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INTERVIEW BY VAZHA TAVBERIDZE

Until President Shevardnadze resigned, Mark Mullen was the director of the National Democratic Institute in Georgia. He then went on to start the Georgian chapter of Transparency International. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Georgian Service sat down with Mullen to discuss previous and current events.

LET'S START WITH THE MOST OBVIOUS QUESTION - YOUR TAKE ON WHAT'S TAKING PLACE RIGHT NOW IN GEORGIA. WHERE ARE WE AT?

In general I'm quite optimistic because a couple of years ago, there was a lot of uncertainty and change doesn't happen when there's uncertainty. Change happens when there's clarity. Now there's clarity. Now, the overwhelming majority of people understand what's going on and understand the task ahead. That doesn't mean there's not a lot of work to do, but the path is pretty clear.

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Image: Brown Political Review

FOCUS ON EURO 2024: Georgia Beat Portugal to Reach Knockout Stage



Image: Reuters

BY ALASTAIR WATT

Georgia entered the unimaginable dreamland of the last 16 of Euro 2024 after a performance for the ages earned them a staggering 2-0 victory over Portugal in Gelsenkirchen on June 26. Exactly three months on from that euphoric triumph against Greece in Tbilisi, the Georgians produced a display that has drawn admiration from all across the football world. The celebratory scenes on the Georgian streets on that famous March night were made to look timid by comparison, as fans partied into the morning all over the country. The feeling of joy and unity was palpable as strangers embraced each other lovingly, car horns tooted incessantly, and even the most reserved Georgians danced jigs of delight, all because of something as simple as a football match.

In the time between that Greece win and this Portugal conquest, Georgia had been hitting the global headlines for less uplifting reasons of course, as protests swept the country for many weeks and images of violence on Tbilisi's streets became leading stories.

On Wednesday night, the roads were again full of flag-waving Georgians but blissfully there was not a "Robocop" in sight. While Georgians have won gold medals at the Olympics, its rugby team have performed heroics, its basketball

side have reached a major tournament, and its MMA fighters have secured prestigious belts, this was surely the country's most revered sporting moment to date. After all, people here love their football, yet up until now they haven't been able to take much joy in the national team's results, with many instead worshipping Barcelona and Real Madrid, or Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo.

That's all changed now, as Ronaldo and his fellow Portuguese were vanquished

in sensational style at the Ruhr by a Georgian side brimming with bravery, determination, and not a small amount of genuine quality.

Heading into the Portugal clash, Georgia had already gleaned compliments from football experts all over the continent, after a spirited defeat to Turkey in their opening match and a hard-fought draw with Czechia. Managed by Frenchman Willy Sagnol, the Georgians had done themselves proud in those first two matches, but surely Portugal would be the end of their endearing story. It wasn't. The task for Georgia was straightforward but, in the eyes of most, nearly impossible. To progress, they needed to overcome the might of Portugal, captained by Ronaldo and considered among the favorites for the entire tournament. Even though the Portuguese were already confirmed as group winners and opted to rest some of their stars such as Bruno Fernandes and Bernardo Silva, for Georgia this was a herculean assignment. It was one they tackled with the sort of guts the country's natives have proudly shown for centuries in all kinds of adversity. Keeping things tight, holding on for maybe one chance, and praying for good fortune – that might have been the presumed strategy. However, less than two minutes into this do-or-die encounter, Georgia had what even their most opti-

mistic supporter can't have anticipated: an opening goal.

A slack Portuguese pass gifted possession to Giorgi Mikautadze, who'd scored in both of the first two games, and he fed an inch-perfect through ball to Georgia's superstar Khvicha Kvaratskhelia.

The young man whose number 77 Napoli shirt has become standard issue attire for the nation's children (and many adults) then advanced with inexplicable composure before powering a left-foot shot past Portuguese goalkeeper Diogo Costa. As the net bulged, a mixture of disbelief and unimaginable delight soared across the stands in Gelsenkirchen, and all over the homeland from the twinkling Black Sea in the west to the semi-desert in the east and every village in between.

No one had truly prepared for this, and now there was another 88 minutes to negotiate. Yet while the heart rates exploded among the supporters, the Georgian players somehow kept their cool and their discipline. Of course, the Portuguese threatened, with Giorgi Mamardashvili, the standout goalkeeper of the championship so far, forced into some customarily excellent saves. But there was a sense of calm about the Georgian rearguard. As Ronaldo squealed in anguish and received a yellow card for his childish histrionics, the likes of Guram Kashia, Lasha Dvali, and Otar Kakabadze

exhibited a strength of character that allowed fans to believe that the nearly impossible may actually be possible. After a frenetic first 45 minutes, the half-time whistle gave the Georgian team and its backers a merciful opportunity to breathe and take stock of the magical reality in which they found themselves. If they could hang on for another 45 minutes, history was theirs – an unprecedented place in the knockout stages of an international tournament.

But as it transpired, "hanging on" was not what Georgia did by any means. Indeed, they ought to have doubled their lead in the 50th minute when a cutback found Kvaratskhelia twelve yards from goal, only for the Georgian talisman to misconnect tamely into the arms of Costa. Although that felt like a miss that Georgia would live to rue, they were presented with an even greater opportunity soon after.

Holding a one-goal lead against world-class opponents, quite what defender Luka Lochoshvili was doing anywhere near the Portuguese penalty box is somewhat mystifying – but his bravado was rewarded as he nicked the ball past Antonio Silva whose kick to the shin brought the marauding Georgian to the ground. Eventually, after Mamardashvili had produced yet another breathtaking save at the other end, the referee awarded a deserved penalty to Georgia following a few inspections of the VAR monitor. Up stepped Mikautadze who, with the weight of a nation on his shoulders, coolly struck the ball past the despairing Costa to hand Georgia a priceless two-goal advantage. Once again, euphoria abounded but now the disbelief was replaced with belief. Georgia could do it.

In the remaining half hour or so, despite the occasional scare, the Georgians saw out the match with a scintillating combination of composure and talent to clinch an unthinkable spot in the last 16. There, they'll face the daunting challenge of Spain in Cologne on June 30, where they'll have the support of arguably almost every non-Spaniard watching. After all, Georgia is THE story of the tournament so far, and the merits of the country's seat at this particular European table are in no doubt whatsoever. In fact, Georgia is fittingly playing the role of tamada here, leading the toasts and setting the jubilant mood at this footballing feast in Germany.



