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Pavel Slunkin - Belarus Lessons for Georgia

INTERVIEW BY VAZHA TAVBERIDZE

Pavel Slunkin, a Belarusian diplomat and political analyst, is currently a visiting fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations. Prior to joining the ECFR, he worked for the foreign ministry of Belarus. Pavel participated in the Minsk talks and worked as a political analyst at the embassy of Belarus in Lithuania. In 2020, he resigned in protest over the rigged elections and violence against the Belarusian people. Radio Free Europe / RL's Georgian Service sat down with him to discuss the comparisons being made ever more often between Georgia's future and Belarus' past and present.

"There are similarities and parallels between the two countries, but I would rather begin by pointing out the biggest difference between the two: While Belarus has been under Lukashenko's dictatorial rule since its independence, and has been turned into a totalitarian state, one where going against the regime has become significantly harder over the years, Georgia has seen an opposing trend; it has a history of democracy, and strong institutions.

"Belarus was never pro-Western, even if Lukashenko had periods where his relationship with the West improved, while in Georgia, people actively demand that the country moves toward becoming an EU/NATO member state.

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Pavel Slunkin

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As of 23 May 2024

| BONDS | | | | COMMODITIES | | | |
|--------------|--------------------|-------|-------|-----------------------------|----------|-------|-------|
| | Price | w/w | m/m | | Price | w/w | m/m |
| GRAIL 07/28 | 89.53 (YTM 7.00%) | -0.4% | -0.8% | Crude Oil, Brent (US\$/bbl) | 82.88 | +0.6% | -5.1% |
| SILNET 01/27 | 100.53 (YTM 8.14%) | -0.1% | -0.7% | Gold Spot (US\$/OZ) | 2,421.05 | +2.7% | +1.2% |
| TBC 06/24 | 99.93 (YTM 6.63%) | -0.0% | +0.1% | | | | |

| CURRENCIES | | | |
|---------------------------|-----------|--------|--------|
| | Price | w/w | m/m |
| GEL / USD | 2,7175 | +0.6% | +1.8% |
| Bank of Georgia (BGEQ LN) | GBP 41.85 | -11.3% | -13.4% |
| GEL / EUR | 2,9496 | +1.0% | +3.7% |
| Georgia Capital (CGEQ LN) | GBP 10.20 | -5.6% | -20.9% |
| GEL / GBP | 3,4539 | +1.6% | +6.6% |
| TBC Bank Group (TBCG LN) | GBP 27.15 | -8.0% | -11.4% |
| GEL / CHF | 2,9815 | +0.2% | +1.7% |
| GEL / RUB | 0.0301 | +1.7% | +6.9% |
| GEL / TRY | 0.0844 | +1.0% | +2.9% |
| GEL / AZN | 1,5995 | +0.7% | +1.8% |

| INDICES | | | |
|------------|-----------|-------|--------|
| | Price | w/w | m/m |
| FTSE 100 | 8,416.45 | -0.1% | +6.6% |
| GEL / AMD | 0.0070 | +0.9% | +3.2% |
| FTSE 250 | 20,783.37 | +0.8% | +7.2% |
| GEL / UAH | 0.0684 | +0.4% | +2.1% |
| DAX | 18,726.76 | +0.1% | +5.6% |
| EUR / USD | 0.9213 | -0.3% | -1.8% |
| DOW JONES | 39,872.99 | +0.8% | +5.0% |
| GBP / USD | 0.7868 | -0.9% | -2.7% |
| NASDAQ | 16,832.63 | +1.9% | +10.1% |
| CHF / USD | 0.9110 | +0.5% | +0.1% |
| MSCI EM EE | 48.59 | +0.7% | +7.3% |
| RUB / USD | 90.1820 | -1.3% | -3.1% |
| MSCI EM | 1,093.38 | +1.1% | +8.9% |
| TRY / USD | 32,1986 | -0.3% | -0.0% |
| SP 500 | 5,321.41 | +1.4% | +7.1% |
| AZN / USD | 1,6995 | -0.0% | -0.1% |
| MSCI FM | 2,358.93 | +1.3% | +6.6% |
| AMD / USD | 387.7500 | -0.1% | -1.2% |



New Bypass Road to be Built Along Edge of Alazani Valley

Thirteen kilometers of the ultimate 16 km Bakurtsikhe-Tsnori bypass road has been covered with asphalt-concrete and the construction is actively continuing.

The Bakurtsikhe-Tsnori bypass road

project involves the construction of a 2-lane asphalt-concrete road and 6 bridges.

The new bypass road is being built on the side of the Alazani Valley and will connect the Tbilisi-Bakurtsikhe-Lagodekhi-Azerbaijan border international road with the existing domestic road.

FT: 4 EU Countries Request Consideration of Sanctions for Georgia, Including Suspension of Visa Liberalization

Several member states of the European Union have demanded the imposition of sanctions, including the suspension of the visa-free regime, for Georgia due to the adoption of the "Russian law," the Financial Times reported this week, having been informed by anonymous sources.

The publication writes that despite numerous warnings from Brussels and month-long street protests, the Georgian parliament has adopted a controversial law which is similar to the law operating in Russia restricting media and human rights protection organizations, and which obliges those who receive income from foreign funds to register in the government register.

The publication writes that a meeting of EU foreign ministers is planned for next week. Estonia, the Netherlands, the Czech Republic, and Sweden are among the countries that have requested consideration of imposing restrictive measures on Georgia at this meeting.

According to the Financial Times, sus-

pension of the visa-free regime and freezing of EU funds are among the proposed sanctions. In addition, according to the publication, European countries are separately considering "taking other measures" against the Georgian government.

The Financial Times notes that the representatives of the EU member states warned Georgia that the implementation of the "Foreign Agents" law would be a significant backward step in the accession process and, along with internal problems, the country would fall deeper into Russia's orbit.

The publication notes that the imposition of sanctions is also being discussed in Washington, although the EU's actions are likely to be slower than the US's, as some countries fear that the suspension of the visa regime may be counterproductive, given the fact that it will affect not only the government, but also citizens, many of whom support the European course.

"You have to be careful not to target the wrong people," an EU diplomats told FT.



Georgian PM, FM Attend Funeral of Late Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi

BY ANA DUMBADZE

The Prime Minister of Georgia, Irakli Kobakhidze, together with the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ilia Darchiashvili, went to the Islamic Republic of Iran to attend the funeral ceremony of President Ebrahim Raisi, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hossein Amir Abdollahian, and other government officials.

A few hours before his unannounced visit to Tehran, the Georgian government announced that Irakli Kobakhidze had left a note in the condolence book at the Iranian embassy in Tbilisi, expressing his condolences to the Iranian people.

Iran's president and foreign minister were killed in a helicopter crash on May 19.

Ebrahim Raisi became the president of Iran in 2021, which led to the strengthening of repression against citizens in Iran, especially the brutal suppression of youth protests, which was accompanied by the killing and execution of many young people.

Iran has been under international sanc-



tions for many years, and its aviation is extremely outdated, as manufacturers of aircraft and their parts are prohibited from supplying any products to the country.

Based on the information of the Iranian government media, delegations of about 10 countries at the level of heads of state are present at the funeral ceremony, including the presidents of Tunisia and Tajikistan, the Emir of Qatar Sheikh Tamim, the Prime Minister of Iraq

Muhammad Shia Al Sudan, as well as the Prime Minister of Armenia, Nikol Pashinyan. Chairman of the Russian Duma Vyacheslav Volodyn arrived in Iran. The political leader of "Hamas" Ismail Haniyeh and the deputy leader of "Hezbollah" Naim Qassem attended the funeral ceremony of Raisi. The New York Times wrote that leaders of terrorist groups appeared at the ceremony amid chants "Death to America" and "Death to Israel".

Ukraine Latest: Moscow's Tactical Nuclear Weapons Drills Send a Warning to the West



Russian service members at an unknown location in Russia's southern military district. Source: Reuters

COMPILED BY ANA DUMBADZE

One of the most significant new stories related to Ukraine this week is that the UK is accusing China of providing or preparing to provide lethal aid to Russia for use in the war against Ukraine.

Defense Secretary Grant Shapps told a news conference that US and British defense intelligence had evidence that "lethal aid is now, or will be, flowing from China to Russia and into Ukraine." He called this a "significant development."

The Chinese Embassy in the UK called Shapps' accusation totally groundless.

Western nations have provided Ukraine with billions of dollars in weapons and aid since the Russia-Ukraine conflict started in 2022. Britain is, for the first time, accusing China of working to supply Russia with weapons for use in Ukraine, according to the media report.

"We urge the UK to stop its baseless accusations against China, stop fanning the flames on the Ukraine issue, seriously reflect on its role in international peace and security issues, and truly do something in the interests of world peace and justice," the embassy spokesperson said.

"China is neither the creator of, nor a party to the Ukraine crisis, nor has the country provided lethal weapons to any party involved," a Chinese envoy said, refuting the UK representative's unreasonable accusations against China at a UN Security Council briefing on Ukraine on Monday.

"China has the right to conduct normal economic and trade cooperation with all countries, including Russia. China has always had very strict controls on

the export of dual-use items," said Geng Shuang, China's deputy permanent representative to the UN.

Also on Thursday morning, the Kremlin said "in-depth dialogue" was needed to reduce rising tensions between Russia and the West - particularly with regards to nuclear issues.

Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov accused the "collective West" of refusing to engage with Russia despite the potential dangers.

MORE TOP STORIES

Russian forces have taken over the village of Klishchiivka in Ukraine's eastern Donetsk region, close to the city of Bakhmut, report Russian news agencies. At least nine people have been injured in a Russian air attack on the Ukrainian city of Kharkiv.

Russia accused Ukraine of using a drone to attack a non-nuclear facility at the Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant, causing no critical damage

Moscow said it is bolstering its efforts to protect its energy infrastructure from drone attacks.

Six children were handed over to Ukraine by Russia and reunited with their families, after a deal was brokered by Qatar.

HEAVY FIGHTING IN EASTERN UKRAINE FORCING TROOPS TO ENGAGE IN 'MANOEUVERS'

Heavy fighting in the Pokrovsk area in eastern Ukraine has forced Ukrainian troops to engage in "manoeuvres," the Ukrainian military's general staff have said.

Their report said Pokrovsk, northwest of the Russian-held city of Donetsk, remains the front's "hottest" sector.

Volodymyr Zelensky referred to the region and adjacent areas as "extraordinarily difficult" in his nightly video address.

WESTERN ALLIES TAKING TOO LONG ON MILITARY SUPPORT DECISIONS, ZELENSKY SAYS

Volodymyr Zelensky has said allies are taking too long when it comes to decisions on military support for Ukraine.

