



R.A.V. represents the works of Alexey Balabouev at the renowned Osenat auction

## FOCUS

### ON REACH ART VISUAL

Highlighting the narratives in Georgia's artistic heritage and stepping into dialogue with global artistic dynamics **PAGE 10**

## President Zurabishvili Gives Annual Report to Parliament

**T**oday, I am not standing at the tribune of the Parliament for the last time, but I am standing at this tribune for the first time as the President of a candidate country for the European Union. Congratulations to everyone on this great victory! We did it! - President of Georgia Salome Zurabishvili began her annual report at the plenary session of the Parliament on Tuesday.

The President noted that 2023, "which ended with such a significant achievement and a newfound hope" had not been devoid of its challenges and difficulties.

"Challenges persisted in the field of security - the relentless war instigated by Russia in Ukraine persisted. Russia failed to break Ukraine and could not undermine the unity and solidarity of Europe; rather, it strengthened it," she said. "Despite this failure (or perhaps because of it), Russia initiated a hybrid war, a war without traditional warfare, across the entire territory of Georgia. These attacks comprise every form and weapon.



Continued on page 4 Source: Salome Zourabichvili/IG

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BONDS		Price	w/w	m/m	COMMODITIES		Price	w/w	m/m
GRAIL 07/28	91.60 (YTM 6.23%)	-0.2%	-0.8%		Crude Oil, Brent (US\$/bbl)	79.21	-3.1%	-0.6%	
SILNET 01/27	100.32 (YTM 8.25%)	-0.1%	+0.2%		Gold Spot (US\$/OZ)	2 035.36	-0.2%	-0.5%	
TBC 06/24	99.55 (YTM 6.97%)	+0.0%	+0.1%						
STOCKS		Price	w/w	m/m	CURRENCIES		Price	w/w	m/m
Bank of Georgia (BGE LN)	GBP 37.40	-1.4%	-2.7%		GEL / USD	2,6560	-0.9%	-1.0%	
Georgia Capital (CGEO LN)	GBP 11.16	-0.4%	+7.3%		GEL / EUR	2,8611	-1.3%	-2.6%	
TBC Bank Group (TBCG LN)	GBP 28.65	-1.7%	+2.7%		GEL / GBP	3,3550	-1.3%	-1.7%	
					GEL / CHF	3,0364	-2.3%	-3.8%	
					GEL / RUB	0,0291	-2.3%	-1.7%	
					GEL / TRY	0,0868	-1.7%	-3.6%	
					GEL / AZN	1,5638	-0.8%	-1.0%	
					GEL / AMD	0,0066	-0.9%	-1.0%	
INDICES		Price	w/w	m/m					
FTSE 100	7 628.75	-0.0%	-0.8%		GEL / UAH	0,0706	-1.1%	+0.1%	
FTSE 250	19 104.53	-1.3%	-0.6%		EUR / USD	0,9284	+0.4%	+1.6%	
DAX	16 921.96	+0.1%	+2.0%		GBP / USD	0,7920	+0.5%	+0.7%	
DOW JONES	38 677.36	+1.4%	+3.2%		CHF / USD	0,8744	+1.5%	+2.9%	
NASDAQ	15 756.64	+3.9%	+8.5%		RUB / USD	91,2752	+1.6%	+0.4%	
MSCI EM EE	43.92	+0.8%	-0.1%		TRY / USD	30,5978	+0.9%	+2.7%	
MSCI EM	1 002.55	+2.7%	+0.0%		AZN / USD	1,6997	+0.0%	+0.0%	
SP 500	4 995.06	+3.1%	+6.3%		AMD / USD	403,5000	+0.1%	-0.1%	
MSCI FM	2 307.78	+0.5%	+0.5%						

# Ukraine Latest: Josep Borrell Arrives in Kyiv amid Russian Attacks, EU Promises 50 bln but US Still on the Fence about Future Financial Aid



Josep Borrell in Kyiv this week. Source: Ukrainian Presidential Press Service

COMPILED BY ANA DUMBADZE

European Union foreign policy chief Josep Borrell met officials in Kyiv this week as Russian attacks across Ukraine killed at least five civilians. In their attacks, Russian forces fired cruise and ballistic missiles and Shahed-type drones at targets, injuring 10 others, including a pregnant woman. Borrell arrived in Kyiv on Tuesday on a trip to underline the EU's "unwavering support" for Ukraine as the war nears its third year. Borrell said his talks in Kyiv would discuss support for Ukraine on both the

military and financial sides, as well as Kyiv's progress on its reform path in its bid to join the 27-member bloc. The arrival of Borrell, who is on his fourth visit to Kyiv since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, comes at a crucial moment in the war. The European Union approved a four-year 50 billion euro (\$54 billion) facility for Ukraine last week in a major boost for Kyiv, which depends heavily on its Western allies for military and financial support. EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said on social media platform X that the EU aims to begin payments in March. The Ukrainian government has said it expects to receive about 4.5

billion euro from the EU next month.

## UKRAINE IS OUTMANNED AND OUTGUNNED ON THE BATTLEFIELD

Ukrainian military officials have said they face an acute shortage of ammunition and artillery shells as Russian forces press on with renewed assaults on several areas in the east and southeast of the country.

Ukraine has urged the EU to take "urgent steps" to increase deliveries of artillery shells, stocks that Kyiv says are desperately needed to defend itself against Russia.

Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba told top European diplomat Josep Borrell he expected the EU to ease regulations and sign long-term contracts with defense companies to boost production.

Borrell has said that he expects to provide Ukraine with 1.155 million rounds of ammunition by the end of this year.

"The defense-industrial complex of the European Union continues to grow and develop. We can state that its capacity has increased by 40 percent," Borrell said at a briefing with Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal in Kyiv.

Shmyhal noted that financial, humanitarian and military aid for his country from the European Union has reached almost 85 billion euros (\$91.5bn) since Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022.

"We are grateful," Shmyhal told Borrell during his visit this week.

Meanwhile, senior Russian foreign ministry official, Vladimir Ermakov, said that Western countries carrying out

long-range missile deliveries must be aware of the inevitable consequences of such steps.

Ukraine's military intelligence agency (GUR) claimed that Russia has been recruiting mercenaries in Syria to participate in hostilities against Ukraine.

The major aid package from the United States still remains blocked in Congress amid political infighting. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said it was vital that the US Congress approves long-term funding for Ukraine.

## RUSSIA CLAIMS IT DOWNED 7 UKRAINIAN ROCKETS, 2 DRONES OVER BELGOROD

Russia's air defense systems are said to have destroyed seven Ukraine-launched rockets and two drones over the southwestern region of Belgorod, according to the Russian defense ministry.

The Ukrainian attack was carried out with Czech-made Vampire rockets, the ministry said - the same type which, according to Moscow, was used in attacks on the city of Belgorod in late December.

Belgorod Governor Vyacheslav Gladkov said two people had been injured.

Further, Russia said it had shot down four HIMARS, and 104 drones within 24 hours Wednesday.

"Over the past 24 hours, Russian air defense systems have intercepted four HIMARS multiple launch rocket system projectiles and shot down 104 drones launched by Ukraine," Russia's Defense Ministry announced.

The air battles came "in the areas of the settlements of Mirnoye, Novoe in

the Zaporozhye region, Novaya Kakhovka, Schaslyve in the Kherson region, Vasylivka of the Donetsk People's Republic, Stelmakhovka, Zhytlovka and Ploshchanka Lugansk People's Republic", the statement said.

## UN COORDINATOR IN UKRAINE CONDEMNS 'EXTREMELY UPSETTING' RUSSIAN ATTACKS

Denise Brown, the UN humanitarian coordinator in Ukraine, has strongly condemned the rocket attacks that the Russians launched on Ukrainian cities this week.

"As a result of these strikes, a significant number of civilians were affected, which is extremely upsetting. Also, for a large number of consumers, in particular in Mykolaiv and in the capital of Ukraine, Kyiv, basic services were disrupted, including electricity, water and gas supply, when they are especially necessary in the cold winter season," she said in a statement.

"Millions of people need these services for heating, cooking or transportation. They are critical to the operation of medical and educational institutions," Brown added.

She also said that "Ukrainians should live without fear that their lives will be destroyed due to strikes."

Jarno Habicht, World Health Organization representative in Ukraine, and Munir Mammadzade, UNICEF representative to Ukraine, also expressed deep concern about "the recent drastic increase in attacks impacting civilians and civilian objects across Ukraine".

## Hot-air Balloon Hits Power Line in Asureti Village, Killing Three



A controlled hot-air balloon hit a high-voltage power line in Asureti village in Tetrtskaro municipality. Three people died as a result. One of those killed is Misho Bidzishvili, an Imedi TV videographer. Experts and law enforcement officers are working on the spot. The Ministry of Internal Affairs launched a probe into the accident under Article 275 of the Criminal Code, which refers to safety rules violation.

## SSSG: Ukraine to Russia Bomb Threat Foiled, Probe Ongoing

The State Security Service's counter-terrorist center, through operational and investigative activities, successfully seized several units of special explosive devices and a significant quantity of explosives, they announced during a briefing at the State Security Service on Monday.

The Agency says following investigative actions and based on preliminary information, a specific vehicle was searched, leading to the removal of two electric car batteries. These batteries were used as containers, and each were found to contain six explosive devices each.

"The bomb squad removed the explosive devices and sent them to the Ministry of Internal Affairs' Expert-Criminal Department for examination. To maintain the secrecy of ongoing investigative measures, the containers were restored to their original appearance and presented as mock-ups so that the secret investigative activities carried out would not become known to either the customers or the performers. The primary goal of the investigation was to determine who had ordered them, and others involved in the cargo transportation, the route of movement, and their final use goals.

"The explosive devices were armed with C-4 plastic explosives, typically used by the military, and can be set off using an electric detonator and a specialized timer. The explosive weighed a total of 14 kilograms. The containers also held 6 detonators and 6 special keys. Each of the six explosive device boxes contained an electronic activation timer with a pre-programmed activation time.

"Deploying such a device in crowded areas would cause significant damage



to infrastructure and large-scale casualties," the SSSG representative noted.