Image: Reuters

'Landscape Tells a Story' Multimedia Exhibition Opens in Tbilisi



Image source: euneighbourseast

A multimedia exhibition – 'Landscape Tells a Story' – opened in the Georgian capital Tbilisi on June 25. The exhibition is organized by the Caucasian Environmental NGOs Network (CENN) and brings together Georgian visual artists.

Over the past two months, these artists have created a rich array of multimedia works, including paintings, sculptures, video installations and illustrations. Their work focuses on the role of energy effi-

ciency and renewable energy in combating and adapting to the negative impacts of climate change.

The exhibition will be open to the public from 25 to 30 June, daily from 12:00 to 18:00.

The exhibition is organized by the EU-funded projects 'Georgian Energy Sector Reform Project (GESRP)' and 'Georgia Climate Action Project (GEO-CAP)'. The initiative is also supported by the Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development of Georgia.



Ukraine Latest: Putin's Forces Launch 100 Deadly Glide Bombs Across Ukraine



Image: Independent.co.uk

COMPILED BY ANA DUMBADZE

Moscow's forces launched nearly 100 deadly glide bombs and dozens of kamikaze drones were fired across the border. Glide bombs are an air-dropped munition launched from a distance rather than above the target and can pack a payload up to 1.5 tons. Last week, President Volodymyr Zelensky said that Russia dropped more than 2,400 glide bombs on Ukraine since the beginning of June, with 700 of them hitting the Kharkiv region. It comes as the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued Russia's

top military chiefs with arrest warrants over their attacks on civilian targets.

Russia's former defense minister Sergei Shoigu and leading general Valery Gerasimov are accused of orchestrating a campaign of long-range bombardments against Ukrainian energy infrastructure in the winter of 2022. The Russian military shelled 20 settlements in the Donetsk region in the last 24 hours, killing one and injuring at least nine, regional governor Vadym Filashkin said. This comes as the Russian navy missile cruiser Varvag has carried out drills in the Mediterranean Sea, the state-owned TASS news agency reported on Thursday, citing the navy command. The drills focused on repelling a mass sea drone attack, the navy command said. It also involved simulated engagements with an enemy vessel and a submarine.

Earlier this month, a Russian naval frigate

conducted drills in the Atlantic Ocean searching for submarines while on its way to Cuba.

UKRAINE DOWNS 23 DRONES OVERNIGHT

The Ukrainian air force said it shot down all 23 drones and five out of six missiles launched by Russia in the early hours of Thursday. Khmelnytskyi regional governor Serhii Tiurin said that air defense shot down nine aerial targets over his region. Local authorities have not received any reports of casualties or property damage, he added. Governor Vitaliy Kim said the military destroyed six drones and three cruise missiles over the southern region of Mykolaiv. Two drones were shot down over the southern region of Kherson and one more was shot down over the Dnipropetrovsk region, local authorities said.

ZELENSKY TO SIGN NEW SECURITY PACT WITH EU NATIONS

The EU is expected to sign a security agreement with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky today, pledging to keep delivering weapons, military training and other aid to Kyiv for years to come. The agreement will lay out the union's commitment to help Ukraine in nine key areas of security and defense policy - including arms deliveries, military training, defense industry cooperation and demining, according to drafts. In the event of "future aggression", the document said the EU and Ukraine intend to consult within 24 hours on Kyiv's needs and "swiftly determine" next steps in line with the commitments. The document is part of a broader effort by Ukraine's partners to provide assurances that they will stand by Kyiv for the long haul, with no end in sight to the war and no immediate prospect of Ukraine joining the EU or NATO.



Source: euneighbourseast

EU Foreign Affairs Council Welcomes Decision to Use Profits from Immobilised Russian Assets for Ukraine and Issues Warning for Georgia

On 24 June, the EU Foreign Affairs Council welcomed the decision adopted last week on the use of windfall profits from immobilized Russian assets, which will be allocated to the European Peace Facility. This will allow for the swift operationalisation of the windfall profits stemming from Russian assets immobilized in Europe as a result of restrictive measures for the benefit of Ukraine. This should amount to €1.4 billion available in the course of the next month, and another €1 billion by the end of the year.

"This will be allocated to Ukraine, but for these three purposes: air defense, ammunition and supporting the Ukrainian industry - overcoming or circumventing this structural difficulty that we have had in the last year and a half," EU High Representative Josep Borrell told journalists after the Council.

At the same time, he added, the Council could not unblock seven legal acts concerning the European Peace Facility: "We still have one country blocking the use of about €6 billion from the European Peace Facility." Borrell said the leaders would discuss the issue at the next European Council.

The EU High Representative also said that the Council was finalizing the EU security commitments to Ukraine. "I hope that the work will be completed very soon in order to be able to sign these security commitments, maybe still this month, maybe in the margins of the next European Council. With these security commitments, we send


a clear message to Russia about our will to continue supporting Ukraine," Borrell said.

The Foreign Affairs Council also discussed Georgia, in particular the political developments in the country, including the adoption and enforcement of the law on transparency of foreign influence.

"We have to regret that there is widespread disinformation about the European Union and its values coming also from official actors. We heard Georgian voices at the highest level, surprisingly stating that this law is bringing the country closer to the European Union. And I want to be clear. No. This law and all the negative developments around it are pushing Georgia away from the European Union," Borrell said. "If the government does not change the course of action, Georgia will not progress on the European Union path."


He added that the EU would increase its support to Georgian civil society and media, counter disinformation and increase support to the electoral process. At the same time, the EU will continue monitoring the situation and adapting EU measures as necessary.




"We will downgrade our political contacts in reaching out to Georgia," Borrell said. "We will reconsider putting on hold our financial assistance to the government, and we will reconsider our support from the European Peace Facility. This can be done immediately, but we will continue looking at the situation and take more measures in case of further deterioration."




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New Opinions on Election Code Abolishing Gender Quotas and on the Composition of the Central Election Commission Published



Image: venice.coe.int

MEDIA RELEASE

Strasbourg, 25.06.2024 – The Venice Commission has published today two new opinions on Georgia adopted at the latest plenary session: the Opinion on amendments to the Election Code abolishing gender quotas and the Follow-up opinion to the December 2023 joint

opinion by the Venice Commission and the OSCE/ODIHR on the draft amendments to the Election Code and the Rules of Procedure of the Parliament.

Regarding amendments to the Election Code of Georgia abolishing gender quotas, the Venice Commission stresses that international standards recognise positive obligations of the State to ensure gender equality – as did the Constitutional Court of Georgia in a judgment of 2020, in which it confirmed the con-

stitutionality of the temporary gender quotas as far as their applicability to women was concerned. The 2020 amendments introducing gender quotas for candidate lists in parliamentary and local elections as well as the financial incentives for political parties were in line with previous recommendations of the Venice Commission, but they have now been abolished without being replaced by any other measures aimed at facilitating the election of women candidates.