In an interview with Reuters, the Ukrainian leader said every decision they were coming to was "late by around one year."

"But it is what it is: One big step forward, but before that two steps back. So we need to change the paradigm a little bit," he said.

"When we're quick, they fall behind. And then there's a gap - six, eight months of unpassed (aid) packages, and then two-three months of supplies - and then a year goes by. We would like not to lose the advantage."

Zelensky also said Ukraine had never used Western weapons on Russian territory.

RUSSIA BEGINS DRILLS INVOLVING NUCLEAR WEAPONS

Russia's defense ministry has said it has begun a round of drills involving tactical nuclear weapons.

The exercises were announced by Russian authorities this month in response to remarks by senior Western officials about the possibility of deeper involvement in the war in Ukraine.

It was the first time Russia has publicly announced drills involving tactical nuclear weapons, although its strategic nuclear forces regularly hold exercises.

According to the ministry's statement, the first stage of the new drills includes nuclear-capable Kinzhal and Iskander missiles.

The maneuvers are taking place in the southern military district, which consists of Russian regions in the south.

Russia's latest non-strategic nuclear weapons drills are being watched closely by Ukraine and the West, coming at a time when Moscow is warning Kyiv's Western allies against any direct involvement in the war in Ukraine.

Announcing the exercises earlier in May, Russia's Ministry of Defense directly linked the exercises to "provocative statements and threats of individual Western officials against the Russian Federation."

Earlier this week, Ukraine's President called on allies to get more directly involved in the war, such as by helping to intercept Russian missiles.

The Kremlin accused Zelensky of "hysterics" and said Kyiv's request was due to "unfavorable conditions" for Ukraine on the battlefield.

The Foreign Agent Law, Castration, and the Podcast "Reimagining Soviet Georgia"

ANALYSIS BY RYAN SHERMAN

One thousand years ago, a group of men broke into the residence of the great French lover and intellectual, Peter Abelard. Upon discovering his hiding place, they held him down and performed what must have been a most clumsy and imprecise medical procedure. Abelard was castrated.



For Georgians, the longing to be part of Europe is the wish for borders respected. For sovereignty granted. For nationhood to be not only recognized, but protected



Everyday people in the streets are clamoring for their voices to be acknowledged. Source: Getty / carnegieeurope

These assailants had been dispatched by a man named Fulbert, the enraged uncle of Heloise d'Afgenueuil, the beautiful and now pregnant love of Peter's life.

In his prime, Abelard was the medieval equivalent of a celebrity professor, excelling in philosophy, theology, music, teaching, logic, composition, poetry, and passionate romancing. His lectures drew thousands, and his talent in rhetoric and debate left a trail of jealous contemporaries in his wake.

Often labeled a heretic, Abelard anticipated the Enlightenment throughout his career. "By doubting we come to inquiry," he wrote. "And by inquiry we

perceive truth."

This is the ethos with which I listen to, and appreciate, the podcast Reimagining Soviet Georgia. Hosted by Bryan Gigantino and Sopo Japaridze, the series offers a departure from the worn and familiar rhetoric of neoliberalism. Bryan and Sopo are communists and contrarians. To listen to them is to challenge and sharpen one's own viewpoints and, often, to risk offense.

Indeed, at times, the zeal with which they publicly embrace controversy can be jarring. For example, in a thread on X, Sopo argues that Russia is not an occupier and facilitator of ethnic cleansing in Abkhazia, but the rescuer of Abk-

hazia from the "virulent hate sown by [Georgian] ethnic nationalists." A pre-podcast era example shows Bryan performing a jam poetry piece dedicated to Mother Theresa. With the visibly uncomfortable moderator in the background, he says: "They call you a beautiful flower, with petals of peace, love and harmony." Then, making the sign of the cross, he shouts "Bull fucking shit! You are a witch not worthy of hanging in my garage!" He mimes the looping of a noose around his neck, to scattered hoots and hollers from the crowd.

While much of their subversive series is devoted to sympathetic reexaminations of the Soviet era, recent episodes

have turned to Georgia's current political crisis. This crisis has seen months of protest marches and rallies outside the parliament, sparked by a new law that grants extensive surveillance and punitive powers over civil society and non-governmental organizations, enabling access to communications, personal information, and internal documents. Initially proposed in 2023 by the far-right People's Power Party, the law faced severe public backlash and was withdrawn, only to be rebranded and reintroduced by the Georgian Dream Party in 2024.

This law is felt to be a slap in the face and omen of worsening crackdowns by an increasingly authoritarian ruling party in the hands of Georgian dream founder and oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili. Despite mass protests, the law has now passed the three required readings and votes but has been vetoed by the president. The legislation will now undergo one more hearing and vote to overturn the veto, which it is expected to clear. On both national and international stages, outrage is at an all-time high, and tensions are still rising.

At such a moment, clarity and truth telling are paramount.

Unfortunately, the framing of the crisis by the hosts Reimagining Soviet Georgia mirrors the main narratives of the ruling party's propaganda. They attribute the backlash not to the frustrated wishes and feelings of people, but to manipulation by Western powers in a global geopolitical struggle. This commentary has percolated outside of Georgia where the bulk of their listenership resides, many of them in the same Slavic Studies departments where Georgia is so often lazily lumped.

Continued on page 4

Xeme

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THE BILTMORE
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The Foreign Agent Law, Castration, and the Podcast "Reimagining Soviet Georgia"

Continued from page 3

Bryan begins the most recent episode with an attempt to summarize the crisis's antecedents. "While this outline cannot address every single factor," he says, "it is an attempt by me to summarize where we are."

Yet crucial omissions abound. He fails to mention state forces' violent crackdown on protesters, or the spate of beatings outside of homes, or the widespread intimidation campaign by phone, targeting dissenters and their families. Nor does he acknowledge the spontaneous and uncoordinated nature of the protests, or their general lack of affiliation with opposition parties.

Instead, Bryan asserts that the general strategy of the Georgian Dream strategy is simply "to negotiate the terms of its desired EU membership" and prevent disruption of "capital and resource flows", all in an apparent good faith effort "to avoid geopolitical conflict and protect Georgia's shifting role in an emergent multipolar world."

Nowhere is mentioned the erosion of democratic institutions, the suppression of media, the attacks on opposition figures, or the ruling party's autocratic tendencies. Also sidestepped is President Salome Zurbishvili's own condemnation of the law, and repeated apologies in now familiar statements, such as: "I don't know how long we will continue playing this two-faced game, where we pretend that we want to keep going towards the EU, that we want candidate status. At this time not only are we not doing what we must... we are actually taking contrary steps" (excerpt from the President's July 21, 2022, interview with the Georgian Public Broadcaster).

What are these contrary steps? Our hosts mention none of them, but in addition to the Foreign Agent Law, the President also may be referring to openly hostile rhetoric directed at EU diplomats, or a series of laws facilitating the movement of dark money into the country.

Or perhaps she is thinking of the ruling party's abandonment of the Charles Michel agreement, or the fast-tracking of a clan of friendly judicial appointees, or the denial that the party's billionaire patron is an oligarch, or the obstruction of the president from visiting European capitals to discuss EU ascension, or the sanctioning of the president for taking the trips anyway, or the parliamentary acts giving the government greater control over the Central Elections Commission, or the reports by watchdogs exposing high-level financial corruption in the government, or the reports of intimidation and vote-buying that marred the previous parliamentary elections, or the jailing of critical media figures, or the tightening of the Law of Broadcasting, or the abolishing of the State Inspector's Office, or the sudden swapping out of Prime Ministers, or the universal condemnation of the law by Georgia's closest European partners, or the positive statements about the law made by Russian political figures, or the series of violent attacks on opposition leaders, or the judicial corporatism, or the attempt to impeach the president, or accusations that the West is fomenting revolution, or the clampdown on access to archives, or the restricting of access to public information, or the endless fearmongering about a conspiracy to open up a second front in the Ukrainian war, or the intimating that Europe is controlled by a shadowy "Global War Party," or the extensive wiretapping campaign of citizens, journalists, politicians, and foreign diplomats by the State Security Service, or the use of the Prosecutor's Office to target a bank owned by a prominent opposition figure, or the sabotaging and appropriation of the Anaklia Deep Sea Port Project, or the shielding of the former Prosecutor General and Georgian-Russian businessman with ties to Russia's FSB security service from financial sanc-



Logo of the controversial podcast

tions, or the party's pivot to anti-Queer legislation and rhetoric, or the anti-Western People's Power Party formed from the ranks of Georgian Dream, or the staff purges of nominally independent institutions, or the failures to investigate corrupt judges...

Nowhere in Bryan's generous assessment of the ruling party are any of these problems even implicitly mentioned. Nor does he note that civil society is the only space still left outside of the ruling party's control. He also fails to acknowledge that these protests are, at their core, pro-European demonstrations that follow on the heels of similar protests over several years. They are filled with young people anxious about their democratic future.

According to Bryan, the overreaction on the part of the public is derived from "the culmination of years of opposition lobbying" by a network of "protesters, their allies, and the NGO sector." Tying this corrosive NGO legacy to the overthrow of Eduard Shevardnadze in 2003, Bryan depicts the Rose Revolution as a Western-orchestrated coup to erect an "authoritarian neoliberal state," and not as a popular movement driven by outrage at ubiquitous crime, police corruption, state theft, poverty, and blatant election manipulation. Going further, he places the blame for the 2008 Russo-Georgian War not on a foreign military force invading a sovereign country, but on President Mikhail Saakashvili who "intentionally instigated" the conflict.

His outline conspicuously fails to address the main question that weighs heavily on so many minds. Why on earth, in an election year, would a ruling party of declining popularity, desperate to maintain control, suddenly reintroduce a law guaranteed to spark mass public backlash and broad condemnation from the very European Union the party claims to wish to join?

The swift reintroduction and hasty passage of this law in parliament, coupled with a surge of anti-Western hostility, has sent shockwaves through the international community, leaving a general impression that powerful developments are taking place behind the scenes.

The party line is that this law is merely a tool to improve NGO transparency and bring Georgia closer to Europe. This thin pretense evaporated completely at the third and final reading of the law in Parliament where—in what appears to be an extra-legal last-minute revision—the reach of the law was extended to facilitate the surveillance of anyone suspected of association with an "organization of foreign influence."

Worse still, and strangely for a historian, Bryan fails to touch on the histori-

cal reasons that a European future has long been desired by the majority of the Georgian people.