"The investigation revealed that these devices had been transported from the Ukrainian city of Odesa through Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey to Georgia by a Ukrainian citizen. The intended destination was initially the city of Voronezh in the Russian Federation. Subsequently, the plan changed, with one container thought to be for transit to Russia and another with three explosive devices to be left in Tbilisi.

"The transport was stopped and removed by the employees of the counter-terrorist center when it was about to cross the Georgian-Russian state border from the Georgian side.

"During the investigation, the SSG revealed that seven individuals from Georgia, three from Ukraine, and two from Armenia were implicated in the

importation of explosive devices into Georgia, their transportation within the country, the transfer of one container to the Russian Federation, and the placement of another container in the capital city.

"The probe revealed that Andrei Sharashidze, a Ukrainian citizen and MP candidate of the Kyiv district of the local Rada of the Odesa area in 2020 from the Servant of the People party, who is from Batumi, organized the process. This person tracked the transportation of the aforementioned explosive devices from outside Georgia. The inquiry also determined that the other suspects, except for Sharashidze, were most likely uninformed of the explosive devices and detonator capsules implanted in the car's batteries.

"The ongoing investigation aims to gather evidence, determine the intended

targets, and clarify the route and final destination.

"As for the explosive devices left in Tbilisi, the ongoing investigation will determine whether they were intended to be exported to Russia or kept in Georgia.

"The involvement of Georgian citizens suggests a potential attempt to shift blame for planned terrorist acts to Georgia.

"The probe is open under Article 236 (illegal purchase and storage of explosive substances and explosive devices) and Article 18-323 (preparation of a terrorist act) of the Criminal Code of Georgia," the SSG stated.

The State Security Service expressed gratitude to the General Prosecutor's Office and the Ministry of Internal Affairs for their assistance in the ongoing investigation.

# Mid-week Storms in Georgia Lead to Landslides, Avalanches, Floods and Loss of Life



The landslide in Nergeeti. Source: 1TV

BY TEAM GT

**N**ine people have been confirmed killed in a 30-meter, 150,000 m3 landslide that hit four houses in the village of Nergeeti, Baghdati, in Georgia's Imereti region, on Tuesday night. Temur Mgebrishvili, the head of the emergency management service, is in the disaster zone supervising the ongoing rescue

and clean-up work. "Over 200 fire fighters and rescuers, representatives of various units of the local government and the Ministry of Internal Affairs are on the scene, as is equipment, drones, and a group of canine experts," the Ministry of Internal Affairs announced Wednesday morning. Rescuers said Thursday that they had recovered all nine bodies of the victims missing after hours of searching the area. Locals say there were three minors among those trapped in the landslide,

who died together with their father.

### STRONG WIND, FLOOD HIT SAMEGRELO-ZEMO SVANETI REGION

Strong wind in the Martvili, Chkhorotsku, and Tsalenjikha districts of the western Samegrelo region on Tuesday ripped the roofs from houses and other buildings, including the Rukhi village public school. The Chkhori culture house and ethnic Sisatura village were also damaged. The wind uprooted trees in Tsalenjikha



Twin sisters Anna and Ketii, brother David and their father, killed in the Baghdati landslide. Source: Facebook

villages and damaged electricity transmission lines. The electricity supply was cut off, and restoration works were carried out on Wednesday.

The Enguri River swelled and flooded areas of Anaklia.

Traffic was restricted on the Jvari-Mestia road, which was hit by an avalanche Tuesday night. Nineteen people trapped there were quickly rescued.

Giorgi Guguchia, the Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti Regional Envoy, said that all special services had been mobilized and were working in emergency mode Wednesday. Special commissions are working to calculate the inflicted damage.

### AVALANCHE BLOCKS CENTRAL ROAD OF TAGO VILLAGE, KHULO MUNICIPALITY

Vakhtang Beridze, Mayor of the Khulo municipality in Adjara, reported

Wednesday that an avalanche had hit the central road in Tago village. No one was injured.


Beridze added that due to heavy rainfall, electricity has been cut off from several villages.


The Adjara Roads Department began clearing both central and internal rural roads Wednesday.

### HEAVY RAINFALL HITS VILLAGES OF DUSHETI, TIANETI AND MTSKHETA MUNICIPALITIES

On Tuesday night, heavy rainfall restricted traffic movement and also affected the electricity supply in villages in the Dusheti, Tianeti and Mtskheta municipalities.

Cleaning works were carried out on both central and connecting roads between villages Wednesday, while emergency crews sought to restore the electricity supply.





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# President Zurabishvili Gives Annual Report to Parliament

Continued from page 1

Russia's intent to convert the port of Ochamchire into a military base seeks to shift the confrontation to the Black Sea, within our territorial waters, jeopardizing the strategic prospect of the Black Sea region. These attacks include declaring mobilization in occupied territories, taking steps toward annexation (such as those directed at the Ochamchire port, Bichvinta state residence, and Sokhumi Babushera airport), neglecting human rights, and erasing cultural and identity markers. The relentless intimidation, abduction, and targeting of civilians persist along the occupation line.

"Nationwide anti-Western propaganda, along with pseudo-co-religionist narratives is being disseminated, the encouragement and financing of pro-Russian factions, escalating cyber-attacks on state institutions, are indicative of what to expect in the wake of the upcoming election," the President noted.

"The hybrid warfare encompasses the massive influx of Russian immigrants, directly impacting the economy, sometimes positively, sometimes negatively, and heightening the nation's reliance on Russian investments and markets - a reliance on Russian capital.

"The hybrid strategy is the basis of various provocations, such as the resumption of flights, unhindered entry of FSB agents and other high-ranking officials, unhindered movements of Russian cruise ships in Batumi, and the display of Stalin's icon in the Trinity Cathedral... These actions aim to instigate discord, and confrontation in society, and threaten us with destabilization," she claimed, adding that 2023 had presented "no lack of challenges in terms of democracy."

"In 2023, instead of implementing democratic reforms, we witnessed an unprecedented strengthening of power, directly reflected in the initiation of 'Russian law'. This legislation aimed to suppress civil society and an attempt at its disarmament.

"Following the defeat of this legislation came the law on the National Bank, alteration of the procedure for selecting the chairman of the CEC [the supreme body of Election Administration of Georgia], and ultimately an attempt to impeach the president. This latter not only underscored the non-acceptance of the independence of the presidential institution but also highlighted the dire state of the Constitutional Court," she told Parliament.

"All of this occurs at a time when the primary objective of a country striving towards Europe should be to strengthen independent institutions.

"The necessary balance among the branches of the state, which is the cornerstone of democracy, has been severely disrupted. There is no longer a dividing line between the party and the government. Instead of supervising and controlling the government, the parliament has become merely an implementer of party policies.

"After a short-lived attempt at a coalition government in 2012-2013, which followed the one-party systems of Eduard Shevardnadze and Mikheil Saakashvili, the country has reverted to the old, one-party monolithic model. Recent changes also follow this suit, emphasizing the maintenance and reinforcement of the one-party power system, supposedly labeled as the internal democracy of the party and/or the principle of rotation," the president stated.

"Elite corruption has taken on a new dimension, signaling that the appetite of the elite knows no bounds. In reality, nothing is under effective oversight, and no accountability is demonstrated. All because elite corruption serves as the essential cement that consolidates monolithic power around its reliable caste. They do not vie for power; instead of power, they engage in a distribution of wealth among themselves.

"The deification and idolization of power are directly part of the Soviet legacy, with its vertical structure, one-party rule, authoritarian decision-making, extending gratitude, self-abasement and



self-incrimination for survival, compromising materials, wire-tapping and snitching, clans and slaves, etc. (I am talking about the Soviet system here).

"After independence, no government has possessed the strength or determination necessary to fully dismantle the monolithic power structure and restore a democratic balance of power.

"Instead, power has merely changed hands, with new individuals assuming control, but the fundamental system itself has not and could not be changed," she said.

"This system entails the concentration of power in a single hand and along one vertical, utilizing the judiciary and all law enforcement agencies as branches of power support. The judicial clan has become the embodiment of this never-ending system: individuals like Murusidze and Chinchaladze serve the current ruling team with the same unwavering dedication as they did the previous one. If nothing changes, tomorrow they will simply align themselves with a new owner, pledging their loyalty to them.

"This system is characterized by its desire to destroy the opposition. It neither needs political adversaries nor critical opinions. Therefore, it becomes imperative to demonize any alternative, using labels such as 'traitors,' 'agents,' or 'radicals.' The narrative persists that 'anyone contending my authority is therefore fighting against the country.' Compromising materials are tools of discredit and destruction, while bribery serves as a softer alternative.

"The European orientation has also encountered a particular challenge.

"Initially unnoticeably, and later more pronouncedly, our centuries-old orientation shifted its emphasis: anti-European and anti-Western sentiments transitioned from marginal political circles to state rhetoric. In turn, positions toward Russia notably softened. Further escalation in relations with Ukraine, and public distancing from the EU and the US regarding international sanctions at particularly critical junctures, cast doubt on the firmness of our foreign orientation. Through ambiguous rhetoric and steps, we have jeopardized the monumental efforts and achievements we have made toward European integration.

"Yet, despite these challenges, Georgia

succeeded and obtained candidate status!" the President noted.

"Society did not back down and fought to safeguard its future. The probity of the people, both at home and abroad, has demonstrated to everyone that our aspiration toward European integration has a ground and that the Georgian people are truly committed and united in pursuit of this objective. All of this has convinced our society that it possesses the strength to attain its goal. Additionally, the special role of free, European youth has emerged in building the nation's future, establishing it as a beacon of hope.

"Via our society's experience, with its traditional tolerance, wisdom, and restraint, we avoided and overcame provocations of Russian immigration and propaganda. Our society remains vigilant to Russia's hybrid actions, and we retained stability and unshaken pro-Europeanness.

"From a democratic standpoint, the courageous opposing opinion of the three judges of the Constitutional Court regarding the issue of impeachment, and the failure of the impeachment scenario from both legal and political perspectives, are viewed as positive indicators. The separation of three members and their resignation from the unilateral decision of the National Bank also signal positivity. The signs of society possessing a robust awareness and desire for democracy, a readiness to safeguard the progress achieved, and a refusal to tolerate setbacks, provide a foundation of hope. This embodies the power of people!

"The granting of candidate status represents a new opportunity for the country's future.