While each country can decide how to improve gender equality in democratic institutions, including the Parliament, it has been demonstrated that gender quotas can influence women's parliamentary representation, and they are not contrary to the principle of equal suffrage if they have a constitutional basis, as in Georgia. The Venice Commission thus recommends taking special temporary measures to improve women's representation in Parliament and in local councils (Sakrebulo), such as the re-introduction of gender quotas or other recognised methods for facilitating the election of women candidates, so that current percentages of women who are elected are increased substantially.

In addition, the Venice Commission is highly concerned that the amendments have been adopted in an accelerated procedure, without prior public consultations, and without considering concerns raised by the President of Georgia, the Public Defender of Georgia, several representatives of the opposition and of the civil society, and by international organisations. Moreover, the amendments relating to political parties' candidate lists are relevant for the outcome of elections, and their adoption much less than one year before the next parliamentary elections – scheduled for October 2024 – gives rise to serious concerns regarding stability of electoral law.

As for the follow-up opinion concerning the draft amendments to the Election Code and the Rules of Procedure of the Parliament, the Venice Commission is highly concerned that none of its recommendations has been taken on board by the Georgian authorities, not even partly. The Commission stresses once again that the – now adopted – amendments are clearly insufficient to ensure a consensus-based political process which is crucial for the independence and impartiality of the Central Election Commission (CEC) and for public trust in this institution.

One of the major concerns is related to the new anti-deadlock mechanism for filling vacant positions, which provides for the possibility of two additional rounds of voting under which the candidates can be elected by simple majority, and which bears the risk that the ruling party alone can elect the (non-partisan) CEC members and Chairperson.

Moreover, it is worrying that the amendments of such fundamental elements of the electoral law have been adopted less than one year before the next parliamentary elections due to be held in October 2024, contrary to the principle of stability of electoral law. In the initial Opinion, the Venice Commission had stressed that a derogation from the one-year advance adoption in respect of the next elections would only be justified under the condition of compliance with the key recommendations issued in that Opinion, together with a broader support including by the opposition. These two conditions have, however, not been fulfilled in the subsequent adoption process.

It is worrying that several important previous recommendations have still not been addressed and that elections will again be held on the basis of a legal framework which is still affected by a number of shortcomings. The Venice Commission concludes by reiterating its recommendations of the initial Opinion, including the overall call for a more comprehensive reform – instead of frequent, limited changes – that meets international obligations and standards and addresses prior recommendations, and which is built on broad consensus after extensive public consultations with all relevant stakeholders. The Venice Commission also reiterates its final statements in the initial Opinion: as Georgia works to further its application for membership to the European Union, the Commission encourages the authorities “to use this as an impetus to further enhance the democratic process”.

CoE Parliamentary Assembly Fears that Law on “Foreign Influence” Will Negatively Affect the Conduct of Elections

BY THE GEORGIA TODAY TEAM

The Assembly is concerned that the controversial adoption of the “Foreign Influence Transparency Law” is not an isolated event, but the culmination of a series of events that clearly indicate the country's democratic backsliding, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe said in a resolution adopted today.

“This trend must change. The Assembly calls on the Georgian authorities to clearly fulfill their commitment to the country's democratic consolidation and further European integration and to fulfill the obligations assumed by Georgia and the obligations of joining the Council of Europe, not only with words, but also with concrete and tangible actions,” the resolution states.

The Assembly emphasizes that the adoption of the law “On transparency of foreign influence” cannot be considered in isolation from the upcoming parliamentary elections in Georgia.

“The Assembly fears that this law will adversely affect the conduct of this election and the confidence of stakeholders and the public in its outcome, which may affect the legitimacy of the election. This is particularly relevant



Image source: Council of Europe

because the adoption of this law, despite widespread opposition to it in Georgian society, has inevitably turned the upcoming elections into a de facto referendum on Georgia's democratic trajectory and

foreign relations, significantly raising the stakes in these elections and increasing polarization and tension in the pre-election climate,” the resolution states. However, the Assembly is concerned

that there is a real possibility that as a result of the Foreign Influence Transparency Law, civil society organizations with long and extensive experience observing elections will no longer be

able to observe elections. “Excluding them as election observers will be completely unacceptable and, of course, counterproductive for the Assembly,” the resolution states.

Venice Commission Publishes Opinion Regarding the Constitutional Law "On Family Values and Protection of Minors"

BY GEORGIA TODAY

The Venice Commission regrets that the so-called introduction of legislative initiatives against LGBTQI+ propaganda occurred during a period of long-term protests and strong political tensions.

"First of all, the Venice Commission expresses its regret that the legislative initiative, which aims to supplement the Constitution of Georgia and deals with very sensitive issues, has been launched in a period characterized by strong and long-lasting protests and strong political and social tensions, especially in the conditions when "it takes place just a few months before the elections and ignores the concerns raised by several international observers," the Venice Commission said in its opinion.

In terms of the legal context, the Venice Commission recommends Georgia review the legislative initiative and choose not to adopt it.

In addition, the Commission believes that the compliance of the amendments with European and international standards cannot be established, and even the proposal to adopt such an initiative poses the risk of further aggravating the hostile and stigmatizing environment against the LGBTQI+ community in Georgia.

"Furthermore, the Venice Commission recommends a detailed and well-grounded analysis of the impact on the national system before adopting new amendments,



Image source: georgiatoday.ge

involving all segments of society, especially representatives of sexual and gender minorities, as well as experts and professionals from the relevant sectors (law, health, education, social care, etc.). Such an analysis should be made public and conducted at a time appropriate for frank and unbiased

consultation, allowing for a frank and unbiased assessment of the issues at hand.

As for the legal assessment of the draft constitutional law, taking into account the case law of the European Court of Human Rights and the previous opinions of the Venice Commission on the men-

tioned issue, the Commission considers that the compliance of the [initiated legislative] amendments with European and international standards cannot be established for the above-mentioned reasons, and even the proposal to adopt such a text in Georgia LGBTQI+ It risks (further)

exacerbating a hostile and stigmatizing environment against people. Accordingly, the Commission recommends to the officials of Georgia to completely review this legislative initiative and not to proceed with its adoption", - reads the opinion of the Venice Commission.