Georgia's democratic aspirations and troubled history as a beleaguered imperial possession help explain not only the feelings pouring out in the streets today, but also the mass mobilizations in 2013, 2003, 1991, 1989, 1978, 1956, 1923, 1918, and 1907. This history includes the pre-revolutionary break of the Social Democrats from the Bolsheviks and the resistance to Russification championed by national heroes like Akaki Tsereteli, Iakob Gogebashvili, and Ilia Chavchavadze.

As evinced by its title, one of the tenets of Reimagining Soviet Georgia is that Georgians should better appreciate their Soviet history under the Kremlin. Yet, even among Georgians steeped in Soviet nostalgia, many will tell you that no amount of Kremlin generosity is worth the price of being rusetis mona – a slave of Russia.

One hundred years ago, the Patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church, Saint Ambrosius, dispatched a passionate letter of appeal to Europe, pleading for intervention after the Soviet invasion. He listed Georgia's grievances as follows: The invasion of Georgia by the Red Army; 17 years of tsarist despotism; the yoke of slavery now reimposed; the confiscation of Georgian property "soaked in blood and sanctified with the bones of its ancestors;" the attack on the country's mother tongue and national culture; the banishment of faith "under a banner of false freedom;" and the ruthless persecution of the clergy.

Summoned to a Soviet show trial, Saint Ambrosius delivered a passionate speech to his captors, ending with the unforgettable line: "My soul belongs to God; my heart to my homeland; and you have been given my body, you bastards!"

In recent history, Georgia's peaceful transfers of power in November 2003 and October 2012 were facilitated by Western support. Successive Georgian governments and the people have consistently embraced Western aid and military support. Yet the path to Georgia's EU membership has also been marked by a frustrating, and often patronizing, "carrot-and-stick" approach. For many, the granting EU candidacy status in 2023 signaled a Europe finally ready to assign Georgia's situation the weight it has long deserved.

For the Georgians marching today in the streets of Tbilisi, the longing to be part of Europe demands, first and foremost, a simple and honest acknowledgment by commentators. Georgians do not need lectures on the precariousness of their geopolitical position. They know firsthand the difficult lessons of history

many of us learn only in classrooms. They know that to defy powerful empires entails great risk. They know that the West is not always a reliable partner. They know small countries are vulnerable. They know what it's like to have their lands stolen, their people subjugated, their capital occupied, their culture folklorized, their futures obstructed, their family members exiled, and their writers and politicians purged. They know that survival often depends on undesired collaborations coerced under the threat of annihilation.

However, many far-left factions view any Western involvement as evidence of malfeasance and meddling, and our podcast hosts make no secret of their hatred for western-funded NGOs in Georgia. Such groups, scoffing at the very notion of Western values and partnerships, seem tacitly to approve of the Bolshevik-style coups of the past, with anti-Western locals as figureheads.

But the literature of the Caucasus is also animated by legacies that subvert imperious power and champion heroes who opt out of imposed systems of control. This is an ethos that appeals to a natural justice transcending the authority brought by uninvited masters and their local administrators. This is the same spirit that animates the demonstrations today.

For Georgians, Europe represents the hope of enduring stability and rule of law, representative democracy, independent judiciaries, and a system that does not need to be reset every 10 years with mass protests, as government after government slip into authoritarian tendencies. This is what the demonstrators wish for when they look to the West.

"I am so sick of this," an older protester told me outside the Parliament a few weeks ago. "My father was out in the street doing this exact same thing so that I wouldn't have to. But here we are again." One of my students explained her participation this way: "They want to control everything. That's why they want this law. But we will not give up, because we are fighting for our country."

Thomas De Waal, one of the region's most respected commentators, calls this bill "deliberately imprecise and menacing in intent," and in a May 21 article assesses the Georgian Dream strategy this way:

What the ruling party evidently wants is 'Fortress Georgia', with them firmly in charge. In geopolitical terms that means elements of the following: an economic alliance with Russia; a partnership with Russian, Chinese and Turkish business; the non-aligned status and repressive capacity of Azerbaijan or one of the Central Asian states; the tax-exempt status of the British Virgin Islands; and support from illiberal governments in Europe, chiefly Hungary. It wants to pursue this while espousing a patriotic 'Georgian traditional values' ideology promoted by the Georgian Orthodox Church – and without formally abandoning a commitment in the constitution to European integration.

The anxieties provoked by the Foreign Agent Law and crackdowns stem from the perception that these actions appear inconsistent with a party striving for a democratic majority through transparent and equitable electoral process.

Yet on the global stage, despite diametrically opposed polemics, the far left and far right have paradoxically converged in their final conclusions, while remaining simultaneously out of touch with the sentiments of the everyday people clamoring for their voices to be acknowledged. From each of these ideological frameworks emerge the epitome of a paternalistic condescension, wherein Georgians do not have their own thoughts and emotions, but only those implanted by a cynical West. This tracks a recurring historical irony in the history of far-left politics, in which the very voices we claim to wish to emancipate are dis-



My father was out in the street doing this exact same thing so that I wouldn't have to. But here we are again

carded, while the atrocities committed by leftist authoritarian regimes are overlooked.

Indeed, in one of the more memorable early episodes of Reimagining Soviet Georgia, Professor Ronald Suny—an academic known for his Soviet sympathies—finds himself pushing back against Soviet apologetics. After an uncritical portrayal by the hosts of none other than Joseph Stalin, he responds, "...there were horrors in the Soviet Union, and Georgia suffered from them... Stalin was in some ways the grave digger of the original impulses, which are democratic-socialist, of the Revolution of 1917."

For foreigners like Bryan and myself, it is easy to take the stability of the West for granted, to eschew national identities and to flirt again with Marxist ideology. But Georgia does not have the luxury of landmasses and oceans separating it from its historic enemies. For Georgians, the longing to be part of Europe is also the wish for borders, respected. For nationhood to be not only recognized, but protected. And for unwavering social and economic integration to be forthcoming.

All criticism aside, Reimagining Soviet Georgia is not a bad podcast. I will be the first to say we need more podcasts about Georgia with thoughtful guests and well-prepared questions, discussions about history, and a voicing of perspectives we do not get elsewhere. But what we must object to is the bad faith framing of a national crisis that uncritically reproduces political propaganda and ignores the voices and experiences of ordinary people.

To return, finally, to Peter Abelard: in his more intact days, his fame had swelled along with his audacity. He ingratiated himself with the house of Fulbert and into a tutorship of his cloistered niece, whereupon he poured out confessions of soul and deepest desire. The letters exchanged by the two lovers have become foundational texts of European romantic literature, placing Peter and Heloise in the tragic ranks of Tristan and Isolde and Romeo and Juliet.

In any good story, we expect a definitive resolution to the main conflict of the narrative. Yet, unlike Tristan and Isolde and Romeo and Juliet, Abelard and Heloise's ending is unsatisfactory and anticlimactic. Abelard survived the amputation, but after the couple's severance, each retire to separate hermitages, spending their remaining years in monastic patterns. Abelard was eventually able to reclaim some of his former renown, though in a much more devotional mode.

Embedded within the current crisis in Georgia is an expectation of an ultimate and decisive showdown, yet this very notion highlights a fundamental difference between narratives and real-life events. This lesson can be gleaned from both Abelard's story and Georgia's history of protests. Once the central crisis subsides, a conclusive resolution – whether triumphant or tragic – seldom materializes. Society is left grappling with the same challenges. We can only hope the damage done in the meantime is not irreversible.

Pavel Slunkin - Belarus Lessons for Georgia

Continued from page 1

They see the threat; they see that the government might take the country in the opposite direction, and they are ready to fight it.

"I think the danger is that Georgia might become similar to Belarus in future, and that is what's at stake here; that is what people are essentially protesting against, not merely a piece of legislation.

"With that said, there obviously are similarities. One would be the polarization of society, which both in Belarus and Georgia is being encouraged and manipulated by the governments, the "you are either with us, or against us" approach. So, obviously, they do not try to reduce the polarization; on the contrary, they play on it. Another similarity would be threatening people with war and posturing as the only guarantor for peace. Ever since Putin's full invasion of Ukraine, Lukashenko has been telling us, "Look, Belarus is not part of this war, and if you want it to remain so, then I am the only one who can guarantee it. I am a peacekeeper; I will keep you out of the war." And, obviously, he accuses all his democratic opponents of wanting to drag Belarus into the war. I think Georgian Dream is doing pretty much the same thing, with this nonsensical narrative about the "Global War Party" and accusing the opposition of wanting to open a second front in Georgia, which is just crazy.

"And, obviously, the repressions: All that you are now seeing in the streets in Tbilisi, we saw that in Minsk a few years ago. I would dare to say we saw far worse than what's happened in Tbilisi, as they were far more brutal in Belarus. Intimidation, beatings, arrests, using the so-called Titushki and so on. We too had a phone intimidation campaign, when they would call and threaten and intimidate people. Ironically though, they were also intimidating their own people, to ensure their loyalty: Special services would send threats to high ranking government officials, as if they were sent from the protest leaders: "When we come [to power], you will be dead, we will kill your children, we will take everything from you, you will pay". Lukashenko would use this to instill loyalty: "This is what will happen if you will try to defect, if you don't stay on board. I am the only one who can save you." And many people did believe that these messages were sent by the democratic activists.

WHY DID THE PROTESTS AND RESISTANCE FIZZLE OUT IN BELARUS, AND CAN THE SAME HAPPEN IN GEORGIA? HOW DID LUKASHENKO BREAK THE PEOPLE?

My answer would be that, first of all, Lukashenko was more powerful. Far, far more powerful than Georgian Dream is. He had all the state resources, the apparatus, the siloviki, the army, very well equipped and loyal special forces and, obviously, Moscow's support - Moscow sent troops to the border between Russia and Belarus, essentially saying that if something gets out of control, if the protesters are seen to be winning, we will invade. I know for a fact that Moscow was also intimidating our state officials - deputy prime ministers, ministers, other officials who had resources, political power, not to bail out, not to support the protests or oppose Lukashenko, telling them they would pay a bloody price if not, and so would the country. That worked. It ensured that very few top ranking officials resigned. And, in parallel, they were ramping up the repressions and crackdowns. In the first weeks, when they saw that there were hundreds of



Pavel Slunkin



The government does not have the same reach, the same amount of resources. You still have the opposition, you still have a say in parliament, you still have democracy

thousands of people, so they couldn't effectively disperse or beat them all up, they arrested just a few. The next week, five arrests became 100 arrests. Then they started the hunt - they arrested the leaders first, then they raided the offices of political parties, then intimidated and hunted down whoever remained, or whoever might emerge as a new leader. I was there - I can see all of it even now, as if there was a picture in front of me. They bled the protests dry. You are there, it's a peaceful protest, you are making

sure that the world sees that you don't want any violence, you are unarmed. Then they close in and you see a Kalashnikov pointed right at your face. What can you do? The only thing we could do is to show that there were many of us, that we were the majority, and we weren't going away. And the protests lasted a long time, months, but, bit by bit, the arrests, the crackdowns, the intimidation took their toll; they chipped away at us, bit by bit. Even with the hindsight, I just don't see any way we could have won. Really, this was a battle that couldn't be won.