"First and foremost, the opportunity to enhance security: For us, the most tragic and dangerous situation would be isolation, staying alone and, face-to-face with Russia," she said. "Candidacy and commencing negotiations tomorrow signify our entry into the European security space, thereby reclaiming our role as an active player on the international and regional stages. Consequently, we become firsthand partners with Europe, which has recently demonstrated its strength and adherence to its principles. Europe is a reliable and robust partner of a safe and peaceful region of tomorrow.

A true testament to Europe's sense of responsibility and democracy is its recent demonstration of dialogue and democratic principles, where every effort was made to achieve consensus without succumbing to the dictates of the majority. It has sent the strongest message to Moscow.

"Europe also signifies bolstering independence: The European family has no alternative, where our identity, culture, and values will be safeguarded and highlighted. The route of Russification is not an alternative - we have already traversed it. This memory remains vivid within us. Our smaller, brotherly Caucasian nations, have traversed this path more tragically, some of which are now considered extinct. The Abkhazian language, culture, and identity are perilously positioned along this path! Europe, meanwhile, embodies a space of sovereign nations, diverse languages, minorities, regions, diverse cultures, and protection of identity through equality and legal protection.

"Europe also means prosperity. Nowadays, Europe stands as the wealthiest region globally. However, wealth alone holds little significance unless it translates into universal prosperity, founded on the protection and fulfillment of life, health, and safety rights. This is what Europe promises us. This prosperity must be accessible to all and should not be monopolized by a privileged minority. The foundation of the European state cannot rest on anything other than these democratic principles, which ensure that citizens possess a range of safeguarded rights.

"Citizens have the right to have their work safety ensured and to mitigate tragic incidents.

"Citizens have the right to access healthcare within their own country, ensuring that traveling abroad or seeking shelter in another country is not deemed a necessary solution.

"Citizens have the right to reside in a secure environment where European legislation regulates and just courts safeguard aspects such as food safety, chaotic constructions, the ecological environment, noise pollution, and the issue of uncontrolled stray animals, among others.

"Citizens have the right to be protected from all forms of violence, including sexual harassment and actions that infringe upon dignity.

"Prosperity also involves prevention, ensuring that if a disaster similar to the Shovi natural catastrophe were to occur again, the tragedy would not be repeated, and the state would not prove to be weak, relying solely on the heroism of individuals.

"This is why the decision made on December 15 marked such a significant occasion. In 2023, Georgia solidified its position within the European family for the future. On this day, Europe conveyed a clear message: 'You are Europeans, and your integration into Europe depends solely on you, your will, and the actions you take,'" she said. "Now, it is our turn to act!"

"The objective for 2024 is unequivocal! Our destiny lies within our control! This entails assuming the utmost responsibility, as we are presented with an unparalleled opportunity not only to formally integrate into the European sphere but also to instill a sense of European identity within ourselves, metamorphosing the post-Soviet nation into a vibrant, prosperous, resilient, European, and democratic entity. Only through such a transformation can we incite the youth to stay in the nation, beckon back the diaspora, and ignite fresh vigor, thereby forging our destiny independent of external influences.

"Today, it's time to consign the past to history and pave the path for a new Georgia. This signifies our European path and, consequently, our national path!

"The imperatives laid forth by Europe align closely with the requisites for fortifying the nation, echoing the longstanding clamors of society: justice, equality, and security," the President stated.

"To realize this vision, it is imperative to bid farewell once and for all to the most deleterious vestiges of the Soviet era.

"This entails transforming the power model and transitioning to the European model: the European governance framework embodies principles of free competition, pluralism of viewpoints, and governance predicated upon compromise and equitable power distribution. In the European paradigm, coalition governance, if not unavoidable, is commonplace, which means that at least the dialogue between the political factions is possible and establishing the common ground is necessary.

"This signifies the battle against corruption to establish a novel European-style market and social economy: wherein wealth is equitably dispersed, budget allocations reflect the well-being of the majority, private initiatives are unhindered, and procurement processes are transparent and equitable. Attainment of success should hinge on merit, talent, and diligence rather than on connections and favoritism within circles of influence.

"The European model mandates a just judiciary: liberation of the economy, safeguarding human rights, and fostering equitable conditions for political entities - all matters necessitate recourse to an impartial court; a court that upholds and applies the principles of the rule of law, shielding the vulnerable from the powerful, the marginalized from the privileged, and the just from oppressive forces.

"It is evident that no single side can solely fulfill these priorities, as the duty over these endeavors collectively rests on the commitment of every individual to the nation and its future.

"However, concurrently, it is apparent that the primary duty and accountability lie with those vested with the levers of power, namely the government, the parliamentary majority, and now too, to their leader, Bidzina Ivanishvili. They bear both a collective and individual responsibility to promptly actualize the nine recommendations laid out by the European Union.

"As the president of this nation, I cannot and will not preemptively assess the new prime minister or evaluate the implications of one's arrival, another's departure, or incentivizing the third. Nevertheless, it is incumbent upon me to vocalize from this podium everything our public is concerned with, of which they have the right to receive a response. Such accountability to the people is the main principle of democracy.

"I direct my query to the new prime minister, implicated in the admission of Gavrilov into the national parliament, the revocation of Charles Michel's document, anti-European rhetoric, and impeachment proceedings: How do you intend to adhere to the public's European mandate and specifically enact the European recommendations before the elections?!"

"Will you present a comprehensive plan delineating the recalibration of the Supreme Council of Justice and the Supreme Court within a stipulated timeframe? How you will ensure consensus on the formation of the Election Administration of Georgia, provide the anti-corruption bureau with investigatory powers and independence, ensure the independence of the National Bank of Georgia, and align with the foreign and defense policies of the European Union?"

"However, the principal addressee of the public's inquiries today transcends the prime minister, the chairman of the Parliament, or the chairman of the ruling party - it is the individual effectively steering the nation.

"Therefore, I address my inquiries to Bidzina Ivanishvili. The public is entitled to receive your clarification regarding the statements made upon your return: concerning corruption, the nation's foreign policy, personnel changes within the government, and whether you terminated an individual's position due to their guilt before the nation, a divergence of opinions, or other undisclosed reasons.

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## Environment Agency Head: Landslide Developed Instantly, Making it Impossible to Prevent

**T**he National Environment Agency Head, Vasil Gedevanishvili, has reported that multiple groups of geologists from the National Environment Agency are actively working at the landslide disaster site in Baghdati, conducting a detailed study and analysis to determine if there is any additional danger. The agency plans to publish a comprehensive report shortly.

Gedevanishvili expressed deep sorrow regarding the incident and offered condolences to the families of the victims.

"The landslide caused about 150,000

cubic meters of material to fall from the rock, destroying residential houses. The landslide developed instantly, making it practically impossible to prevent.

"The National Environment Agency conducts a nationwide threat assessment every year, identifying potential threats, which are numerous in Georgia. In this specific case, the slope in Baghdati was not directly evaluated, and the agency is actively working to provide more details," he explained.

Gedevanishvili said that with climate changes, natural events have become more frequent globally and in Georgia.

He emphasized that potential threats require additional research and study.

"Additional analysis of potentially landslide-prone areas is essential to assess the risks, but even then, it does not guarantee full protection against such events," he added.

He clarified that there were no specific statements or messages received from the families before the incident, except for one statement related to falling stones on an adjacent slope.

On Tuesday night, a landslide hit Nergeeti village of the Baghdati municipality in the Imereti region, trapping four houses.

## Azerbaijan Election: President Ilham Aliyev Wins Fifth Term



SOURCE: DW

**A**zerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev has secured a fifth consecutive term in office. Following the recapture of Nagorno-Karabakh in September, the result was a predictable landslide, but Aliyev's rivals have alleged fraud, DW reports.

President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan secured a fifth consecutive term in elections on Wednesday, winning 92% of the vote.

"The Azerbaijani people have elected Ilham Aliyev as the country's president," Central Election Commission chief Mazahir Panahov told a press conference.

Turnout in the snap election, which was called a year early following Azerbaijan's recapture of the Nagorno-Karabakh region from Armenian separatists last September, was 67.7%, DW reports.

Several thousand Aliyev supporters united on Wednesday evening in the streets of central Baku to celebrate his re-election, singing patriotic songs and holding signs with messages such as "Karabakh's liberator" and "We are proud of you!"

"Although he fell short of the 93.9% predicted by initial exit polls, the margin of victory was still high, even by Aliyev's standards. In previous elections, he generally only won about 85% of the votes.

"However, the election was held amid a crackdown on independent media and in the absence of any real opposition,"

DW notes.

Azerbaijan's main opposition parties boycotted the vote, which Ali Kerimli of the Popular Front party called an "imitation of democracy."

"There are no conditions in the country for the conduct of free and fair elections," he said.

The six other candidates who ran were little-known and had praised Aliyev as a great statesman and commander-in-chief since he announced the election in December, a year ahead of schedule.

Aliyev said he called the election to "mark the beginning of a new era" that sees Azerbaijan having full control over its territory.

For the first time in Azerbaijan's post-Soviet history, 26 polling stations opened in Karabakh, where the president and first lady Mehriban Aliyeva went to cast their ballots in the region's main city of Khankendi.

The enclave has been largely deserted after its entire ethnic-Armenian population — more than 100,000 people — fled to Armenia after Baku's takeover.

In 2009, Aliyev amended Azerbaijan's constitution to allow him to run for an unlimited number of presidential terms. Rights advocates criticized that move, saying it would see him become president for life.

Then, in 2016, Azerbaijan adopted controversial constitutional changes that lengthened the president's term in office from five years to seven. Aliyev has further shored up his dynastic grip on power by appointing his wife Mehriban Aliyeva as first vice president.

## President Zurabishvili Gives Annual Report to Parliament

Continued from page 4

"As society aims for a new European governance model, clarity is crucial regarding how and when the transition from a single-party, monolithic, and hierarchical structure to a democratic European framework will occur. The public eagerly awaits your response regarding when you will dismiss Murusidze-Chinchaladze from the judiciary. While you confront the United National Movement on one front, remnants of it persist unaddressed on the other.