"Ivanishvili would like for Georgia to be a place where he can retire and spend his life in passive control" - Mark Mullen on Georgia at a Crossroads & Bidzina

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LET'S DISCUSS BOTH OPTIMISTIC AND PESSIMISTIC SCENARIOS OF WHAT'S AT STAKE. IF ONE HAPPENS, THE OTHER WON'T. HOW DO THESE DIFFERENT FUTURES LOOK?

I think the elections are very important. Remember, in 2003, the election commission pretended that Shevardnadze and his party had won the election and they didn't. So there was a change a couple of weeks later. What's important is the outcome and hopefully that it is an electoral one. If the pro-European and democratic forces win, then I think Georgia will be in the European Union - It'll take a long time, and everybody knows that, but it'll be great for Georgia along the way because of the ability for Georgians to work in Europe - basically a macroeconomic guarantee for Georgia. It means democracy. It means finally there's not the big strong man that saves Georgia from the previous leader and all that stuff, which is great. That change is going to happen. The question is when. If it doesn't happen around this election, then it's going to take much longer. I think that Bidzina Ivanishvili would like for Georgia to be a place that he can peacefully and calmly retire and spend the rest of his life in sort of passive control, that Georgia can become a center of international sanctions busting and international sanctions avoidance for Russia and China as well. I think that's the idea behind a Chinese company taking over the port of Anaklia. That means that it will just slow the process down and that a generation of Georgians will have to wait longer in order to live in a normal democratic, European country. It could also mean that Georgia will become a Russian colony again, as it was before. It's a pretty unpleasant scenario, but in one way or another that will be the trajectory. The longer Georgia has to wait to join its inevitable European path, the more difficult it will be for it to get there. This is the best opportunity to do that anytime for the next several years.

SPEAKING OF BIG, STRONG

MEN, OR, IN THIS CASE, SHORT STRONG MEN, WHAT'S YOUR TAKE ON THE MAN IN QUESTION?

I don't really know very much about him. It was really interesting reading the speech that he gave several weeks ago, how there are these foreigners that are trying to control Georgia and the Global War Party and things like that. People in Georgia who only speak Georgian and don't get outside of Georgia very much, who perhaps haven't spent any time in the European Union or other countries, I can imagine might believe that. So I think that his message could be compelling for people who don't understand much about the interconnected world. I think for Georgians who've lived abroad, studied abroad, have more international experience, maybe are polylingual, that message does not resonate. I think that he's increasingly losing touch with reality. I've only met him a couple of times, but my sense is that he probably doesn't have too many people around him that are speaking with him very honestly.

WHAT WAS YOUR IMPRESSION BACK THEN? WHAT WAS THE MEETING ABOUT?

I met him at his house very soon after he announced that he was entering politics. He called me and told me that he planned to become involved. I said, fantastic, everybody agrees it's time for the National Movement to go. There was human rights abuse. I said, it's great that somebody's doing that and I wish you the best of luck. He more or less made me an offer to join his team and I said I'd like to preserve neutrality and work for Georgia in a sort of non-partisan way. It was all very friendly, but then, after the meeting which ended relatively soon after I said that, there was a TV show, Anatomia, about me, about how corrupt I was, yet it was pleasing to see they'd discovered nothing, and I figured they must have done a lot of research and didn't really find anything. I think his calculation was a little cynical: if his portray me as a corrupt "Mishas Dzmakatsi" (Misha's buddy in Georgian), then after the elections, no matter what

I say it will be beneficial for them: If I say something that suits them, they'll say: even Misha's Dzmakatsi is saying this! If I criticize them, they'll say of course he would say that he is Misha's buddy. So it was a win-win scenario for them, but I don't really care, that's just how it is.

DO YOU THINK HIS OFFER TO JOIN HIM WAS GENUINE? IN WHAT CAPACITY?

He didn't really talk about it. The guy's got a lot of money, and I think he's used to spending it on and deploying people that are helpful to him. There was no discussion about that, I don't know what he wanted me to do, we didn't make it to the job description part of that. But he was a nice enough guy, had some interesting art, lovely decorations and a very impressive estate.

SPEAKING OF MISHA'S DZMAKATSI, HOW DESERVED DO YOU THINK THAT WAS AS A NICKNAME?

It wasn't at all. I mean, look, I know him, and I have hung out with him, and whatever else, but we were never that close. To be honest, I was much closer to Zurab Zhvania, who I have a whole lot of respect for. With Misha, sure, we talked, we had lunch a couple times. On February 6th, 2004, quite soon after Shevardnadze resigned, before the parliament had changed, the national movement illegally amended the constitution and they did it very quickly, in 36 hours. There wasn't even time for any of the foreigners to say anything about it, nobody knew what was happening and nobody really wanted to make much noise anyway, it was this new government and it was all to accommodate Zhvania to be the prime minister, and for Misha to get the presidential role. But it's a really bad precedent to do that. I went on Rustavi 2 TV channel, and I said this is illegal. It's a really bad precedent to do that, it's a really bad idea and do not do this and Misha put out the order: don't talk to Mark, he's no longer invited to anything, don't meet with him, and that lasted until 2007. I didn't really care, I had other things

going on, I was never close enough for that to be a big problem for me. I never made any money from them, Misha and I had never really been that close. But I think right now there's just sort of this general portrayal by the Georgian Dream people, about the global war party that brought Misha into power. I don't know whether they think I'm a card-carrying member, but I'm not.

THE NEXT QUESTION I WAS GOING TO ASK WAS HOW DID WE COME TO THIS? BUT LET ME REPHRASE, COULD THE WEST HAVE DONE SOMETHING FROM 2012 TO THIS DAY SO THAT IT DIDN'T HAVE TO COME TO THIS?

In 2008 when Russia invaded, Obama was on a plane going on the first holiday he'd had in a long time to Hawaii with his family. John McCain, who he was running against, said we are all Georgians. Obama was very nervous about it. It was as if Obama was the new guy and McCain's the guy who really understands these things. I think Obama's policy towards Misha and Georgia was that Misha needs to get over himself. That Misha thinks that somehow the United States owes him a favor. I mean, Americans love Georgia. Any American who's ever visited Georgia falls in love with the place. But that's no basis for a foreign policy. The reality of it is Georgia is an independent country. It really is truly independent. Trying to say you guys have to have our back and solve our problems for us is not healthy. If you select Bidzina, fine. And Georgia chose Bidzina. It was a fair election. Luckily, Misha had the good grace not to fight that. Then Otsneba took over. I think more recently, as things have migrated, that the ambassador has done great work in clarifying U.S. foreign policy. I think that the sanctions that were put in place on the people who passed the Russian law, together with the speed of their implementation, has to be a record in the United States Congress. I think this is fantastic and very appropriate but I don't know what else the United States is supposed to do, because this is a Georgian problem. There is also a take in Georgia that I

often hear from some people, that America will save us and Europe is a mess. I don't know. A big part of American foreign policy since Obama is that Georgia's future is with the EU. That the United States' best role is to support the EU and Georgia's relationship with the EU. I think that's a very smart policy.