With Georgia, it's different, it's not yet the totalitarian dictatorship that Belarus already had in 2020; the government here does not have the same all-encompassing reach, the same amount of resources. You still have the opposition, you still have a say in parliament. Simply put, there is democracy in Georgia. And as numerous as the protests are, I think even more people are staying at home, not going to protest in the streets, but still not government supporters. They share the values of those who take to the streets, but they are still at home. You should find creative ways to involve them in the protests.

Based on the Belarus experience, long term strategy and vision are important. We come out on the streets, we protest, we know what we want to achieve in general, but we don't know how. I think that could become a problem in Georgia, as I see the numbers are decreasing. In Belarus, people would ask themselves: So we did what we could, we tried, and nothing changed. People stop seeing any

reason to come, just because it's a risk with no results. I hope that doesn't happen in Georgia, but there's a chance it might.

IN GEORGIA, WE WORRY WE MIGHT SEE RUSSIAN GUNS AND RUSSIAN TROOPS HEADING HERE TO ENSURE "STABILITY." WHAT DO YOU DO WITH SUCH AN IMMEDIATE THREAT?

This is exactly what happened to us. People knew that even if we won, there were tens of thousands of troops near the border with Russia and they would send the troops over. And this was a very destructive point for most of society, because the way people saw it, yes, we had a chance to win against Lukashenko, but when Russia got involved, then we realized there was nothing we could do; we would lose.

How realistic that scenario is in Georgia's case, I don't know. My guess would be that Moscow can help Georgian Dream without getting actively involved, just sending over some people, some resources, without resorting to invasion to guarantee that the government wins and stays. What should the Georgian people do in this situation? I'm afraid I don't have any good advice. Russia spoils every single spark of democracy in its neighborhood, that's the reality we live in.

COULD THE WEST PERHAPS PLAY A MORE ACTIVE ROLE IN PREVENTING THIS?

The West could play a more important role. And they should have done this already, when Georgian Dream started

politically motivated arrests in previous years. They weren't active enough. The talk about limiting visa liberalization and personal sanctions should have started before. Now it might already be too late, it might be that Georgian Dream, much like Lukashenko when he was sanctioned, think: We will survive this, we'll weather this storm. In a way, the sanctions will probably make Georgian Dream even more dependent on Moscow than they are now; will make them outright puppets of the Kremlin, much like Lukashenko. So I'd probably go for some sort of a balanced, compromise approach - something that the recent bill from US Congressman Wilson seems to be going for. The compromise might not be a victory for either side, but it will prevent even worse outcomes, including the one where Russia gets involved.



The sanctions will probably make Georgian Dream even more dependent on Moscow than they are now

"Dream" Calls Visa-free Proposal With the US a Vague Prospect, Prefers "Russian Law"

BY TEAM GT

Georgian Dream responded to the draft law to be submitted to the US Congress, which promises a comprehensive package of economic and security support for Georgia and liberalization of the visa regime, if the government abandons its growing anti-Western rhetoric and stops its backsliding in terms of human rights.

The political council of Georgian Dream claims that this draft law has not yet been adopted in America and the prospect of its adoption is unclear. In Dream, they continue to propagate that since 2020, non-governmental organizations have tried to organize a revolution in Georgia twice, thus justifying the need to adopt the "Russian law."

The ruling party has called the US the draft law, which includes sanctions, "insulting blackmail," and they say that the recovery of Georgian-American relations depends entirely on the right actions of the American side, not "promises with a vague perspective", but "showing respect for the Georgian people" is necessary.

"Unfortunately, a number of American politicians and officials are making mistake after mistake and are still talking to Georgia in the language of blackmail" - they say in Georgian Dream.

"The Government of Georgia is not



playing. We are passing the NGO Transparency Act because we see no other way to protect the country. Since 2020, NGOs have already tried to organize a revolution in this country twice, and we will not wait for a third attempt.

"For us, this law is not a subject of trade, but an effective means of protecting the sovereignty of Georgia, and we cannot trade the sovereignty of the country under any circumstances. We cannot leave unjust attacks on Georgia unanswered either. This is our responsibility to the Georgian people, who gave us the mandate to manage the country," the party said.

In Georgian Dream, they say that a dignified attitude towards Georgia should have been expressed in a completely different way. In the conditions of such an attitude, according to the statement of the ruling party, the US would prove that it is a strategic partner of Georgia:

"In particular, without any conditions, it would grant visa liberalization to the citizens of Georgia and sign a free trade agreement. As it is clear from the bill that the US could have done this before, however, it showed an indifferent attitude towards Georgia and the Georgian people.

"The US has been putting money into

the Georgian economy, which it last did in 2009-11, when Saakashvili's regime was on the brink of economic collapse.

"The US ensured a change in the behavior of the NGOs, in particular, the end of their policy of non-recognition of the legitimacy of the Georgian government and the setting aside of revolutionary plans.

"The use of the EU topic as a tool of constant blackmail against Georgia should be stopped, negotiations with Georgia should be opened by the end of the year, thus restoring justice to Ukraine, Moldova and Bosnia and Herzegovina," Georgian Dream representatives have said.

Georgian Dream states that if the US

does all this, in this case, the "Russian law" will no longer be needed, and they will no longer have to answer to "unfair statements":

"However, if NGOs do not stop their attempts at revolution, do not stop attacking the Orthodox Church, supporting religious extremism, encouraging religious-based political intervention, LGBT-propaganda, drug propaganda, trying to undermine state institutions and creating obstacles for economic projects, and the attacks from American politicians and officials on Georgia will continue, in this case we will need a law on transparency to repel those attacks. Accordingly, today, there is no alternative to the adoption of the law on the transparency of NGOs," the party said.

Georgian Dream claims that the partners of Georgia can qualitatively rearrange relations in one year at most, and they say that "if they realize this, the relations will be sorted out very quickly", but if they continue to act with the same approach towards Georgia, the ruling party says that they will also harm the interests of Georgia as well as the US.

"Everything is in the hands of partners, and Georgia, as a small country, cannot unilaterally change anything. Therefore, we should remain hopeful that rational thought will prevail in America, thus both countries will only benefit," they said.

For the record, the US is considering transferring an important military and trade package to Georgia if the anti-democratic course changes.

BUSINESS

World Bank Approves \$35 Million Investment for Black Sea Submarine Cable Project Preparatory Activities

The World Bank's Board of Executive Directors this week approved a \$35 million loan for the first phase of the Enhancing Energy Security through Power Interconnection and Renewable Energy (ESPIRE) Program for Georgia.

The ESPIRE Program consists of three phases, with a potential financing envelope of up to \$500 million that seeks to improve Georgia's institutional capacity for the development of submarine cable projects, strengthen Georgia's domestic power transmission system, and establish a direct electricity interconnection between the South Caucasus and Southeast Europe. Additionally, the parallel digital interconnection would reduce internet connection costs, improve bandwidth, and generally enhance international digital connectivity across the Black Sea.

The ESPIRE Program is designed to support the next steps in the preparation of a potential Black Sea Submarine Cable (BSSC) Project, which aims to establish parallel electricity and fiber-optic submarine cable interconnections across the Black Sea, with landing points in Georgia and Romania.

"The ESPIRE Program can play a pivotal role in realizing one of the most strategic and ambitious energy and

digital connectivity initiatives in the region," said Rolande Pryce, World Bank Regional Director for the South Caucasus. "The Black Sea Submarine Cable Project has the potential to become a transformational interconnection between the South Caucasus and Southeast Europe, helping the countries from both sides of the Black Sea to improve energy security, decarbonize energy supply, and develop renewable energy, as well as increase direct digital connectivity."

The first phase of the ESPIRE Program is especially critical, as it aims to help identify a suitable corridor for the BSSC Project, and support further preparatory activities, such as surveys of the Black Sea seabed, including geophysical and geotechnical investigations. To enhance the implementation readiness of the BSSC Project, the first phase also includes capacity building and technical assistance for the establishment of adequate institutional mechanisms for intergovernmental coordination and joint decision-making with other countries participating in the BSSC project.

If Georgia and other participating countries decide to proceed with the implementation of the BSSC Project, Phase 2 of the ESPIRE Program would finance, in parallel with Phase 1, the strengthening of the on-land transmis-



A submarine cable. Source: Getty Images
sion grid in Georgia and potentially other countries, which would be crucial to enabling electricity exchanges through the submarine cable system. Phase 3 would then support the financing of the submarine cable itself, in collaboration with other financiers. The fiber-optic cable component in the same seabed corridor is expected to attract significant private-sector investment.

"The Black Sea Submarine Cable is a flagship project initiated by Georgia, which will provide a direct connection of the South Caucasus countries to the European energy system. The first phase of financing, which was approved by the

World Bank, is fundamental in terms of further development of the project," said Levan Davitashvili, First Vice Prime Minister, Minister of Economy and Sustainable Development of Georgia. "Implementation of the BSSC project implies the boost of large-scale infrastructure in the country, the creation of jobs, and increased investments in Georgia's economy. With the Black Sea Submarine Cable project, Georgia will become a very important partner country of the European Union, and this will contribute to the strengthening of the energy security of the European Union, Georgia and the entire South Caucasus region, the

development of the renewable energy sector and the increase of transit opportunities between the regions."

"The World Bank-supported first phase of the ESPIRE Program will contribute to the important initiative that aims to improve Georgia's energy security, and to support the preparatory works for the Black Sea Submarine Cable (BSSC) Project," said Lasha Khutsishvili, Minister of Finance of Georgia. "We believe that the project will strengthen Georgia's role as a reliable transit country and exporter of renewable energy from the South Caucasus to the European Union, contributing to the diversification of energy sources and the development of regional transport corridors. The project is viewed as a significant step towards closer integration between the South Caucasus region and the EU, fostering economic growth, development, and connectivity across the region."

The ESPIRE MPA Program is part of the World Bank Group's Global Challenge Programs on "Energy Transition, Efficiency and Access" and "Accelerating Digitalization." The Program is also consistent with the forthcoming World Bank Georgia Country Partnership Framework 2025-2029, focusing on enhancing inclusive growth and competitiveness, and improving connectivity and integration.



Become a Part of the Tbilisi Circular Lab!

If you are a business that consumes, uses, or produces packaging and wants to explore more sustainable practices, join us in the Tbilisi Circular Lab!