"I also extend my address to the opposition. You too carry the responsibility. Cease the fighting and animosity toward each other, as it fosters despondency and nihilism in society. It is not my prerogative to impose unity or dissolution upon you, but I appeal to you to strive to converge on the main priorities of the nation. Demonstrate to the public that despite your divergent ideologies, you can engage in dialogue, collaborate, and achieve outcomes in pursuit of our European aspirations. The primary mission of the opposition is to mobilize and garner public support for the European cause.

"I implore the public; your role and engagement will be pivotal. At this critical juncture, it is perplexing why there should be any attempt or inclination toward propagating hopelessness, self-reproach, and pessimism. Such sentiments are unwarranted in our country today. None among us has the right to stagnate, succumb to inertia, or forfeit one of the brightest and most attainable prospects for our future. When we discuss the future, the will, and the vision of the people, the time has arrived for every voice and will to be truly registered, as the upcoming

elections will shape our future. It is the responsibility and duty of every citizen to actively participate therein. Active participation necessitates complete mobilization. If the future is being shaped today, failing to engage therein constitutes a dereliction of duty.

"I appeal to our diaspora citizens, who are equally responsible for contributing to shaping the nation's future: familiarize yourselves with your rights, and complete consular registration promptly to ensure the timely request for the establishment of new polling stations, a right enshrined in law. Advocate for an extension of election days similar to other European nations. Participation in elections poses no threat, even for those residing abroad illegally—a fact confirmed both verbally and practically by our allies. Personally, I will be the protector of your election rights.

"To the youth, I emphasize: your contributions to last year's triumph were substantial, and now, your involvement is paramount in preparing for the forthcoming pivotal phase. This nation is yours, boasting a glorious past and an equally glorious future; don't leave it to anyone else!

"History across various nations attests that unprecedented youth activism during elections can alter outcomes and shape the future. You can do this too!

"Lastly, it is imperative for everyone to understand that these elections transcend mere voting for one party over another, a particular political program, or leader, or abstaining from voting due to personal preferences. Today, we stand at a decisive juncture in our history where, through elections, we will determine our future, vote for a new governance model, and a new economy — ultimately, a new European state.

"Do not perceive that I do not sense

a significant responsibility in the face of this historical task, not as one with specific legal or material leverage (which I do not possess), but as the moral force and transmitter of the state position. Hence, throughout this challenging period, I shall remain steadfast by your side, acting as an observer, welder, and supervisor of these processes.

"Certain individuals may have harbored or continue to harbor the expectation that resentment, harassment, or other adversities might wear me down, weaken my resolve, and compel me to forsake the oath I swore before you, the power of which I feel to this day. I assure you that I will remain steadfast, loyal to this oath and the Constitution until the very end.

"Someone might also be eager to thrust me into the arena of political wrestling, depicting me as the leader of a political force, whether of the ruling party or the opposition. In vain! I have traversed this path. I believe that today, the country requires a non-partisan, yet principled, state leader possessing a strategic vision, and devoid of political ambitions and personal interests, who will serve the ultimate goal to the very end: to replace the Soviet past with a European future, to perpetually fortify the country's independence within a free and peaceful European family.

"I am overjoyed that this significant step toward Europe has been taken during this very mandate, which has always been and continues to be the primary objective of my involvement in Georgian politics. I am not planning to or need to engage in any competition regarding the extent of my contribution to this victory, as it stands as an achievement for all of Georgia. Now is not the time for us to drift apart, but

rather the time to bring this achievement to fruition. On a personal level, I am committed to relentlessly pursuing this objective, whether within the nation or extending beyond its borders.

"I caution you all to recognize and understand that our country, alongside our profoundly fatigued and disappointed society, can no longer endure endless hatred, divisive and destructive elections (characterized by a winner-takes-all mentality), the preaching of revenge, and the relentless pursuit of scapegoats. What our country requires now is appeasement and protection, and above all, the ability to envision the future of the country and have faith in one's perspectives within it. Therefore, from this podium today, I present to you a path out of this deadlock, ensuring that we do not squander this exceptional opportunity.

"The country yearns for unity. Society no longer believes in, nor desires to witness, the schemes of party unification that have already been attempted more than once. It remains unconvinced by singular claims of absolute victory. What it needs is a tangible objective, a rallying point that brings together vital forces and mobilizes energy toward a singular goal.

"We have a goal - the European future. To achieve this, consolidation of key priorities is imperative. This can be accomplished through the formation of a united platform. This is what I am proposing - to create a charter of the future - a united platform for Europe!

"I am prepared to assume my responsibility for the formation of this platform and to establish a coordination center within my administration. This center will consolidate all specific proposals regarding European priorities, and through dialogue and consensus,

it will facilitate to crafting a united document.

"For this purpose, in the coming days, I intend to meet with representatives from across the political spectrum as well as interested individuals from civil society. This approach aims to be inclusive, and I am fully receptive to meeting and listening to all.

"There is no alternative winning formula, as the divisions and confrontations of the past will only breed skepticism and hopelessness, ultimately weakening the country.

"The winning formula does not signify the triumph of any particular side or party, but rather the triumph of unity, Europeanness, and the country itself. Just as Georgia emerged victorious on December 15, it must now continue to prevail through implementing reforms and conducting fair elections. This stands as the sole guarantee for stability, peace, and progress.

"As it has been throughout all stages of my political journey, my role remains unchanged: I stand at the forefront of independence, nationhood, democracy, and the European future. Just as I have done until today, I will continue to categorically oppose any attempts to revert to the Soviet-Russian past and sabotage the European opportunities.

"Finally, I want it to be clear to everyone that this peaceful, fair, and equal future belongs not only to us but also to those in occupied Abkhazia and Tskhinvali who can no longer protect their basic human rights, cultural identity, language, and lands from forceful alienation. Instead, a reliable and trustworthy path lies ahead for us to enter Europe together. This future has no alternative; it is the will of the Georgian people, and it is our duty to fulfill this will," Salome Zurabishvili concluded.

# "Extremely Worrying" – Atlantic Council's Peter Dickinson on Ukraine's Impending Gov't Reshuffle

INTERVIEW BY VAZHA TAVBERIDZE

**P**eter Dickinson is a British media professional specializing in Ukraine who works as Editor of the Atlantic Council's UkraineAlert Service, and Chief Editor of the Business Ukraine and Lviv Today magazines. Radio Free Europe/RL's Georgian Service sat down with him to discuss the impact of the planned removal of Zaluzhny and Ukraine's prospects in future offensives against Russia.

## ONE OF THE MOST TALKED-ABOUT THINGS TODAY IS THE IMPENDING GOVERNMENT CHANGES IN UKRAINE. WHY IS IT HAPPENING?

Well, unfortunately, it looks like domestic politics. There's no clear military reason that I'm aware of why Zaluzhny should be removed. The only the military argument as such, is the idea that war is changing very quickly and we need new thinking, new people in charge, people who are not from the old school, as it were, who are prepared to adopt new strategies, to incorporate all these new forms of warfare that we're seeing. But Zaluzhny is as good a candidate as you're going to find, and is certainly strong in this area. His strategies over the last two years demonstrate this- he incorporated a lot of new weaponry effectively in 2022. I don't believe the argument that he's a yesterday's man, that he's not fit for the new challenges.

Then there's the illusion that he's too cautious. There's been a number of incidents where Zaluzhny has reportedly wanted to withdraw and Zelensky has said "no, we stay." Bakhmut was one, and I've heard similar reports about Avdiivka and the counteroffensive last summer, that Zaluzhny was too conservative in his approach.

## COULD IT BE THAT HE'S PAYING THE PRICE FOR THE FAILED COUNTEROFFENSIVE?

No, I don't think so. The Ukrainians see that the counteroffensive failed because they didn't receive enough weapons. It's really as simple as that. But I think some in the Zelensky team have tried to create the idea that Zelensky is a much more aggressive leader, a much more ambitious leader, and he needs a military leader who will be the same, who will not be conservative. Zelensky has been very upbeat in his talk about the Ukrainian victory, and he was publicly upset when Zaluzhny talked about the stalemate last year. He was quoted as saying: "I believe in victory. I need people who believe in victory." So, there is a sense that he wants to have somebody who will be as ambitious or as proactive as he is in his thinking. He wants no retreats.

## WHAT ARE THE PITFALLS IN THIS KIND OF CHANGE?

Oh, it could be extremely costly. I think the main reason Zelensky wants Zaluzhny removed is because he fears Zaluzhny's popularity. Ukrainian politics is very, very fickle. Popularity comes and goes in hours or days. And the reason why Zaluzhny is significantly more popular is that, in Ukraine, people have no faith in politics. Anyone who becomes a politician, immediately loses half of their credibility. Because Zaluzhny's not a politician, he's seen as more trustworthy, and he's clearly a very successful military commander. He's well respected. The two most respected institutions in



Peter Dickinson

Ukraine are the military and the volunteer movement, and Zaluzhny is a symbol of that.

## IT DOESN'T SPEAK WELL ABOUT UKRAINE'S LEADERSHIP, DOES IT? A POPULARITY CONTEST? THE NO.1 AGENDA SHOULD BE HOW TO EFFECTIVELY KICK THE RUSSIANS OUT.

Yes, it's extremely worrying. It speaks very, very badly for Ukrainian leadership. And it suggests that disaster is coming.

## WHAT COULD THE COST BE INTERNATIONALLY?

I don't think the West will react. The West will leave it to Ukraine to decide if they choose another military leader. The West supports Ukraine for its own interests, not for Ukrainian interests. They understand that Ukraine is not a perfect democracy, they understand that Ukraine is far from an ideal nation in terms of its institutions. And they respect that, they understand that it takes centuries to establish such a country. The West's interest is in preventing Russia from becoming an expansionist imperial power which threatens NATO, so they will continue to support Ukraine.

But the Russians, of course, will exploit the Zaluzhny situation, it will allow them to demoralize Ukrainian society. It will become the number one theme of Russian propaganda. We will hear nonstop about how Zelensky is prioritizing his political interests over Ukraine's national interests, how it's madness to die for Zelensky, when Zelensky only cares about Zelensky, how Zaluzhny is a hero who's been betrayed, and how "we must stop the war with our Russian brothers tomorrow, because it's a losing game, and Zelensky is a traitor."