DO YOU SEE A CONTINUATION ON THIS SANCTION PATH? TIGHTENING THE SCREWS, SO TO SPEAK?

Well, these sanctions are largely symbolic. But symbolism matters. I think it's making it even more clear for all Georgians that Georgian Dream is rejecting the West. I've never heard EU officials speak so clearly about this rejection and about this government.

DO YOU THINK THERE IS CLARITY ABOUT WHAT'S AT STAKE? WITH WHAT'S HAPPENING IN GEORGIA GEOPOLITICALLY, THAT THEY MIGHT LOSE GEORGIA TO RUSSIA?

Yes, I think there's clarity and I think they understand that. Now, the question is, what can we do about it? With Ukraine, the West could do a lot more. I think that the West should do a lot more. Ukraine needs more help than it is getting. With Georgia, Georgia is not at war. There is no chance that Georgia is going to enter war, and how hard the West should push is complicated because Georgia's an independent country. This is a time where citizens of Georgia need to decide what happens and make that happen. You're an independent country, there is no doubt about that, so you will decide what's going to happen on October 26th and you make it happen. It won't happen from Washington or Brussels or anywhere else.

I THINK THAT'S A WONDERFUL SENTIMENT TO WRAP THIS UP ON. THANKS SO MUCH. IT'S BEEN A PLEASURE TO TALK TO YOU.

Thanks. It's been a pleasure to talk to you.

EFES Georgia has Switched to Renewable Energy



EFES Georgia continues to care for the environment. That's why the company has switched to renewable energy. All electricity consumed by EFES Georgia is now sourced entirely from renewable energy sources. As the company explains, by switching to renewable energy, not only is the impact on the environment reduced, but the company contributes to the creation of a greener and more sustainable future by fulfilling its share of responsibility in the process of global transition to eco-friendly energy sources.

EFES Georgia prioritizes sustainability in all aspects of its operations. In 2008, the company started the construction of a biological wastewater treatment plant, which has been fully operational since 2012 and processes the wastewater generated as a result of the production cycle.

To further minimize environmental impact, the company is also focusing on other environmental initiatives. These include optimizing the supply chain to reduce transportation emissions, and implementing innovative waste management programs, aiming at creating a

better world for future generations.

Nikoloz Khundzakishvili, Corporate Affairs Director of EFES Georgia discusses the topic in detail.

WHAT DOES THE TRANSITION OF THE COMPANY AND ITS PRODUCTION TO RENEWABLE ENERGY MEAN?

The transition of the company and its production to renewable energy means the transfer of all energy sources and production processes to electricity obtained from renewable sources, including solar, wind or hydro, and geothermal energy. For us, as a responsible company, environmental protection is a declared priority.

EFES Georgia became the first Georgian company to use the mechanism of purchasing and canceling certificates of origin for electricity obtained from renewable sources. With this mechanism, which has been operating in Georgia since 2023, companies can confirm that the electricity they consume is fully or partially obtained from renewable sources.

We believe that promoting the production and consumption of green energy is important in reducing dependence on fossil fuels. Therefore, we encourage industry partners to use the mechanism to purchase and cancel certificates of origin for electricity from renewable sources. By doing so, we can all reduce



our environmental impact and contribute to creating a greener and more sustainable future. We will also increase the demand for green energy from companies, which will ultimately encourage appropriate investments in the field of renewable energy generation.

HOW BENEFICIAL IS THIS TRANSFORMATION FOR THE COMPANY ITSELF?

In addition to the fact that the use of green energy greatly contributes to environmental protection, this transformation proves to be beneficial for the company in the long term, as it reduces dependence on fossil fuels, reduces carbon emissions and is in line with sustainability goals.

WHAT ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES ARE PLANNED TO REDUCE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT AND DEVELOP GREEN PRODUCTION?

To further reduce environmental impact and develop green production, EFES Georgia focuses on initiatives such as (1) optimizing the supply chain to reduce transportation emissions and (2) implementing innovative waste reduction and recycling programs. At our facility, we ensure that no waste ends up in landfill, and everything is recyclable.

Additionally, EFES Georgia is a signatory of the UN Global Compact, aligning its activities with the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

TELL US ABOUT ANY OTHER ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVITIES YOU'RE INVOLVED WITH

In addition to our ongoing efforts, we actively support various environmental initiatives through community engage-

ment and cross-sector partnerships. One such initiative is the Forest Friend program implemented by the National Forestry Agency, where we fully fund the restoration and maintenance of a 12-hectare forest. We also implement a plastic separation project in Rustavi municipality, alongside educational and awareness campaigns aimed at fostering sustainable practices. Furthermore, we collaborate with industrial partners to drive systemic changes towards a more sustainable future.

In addition, our company has been implementing environmental activities for years, including energy efficiency and energy saving, waste management, sustainable use of natural resources and environmental awareness campaigns.

Since 2012, we have been operating a biological Wastewater Treatment Plant, which processes the wastewater generated as a result of the production cycle. This technology is recognized as one of the best for breweries. It allows high-quality treatment, which means that the discharged wastewater quality satisfies EU requirements, thereby significantly reducing its impact on the environment.

It should be noted that participation in environmental activities, such as waste reduction and water conservation, is included in the evaluation criteria for our employees. For instance, employees who demonstrate greater environmental friendliness will receive higher bonuses.

Additionally, I would like to emphasize our entrepreneurship program, GO Green, which we implemented last year in collaboration with Impact Hub Tbilisi and Startup Büro. The program aims to foster sustainable entrepreneurship in Georgia and strengthens startups, companies, and individuals in this direction.



Global Growth Is Stabilizing for the First Time in Three Years But 80% of world population will experience slower growth than in pre-COVID decade

The global economy is expected to stabilize for the first time in three years in 2024—but at a level that is weak by recent historical standards, according to the World Bank's latest Global Economic Prospects report.

Global growth is projected to hold steady at 2.6% in 2024 before edging up to an average of 2.7% in 2025-26. That is well below the 3.1% average in the decade before COVID-19. The forecast implies that over the course of 2024-26 countries that collectively account for more than 80% of the world's population and global GDP would still be growing more slowly than they did in the decade before COVID-19.