Tbilisi Circular Labs (TCL) is a GIZ-supported circular economy project that aims to accelerate business models which integrate reusable packaging systems, in other words, a system that allows the packaging to be returned to the producer/service provider/business operator, cleaned and reused for the same purpose. The Tbilisi Circular Lab seeks to identify and engage 10 businesses interested in piloting the adoption of reusable packaging systems within their operational frameworks, meaning a system whereby packaging is returned, cleaned, and reused for the same purpose. The program offers comprehensive training, mentoring, and coaching to participants. Additionally, a minimum of one and a maximum of two projects will receive financial support for piloting reusable packaging systems. The program puts special emphasis on businesses (co) owned by women.

To become a member of the Tbilisi Circular Lab, you only have to provide a very brief vision of how you see your business transitioning to reusable packaging that can be returned and reused for the same purpose and answer a few questions about your business. Registration deadline: May 30, 2024. Please read the Terms and Conditions carefully before filling out the form.

Interested businesses should apply by May 30: <https://forms.gle/5Zt7jKLGvWaBq4J8>

International Wine Challenge 2024 Announces Award Winning Wines from 38 Countries – Georgia Claims 7 Gold Medals

The International Wine Challenge, the world's most influential, impartial and rigorously judged global wine competition, has announced the results of its 2024 competition, marking its 40th year. Medals were awarded to 38 winemaking countries following a blind tasting by an international panel of experts last month. While France, Australia and Spain remained top of the medal table, niche wine producing countries England, Georgia, Japan, Canada, Romania, Ukraine and India all saw an increase in the number of medals awarded.

EMERGING WINE REGIONS ENGLAND, CANADA, GEORGIA, JAPAN, ROMANIA, UKRAINE AND INDIA INCREASING IN RECOGNITION WINNING MORE MEDALS THAN EVER

The improving quality of wine around the globe is evident in this year's results, with many countries gaining more medals than ever before.

England has seen a rise in medals with 13 Gold, 54 Silver and 58 Bronze, having climbed up the medal table to 9th place this year from 10th last year.

Canada gained 14 more medals than last year, with 3 Gold, 27 Silver and 29 Bronze. The Niagara Peninsula was the standout region winning 46 of the medals, compared to the 28 medals it won last year.

Georgia also won more medals this year, in particular the Kakheti region, which won 48 out of the 51 medals awarded to Georgia, with most wines awarded being skin-contact white or red.

Japan has won its most ever Gold medals for wine, with two going to Chardonnays, both won by Takahata Winery, and one going to a Kosu wine.

Other countries with significant gains were Romania with 12 more medals than last year, including 5 Silver and 13 Bronze, giving them a total of 18 medals. Ukraine saw an increase from just 1 medal last year to 8 this year, 7 Bronze and 1 Silver. India also gained an extra 3 medals with 5 Bronze medals awarded.

Highlights:

- The English Sparkling Trophy was awarded to Wiston Estate, Library Collection Blanc de Blancs, 2010 and Gusbourne was awarded the English Red Trophy for its Pinot Noir, 2022.

- The Niagara Peninsula was the only region to win a trophy from Canada, with the Canadian Ice Wine Trophy going to Lakeview Wine, Vidal Ice-wine, 2021

- Vazisubani Estate, Kisi Qvevri, 2021 won the

Georgian White Trophy, the second White Trophy in the competition to be awarded to a white wine with skin contact.

- The Japanese White Trophy was won by Takahata Winery, La Clôtüre Electrique en Kamiwada Chardonnay, 2022.

FRANCE ON A WINNING STREAK WITH MOST HIGHLY AWARDED WINEMAKER

France continued its winning streak, winning the highest number of medals in each category with 72 Gold, 394 Silver and 455 Bronze; an increase of 84 more medals than last year.

Highlights:

- The International Pinot Noir Trophy was awarded to Edouard Delaunay for the 9th time in a row, with his wine Charmes-Chambertin Grand Cru, 2021, making him the most highly awarded winemaker in the competition with seven other trophies to his name, including French Red Trophy, Burgundy Red Trophy, Chambolle Musigny Trophy, Charmes Chambertin Trophy, Corton Trophy and the Nuits St Georges Trophy.

- The International Sauvignon Blanc Trophy was awarded to Loire Valley for the first time since 2017, with Château de Tracy winning back the trophy with its Les 101 Rangs 2019.

- This year saw the IWC introduce several new regional trophies, including the Provence Rosé Trophy which was won by Château Paquette Angélico, 2023 in its debut year.

- The Chablis Grand Cru Trophy, Chablis Premier Cru Trophy and Chablis Trophy were all won by La Chablisienne which also won five Gold medals as well as a further 13 Silver and Bronze medals.

SPAIN, PORTUGAL, ITALY & AUSTRIA – EUROPEAN COUNTRIES SECURED FOUR OUT OF THE TOP FIVE HIGHEST MEDAL RANKINGS IN THE COMPETITION

With France in 1st place, Spain, Portugal and Italy took 3rd, 4th and 5th place in the highest medal rankings at this year's competition.

Spain remained in 3rd place in the medal rankings with 34 Gold medals, 207 Silver and 215 Bronze, with Jerez winning 22 out of the 34 Gold medals. Rioja was the winning region, with a total of 138 medals awarded, the most of all the regions. Spain has also seen a rise in medal wins for sparkling wines, gaining 46 medals this year, compared to 39 last year.

Portugal too increased its medal count, winning

33 Gold, 175 Silver and 195 Bronze, ranking in 4th place on the medal table. Portugal won 11 trophies for its fortified wine as well as one for still wine.

Italy won 337 medals in total and came in 5th place, winning medals for orange wines for the first time in the competition's history.

Austria gained an extra 11 medals on last year, taking its total for 2024 to 101 with 10 more Gold medals than 2023.

Highlights:

- The Spanish Red Trophy was won by Bodegas Valdemar, Balcón de Pilatos Maturana, 2020, resulting in Rioja claiming the prestigious title for the 2nd year in a row.

- The Spanish White Trophy was won by a Galician winery for the 6th year in a row with Bodegas Pazo de Villarei, Albariño, 2023 taking the top prize.

- Quinta da Terrincha, Tinto, 2021 from the historical Douro vineyards won the Portuguese Red Trophy.

- The Italian White Trophy was awarded to Borgo Savaian di Stefano Bastiani for its Aransat, 2022 orange wine, having also won the new Italian Skin Contact Trophy.

- The Italian Red Trophy was awarded to a wine made from the Lagrein grape variety native to the South Tyrol with CAVIT taking home the prize with its Bottega Vinai Lagrein Trentino, 2021.

- Austria was awarded the International Riesling Trophy for Petra Unger's Ried Gaisberg IÖTW Kremstal Reserve Riesling, 2022.

GLOBAL RECOGNITION FOR NEW WORLD WINES WITH INTERNATIONAL TROPHIES FOR AUSTRALIA, NEW ZEALAND, ARGENTINA

Australia continued its streak as the top new world country in terms of medals with 54 Gold, 250 Silver and 154 Bronze ranking it in 2nd place behind France. Australia also came 2nd to France in terms of overall trophies, winning a total of 19, 10 of which were from South Australia.

New Zealand also proved its dominance on the international winemaking scene, claiming two out of seven of the International Varietal Trophies for Syrah and Chardonnay.

Despite a growing number of Malbec entries from

countries all over the world, Argentina continued its winning streak as the only country in IWC history to have won the International Malbec Trophy.

Highlights:

- Shaw + Smith was awarded the Australian Red Trophy for its Balhannah Vineyard Shiraz, 2021.

- Having won the International Cabernet Sauvignon Trophy for the first time in over a decade last year, Australia reasserted its dominance in Cabernet Sauvignon production with Robert Oatley claiming the title for The Pennant Cabernet Sauvignon, 2018.

- The International Syrah Trophy was won by Kennedy Point Vineyard with its 2021 Syrah, reinstating New Zealand's increasing expertise with this grape variety, having also claimed the title from France last year.

- Church Road was on a winning streak and was awarded the New Zealand Red Trophy for its Church Road 1 Merlot, and it also won the International Chardonnay Trophy with its Grand Reserve Chardonnay, 2021.

- The International Malbec Trophy was won by Argentina for its Bodega Dante Robino, Gran Dante Malbec, 2021.

The full list of 2024 International Wine Challenge award winners released on 16th May can be seen online. The IWC Champion Wines for 2024, which are selected following a re-tasting by the IWC Co-Chairs of all the trophy-winning wines, will be revealed at the IWC 2024 Awards announcement on Tuesday 9th July.

ABOUT THE INTERNATIONAL WINE CHALLENGE

In its 40th year, the International Wine Challenge is widely acknowledged as the world's most rigorous, impartial, influential and global wine competition. The International Wine Challenge assesses every wine 'blind' and judges each for its faithfulness to style, region and vintage. Awards include medals (Gold, Silver, Bronze) and Commended awards. Trophies are awarded to the very best wines in each category. The International Wine Challenge is committed to helping consumers discover great wine, and the medals displayed on winning bottles offer a trusted guarantee of quality.

INTERNATIONAL WINE CHALLENGE RESULTS 2024: MEDAL SUMMARY TABLE, RANKED BY TOTAL MEDALS

| Country | Total Medals | Gold | Silver | Bronze | Commended |
|-----------------|--------------|------|--------|--------|-----------|
| France | 921 | 72 | 394 | 455 | 353 |
| Australia | 458 | 54 | 250 | 154 | 107 |
| Spain | 456 | 34 | 207 | 215 | 217 |
| Portugal | 403 | 33 | 175 | 195 | 187 |
| Italy | 337 | 15 | 129 | 193 | 226 |
| New Zealand | 254 | 23 | 109 | 122 | 90 |
| South Africa | 222 | 15 | 102 | 105 | 95 |
| Argentina | 160 | 11 | 78 | 71 | 75 |
| England | 125 | 13 | 54 | 58 | 49 |
| Chile | 104 | 3 | 36 | 65 | 58 |
| Austria | 101 | 24 | 48 | 29 | 10 |
| Canada | 59 | 3 | 27 | 29 | 21 |
| Croatia | 56 | | 19 | 37 | 42 |
| Georgia | 51 | 7 | 28 | 16 | 12 |
| Japan | 51 | 3 | 14 | 34 | 28 |
| Turkey | 32 | | 15 | 17 | 30 |
| Greece | 31 | 1 | 19 | 11 | 3 |
| USA | 31 | 1 | 10 | 20 | 13 |
| Germany | 27 | 4 | 16 | 7 | 6 |
| Moldova | 27 | | 6 | 21 | 43 |
| Mexico | 22 | | 3 | 19 | 31 |
| China | 19 | | 7 | 12 | 21 |
| Brazil | 19 | | 6 | 13 | 32 |
| Romania | 18 | | 5 | 13 | 15 |
| North Macedonia | 16 | | 7 | 9 | 10 |
| Lebanon | 16 | | 4 | 12 | 4 |
| Hungary | 9 | 6 | 2 | 1 | 5 |
| Uruguay | 8 | | 6 | 2 | 7 |
| Ukraine | 8 | | 1 | 7 | 5 |
| India | 5 | | | 5 | 6 |
| Peru | 2 | | 1 | 1 | 3 |
| Switzerland | 2 | | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Sweden | 2 | | | 2 | 1 |
| Belgium | 2 | | | 2 | |
| China - Taiwan | | | | | 3 |
| Andorra | | | | | 2 |
| Colombia | | | | | 2 |
| Egypt | | | | | 2 |

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Vake Residence: Leading the Way in Sustainable Architecture

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is a pivotal focus in the construction industry, emphasizing green and energy-efficient construction initiatives. Since its inception, Gumbati Holding has prioritized the use of environmentally friendly materials, energy-efficient designs, and renewable energy sources. This commitment ensures that their projects are not only aesthetically pleasing, but also environmentally responsible.