## AND WHAT WILL ZALUZHNY BE DOING WHILE ALL THIS IS GOING ON?

I think he will probably go very quiet for a while. There will be enormous pressure on him to become a figurehead for politicians. We've already seen some politicians in Ukraine attempting to use him as such, and if he is removed, they will become very active in their protest. But I think he'll be very cautious about

getting involved. I don't think he's particularly interested in being a political figure, but he's certainly a patriot, he's certainly a leader. And I think he would want to somehow continue that, which means he will have to go into politics. It depends on the way he is removed. If he is simply dismissed, then we might see him in politics within six months. If he is moved to another position, he may keep quiet and see if he can continue to influence the war effort through whatever position he's given within the administration or as head of the Security Council or whatever it may be. But I think if he's dismissed entirely, he will almost inevitably become a symbolic figure, at least in the political sphere.

## FROM THE RUSSIAN PERSPECTIVE, BETWEEN ZELENSKY AND ZALUZHNY, WHICH ONE IS MORE LIKELY TO NEGOTIATE WITH YOU?

It is very unlikely that either of them would sit down with Russia in the near future, in the current circumstances. Perhaps if the military situation became dramatically worse, or dramatically better, then negotiations might become a realistic proposal, but at this stage I think neither of them would entertain the idea at all. There's almost nobody in Ukraine today who would negotiate with Russia.

## HOW DOES THIS CHANGE AFFECT IMMEDIATE WAR EFFORTS?

Well, Ukraine has no opportunities now, because they have no weapons. Ukraine is on the defensive, and that will be the situation for the foreseeable future, until they receive more aid. At the moment, they're having to ration their ammunition and have very limited abilities to defend themselves. And it's quite likely they will have to make some minor retreats on the front, perhaps at Avdiivka, perhaps around Bakhmut, perhaps on the Zaporozhzhia front.

## DO YOU EXPECT THIS TO CHANGE, CONSIDERING THE DEVELOPMENTS THAT WE'VE BEEN SEEING IN THE US AND EUROPE?

The European situation is very positive, with the European Union agreeing to this very large, long term aid package.

And we're seeing the Germans are dramatically increasing their support. They are still cautious in terms of weapons, but in terms of volume, they're increasing. They began the war by giving 5000. Now they're giving 8 billion euros per year. So it's a massive increase in German support. We're seeing countries like the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Romania, trying to mobilize more; Finland is dramatically increasing its military output. And the rhetoric has changed. We're seeing countries like France speaking openly about the very real danger to Europe if Ukraine is not defended, if Europe doesn't rise. Europe has really moved quite significantly in the last few months. But it's mainly moved because of America, because they see that America is essentially lost now to the Western coalition. It seems like an unpredictable situation, but it certainly looks like there is very little hope of any more American aid before the elections in November, what with the Trump camp, the MAGA movement within the Republican Party, very clearly having decided there will be no aid for Ukraine. With Trump's threats, everybody in the Republican party knows that if they support Ukraine, they will lose their careers and they will have no job come Trump's return in November.

The key question is, can Europe replace America in this context? I think the answer is no, it can't. Certainly not in the short term. So although it's good that Europe is responding in a very proactive way, it won't be enough. It will be enough to prevent a complete collapse, but it will not be enough to allow Ukraine to launch another major counteroffensive.

## WHAT SHOULD UKRAINE DO UNTIL THE SITUATION CHANGES FOR THE BETTER?

Defend itself. They are building defenses along the front lines, they are looking to prevent Russia from making any major advances, looking to hold the ground they currently hold. They've managed to liberate half the land that Russia seized in 2022. So they want to hold that, they want to protect the rest of the country. Then they're looking to open up new fronts. The Black Sea has already been the big success story of the past year, seeing Ukraine managing to break the Russian blockade and resume merchant

shipping from its ports, forcing the Russian fleet to retreat. Ukrainian exports are now almost at pre-war levels.

## AND THEN THERE ARE THE ATTACKS DEEP INSIDE RUSSIA, TARGETING WAR DEPOSITS, INFRASTRUCTURE, ENERGY. WILL THAT BE ENOUGH TO FORCE PUTIN TO RELINQUISH THE "CONQUERED TERRITORIES"?

No. Ukraine could destroy the entire Black Sea Fleet and most people in Russia wouldn't notice. But the attacks on Russia's oil and gas industry have far greater potential. The campaign has just begun- we've only seen six or seven attacks so far, but the impact is already visible. There were reports that Russian refinery output was down 5%, which is small, but let's see if Ukraine can increase the attacks. If that becomes 20%-30%, it will have a significant impact on the Russian economy, as the Russian economy is very heavily leveraged on energy.

## WHY DID IT TAKE SO LONG FOR UKRAINE TO OPEN AN ATTACK ON THAT FRONT?

Because the West didn't want them to. They were afraid of doing it because the West told them not to. Then Ukraine said, "we don't care anymore. We're desperate, so we're going to do it." This whole war has been fought with the West saying to Ukraine: "Whatever you do, don't escalate." And this goes back to 2014 when Russia invaded Crimea- the West's response to the whole crisis was not to say to Russia, "Stop!" it was to say to Ukraine, "don't fight back."

That mentality is gone now, and Ukraine is increasingly ignoring such restrictions, going against the West's advice, and, of course, the West can't stop them.

## COULD THAT DISOBEDIENCE COST UKRAINE WHEN IT COMES TO WESTERN SUPPORT?

No. It's a paradoxical thing, but the West applauds it. They'd be like, "we wouldn't do it, we'd be so scared, but well done you!" They're looking at a bully in the bar, he's bullying everyone, and this guy gets up and hits him, and they're like, "Wow, I would never have done that." The West loves Ukraine's courage, but they're shocked by it, because they would never do it. And as long as Ukraine is doing it with their own weapons, I don't think there's an issue. If Ukraine were to use Western weapons, that would immediately become an issue. Russia is trying to make a lot of noise about that January downing of a plane in Russia containing Ukrainian prisoners. The whole incident was very suspicious, and it's still not clear what happened. But what we are seeing is a very concerted Russian information campaign claiming Ukraine used Patriot missiles to shoot down a Russian plane inside Russia, the goal of which is to encourage the Americans to stop giving Ukraine weapons because they are using them in Russia and "if it continues, we will drop nuclear bombs on Miami. This is bringing you into the war, so you must stop giving Ukraine Patriot missiles." It's been one of Russia's key goals, to show Ukraine like a monkey with a grenade, that we can't trust Ukraine, that we should just let Russia discipline them, because Russia is the "father" and knows how to discipline them.

This plane thing is a good example of that, and Putin himself has been involved. He's been speaking about it a lot, which is very strange, because he doesn't speak in such specifics often.

# Helping Strangers Become Family - Georgia's Black Market Babies

BY SHELBI R. ANKIEWICZ

**T**amuna Museridze is a journalist who continues to make strides in dissecting the black market in Georgia that encouraged the illegal sale of babies by hospital staff through the 1970s and mid-2000s.

Tales sadly abound in Georgia about mothers who were told their children died shortly after birth, and who were not given a chance to see their bodies and say goodbye. It turns out that many of these babies did not die, and were instead sold to adoptive parents illegally. Museridze has been investigating these cases for years, driven by her own search, and while she has yet to find her own biological parents, progress in reuniting others is being made. Museridze found out she was adopted at the age of 31, and made it her mission to find her real parents. This is when she discovered that Georgia had a black market scandal going back years, that saw babies stolen from mothers in hospitals and given up for adoption.

As part of her campaign, Museridze made a Facebook page, "Vezdeb," to share information about adopted children and to create a space for those involved to talk about what they are going through. When one of the members found their biological parents, the site "exploded" with further hopefuls looking to find their families.

Over the years since, more and more families have been reunited. The latest one to make the news around the world was that of identical twins Amy and Ano, and their reunion with their biological mother, who now lives in Germany. Amy and Ano are biological twins who made their first real discovery of each other through TikTok.

According to the BBC, the sisters saw each other on social media and were astonished by how similar they looked, so they decided to meet in person. Their birth certificates indicated that they were born at the same hospital, in the same year, but weeks apart. However, considering their looks and a vast number of other similarities - in interests, style, and even the same bone disorder (dysplasia), it was clear to them that they were twins.

After receiving agreement from their adoptive families, they went to Museridze's Facebook group to try and find their biological mother. The BBC said the sisters told their story and received a response from a woman in Germany who had given birth the same year the twins were born, and at the same hospital. After DNA tests were conducted, it was concluded that Aza was indeed their biological mother.

Aza told them she fell into a coma shortly after giving birth, and when she woke up, she was told by the hospital staff that her babies had died.

This is just one of the many success stories that have come from Museridze's Facebook group, but she is still searching for her own biological parents. Museridze said she always had this inkling that she was adopted.

"It's really a feeling like I am not in the right place, that I belong somewhere else, to someone else, and I always felt the house where I was raised wasn't my home," Museridze told GEORGIA TODAY. "I had this feeling that I belonged somewhere else, but I couldn't explain it. When I was a child, I kept saying I wanted to go and live in the USA, because I felt somewhere else calling to me, though I didn't know exactly where."

According to Museridze, some of the hospital staff



Twins Amy and Ano together after their reunion. Source: BBC World Service

that were involved in black market adoption are still working in hospitals today as directors or in other positions, even though it is not allowed by Georgian law. They know this information from the parents who bought babies - by taking the names of the doctors they bought them from and comparing them to those working in hospitals today.

The most important step moving forward for Museridze and her team is for the Georgian law to be changed. Museridze said that right now, adopted citizens cannot get access to their personal information like birth certificates, where they were born, when they were born, etc., unless they have the signed permission of their adopted parents. This law applies to everyone, regardless of whether they are a child or an adult.

Museridze has reached out to the government regarding this issue, and received a response promising a change to the law, but there is as yet no indication of progress. For Museridze, this has become her top priority.

"I care more about the people reaching out to us [on Facebook], and this work, than I do about finding my own biological parents. This mission has become my child. So many people are depending on me and believing in me, and I have a lot of responsibility," she tells us.

Right now, the only platform being used by the Vedzeb group is Facebook. Museridze explained that they tried to open a webpage in the past, but it didn't look the way she wanted, and to get it to the standard she needed, too much investment was required - the group doesn't have sponsors, and everything is currently paid out of the pockets of volunteers.