Overall, developing economies are projected to grow 4% on average over 2024-25, slightly slower than in 2023. Growth in low-income economies is expected to accelerate to 5% in 2024 from 3.8% in 2023. However, the forecasts for 2024 growth reflect downgrades in three out of every four low-income economies since January. In advanced economies, growth is set to remain steady at 1.5% in 2024 before rising to 1.7% in 2025.

"Four years after the upheavals caused by the pandemic, conflicts, inflation, and monetary tightening, it appears that global economic growth is steadying," said Indermit Gill, the World Bank Group's Chief Economist and Senior Vice President. "However, growth is at lower levels than before 2020. Prospects for the

world's poorest economies are even more worrisome. They face punishing levels of debt service, constricting trade possibilities, and costly climate events. Developing economies will have to find ways to encourage private investment, reduce public debt, and improve education, health, and basic infrastructure. The poorest among them, especially the 75 countries eligible for concessional assistance from the International Development Association, will not be able to do this without international support."

This year, one in four developing economies is expected to remain poorer than it was on the eve of the pandemic in 2019. This proportion is twice as high for countries in fragile- and conflict-affected situations. Moreover, the income gap between developing economies and advanced economies is set to widen in nearly half of developing economies over 2020-24, the highest share since the 1990s. Per capita income in these economies, an important indicator of living standards, is expected to grow by 3.0% on average through 2026, well below the average of 3.8% in the decade before COVID-19.

Global inflation is expected to moderate to 3.5% in 2024 and 2.9% in 2025, but the pace of decline is slower than was projected just six months ago. Many central banks, as a result, are expected to remain cautious in lowering policy interest rates. Global interest rates are likely to remain high by the standards of recent decades—averaging about 4%

over 2025-26, roughly double the 2000-19 average.

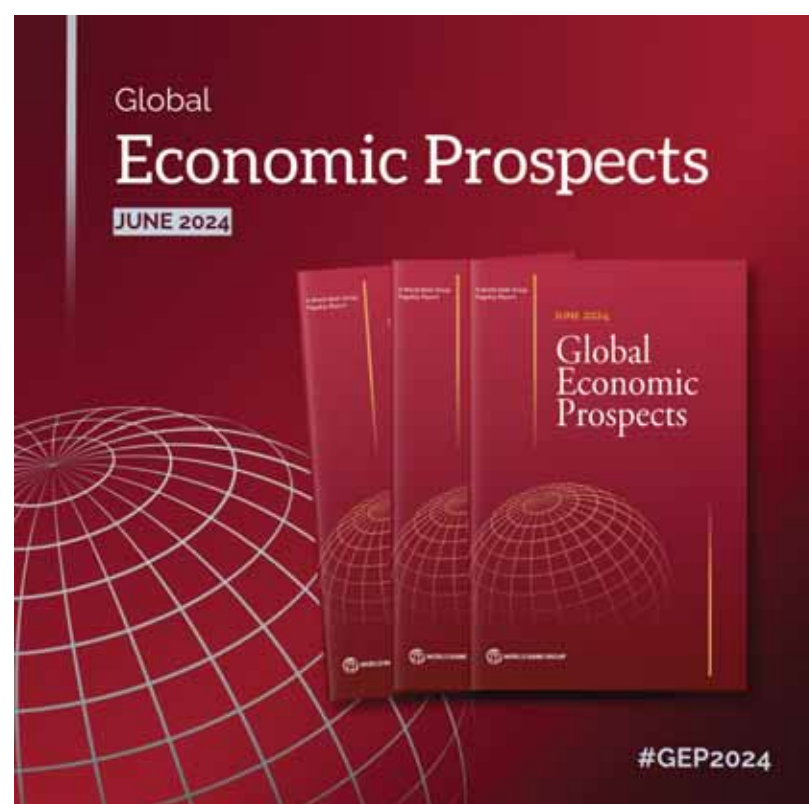
"Although food and energy prices have moderated across the world, core inflation remains relatively high—and could stay that way," said Ayhan Kose, the World Bank's Deputy Chief Economist

and Director of the Prospects Group. "That could prompt central banks in major advanced economies to delay interest-rate cuts. An environment of 'higher-for-longer' rates would mean tighter global financial conditions and much weaker growth in developing

economies."

The latest Global Economic Prospects report also features two analytical chapters of topical importance. The first outlines how public investment can be used to accelerate private investment and promote economic growth. It finds that public investment growth in developing economies has halved since the global financial crisis, dropping to an annual average of 5% in the past decade. Yet public investment can be a powerful policy lever. For developing economies with ample fiscal space and efficient government spending practices, scaling up public investment by 1% of GDP can increase the level of output by up to 1.6% over the medium term.

The second analytical chapter explores why small states—those with a population of around 1.5 million or less—suffer chronic fiscal difficulties. Two-fifths of the 35 developing economies that are small states are at high risk of debt distress or already in it. That's roughly twice the share for other developing economies. Comprehensive reforms are needed to address the fiscal challenges of small states. Revenues could be drawn from a more stable and secure tax base. Spending efficiency could be improved—especially in health, education, and infrastructure. Fiscal frameworks could be adopted to manage the higher frequency of natural disasters and other shocks. Targeted and coordinated global policies can also help put these countries on a more sustainable fiscal path.



ZEG Fest: A New Definition of 'Storytelling'



Image source: Fb

BY SHELBI R. ANKIEWICZ

When people hear the word 'storytelling', they may think of something made up, a restated or reenacted tale, or a person telling a story about their life or a specific moment. ZEG Fest brings a new definition to this word everyone so commonly knows.

Created in 2019 by Impact Hub Tbilisi and Coda Story, ZEG Tbilisi Storytelling Festival has broadened the term to allow speakers worldwide to come and tell their stories. This is done through conversations, images, products, film, and other platforms to connect people. Ketevan Ebanoidze, Co-Founder and Organizer of ZEG Fest, said the festival was created to give everyone, regardless of their background, a chance to talk and be inspired.

"No matter if you're telling your personal stories or the story of your career or anything else, you need to know how to tell the story," said Ebanoidze. "Every other person has a story to tell, and every industry has specifics on how to tell those stories."

The festival commenced on June 21 with panel discussions, Q&A talks, and documentary screenings by various speakers. There were over 100 speakers and six parallel stages with simultaneous sessions throughout the weekend. Ebanoidze said this event differs from other festivals because guests can meet the speakers they listen to. It's for this reason that there's a breakfast, lunch, reception, and happy hour so everyone can talk and make connections, speakers and attendees alike. Ebanoidze explained that it's a very democratic festival where everyone is on the same level.