The company's flagship project, Vake Residence, is a premium-class, multifunctional complex that exemplifies cutting-edge "green" construction techniques and energy-efficient features. The project prioritizes the use of environ-

mentally friendly materials, enhancing sustainability. This innovative approach not only minimizes natural resource consumption for residents, but also offers significant advantages for businesses occupying the office and commercial spaces within the complex.

Gumbati Holding's strategy extends beyond mere adherence to green building standards. The company is committed to creating environments that foster a profound connection between humans and nature. The Vake Residence project exemplifies this approach, featuring a variety of recreational spaces, including communal open terraces, rooftop terraces, and a secluded green yard. These thoughtfully designed areas are intended to enhance the living experience by integrating natu-

ral elements into everyday life.

For this purpose, the 10th floor of the project will feature a 6-meter open green terrace designed to host various rest, entertainment, and work spaces. The integration of green spaces serves not only to enhance the project's aesthetic appeal, but also plays a critical role in improving air quality, regulating temperature, and promoting overall well-being. In the context of today's dynamic lifestyle, these green oases significantly contribute to the mental health of residents, adding substantial value to the project both as a residential option and an investment opportunity.

The use of the highest-grade construction materials and strict adherence to seismic resistance standards, as mandated

by Georgian legislation, underscore their commitment to residents' well-being. An independent expert report further attests to the project's structural soundness.

Vake Residence caters to a discerning demographic, for whom quality, comfort, and convenient access to essential amenities are paramount. Many prospective buyers view this development as an attractive investment opportunity, given the upward trajectory of the real estate market, particularly in multifunctional complexes. A professional property management company will oversee the project, offering an additional advantage for prospective tenants. Spanning one hectare of land, with a projected construction encompassing 100,000 square meters, the ambitious undertaking commands an estimated

investment exceeding 30 million dollars.

The real estate sector is widely regarded as one of the most lucrative avenues for investment, particularly in the realm of multifunctional complexes, which are experiencing growing demand. Concurrently, the value of residential, office, and commercial spaces within these complexes continues to rise.

Since 2014, Gumbati Holding has been at the forefront of both residential and investment projects. To date, the company has successfully completed five projects, including the Vere Business Center in Vera. Currently, the company is progressing with two ongoing projects, with Vake Residence standing out as a premier residential and investment development.



Energy Efficiency in Georgia – The Government’s Promise

BY KATIE RUTH DAVIES

This month we have discovered what we can do as individuals and business owners to make our own homes and offices more energy efficient, and some of the issues Georgia faces in terms of energy efficiency. This week, I’m going to look at what the Georgian government is doing, with its numerous foreign partners, to bring Georgia’s buildings in line with Western aspirations to go green and mitigate our negative impact on the environment.

WHAT IS ENERGY EFFICIENCY?

Energy efficiency (EE) refers to the efficient use of resources so as to reduce our energy bills and operating costs, putting a decreased strain on energy infrastructure and lowering investment needs for new supply. It also refers to improving our energy security by reducing our reliance on imported or scarce energy resources, leading to a cleaner and healthier environment, lower greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, and lessening our environmental impact. What’s more, the use of clean energy and innovative technologies ultimately leads to more public transport use over cars, more employment opportunities, and renovated and energy efficient buildings offering us healthier and more cost effective living and working spaces.

THE DRIVERS OF ENERGY EFFICIENCY AND RENEWABLE ENERGY SOURCE REFORMS IN GEORGIA

There are five main drivers behind Georgia’s moves to unite with the global community against climate change and energy inefficiency.

Georgia’s first green driver was the EU-Georgia Association Agreement, signed in 2014 and entering into force in 2016, through which, among other things, Georgia committed to gradually aligning its energy legislation and policies with the EU:

- Electricity and gas market liberalization
- Promotion of renewable energy and energy efficiency
- Establishment of independent energy regulatory authorities
- Compliance with EU energy efficiency and environmental standards
- Cooperation in the area of energy security and diversification of energy sources
- Implementation and Monitoring

Next came the Energy Community, which was established in 2005 to extend the EU’s internal energy market to Southeast Europe and beyond. Georgia became a member in 2017, and since has sought the Energy Community’s help, through exchanges of best practice, to create a single regulatory framework for the energy sector, monitored by the Energy Community Secretariat.

The famed and rather ambitious Paris Agreement, a global climate change accord adopted in 2015, was ratified by Georgia in 2017. Overall, the Paris Agreement aims for GHG emissions reduction by 2030 (compared to 1990) by 35% (47% from 2025) and by 50%-57% in cases of international support.

After this came the EU’s even more ambitious and far-reaching introduction of the European Green Deal, adopted in 2019, and referred to as a “man on the moon moment” by the European Commission’s President, Ursula von der Leyen. The Green Deal’s goal is to have a “global and just transition” that seeks global net-zero GHG emissions by 2050, economic growth decoupled from resource use, the development of energy efficiency and renewable energy sources, the development of sustainable and energy efficient buildings and a sustainable transport systems, the development of circular econo-

mies, the protection of biodiversity, sustainable agriculture and food systems (“from farm to fork”), zero pollution (water, air, soil), development of green finance, global digitalization, and the promotion of research and innovation. It also promises that no person and no place will be left behind.

Georgia also subscribes to the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals. Of interest here is SDG Number 7, which seeks to ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all, universal access to energy for all, access to electricity and clean cooking fuels and technologies for all, an increase in the share of renewable energy in the global energy mix, and an improvement in energy efficiency across different sectors, among them buildings, industry, and transportation. With this comes investment in and upgrading of energy infrastructure and clean energy technology.

It is well recognized, not least by the Government of Georgia, that achieving SDG 7 is crucial for supporting the country’s economic and social development, improving human well-being, and addressing climate change. It is closely linked to other Sustainable Development Goals, among them SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), and SDG 13 (Climate Action).

GEORGIA’S ENERGY EFFICIENCY: BUILDINGS AND BUSINESSES

“Georgia has recently enacted regulations to boost energy efficiency in buildings, particularly targeting new constructions,” Zviad Kharebava, Director of Infrastructure and Environment at PMCG, tells GEORGIA TODAY. “Regulations set requirements for EE parameters and cover building insulation, heating, cooling, ventilation, lightings systems, etc. However, challenges persist in older privately owned buildings in cities like Tbilisi, where implementing energy-saving measures is difficult due to aging infrastructure. Efforts to innovate and improve energy efficiency in public buildings are gradually gaining traction, in public schools, kindergartens, and so on.”

“We are looking to develop the Net-Zero Consumption Buildings Strategy, which requires that all new buildings should be developed according to the technical requirements of the Law on Energy Performance of Buildings, which were introduced in 2020, though the technical annexes are still in the process of being adopted,” Giorgi Mukhigulishvili, Researcher in Energy and Climate Change Studies, tells us. “Net Zero buildings should decrease energy consumption via energy efficiency measures, but also have renewable energy integrated within them. In reality, it’s mainly related to future buildings,” he says.

He also gives us some positive news in that 50% of Georgian municipalities have so far signed the Covenant of Mayors (32 of the 64 municipalities in the country). “This requires directly that municipalities should save energy, increase the share of renewables in their energy consumption, and also decrease GHG emissions on their territories – public buildings and residential. They do so through donors providing technical and professional support to develop and implement strategies, and through twinning with cities abroad so as to share best practices,” he says.

As for the private sector, we are told that the state offers incentives to construction companies to go green.

“For example, the National Bank of Georgia developed sustainable taxonomy for the financing sector,” Mukhigulishvili tells us. “When a company decides to develop a green business, including energy efficient buildings, they will be provided with low interest loans – this encompasses both from-scratch construction and renovation of existing infrastructure. This Green Taxonomy has 11 sub-topics, including the energy performance of buildings, energy efficiency in buildings, general energy efficiency, for example in agricul-



Source: Property Georgia

ture, industry and transport etc., and one of the key requirements is that it should be in line with the energy efficiency law and the performance of buildings law, as well as their technical annexes. If the businesses meet these requirements, they will be eligible for these low interest loans and support mechanisms.”

Mukhigulishvili notes that the donor’s role is vital here – the World Bank, USAID, UNDP and GIZ and others are very much involved in the process, he tells us, supporting businesses and the state in developing the above measures.

However, Georgia as yet lacks the necessary qualified and experienced auditors to check the meeting of these standards in the process of construction and renovation.

“We lack qualified professionals,” Mukhigulishvili says. “We do have a number of energy auditors for residential buildings, but we don’t have energy auditors for large-scale industrial businesses.”

He highlights that to overcome the clear challenge, the government has asked for the development of vocational education programs to grow and support energy auditors, certifiers, evaluators and other necessary specialists.

“And even more can be done,” Mukhigulishvili states. “The money is there. A key problem, which the ministry recognizes, is that we need a sustainable system to support energy efficiency and renewables development: In particular, we need to develop an independent entity to implement all the technical annexes, laws and so on. The ministry is responsible for the policy development, not the implementation. In Slovakia, for example, there is a specific energy efficiency agency, under the Ministry of Economy, which monitors and implements these measures. Georgia needs such bodies and coordination.”

THE WORLD BANK GREEN REPORT

Buildings are responsible for around 40% of energy consumption and 36% of CO2 emissions in the EU, and, while of course the numbers for Georgia will be different, they aren’t that far off: Mukhigulishvili tells us that Georgia’s residential sector consumes 30% of all energy consumption and the commercial sector 11%.

