

BY LIZA MCHEDLIDZE

Prime Minister Introduces New Defense Minister Irakli Chikovani

Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze introduced the new Minister of Defense of Georgia, Irakli Chikovani, to the agency's employees. Upon his arrival at the Ministry of Defense, Chikovani was welcomed by former Minister of Defense Juansher Burchuladze, who congratulated him on his appointment and wished him success.

Kobakhidze expressed gratitude to the representatives of the Defense Forces for their honorable service and loyalty to the country, promising support to every soldier. The Prime Minister highlighted the new minister's extensive political and professional experience, expressing hope for successful cooperation with the defense forces in continuing the agency's plans and reforms. He also thanked former Minister Juansher Burchuladze for his service and wished him success.

"I met with representatives of the Ministry of Defense, as well as representatives of the Defense Forces. I expressed gratitude to Juansher Burchuladze for his work and introduced the new minister, Irakli Chikovani. We discussed issues related to the development of defense capabilities and strengthening of defense resources. It is important and a great honor for me that the first meeting in my capacity as Prime Minister took place in the Ministry of Defense, alongside representatives of the Defense Forces," said Irakli Kobakhidze.

The new Minister of Defense, Irakli Chikovani, expressed his



respect and support for the Georgian army. He emphasized that the Ministry's team will remain dedicated to the strategic goals of the Ministry of Defense and to further strengthening the Defense Forces. Chikovani also thanked former Defense Minister Burchuladze for

his service to Georgia.

"I would also like to express my gratitude to Juansher Burchuladze, the former minister. During his tenure, along with Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili, many positive changes were implemented, significantly enhancing our defense capa-

bilities.

Let me emphasize that both the Ministry of Defense and the Defense Forces have a clear vision of how to develop our defense capabilities. We have outlined plans for both the short and medium term," said Chikovani.

The meeting at the Ministry of Defense was attended by Major general Giorgi Matiashvili, Commander of the Defense Forces, along with his deputies, commanders, department heads of the General Staff, and leaders of structural units of the Civil Office.

European Integration Committee Chairperson Maka Bochorishvili Meets with US Ambassador Robin Dunnigan

BY LIZA MCHEDLIDZE

Chairperson of the European Integration Committee, Maka

Bochorishvili, met with the Ambassador of the United States of America to Georgia, Robin Dunnigan.

According to the Parliament's press

service, the parties discussed various aspects of the strategic partnership between Georgia and the USA, including opportunities for developing parliamentary cooperation. The meeting also emphasized Georgia's progress towards integration into the European Union and underscored the significance of the EU's decision to grant the country candidate status.

Maka Bochorishvili briefed the ambassador on the government's plan and future steps for implementing the nine measures outlined by the European Commission for Georgia.

During the meeting with Dunnigan, the issue of Georgia's integration into NATO was discussed, emphasizing the importance of U.S.-Georgia relations and America's support for the country's Euro-Atlantic integration.

The parties discussed regional security issues, including a review of the situation in the occupied Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions, as well as the threats emanating from Russia.

During the meeting, they discussed the agenda of the Parliament of Georgia, the domestic political situation, current

events, and the parliamentary elections scheduled for 2024.

"It is important that relations between us are developed in all directions and taken to a higher level. We particularly appreciate the contribution made by the United States of America to our country's progress towards the European Union. It is important to continue cooperation in various aspects, including economically, strengthening bilateral relations, and supporting Georgia's integration into the European Union," Bochorishvili stated.

Ambassador Dunnigan congratulated Maka Bochorishvili on Georgia achieving the status of a candidate country for EU membership and expressed readiness to support the process of further reforms.

"America wants to see Georgia as a member of the European Union. We want to do everything to support Georgia in this process. The European Integration Committee and its Chairman play a very important role in this process. We discussed how the United States can support the committee's work in the nine-step process," said Robin Dunnigan.



Exchange Rates: US Dollar - 2.6573; Euro - 2.8584; GBP - 3.3455; 100 Russian Ruble - 2.9213; Swiss Franc - 3.0318

Stalin Icon in Sameba Church: Georgia's Controversial Debate and Political Ramifications

BY MALKHAZ MATSABERIDZE

Last month, together with the Orthodox Christmas, a strange discussion about Stalin depicted on the icon took place in Georgia. In the end, the Patriarchate sent the icon to be copied and Stalin will no longer be depicted on it. Some considered the incident to be a coincidence, while many believe that it is a deliberate provocation planned in Moscow, which not only will not end there, but is only the beginning of a new direction of the anti-Western campaign.

During the heated discussion, it was revealed that the icon of the Holy Matrona of Moscow was painted in Russia by order of the leaders of the pro-Russian party Patriots Alliance Irma Inashvili and Davit Tarkhan-Mouravi and was brought to the Trinity Cathedral a few months ago. Archimandrite Ioane Mchedlishvili then asked for forgiveness for placing the icon with Stalin's image in the church in such a way that it was not known to the Patriarchate.