The first night concluded with an opening ceremony that included a talk with some guests, a visual presentation about Georgia's Gen Z revolution, and a performance. Saturday, June 22 began, and there were sessions about what philosophers can do in the age of AI, what role fiction has in the world, and how the foreign agent law in Georgia affects journalists. Genia Mineeva, Founder of Been London, had a session entitled 'How to Style It' with a product as the main storyteller.

Mineeva is a former BBC journalist who saw a problem with waste and wanted to do something about it. With no former knowledge of sustainability, Mineeva said she pursued an education on the topic and now has a company that turns waste, whether it's plastic, leather, cotton, or other materials, into premium, luxury products. She believes that a physical product, such as one of her wallets or bags made of apple skin in replacement of leather, has the power to push people to adopt a different behavior, without having to use any words.

"Let's tell the story to show the possibilities of how we can live slightly differently, how we can make our physical products differently instead of constantly taking from the environment," Mineeva told GEORGIA TODAY. "We can reuse what we already have."

According to Mineeva, storytelling is a tool that can change a person or make them reconsider things. She explained that one of her company's goals is to have people think about how the things

they use daily are made, whether from oil, animals, or a positive material, so they can enforce change where needed. She said storytelling is one of the most powerful tools we have as humans to evoke change, and Georgia has created an open space to use and talk about this.

Saturday night concluded with a screening of Georgia's European Championship game against the Czech Republic, where many attendees gathered to watch and celebrate. Although the festival emphasizes speakers and connecting professionals of different backgrounds, whether journalists, dancers, filmmakers, activists, philosophers, etc., the event is also open to the public each year. Natasha Thalluri is an Indian PhD student at Harvard studying aspects of the Georgian language.

She said she heard about the festival through friends and thought it would be comparable to literary festivals in India that focus on fiction amongst other topics. However, Thalluri explained that the way ZEG portrayed storytelling differed

from her expectations, even though she instinctively knew there were various ways to tell a story. Since the festival is based in Georgia and focuses on local and global topics, Thalluri said it was interesting to see issues and hear stories through this lens of the globe, that she otherwise would never have thought about.

"The way Indians see the world is one way, and when you talk to people from Eastern Europe and think about the experience of the Soviet Union and how it has affected them, I don't think of the Soviet Union in the same way they do," said Thalluri. "People my age have a very different understanding of what the Soviet Union is and its impact on global affairs."

The festival's last day was June 23, which began with optional walking tours, one entitled 'A Walk Through Jewish Tbilisi'. It was led by Lasha Shakulashvili, lecturer of Yiddish at Tbilisi State University (TSU). He said he started doing tours in Tbilisi just two weeks

after he had a fallout with TSU regarding the protests in Georgia against the Foreign Agents Law.

To him, storytelling is important because it's a way to compete with other professionals in the same field who have better archives, documents, or more knowledge. Shakulashvili grew up with a blind grandfather, whom he would take on walks around Tbilisi and describe things to entertain him. He explained how he discovered the art of storytelling between his childhood and teaching at TSU.

Shakulashvili said that on his tours, he shows the face of a person or thing so people will remember the history he explains by relating it to what he shows as a visual. With his form of storytelling, he said he gets to explain the Jewish culture in Georgia, as well as Georgia as a country to his guests. To him, this means storytelling equates to coexistence.

"Humans cannot find a connection to a building or a calendar. They can find a connection to the person who lived in that building or who is in that newspaper article," said Shakulashvili.

The last day continued with sessions such as how people live in exile worldwide as authoritarianism rises, how to respond to disinformation, and an 'off the record' with journalist Quentin Somerville, who has covered conflicts for the BBC. The festival closed with a ceremony and after-party, available for speakers and everyone who bought tickets.

The co-founder, Ebanoidze, said ZEG Fest came to be because Impact Hub Tbilisi, a space that focuses on building connections and bridges between people, and news outlet Coda Story, which focuses on Georgia and media, came together to create something that would combine democracy and journalism for the public. However, Ebanoidze said that after consideration, they realized storytelling isn't just for media and journalists, but for every industry, which is how ZEG was born.

In Georgian 'zeg' means 'the day after tomorrow', which goes hand in hand with the goal of the festival, which according to the festival's Facebook page, is telling stories that will matter even the day after tomorrow.

Moving forward, Ebanoidze said they want to retain their network, so they are brainstorming year-round events such as online seminars or smaller festivals in different countries; however, nothing is confirmed. She said the main festival will always be in Tbilisi because ZEG helps to promote the city.

"Our main goal is to keep Georgia on the global map," Ebanoidze told GEORGIA TODAY. "To talk about the issues we are concerned about here, to voice them globally, and tell our stories to guest speakers who then bring them to their own countries."



Shangri La Tbilisi Introduces Revolutionary Spread Bet Roulette, a First in Georgia

In a groundbreaking move for the Georgian entertainment scene, Shangri La in Tbilisi has become the first venue in the country to unveil Spread Bet Roulette, a popular and innovative roulette side bet, widely played in establishments throughout the United Kingdom.

Spread Bet Roulette, designed to integrate seamlessly with the Cammegg Display and Cammegg Mercury360 roulette wheel, promises to elevate traditional roulette experience with enhanced side betting options and lucrative payouts. Unlike traditional bets that focus solely on a single winning number, Spread Bet Roulette introduces a dynamic new element where players can bet on a range of outcomes generated alongside the main game.

The game operates by incorporating a bonus number ranging from 0 to 72, transparently generated by the Mercury360 wheel. At the start of each game, players can place Spread Bets alongside or instead of their usual roulette bets. The winning number, along with its spread incorporating the bonus number, is displayed prominently for all participants to see. Payouts are then settled at the end of each spin, offering a fresh twist to the familiar roulette format.

"Spread-Bet Roulette is a truly revolutionary side bet," says Helen Keane, General Manager of Shangri La Tbilisi. "Introducing exciting new betting opportunities without disrupting the pace of the base game. Players can now enjoy higher maximum payouts of up-to 400 to 1 on our roulette gaming tables."

The introduction of Spread Bet Roulette marks a significant step for Shangri La, known for its commitment to innovation and enhancing customer experience. With this new addition, the entertainment center aims to attract a broader audience of both seasoned roulette enthusiasts and newcomers eager to explore the excitement of higher payouts on live roulette.



Shangri La's initiative to introduce Spread Bet Roulette sets a precedent in Georgia's gambling industry, potentially paving the way for similar innovations across other establishments in the region. As the game gains wider acceptance of the players, it is expected to add a new layer of excitement and engagement to

the vibrant gambling landscape of Tbilisi and Batumi.