“In 2021, when the electricity price increased for the commercial sector in Georgia, we saw energy efficiency measures being applied. Last year, the World Bank released a study ‘Greening Firms in Georgia,’ the first of its kind in Georgia,” Mukhigulishvili says. “The report explores key challenges and opportunities for Georgia’s businesses to accelerate their contribution to the country’s green transition, through efficiency and reduction in emissions. GHG emissions per capita in Georgia are still below the EU average, but are growing faster than those in the EU, which poses a risk for achieving the Paris Agreement’s Nationally Determined Contributions [NDCs] and increasing the competitiveness of the Georgian economy.”

The World Bank report highlights that Georgian firms typically use energy-inefficient methods, and have increased their energy use in recent years. This, the report notes, will affect their competitiveness “as energy prices increase, the demand from consumers changes to products with greener footprints, and as new carbon trade measures are introduced in the EU and other large markets.”

“Greening the private sector is therefore a source of competitive advantage that

can facilitate access to global value chains and make the economy more resilient to climate shocks and geopolitical tensions in upcoming years. If no actions are taken, industry emissions are on a path to increase by 90 percent between 2015 and 2030,” the report highlights.

“Many developed and developing countries are decoupling economic growth from GHG emissions. In Georgia, emissions are growing not only due to GDP growth but also due to the reliance on outdated technologies, poor management and organization, inefficient energy use, and weak incentives to go green because of the institutional framework and relatively low energy prices,” it adds.

Yet, the World Bank report suggests that it’s not too late to turn things around, noting that, while “there is ample room for cost-effective improvements in energy efficiency in all sectors,” since 2017, greener and more energy efficient firms, particularly new businesses and startups, have been expanding their market shares, and “even modest increases in energy efficiency among inefficient firms could reduce aggregate energy expenses and carbon emissions by 50 percent, while increasing firms’ profitability due to savings in energy costs.”

It is widely recognized that policy and private capital mobilization are key factors for positive change. Indeed, the World Bank report found that in Georgia, 8 out of 10 inefficient firms “require upgrading or expanding their fixed assets to reach the median level of efficiency,” yet “2 out of 10 could improve their efficiency without additional capital investments and might require investments in training or consulting to improve their organization and increase their efficiency.”

Also key is reliability in supply. Both Georgian business-owners and homeowners experience frequent power outages that, “combined with an underdeveloped framework for renewables,” sees more people turning to the quick and easy option of fuel generators rather than investing in the better long-term alternative of cleaner renewables.

The report notes that “relatively low electricity and gas prices discourage the adoption of clean technologies and a more efficient use of energy in production. Further, despite some progress, the institutional setting and regulatory framework do not promote a more responsible approach to the environmental impact of production,” and recommends that “in addition to structural reforms, improving energy efficiency requires firm- and sector-specific interventions that target three sets of issues: (i) information and awareness, (ii) skills of managers and workers, and (iii) access to finance.”

GEORGIA’S PROMISE

Georgia’s National Climate Change Strategy 2030 and the Paris Agreement’s Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), outline the concrete actions the country plans to take.

In 2017, it was noted that Georgia’s share in global emissions was 0.04%, of which energy made up 60% and waste 9%. In its updated NDCs, Georgia has committed to unconditionally reducing its GHG emissions to 35% below its 1990 baseline level (an approximately 16% per capita reduction) by 2030, in doing so reiterating its strong commitment to the landmark 2015 Paris Agreement, through which world leaders agreed to take action to limit the overall temperature rise to well below 2

degrees Celsius, aiming to keep at a safe threshold of 1.5 degrees Celsius.

Georgia’s national mitigation targets today also see the country aiming to develop low-carbon approaches in the building sector, including with regard public and tourist buildings, and to promote climate-friendly, energy-efficient technologies and services.

Georgia’s strategy also supports the development of low-carbon approaches in the agricultural sector by promoting climate-smart agriculture and agro-tourism, and the development of low-carbon approaches in the waste sector. GHG emissions in the power generation and transmission sector are expected to be lowered by 15%, and a 5% cap is to be put on emissions in the industrial sector, implemented by encouraging innovative technologies and services tailored to climate goals. Further, Georgia plans to increase the carbon absorption capacity of the forestry sector by 10% by 2030 compared to the level recorded in 2015.

“The 2030 – 2050 deadlines are feasible goals for us, but only if we stay on and speed up our European integration track,” Mukhigulishvili opines.

In terms of making Georgia’s buildings more energy efficient, future steps include raising energy efficiency standards for new buildings, promoting the use of energy-efficient construction materials, and integrating renewable energy sources like rooftop solar panels.

“Georgia’s commitment to aligning its energy efficiency efforts with EU standards is evident, reflecting its broader association agreement with the European Union,” says PMCG’s Zviad Kharebava. “By harmonizing legislation with EU directives like the Energy Performance of Buildings Directive (EPBD), Georgia aims to ensure consistency in energy efficiency practices and foster sustainable development.”

In conclusion, while progress has been made, broader efforts encompassing both residential and industrial sectors are crucial for achieving significant and sustainable improvements in energy efficiency nationwide.

This article was inspired by the EU-funded Georgia Energy Sector Reform Program (GESRP)’s three-day media mentoring program ‘Covering Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy Issues in Georgia’ on April 19-21, 2024, at the Tsinandali Estate, Radisson Collection Hotel.

KEY COMPONENTS OF GEORGIA’S NEW CLIMATE PLEDGE INCLUDE:

- Unconditionally limiting its total GHGs by 35% below the 1990 level by 2030 and potentially increasing this commitment (with sufficient international support) to 50 to 57%.
- Continuing to record GHGs not regulated by the Montreal Protocol in its National GHG Inventory.
- Setting out feasible targets for limiting emissions in seven sectors (transport, buildings, energy generation and transmission, agriculture, industry, waste and forestry). This includes reducing emissions by 15% below the reference level in the transport and the energy generation and transmission sectors, by 10% in the forestry sector and by 5% in the industry sector.
- Shifting to low-carbon development approaches in the construction, waste management and agriculture sectors.



Too Much

BY TONY HANMER

The village of Etseri, in Upper Svaneti, has been reeling for a couple of days from two more deaths. Mere weeks after Naira's three teenagers' car plunged into a raging melt-choked river, a pair of brothers, one in his late 30s, the other early 40s, met a similar fate. They are survived by parents and another brother. All of Svaneti is screaming, "Why, God?"

The parents of the earlier three teenagers had to go through the impossible tangle of parental grief mixed with relief, if that's what you would call it, that dragging the river eventually granted them bodies to bury instead of empty coffins. The brothers' bodies were more quickly recovered. My wife and I are returning from Tbilisi now, just in time for these twin funerals.

These brothers grew up and lived in Etseri's Ladreri hamlet, which was ground zero for my introduction to the village in 2000. My surgeon friend and eventual blood brother, Nodar Aprasidze, took me to his own home there many times and introduced me to the whole village before Lali and I moved there ourselves some 12 years ago. I have many fond memories of Nodar's big old house, where his father, brother and sister lived; now only the brother is left. I have

participated in too many funeral feasts in this hamlet, too, as well as everywhere else I've been in Svaneti. But all the rest of the funerals there were for elderly people, entirely expected.

This time the grief will be deadly sharp, the turnout massive from the whole province. I can hardly bear to think what it will be like. I think that at the wake, before the open coffins, I will be unable to restrain myself, and will weep and wail along with the rest of the mourners. Enough British stiff upper lip.

There have been too many preventable deaths in Svaneti in the last few years. I won't go into detail here about what caused them. But we are all exhausted and wrung out. Too many young people dying, some murdered, others in other wrong ways. We need change; that's what I'm praying for. It's not enough to cry out that "He or she was such a good person!"

I don't know what else to say. My heart is broken. I know this piece is shorter than usual, but it's all for now.

Tony Hanmer has lived in Georgia since 1999, in Svaneti since 2007, and been a weekly writer and photographer for GT since early 2011. He runs the "Svaneti Renaissance" Facebook group, now with over 2000 members, at www.facebook.com/groups/SvanetiRenaissance/. He and his wife also run their own guest house in Etseri: www.facebook.com/hanmer.house.svaneti

Tbilisi Jazz Festival Brings Quartet that Celebrates 'Year of Czech Music'

BY SHELBI R. ANKIEWICZ

The 2024 Tbilisi Jazz Festival selected the Herak/Bulatkin Quartet as one of the artists to perform at the three-day event as a part of the 'Year of Czech Music.'

Running for the 27th year, the Tbilisi Jazz Festival is the first international jazz fest held in a former Soviet Union country, and it continues to expand each year. Every year artists are invited to perform from around the world, and according to the Managing Partner of the festival, Misha Giorgadze, they are very excited to welcome so many performers at this year's prestigious event.

"This year's festival line up is truly stunning, so we are sure that for the audience, it will be another breathtaking journey into the world of incredible creativity and improvisation," wrote Giorgadze in an email.

Director of the Czech Center Tbilisi, Ivana Bursiková, said this is the third year that Czech music has been featured in the festival lineup. However, it is extra special because the performing group, the Herak/Bulatkin Quartet, will be doing so as a part of the 'Year of Czech Music.' Bursiková told GEORGIA TODAY that numerous, famous Czech composers have anniversaries this year, such as Bedrich Smetanav and Antonín Dvorák, amongst others, so the idea is to further promote Czech music worldwide.

The Quartet, led by Dutch vibraphonist of Czechoslovak descent Miro Herak and Czech pianist Daniel Bulatkin, will perform on stages all around the world, including Tbilisi, Rome, London, Budapest, and the famous Jarasum Jazz Festival in South Korea. Bursiková said the group received a grant from the Czech Republic Ministry of Culture so they can perform in these different venues. The quartet was offered the chance to play in the Tbilisi Jazz Festival, and since the Czech Center Tbilisi likes to promote young artists, and the locals liked their

sound, Bursiková said it was settled that they would be among the performers.

Bursiková noted the group is influenced by Slavic and Gypsy folk music, while also incorporating classical music and rhythms from the Balkan area. The quartet uses various rhythms created by a vibraphone, light electronics, and extended techniques on the double bass.

Giorgadze said what is so special about jazz music is the public education it shares, not necessarily through words, but through sounds.

"I believe it is very important to get the audience familiar with not only modern tendencies of today's international musical industry, but to share with the audience the philosophy of jazz - freedom, solidarity, equality and dialogue between people despite any differences," Giorgadze said.

The Czech Center Tbilisi was founded three years ago by Bursiková. Czech Centers is a big network with at least 28 locations worldwide, and their mission is to promote Czech culture. Bursiková explained how their main themes are photography, film, architecture, and monument care; however, they also promote science, business, sports, or anything that can be of interest to the Georgian public.