According to this version, the icon remained unnoticed until on January 7, deacon Ilia Chigladze spread the information on the social network that

the Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin was depicted on the icon of the Holy Matrona in the Trinity Cathedral. This information has already attracted the attention of non-governmental organisations and journalists, the icon and its 'Stalin fragment' appeared in the media, and a wave of criticism quickly arose, which was caused by the image of Stalin on the icon.

On January 9, the icon was splashed with paint. Activist Nata Peradze shared the video that showed the splashed icon and she was quickly accused of damaging the church property. This was followed by threats against Peradze, and on January 10, pro-Russian Altinfo members gathered outside Peradze's house with violent and threatening calls. Peradze was protected by the police. The leaders of the Georgian Dream announced that the Parliament of Georgia will pass a law in the near future that will impose punishment for damage to church objects.

On January 11, the Georgian Patriarchate issued a statement that changes would be made to the icon and Stalin's figure would disappear from the icon. On January 17, an announcement was made that the icon was moved to make changes to it, and

another icon of St. Matrona was placed in the church. This probably ended the 'hot phase' of the discussion. But the issues surrounding the dispute were not completely exhausted.

It has been predicted for a long time that Georgia's approach to the West and every step taken in this direction would be followed by a reaction from Moscow, and the appearance of the icon of Matrona of Moscow in the Church of Trinity in its current form can be considered as such a step. Russia has two main levers to influence some part of Georgian society - Orthodoxy and Stalin. Both were depicted together on the icon of the Holy Matrona.

One part of the critical remarks concerned the icon of Matrona Muscovelli herself. It was mentioned that this is a saint of local importance and questioned whether it was appropriate to include her icon in the main cathedral of Georgia. However, such discussion around the topic seems to be unacceptable for the Georgian Church, and the strong pro-Russian sentiments in the church among clergymen of various ranks are clearly visible in this case. Even an icon of Stalin appeared in Russia, but the Russian Orthodox Church, despite its positive attitude towards Stalin,

did not come this far.

The main dispute was about the image of Stalin on the icon of Matrona. In Russia, the version that the communist dictator Stalin was actually a believer and that Trotsky and other Bolsheviks of Jewish origin prevented him from protecting the church is spreading more and more intensively. The version of Stalin's belief found supporters in Georgia as well, citing various facts, including the fact that Stalin recognized the autocephaly of the Georgian Church to the Russian Church.

During the discussion, others did not claim that Stalin was a believer. They simply noted that Diocletian, the dragon and other forces embodying evil are depicted next to the saints on Christian icons. The image of Stalin should have been perceived in this way. Opponents of this version pointed out that the figures embodying evil are depicted knocked down while Stalin in the icon fragment is a larger and more upright figure than Matrona, and has come to her for advice as a believer.

This discussion was brought to an end by the Patriarchate, who first offered to make changes to the icon to its donors, and then took it upon themselves

to change the relevant fragment of the icon. Stalin will disappear from the icon but what happened is thought-provoking for pro-Western political forces and the non-governmental sector.

According to some experts, splashing the icon was a wrong move and represented an insult to the religious feelings of believers, and the government was given an excuse to act as a defender of the church. It is likely that the Georgian Dream will actively use the status of the defender of the Orthodox Church during the election campaign.

As for the pro-Western opposition, they will have to clearly show that the West is not against Orthodoxy. It will not be possible to defeat the Stalinist propaganda by increasing the demands to close the Stalin Museum and take down Stalin's monuments, especially since the Georgian Dream will not do it.

Not only the official power, but also some opposition parties shy away from open and active criticism of Stalin based on 'electoral considerations'. Overcoming the abundantly created historical myths about Stalin requires long work, first of all in youth. It is necessary to show more impressively what damage the communist regime brought to Georgia.

The News in Brief

PREPARED BY MESSENGER STAFF

Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze Vows Aid for Baghdati Landslide Victims



Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze visited the village of Nergeeti in the Baghdati municipality, where the landslide disaster occurred, resulting in 9 deaths. He promptly assessed the situation on the ground and extended

and compensation.

"All necessary measures will be taken. Where accommodation is needed, the government will address this issue. Similarly, where compensation is required, appropriate measures will be taken. The cleanup efforts to address the aftermath of the natural disaster will be completed today or tomorrow. Everything is progressing at a fast pace.

In terms of prevention, every possible measure will be implemented in the future to minimize the occurrence of such incidents. It's important to note that no measure can guarantee absolute prevention. In this particular instance, it was an exceptionally challenging case. However, overall, every effort will be made to prevent any form of natural disaster whenever feasible," stated Kobakhidze.

Premier Li Qiang Congratulates Irakli Kobakhidze, Pledges Cooperation

The Premier of the People's

Republic of China, Li Qiang, extended congratulations to Irakli

lations to you. Currently, the China-Georgia strategic partner-



Kobakhidze on his appointment as the Prime Minister of Georgia. In a letter addressed to Kobakhidze, Premier Li Qiang expressed readiness to collaborate with the new Prime Minister of Georgia in order to enhance cooperation between the two countries.