Looking ahead, Museridze said she wants to take this group to a global level. In 2012, she heard that in Spain, they had identified 400,000 similarly stolen babies. It was only then she realized how prevalent the practice was throughout the rest of the world.

"After the BBC documentary, people started calling me from Bangladesh, Poland, Serbia, and Romania, and they were saying that this had happened to them, too," Museridze says. "So now those people are searching for their parents, and we are going to make a National Government Organization and ask for help from others, maybe big organizations

like NATO."

The BBC documentary, 'Betrayal at Birth: Georgia's Stolen Children', was released a few weeks ago. It highlights Museridze's work and some of the stories that have come out of her Facebook group. She was also featured on the BBC's 100 Women for 2023.



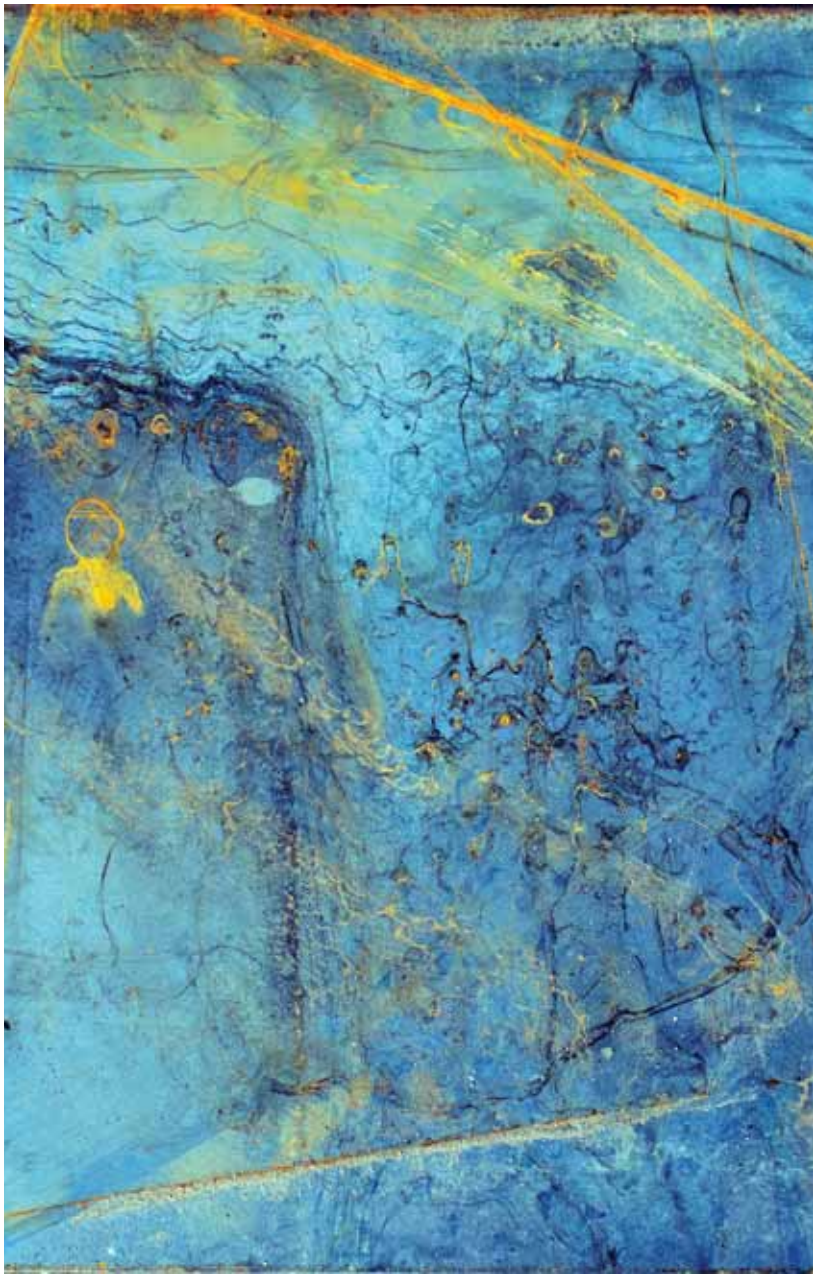
Tamuna Museridze. Source: BBC World Service

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# tRUSTworthy



is chemically exactly what oxygen does. It has similar roots, in translation, in Russian: kislород, or acid-birthing, and Georgian: zhangbadi, literally rust-birthing, and many other languages too, no doubt).

Some steel sheets I looked at were easily 8m by 2m in size, though quite thin and flexible, and about 850 GEL each to buy, I was told. One or two of them I could quite happily have bought and put on display in their glorious entirety, in a gallery. But then there's a whole list of practicalities.

How would even you transport the monster? Rolled up, it'd likely damage its own surfaces against each other. Flat, it's simply huge, needing a long truck bed; and how would you get it in there without any damage? These are not the usual delicate considerations for such material. Where would you even display it—what gallery would have space, even if they were as fascinated as I am? How much does it weigh? You'd need to back it with something firm, like a lot of wood framing, to make it stiff; that'd add quite a bit to its weight, making hanging even more challenging...and so on. How would you even get it into the gallery? This isn't the Met! But it NEEDS to be seen, in all its glorious detail, from end to end! Ah well, maybe when I'm rich and famous I'll figure out how to deal with such eccentricities. For now, just shoot some glorious bits.

The landscapes and other things I was seeing were straight out of science fiction or Salvador Dali, plus a little of Gustav Klimt. Utterly otherworldly.

Later, after processing most of the 132



BLOG BY TONY HANMER

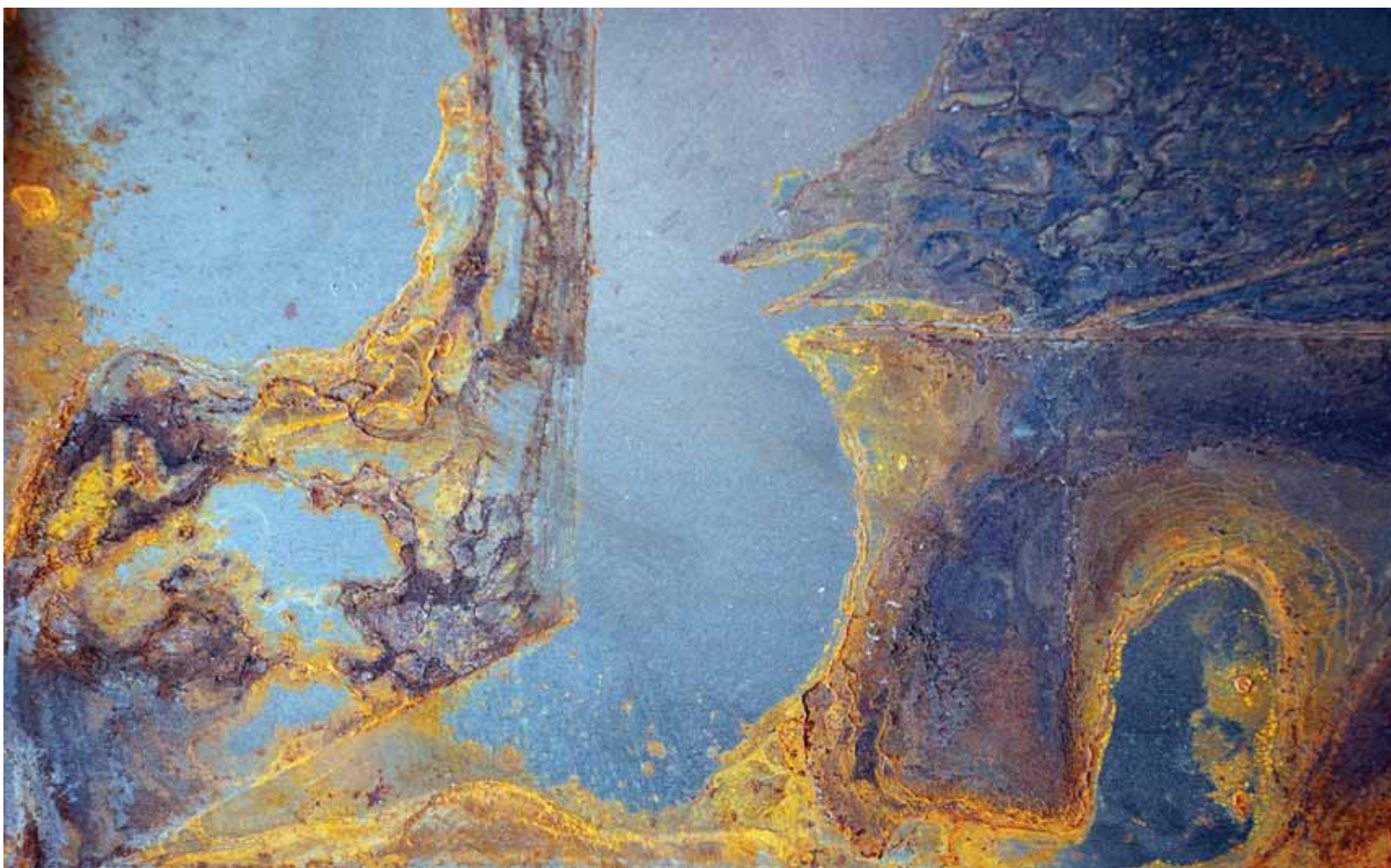
It seems that a book of images of oxidized steel is in the works.

Last week, I was drawn back to the Tbilisi steelyard where I have gotten lost in surreal landscape photographs already twice. This time was my longest. There had been no rain for some time, so the steel was dry, which is important, and enough time had passed (more than half a year) for some top layers of the steel sheets to have been sold,

revealing new ones underneath. I wandered in a daze, dodging my shadow when the weak sun cast it on the mostly horizontal surfaces, and once again found new inspiration everywhere.

New sheet steel is mostly bluish in tones, and any interaction with moisture of course starts this rusting, in all the warm tones of reds through yellows which jump forward off the receding cool background. So there is quite a palette on display, in almost a three-dimensional effect.

("Oxy-gen" has Greek roots of "burn" and "birth", a making of burning, which



images from a couple of hours' shooting (including a few of whole sheets and the yard and its workers themselves, for context), I came across a Facebook group called Rust Art, joined, and began posting too many images. It was interesting to compare my own work with that of some of the 8000 other members, most of us with unique styles. Some people prefer rusty objects, in part or in whole, whereas I'm much more for finding concrete images and shapes in abstract places. Felt like finding my tribe, in this medium at least.