The goal, according to Bursiková, was to show what happens in the Czech Republic by establishing an organization and partnerships in Georgia. The Center coordinates heavily with its partners on events, and after three years, they established a cooperation with the biggest Ethnofest in Tbilisi. They also have other partners in the photo and film industry, and private entities to focus on architecture and monument care.

"Georgians have extremely good knowledge of our Czech reality - our musicians, writers, our presidents, whatever is happening in our country," explained Bursiková.

She said the Center holds exhibitions of varying topics for the purpose of creating an outreach. One project they worked on entailed going to various schools around Georgia and showing an



exhibition of famous Czech women. The children then made portraits and descriptions about the women they saw. Bursiková told GEORGIA TODAY that this shows young girls in Georgia the possibilities they can do with their lives.

Another project in small villages, amongst local people, shows what people can do with small tools and their hands to make their surroundings look better. This could mean painting a house or planting flowers. Bursiková said very often people are waiting for things to be done for them, but there are so many things that can be completed with little to no effort to beautify the spaces around them.

The Tbilisi Jazz Fest started on May 22 and will wrap up on May 24. Each day has different performances, including the Herak/Bulatkin quartet, Bill Frisell Trio, Joey Calderazzo, John Patitucci, Dave Weckl Trio, and Stacey Kent. Bursiková stresses the significance that events like the jazz festival currently have in Georgia.

"Music is the last thing remaining. I'm afraid that everything [the Czech Center] does now will be perceived as political, though we strictly promote culture," says Bursiková. "Music is an extremely good means because it unites people no matter what color, or sexual orientation they have. This is something that should be supported now."

Giorgadze says the festival brings a positive international image for Georgia, making it attractive for tourists and investors, while also showing the world that the country is safe and technologically advanced enough to hold events of such a high nature. Tickets and timing for the event can be found online.

Empowering Georgian Youth to Protect the Black Sea

High school students from seven public schools across Anaklia, Batumi, Bobokvati, Gonio, Kobuleti, and Poti engaged in dolphin monitoring on Georgia's Black Sea coast. Every 10 days, using specialized protocols, they monitor and record the presence of dolphins at various locations, including Gonio and Poti.

Their learning journey started with seminars at Batumi State University where young advocates of the Black Sea, under the guidance of esteemed researchers, explored the wonders of marine biodiversity, the pressing threats to the ecosystem, and actionable steps for conservation.

Following this immersive experience, motivated students were offered a chance to participate in dolphin monitoring and effectively become Black Sea researchers.

Over the coming months, they will participate in diverse educational and environmental activities, including Clean Beach Days and guided tours of protected areas. The culmination of this learning journey will be marked in October with a celebratory gathering in Batumi for the annual Black Sea Day, uniting environmental researchers, activists, and youth.

This exciting educational initiative is organized by the European Union (EU) and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in partnership with the National Environment Agency of Georgia's Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture. It falls under the EU/UNDP regional project 'European Union for Improving Environmental Monitoring in the Black Sea' (EU4EMBLAS), a joint initiative with the



High school students from seven public schools across Anaklia, Batumi, Bobokvati, Gonio, Kobuleti, and Poti engaged in dolphin monitoring on Georgia's Black Sea coast. Source: UNDP/Irakli Dzneladze

governments of Georgia and Ukraine. Between 2014 and 2019, EU4EMBLAS spearheaded regular monitoring surveys conducted by an international team of researchers, building an understanding of the environmental status of the Black Sea.

The last research, released in 2020, revealed environmental challenges, including plastic waste pollution along the Georgian coast (90.5 items per sq. km), microplastics at depths of 2,000 meters, hazardous chemical influxes, and the intrusion of invasive species. Positive biodiversity trends showcased the resilience of certain species sensitive to pollution and the return of the Euro-

pean oyster, previously extinct since the 1940s.

In its current phase, set to continue until April 2025, the EU4EMBLAS project remains committed to supporting governments, educational institutions, civil society, and communities in Georgia and Ukraine. The project offers targeted interventions to mitigate pollution and provides policymakers with recommendations to safeguard the Black Sea ecosystem.

ABOUT THE EU4EMBLAS PROJECT:

The 'European Union for Improving Environmental Monitoring in the Black Sea'



Source: UNDP/Irakli Dzneladze

(EU4EMBLAS) is the fourth phase of the joint EU/UNDP initiative, funded by the European Union and implemented by UNDP in partnership with the governments of Georgia and Ukraine. With its overall goal to improve the Black Sea protection, the project addresses the limitations in the availability of accurate, reliable, and comparable data on the marine environment, building national capacities of both countries to monitor the marine environment in line with the EU Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD) and Water Framework Directive (WFD). Furthermore, the project assists Georgia and Ukraine in raising public awareness of the Black Sea environmental issues and facilitating engagement in conservation and protection measures. Since its incep-

tion in 2013, EU4EMBLAS has received a total EU funding of EUR 6.65 million. For more information, visit: <https://emblasproject.org>

ABOUT THE EUROPEAN UNION:

For over 30 years, the European Union has built a close partnership with Georgia, supporting its development through knowledge and experience sharing, expertise, innovation, and financial support. The relationship between the EU and Georgia is based on shared values of peace, freedom, democracy, human rights, and inclusive economic growth. More information about the EU's support in Georgia can be found at <https://eu4georgia.eu/the-european-union-in-georgia/>

American Friends of Georgia Marks 30 Years of Humanitarian Achievement



BY KESARIA KATCHARAVA

In a remarkable showcase of generosity and camaraderie, American Friends of Georgia (AFG) celebrated its 30th anniversary with a dazzling gala held at The Biltmore Hotel Tbilisi's grand ballroom on May 18. AFG, a non-governmental organization founded in 1994 by Constantine Sidamon-Eristoff, affectionately known as Connie, has tirelessly worked to uplift the lives of the less fortunate across the country.

From its establishment, AFG has embodied philanthropic values, reaching out to support children and elderly individuals across Georgia. The annual gala, a grand affair, stands as evidence of the organization's dedication to promoting unity and involvement within communities. Lena Kiladze, AFG's Executive Director, emphasized the event's importance, portraying it as a night where people come together in kindness and unity.

"This occasion marks a significant milestone, serving both as a historic moment and a forward-looking message for the future. AFG has a long history in Georgia, characterized by the bonds of friendship, fellowship, and the profound connections that exist between humans that can change the world for the better," she said.

Bill Corcoran, newly appointed President of AFG, emphasized the organization's enduring dedication to the Georgian people. Corcoran, who traveled from the US specifically for the event, reiterated AFG's commitment to serving the elderly, women, and children in the different regions of Georgia. He spoke passionately about the intrinsic bond between the American and Georgian peoples, emphasizing the need to safeguard Georgia's cultural heritage and foster its growth.

"We have cared for 30 years. We've spent millions of dollars here of our

own money, not US government money, just American money from individuals," Corcoran emphasized. "We want to continue to do that, and hope that we will have the ability to do so in the future."

The evening commenced with an exhibition showcasing the lots slated for auction, with proceeds dedicated to furthering AFG's noble charitable endeavors. Guests were welcomed into the ballroom by the melodious strains of the Suliko Ensemble of the Tbilisi Opera, whose stirring rendition of the Georgian anthem set the tone for an evening of reflection and gratitude. As attendees settled into the ambiance of the gala, they were reminded of the rich history and unwavering commitment of AFG, while partner and sponsor companies were graciously acknowledged for their invaluable support.

Among the esteemed patrons and sponsors, Petrocas Energy Group stood as the patron of the gala, while golden sponsors including Dagi, Mze, and Mr. Sergi Nakaidze, lent their generous support to the cause. Shumi Winery and Chateau Mukhrani generously provided the drinks for the evening, ensuring that guests could savor the finest Georgian wines throughout the festivities. Silver sponsors, including Adjara Collective, KBOC, and TBC Bank, alongside bronze sponsors BLC Law Office and Socar Midstream, further underscored the collective commitment to AFG's mission.

Proceeds from the gala will be channeled towards two pivotal projects, which are part of many initiatives championed by AFG, among them cultural heritage protection and educational projects in remote villages and districts. The first project focuses on revitalizing the Dzegvi Shelter, situated outside Tbilisi. What began as an orphanage in 1995 has evolved into a thriving community, offering refuge to street children, single mothers, elderly individuals, and persons with disabilities. AFG aims to enhance this sanctuary by implementing initiatives such as building greenhouses, renovat-

ing infrastructure, and fostering social and economic activities for its residents.

The second project, the Hospice and Palliative Home Care Program, represents a beacon of hope for Georgia's elderly population. Serving as the nation's inaugural hospice initiative, this program provides comprehensive nursing care and support to over a hundred elderly individuals during their final stages of life. Through the provision of medication and attentive care, AFG endeavors to alleviate the suffering of those in need and offer solace to both patients and their families.

Cliff Isaak, General Director at Kura Basin Operating Company and esteemed member of AmCham, along with his role as Honorary Consul of Canada in Georgia, expressed his heartfelt gratitude towards the organization. Isaak, who has been involved with AFG since its inception, hailed the evening as a remarkable celebration of the support garnered over the years. He highlighted the joy of witnessing the participation of young beneficiaries from Zegvi, underscoring the impact of AFG's initiatives on the lives of Georgian children.

The highlight of the evening was the eagerly anticipated auction, featuring a curated selection of exquisite artworks generously donated by renowned artists. From Henri Matisse's timeless lithograph "Vegetaux," to contemporary masterpieces by Georgian talents such as Gia Gugushvili and Tutu Kiladze, the auction showcased a diverse array of artistic expression. Each winning bid not only secured a cherished artwork, but also contributed directly to AFG's ongoing humanitarian initiatives.

Following the spirited auction, guests were treated to a captivating performance by the world-renowned jazz trumpeter, Chris Botti, and his ensemble. Amidst soulful melodies and enchanting rhythms, Botti shared poignant reflections on his personal journey and the profound impact of his experiences in Georgia. His heartfelt expressions of love and admiration for the country resonated deeply with

the audience, serving as a testament to the enduring bond between art, culture, and philanthropy.

As the evening drew to a close, guests departed with hearts full of gratitude and inspiration, reflecting on the transformative power of compassion and community. Through three decades of

unwavering dedication, American Friends of Georgia has exemplified the spirit of humanitarian excellence, enriching countless lives and forging lasting connections across borders. As the journey continues, AFG remains steadfast in its commitment to creating a brighter, more compassionate future for all.



Photos by Davit Khizanishvili



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I am Georgian and therefore I am European

Zurab Zhvania, Council of Europe, 1999