"Your Excellency, I am pleased to learn about your appointment as Georgia's Prime Minister. On behalf of the Government of the People's Republic of China and myself, I extend sincere congratu-

ship is gaining positive momentum, mutual political trust is deepening. One Belt, One Road cooperation is progressing steadily, and coordination in international relations is growing closer. I am prepared, alongside you, to deepen cooperation between China and Georgia to facilitate the further development of bilateral ties through joint efforts. I extend my best wishes for the prosperity of Georgia and the happiness and health of the Georgian people," the letter reads.

Weather

Monday, February 12

Day Partly Cloudy
High: 18°C

Night Partly Cloudy
Low: 6°C

Tuesday, February 13

Day Mostly Cloudy
High: 18°C

Night Mostly Cloudy
Low: 7°C

his heartfelt condolences to the families of the victims.

Kobakhidze informed the media that the government will take all necessary measures, including providing accommodation

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Georgian Mezzo-Soprano Ketevan Kemoklidze to Kickstart 2024 with Iconic Carmen Performance in Spain



By Salome Modebadze

With over two decades on the international stage, Georgian mezzo-soprano Ketevan Kemoklidze remains an influential figure in the performing arts world. Now a dedicated mother of two, she embarked on her professional journey in 2002 during a challenging period for Georgia following its independence from the Soviet Union.

In an exclusive interview with *The Messenger* prior to her departure for Spain, Kemoklidze expressed her excitement about commencing 2024 with the beloved role of Carmen, composed by Georges Bizet, at the Baluarte venue in Spain's Navarra region.

"My Carmen debut took place in Tokyo ten years ago, and since then, I have had the privilege of performing it in numerous languages across the globe, including Seville," she shared. "It holds immense significance for a Georgian singer to perform in Carmen's homeland, and I am honored to be entrusted with this role as a foreign artist. I have resided in Spain for eight years now, but this opportunity transcends borders and is a tes-

tament to my dedication as an artist."

Kemoklidze's journey began in 2002 when she, an economics student at Tbilisi State University, was cast as Maddalena in Giuseppe Verdi's *Rigoletto* at the opera studio of Tbilisi State Conservatoire. The following year, she ventured into international competitions and claimed her first grand prix at the prestigious Toulouse International Singing Competition in 2004. This accolade led to an invitation to join the esteemed La Scala Academy.

A Life Crafted with Passion

Kemoklidze, who discovered her passion for singing from an early age, has always believed in her chosen path.

"I wouldn't alter a thing about my journey. This is the life I envisioned for myself as a child, and I am grateful for the opportunities that have come my way. I had no guidance; no one showed me the path to follow. Life, fate, or whatever you may call it, propels you forward, but it is up to us to recognize and seize those chances," she mused.

Advising young musicians to maintain objectivity about their talents, Kemoklidze emphasized the importance



of self-confidence and familial support. When parents and family recognize a child's true strengths, they refrain from interfering, but offer guidance when the child lacks confidence in their decisions.

"This profession demands immense effort and hard work, so it is essential for young artists to be realistic about their expectations. They should establish themselves in Georgia before venturing into international competitions. The profession of a musician is undoubtedly challenging, but I find that the modern youth are quite realistic in their approach," she said. Kemoklidze encourages young talents to work diligently, regardless of setbacks, as they always have the option to pivot if their initial endeavors prove unsuccessful.

Currently mentoring students in both Georgia and Spain, Kemoklidze believes that sharing her experiences is not only valuable for the youth but also for her personal growth.

Family as a Collaborative Effort

Living in Spain with her husband and two children, Kemoklidze cherishes her family's support system as she navigates her demanding career. Together, she and her husband share responsibilities to ensure the well-being of their children.

"Motherhood is an incredibly demanding role that requires continuous learning and preparation. Balancing it with a career as a musician presents additional challenges,

but my children have adapted to my frequent travels. They have grown up in this environment and are accustomed to my lifestyle. However, like any other children, they yearn for their mother's presence at home," she confessed.

Before embarking on her journey to Spain to perform her beloved role of Carmen, Kemoklidze spent New Year's in Georgia, surrounded by family and friends in their newly acquired apartment.

New Year's Wishes and Dreams for 2024

Kemoklidze expressed her heartfelt wishes for the new year, extending them to herself, *The Messenger's* readers, Georgia, and the world. In these turbulent times, she emphasized the importance of inner peace and happiness, stating, "When you are happy, you want everyone around you to share in that joy. That's the unique nature of happiness—it needs to be shared."

She also acknowledged Georgia's significant milestone in 2023, receiving the status of a European Union candidate country.

With a packed schedule for the ongoing musical season, *The Messenger* extends its warmest wishes to Kemoklidze for continued success and international recognition. May her dreams for 2024 come to fruition, and her talent continue to inspire audiences around the world.

Photo courtesy of Ketevan Kemoklidze's official Facebook page



Fotografo: Elena del Real