One of the group's members also suggested that I do a book from this work, which I'm now considering. It'll have to be large, to show off the intricate detail, and well printed for the colors. Not cheap; I'll need to find someone to take it on. Just another pipe dream? Time will tell.

The icing on the cake was chatting with the yard manager and workers as I was leaving. It turns out that he and my wife have the same last name! So we're related by marriage.

Tony Hanmer has lived in Georgia since 1999, in Svaneti since 2007, and been a weekly writer and photographer for GT since early 2011. He runs the "Svaneti Renaissance" Facebook group, now with over 2000 members, at [www.facebook.com/groups/SvanetiRenaissance/](http://www.facebook.com/groups/SvanetiRenaissance/)

He and his wife also run their own guest house in Etseri:

[www.facebook.com/hanmer.house.svaneti](http://www.facebook.com/hanmer.house.svaneti)



# Why Doesn't America Have a Department of Culture?

OP-ED BY NUGZAR B. RUHADZE

A funny question, isn't it? Lots of countries in the world have a Ministry of Culture, yet the United States doesn't. Is this shrewd or senseless? Probably neither: It's just the way it is. While the current American government operates with the help of sixteen departments, George Washington's cabinet included just four: state, treasury, war and justice. As time went by, the number of departments grew, but it seems that nobody ever thought that America needed a governmental body in charge of cultural matters.

I am an American citizen, and I have been on the air in the States for quite a while, working as a TV reporter (with considerable national popularity, to put it without any feigned modesty). Hence, I had numerous chances to ask such questions publicly, and I would get a hundred different answers, either tongue-in-cheek, or serious, or marked with the h'm-type perplexity: "Why should we bother ourselves with a department of culture if we have no culture?" or "Culture doesn't need to be controlled by the administration," or something like this: "Good question, never thought about it, could be a good idea!"

Most Americans hate big government, but they can't help it. There were attempts in the past to get rid of the department of education, but they still have it on a certain level of operational indispensability, like general enlightenment methodology or overall trends and directions



in the field. An administrative body in the field of culture has never materialized in the over four-hundred-year history of the nation, and so surely there are reasons for this attitude to culture as such. The predominant thought in American society is that culture is well taken care of without need of special departments in the government. For instance, the national monuments are preserved by the National Park Service; to take care of museums and libraries, they have the famous Smithsonian Institution; the National Endowment for the

Arts vigorously promotes the fine arts; linguistic standardization is managed by special patterns and services in unison with the demands of the market. America does all these things without syndicating them into one official body.

If a stray question is asked all of a sudden, as to whether America even has a culture to protect, Americans will forthwith provide a prompt answer to the affirmative: "Jazz, blues, rock'n'roll, disco, rap, country, hip-hop, swing and boogie are all ours; we gave the world blue-jeans, T-shirts and miniskirts, bikinis and short

shorts; we fed them cheeseburgers and rib-eye steaks; we let them read into the most valuable literary pearls by the giants like Poe, Twain, Melville, Faulkner, Steinbeck, Fitzgerald and Hemingway; we let the world youth be educated at formidable enlightenment shrines like Harvard, Stanford and Yale; we supplied to the planet our constitutional democracy and sharp feeling of life, liberty and pursuit of happiness; we had the humanity enjoy god-and-goddess-like artistic figures like Audrey Hepburn, Clark Gable, Catherine Hepburn, Marlon Brando,

Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley, John Wayne, Paul Newman, Jack Nicolson, Al Pacino, Robert De Niro, Brad Pitt, Dustin Hoffmann and Meryl Streep, to name a few" - all of which have had an extraordinarily influential and unfading global effect since the turn of the last century.

Frankly, Americans would not be exaggerating in being so openly proud of all the above, and still, they have never needed any ministry of culture to keep all the enumerated assets in place and well taken care of. They believe that keeping up and maintaining national culture needs money, not the administration, and America is providing its outstanding culture with a huge amount of raised and charitable funds. It is good people, patrons of arts and culture, that do the outstanding, using their own money to keep the matters of American culture up and running, attaching no painful strings to their contributions as any governmental body would do.

Actually, this type of treatment of culture is an old Western tradition. Any royalty or nobility of even a lower rank in the past in Europe, or anywhere else, for that matter, understood well the value of literature, music and art, keeping up the idea of patronage over them by creating various endowments and foundations. The tradition is still ongoing. Incidentally, a governmental department of culture would only get in the way to benefit the beautiful. At least, this is how they conceive taking care of their culture in the United States of America. Is this what we should be doing in Sakartvelo, too? Not necessarily, but it makes a lot of sense to give a tolerant thought to what others are doing with excellence.

## Georgian Poets: The Two Tamars

TRANSLATED FROM  
GEORGIAN INTO ENGLISH  
BY KETEVAN TUKHARELI

Tamar Eristavi, a Georgian poet and translator (1932-2014), graduated Tbilisi State University from the faculty of Western European Languages and Literature.

From 1960-1973, she worked in Tbilisi's Ilia Chavchavadze Institute at the Chair of English Language, and, until 1993, she led the youth section of the Chief Board of Translation and Literary Relations at the Writers' Union. She was among the editorial staff of the World Literature Library and contributed to the complete

Georgian Publication of Shakespeare. Tamar Eristavi translated and compiled the Anthology of Scotch Poetry (1979), and translated poems by Robert Burns (1959), George Gordon Byron, Jacques Prevert, Mikhail Lermontov, Nikolai Tikhonov, and others. On her death, she was buried in Didube Pantheon.

Her poems have translated into various languages. Here is one of them:

Whatever was-was,  
Whatever is-is.  
I lived so long  
That I could see  
The sun and the moon,  
The bee on the flower,  
The dew on the grass,  
And now, when  
The day is gloomy,

Standing, with the  
Top of the fir-tree,  
I'm looking forward  
To seeing the snow  
And the winds blow.  
\* \* \*

It is cloudy,  
It is drizzling,  
The sky has  
Come down, near,  
But I don't forget  
The height of  
The sky,  
I remember it  
And that's why.

Tamar Javakhishvili-Amirejibi (born 1937) is the author of two collections of poems: "The Poems" (1977) and "Till I remember" (1986). She translated the



Tamar Javakhishvili-Amirejibi

poems of Boris Pasternak and Aleksander Blok. Her poems and translations have been published in Georgian newspapers, literary journals, calendars (2021, 2024). Here is one of them:

If life is a dream,  
You are the dream

Of my dream for me,  
I woke up very early,  
Alas! Your face  
It disappeared...  
And when I wake up  
Forever -  
I'll remember  
Nothing, never!



Source: Adobestock/Alexstar

# Georgia's Artistic Legacy – The Journey of Reach Art Visual



**T**hea Gogvadze is the visionary Founder and CEO of Reach Art Visual (R.A.V.), and GEORGIA TODAY had an opportunity to delve into a conversation with her to explore the intricate dynamics of art, culture, and diplomacy. Discover the motivations driving R.A.V.'s pioneering efforts in promoting forgotten artists like Alexey Balabouev, and how they are reshaping the narrative of Georgian art on the global stage. Join us as we uncover the evolution of R.A.V. and its enduring commitment to celebrating Georgia's rich cultural heritage through the language of art.

**AS THE FOUNDER AND CEO OF REACH ART VISUAL, COULD YOU SHARE THE PERSONAL MOTIVATION OR INSPIRATION THAT LED YOU TO ESTABLISH THE ORGANIZATION, AND HOW YOUR VISION FOR R.A.V. HAS EVOLVED OVER TIME?**

My motivation stems from a deep-seated desire to explore and research Georgian art as both a cultural treasure and a viable subject of business exploration. My vision has evolved over time, initially driven by curiosity to uncover untold narratives within Georgia's art history from the past, as well as a contemporary story. and now encompassing a commitment to supporting art historians and enthusiasts while fostering a vibrant ecosystem for artists and aficionados alike. Through Reach Art Visual, I aim to highlight the intricate narratives woven within Georgia's artistic heritage to step into dialogue with worldwide artistic dynamics. Maybe this is an ambitious statement, but this is what it is.

**BALANCING A ROLE IN DIPLOMATIC WORK AND A PROMINENT POSITION IN THE ART WORLD IS UNIQUE. HOW HAS YOUR EXPERIENCE IN DIPLOMACY INFLUENCED YOUR APPROACH TO CURATING ART PROJECTS AND LEADING R.A.V.?**

Profoundly. With a broad algorithm of thinking, I view art as a universal language, capable of transcending cultural barriers and connecting people across the globe. My vision is to utilize art as a

translator, effectively conveying the essence of Georgian creativity to audiences worldwide. By promoting art as a universal language, we can seamlessly integrate art in Georgia into the global conversation, fostering a sense of unity and belonging within the international art community. Georgia, with its demonstrated flair for vibrant expression and sophisticated taste, stands poised to make significant contributions to the art world. Through R.A.V., we strive to showcase art in Georgia as a cherished member of the global artistic family, both at home and abroad.

