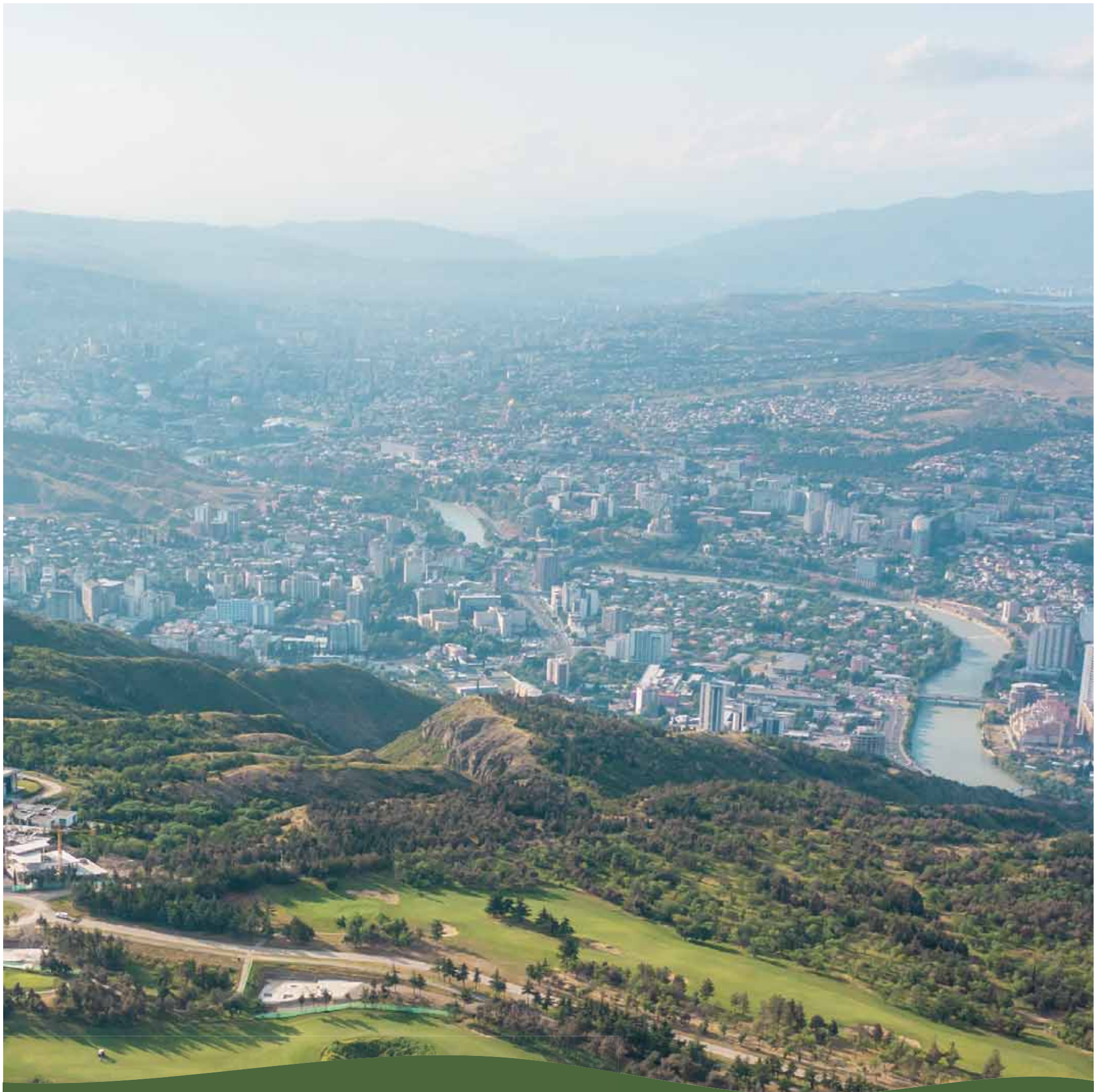
ADDRESS
1 Melikishvili Str.
Tbilisi, 0179, Georgia

Tel.: +995 32 229 59 19
E: info@georgiatoday.ge
F: GeorgiaToday

ADVERTISING & SUBSCRIPTION
+995 555 00 14 46
E-mail:
marketing@georgiatoday.ge

Reproducing material, photos and advertisements without prior editorial permission is strictly forbidden. The author is responsible for all material. Rights of authors are preserved. The newspaper is registered in Mtatsminda district court.

Reg. # 06/4-309



TBILISI HILLS



**Live in harmony
with nature**

WWW.TBILISIHILLS.COM

Discover distinctive
residential complex
with spectacular views

- Exclusive land plots from 1000 m²
- Upscale private houses
- Premium class apartments
- 18-hole golf course
- Restaurant with European cuisine

sales@tbilisihills.com

+995 577 40 24 02

+995 599 99 99 04