**REPRESENTING ALEXEY BALABOUEV AT THE OSENAT AUCTION IS A SIGNIFICANT ACCOMPLISHMENT. HOW DID THIS EXPERIENCE INFLUENCE YOUR PERSPECTIVE ON THE POTENTIAL FOR THE GLOBAL RECOGNITION OF GEORGIAN ARTISTS, AND WHAT AMBITIONS DO YOU HAVE FOR FURTHER INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATIONS?**

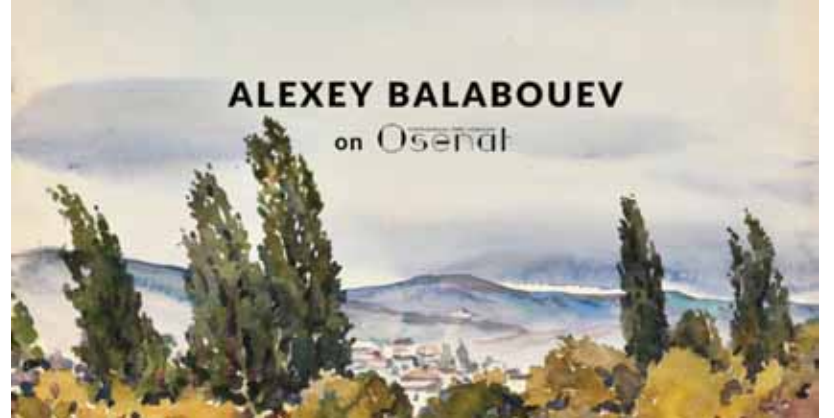
Representing Alexey Balabouev there was emblematic of our commitment to unearthing and showcasing the rich artistic heritage of Georgia. This experience has profoundly influenced my perspective on the global recognition of Georgian artists, illuminating the vast



potential for their talent to resonate on the international stage. Through projects like Alexey Balabouev's, we delve into the untold stories of Georgian art, many of which were submerged during the turbulent times of the Soviet Union's collapse. In 2023, our acquisition of a substantial collection spanning various artists from the Soviet era unveiled unique names that had been overshadowed by historical upheavals. As Georgia emerges as a strong, independent nation, we are poised to reclaim and celebrate these treasures, affirming our pride in our cultural legacy. Looking ahead, our ambitions for further international collaborations extend beyond mere representation; we aim to cultivate enduring partnerships that amplify the voices of Georgian artists, enriching the global artistic landscape with the depth and diversity of our cultural heritage.

**CAN YOU SHARE INSIGHTS INTO THE PROCESS OF SELECTING SPECIFIC ARTWORKS BY ALEXEY BALABOUEV FOR THE OSENAT AUCTION? WHAT CRITERIA WERE CONSIDERED IN CHOOSING THESE PARTICULAR PIECES?**

Selecting the artworks for the auction involved a meticulous collaboration with renowned art historian Konstantine Bolkvadze. Balabouev's pieces were chosen based on their exceptional artistry and the mastery evident in his work. One key criterion was the precision displayed in the execution of his pieces, reflecting a level of skill and craftsmanship that sets his art apart. For instance, Balabouev's watercolor works exhibit a level of detail and finesse rarely seen in contemporary art, making them particularly noteworthy. Each selected artwork underwent careful consideration to ensure that it represented the essence of Balabouev's talent and contributed meaningfully to the narrative we sought to convey at the auction. Through this discerning process, we aimed to showcase the depth and uniqueness of Balabouev's artistry to a global audience, reinforcing his significance within the broader artistic landscape.



**BALABOUEV'S ART IS DESCRIBED AS UNCONVENTIONAL AND NON-IDEOLOGICAL. HOW DID THESE DISTINCTIVE QUALITIES INFLUENCE THE RECEPTION OF HIS WORK AT THE INTERNATIONAL AUCTION, AND WHAT CHALLENGES OR ADVANTAGES DID THEY PRESENT?**

Balabouev's art brought a unique dynamic to the international auction scene. His departure from traditional Soviet socialist realism and avoidance of political symbols resonated deeply with collectors seeking narratives beyond the confines of ideology. The diverse array of collectors present at such auctions, each with their own preferences, ranging from socialist realism to its antithesis, created a fertile ground for the reception of Balabouev's work. His pieces, unencumbered by ideological constraints, appealed to those who valued artistry that transcended political boundaries and offered fresh perspectives. While navigating the auction landscape posed its challenges, Balabouev's unconventional style offered distinct advantages by capturing the attention of collectors with diverse tastes. It's therefore unsurprising that all three pieces showcased at the auction were received so favorably, underscoring the universal appeal and enduring relevance of Balabouev's artistic vision on the international stage.

**BEYOND THE FINANCIAL SUCCESS AT THE AUCTION, HOW DOES R.A.V. MEASURE THE IMPACT OF ITS MISSION IN TERMS OF INCREASING AWARENESS AND APPRECIATION FOR FORGOTTEN ARTISTS LIKE ALEXEY BALABOUEV?**

We measure our impact by the extent to which we are able to shed light on these artists' stories and contribute to their recognition within the artistic community. Being able to share these stories and participate in their preservation allows us to be active participants in history, fostering a deeper appreciation for the richness and diversity of artistic expression. Thus, our success is not solely defined by financial metrics but by the meaningful contributions we make to the rediscovery and celebration of talented artists like Balabouev, ensuring their rightful place in the annals of art history.

**GIVEN YOUR EXPERIENCE IN BOTH DIPLOMATIC WORK AND THE ART WORLD, HOW DO YOU SEE THE ROLE OF ART IN SHAPING CULTURAL NARRATIVES AND FOSTERING INTERNATIONAL UNDERSTANDING, ESPECIALLY IN THE CONTEXT OF REPRESENTING GEORGIA ON THE GLOBAL STAGE?**

The intersection of diplomatic work and the art world offers a unique perspective on the role of art in shaping cultural narratives and fostering international understanding, especially in representing Georgia on a global stage. Art serves as a powerful medium for transcending language barriers and communicating the essence of a culture to diverse audiences worldwide. In the context of Georgia, a country known for its rich cultural heritage and distinct aesthetic sensibility, showcasing Georgian art becomes not only a marketing strategy but also a reflection of the nation's identity and values. Just as Georgian wine and fashion have established themselves on the global stage, art presents an opportunity for Georgia to further solidify its cultural presence and influence. By promoting Georgian art internationally, Reach Art Visual (R.A.V.) aims to contribute to this narrative and elevate the country's cultural standing on the world stage.

**LOOKING AHEAD, ARE THERE ANY UPCOMING PROJECTS OR COLLABORATIONS THAT R.A.V. IS EXCITED ABOUT?**

We are preparing for an exciting international project that is currently in its nascent stages. While details are still emerging, we are poised to make a significant impact on the Georgian art market and beyond. I encourage everyone to stay tuned for updates as we work diligently to bring this project to fruition. As always, R.A.V. remains committed to promoting Georgian artists and their unique contributions to the global artistic landscape, and we are eager to embark on this new endeavor with enthusiasm and dedication.



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# Clay Angels: Build a Kiln and Inspire a Village!



Dee and friends with Bishop Isaiah

I'm a potter, and I am fundraising to make a dream come true in a small village far away, - says Dee Harris. "It's a dream I share with my friends, Alex Paton, Bishop Isaiah, Tim Sherman and Kevin Crowe. We want to build a modern, wood-fired 'train' kiln in the tiny village of Zemo Nikozi in central Georgia. Please donate

to become a 'Nikozi Clay Angel,' and help us build this kiln!"

The majority of the money raised will go to buying materials: bricks, kilnshelves, framing iron, refractory concrete, tools, wood posts, beams and roofing, to construct the kiln and a protective shed, she tells us.

"Part of the money raised will also

cover travel and living costs for Alex Paton and Kevin Crowe to be there to oversee the kiln's construction and the first firing of the new kiln. We will all volunteer our time, and we will be joined by local volunteers as well in order to get the kiln built," Dee says.

For those of you who care about handicraft, and pottery in particular, this is



The upcoming ceramics studio



A train kiln built by Alex Paton in the US

truly a chance to be part of the history of ceramics in the country of Georgia. The Nikozi woodfiring kiln will be the first modern-design train kiln built in that country.

This kiln will be built next to a small ceramics studio (currently under renovation) near the monastery where Bishop Isaiah resides and works, and just down the road from the children's arts education center that he built to provide inspiration and hope to local residents.

A kiln will allow Bishop Isaiah to expand the impact of the arts education center, encourage increased hope in an economically struggling village, and hopefully spark the rebirth of a local crafts/pottery tradition in a region suffering from chronic poverty and hopelessness.

"It's my passion project, all of ours really," Dee says. "And I know we are all honored by the chance to help Bishop Isaiah fulfill this vision, and it will benefit many deserving children and local craftspeople. All funds raised will go 100% to getting this kiln built and running. If we are so lucky as to raise any surplus funds, those will be invested into potter's wheels and other crucial equipment to furnish the ceramics studio once it has been fully renovated. Not a penny will go to waste!"

Nikozi Clay Cherubs - \$5 to \$45 donation

Nikozi Clay Angels - \$50 to \$100 donation

Nikozi Clay Archangels - \$101 to \$500 donation

Once you've made your donations, all donors will be kept up to date with regular photo and video updates from the

project as the build progresses. In addition:

- Clay Cherubs will get a Nikozi postcard, signed by members of the build team!

- Clay Angels will receive a postcard and one brick on the kiln will be inscribed with their name in thanks for your generosity!

- Clay Archangels will have a brick inscribed with their name, will receive one piece of pottery from the first kiln firing, and will be offered a short video tour of the kiln and monastery, hosted by Bishop Isaiah and the build team!

"And Archangel-level donors are welcome to have a guided tour of the kiln and ceramics center, when completed, the next time they visit Nikozi," Dee says.

An important note: Bishop Isaiah is truly a remarkable person, and a community hero in every sense of the word. In addition to creating the children's arts center that keeps the community vital, he has rebuilt his monastery twice - once following the 2008 invasion - and he also runs an annual International Animated Film Festival in his village, which attracts prominent animators and film directors from around the world! His efforts have truly provided life-giving energy and opportunity to the people in his region.

Please join in making his dream and vision for Nikozi a reality!

GoFundMe link: [https://www.gofundme.com/f/clay-angels-build-a-kiln-and-inspire-a-village?utm\\_campaign=p\\_cp+share-sheet&utm\\_medium=copy\\_link\\_all&utm\\_source=customer](https://www.gofundme.com/f/clay-angels-build-a-kiln-and-inspire-a-village?utm_campaign=p_cp+share-sheet&utm_medium=copy_link_all&utm_source=customer)



Apprentice potter Gio and friend at Nikozi's children's arts education center



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Lagidze Water, originating in 1887, is a Georgian delight crafted by pharmacist's apprentice Mitrofan Lagidze as a healthier alternative to imported lemonades. This elixir combines natural syrup with carbonated water, offering a smooth, lightly fizzy experience in flavors like lemon, pear, tarragon, leijoa, cherry, and various grapes.

Lagidze opened his first shop in Tbilisi in 1906. Cafe Lagidze became a cultural icon and a local hotspot with its vintage charm. While the original shop is long gone, it is still served in some Georgian cafes. Bazzari Orbeliani's food court provides charming settings to enjoy several flavors of this iconic Georgian beverage.

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