Andrew Cammegg, Director of Cammegg Ltd explains "We are excited to share and showcase in the beautiful country of Georgia our Spread Bet Roulette side bet – acknowledged to be one of the best roulette game innovations

for the gaming floor. The next step for us would be to introduce our progressive bet version of Spread Bet, further increasing excitement to traditional roulette." The roulette wheel manufacturer Cammegg Ltd is known for its outstanding manufacturing quality and precision engineering.

For enthusiasts and curious players alike, Spread Bet Roulette at Shangri La Tbilisi, represents not just a new bet option, but a glimpse into the future of interactive and dynamic gaming experiences.

SPONSORED CONTENT

Celebrating Diversity: New Book Presentation by The Women's Initiatives Supporting Group

BY KESARIA KATCHARAVA

On the evening of June 20, 2024, a remarkable event took place at the Kurorti venue in Tbilisi, where the Women's Initiatives Supporting Group (WISG) hosted a presentation of their latest publication, the Colorful Love cookbook. This event not only marked the culmination of hard work and dedication but also exemplified the organization's commitment to promoting equality and supporting their community.

Founded in 2000 by a group of eight visionary women, WISG has been at the forefront of advocating for women's rights and the empowerment of marginalized communities in Georgia. Over the years, they have established themselves as pioneers in addressing issues of gender equality, particularly focusing on lesbian, bisexual, and trans people.

A CULINARY JOURNEY OF INCLUSIVITY

The centerpiece of the evening was the "Colorful Love" cookbook, a collection of queer recipes that celebrate diversity and love in its many forms. Each recipe not only tantalizes the taste buds but also tells a story of cultural richness and personal expression. From appetizers to desserts, the cookbook is a testament to



Image source: Kesaria Katcharava

the creativity and resilience of the LGBTQI+ community. During the presentation, guests had the opportunity to indulge in dishes inspired by the recipes from Colorful Love, prepared with care and passion by volunteers and supporters of WISG. This culinary experience mirrored the organization's ethos of

inclusivity and solidarity, where food became a medium to bridge differences and foster understanding.

SUPPORTING A WORTHY CAUSE

The event also served a noble cause beyond the celebration of food and culture. Attendees were encouraged to

contribute through book donations, with all proceeds dedicated to supporting Sofo Basiladze and her family during a challenging time. Sofo's mother's battle with stage four cancer has resonated deeply within the community, prompting an outpouring of support and solidarity. By purchasing the Color-

ful Love cookbook, guests not only acquire a collection of delicious recipes but also contribute directly to a compassionate cause, embodying the spirit of communal support that defines WISG's mission.

LOOKING FORWARD

As the evening drew to a close, amidst heartfelt speeches and expressions of gratitude, it was clear that the impact of WISG's work extends far beyond this event. The Colorful Love cookbook stands as a testament to their ongoing efforts to promote social justice and equality through innovative and inclusive initiatives. Looking ahead, WISG remains committed to advancing feminist ideals and creating safe spaces where all individuals, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, can thrive and be celebrated. Their journey continues with unwavering determination, guided by the belief that every voice matters and every contribution counts.

The book presentation organized by the Women's Initiatives Supporting Group was not just about a cookbook, it was a celebration of diversity, compassion, and community resilience. It underscored the power of collective action and the profound impact of supporting one another in times of need. As we reflect on this event, let us carry forward its message of inclusivity and solidarity in our own communities, ensuring that everyone has a seat at the table.

"Tbilisi Independent" at Frieze No.9 Cork Street



Lia Bagrationi, "View From My Window", acrylic on canvas, 2023

FEATURED ARTISTS:

Alexander Bandzeladze (1927-1992) is an outstanding representative of the so-called 1960s Generation in Georgian art space. His artistic exploration spans a broad spectrum, beginning as early as the 1950s during the Soviet period. Bandzeladze was experimenting and searching for different styles and worked with the same passion in painting and graphics; he was a master of book illustration and a monumental artist.

During the 1960s the artist's pursuit of non-figurative expression was driven by intuitive sensitivity and creative empirical observation. Alexander Bandzeladze's name is associated with the development of Georgian abstract expressionism and the formation of the 80s generation of Georgian nonconformist artists. His work is hugely significant to the history of the development of new Georgian art.

Alexander Bandzeladze's late non-figurative abstract paintings from the 1980s epitomize the synthesis of his artistic exploration and observations. In this period, Bandzeladze masterfully employed a soft palette and strategic use of color to create a harmonious yet contrasting visual experience. One notable piece from this period, "Dream by Drunk Noah," encapsulates Bandzeladze's

inspiration drawn from religious motifs. The painting reflects the artist's individual perspective, weaving a narrative that transcends literal interpretation.

Lia Bagrationi (1957), a modern Georgian artist, is a member of the International Academy of Ceramics (IAC). She is co-founder of the Georgian Ceramic Art and Craft Foundation, The Clay Office and an associate professor at Tbilisi State Arts Academy. Her works are preserved in both local and international collections.

Lia Bagrationi, renowned for her plethora of innovative ideas and experimental work throughout her extensive career, approaches the elemental issues of time, space and human existence with a deeply philosophical lens. Lia's artistic vision finds its manifestation across diverse mediums and materials such as clay objects, mixed media installations, fabrics, paintings, drawings.

"The View from My Window" series features the recurring perspective from the artist's residence, meticulously captured on canvas. The focal point of this series is a piece depicting from the window of her studio place. Lia Bagrationi's dynamic palette and varied forms creates vivid and evocative scenes in her landscapes. Her use of carefully designed borders enhances the composition, guid-

ing the viewer's gaze and immersing them in the artist's unique horizon.

Tamuna Sirbiladze (1971-2016). Tamuna was born in Tbilisi, Georgia in 1971. From 1989 to 1994 she studied at Tbilisi state academy of art in Tbilisi, where she gained a degree. After moving to Vienna in 1997, she studied at the academy of fine arts (until 2003), where her teacher was Franz Graf. In 2003 she further extended her studies at the Slade school of fine arts in London. In the meantime, she had met the artist Franz West, whom she married in 2002, and with whom she collaborated on several art-projects and works until his death in 2012.

Always very active, she was included in a group exhibition as soon as she moved to Vienna. Over the years, she made a huge body of works encompassing installations, videos, site-specific projects and an enormous amount of paintings, which she exhibited in various exhibitions in Galleries and Museums all over Europe, like 2001 Plakatentwürfe with Gisela Capitain in Cologne (cooperating with Franz West), 2007 in concurrence with ColletPark Gallery in Paris, 2008 Painting and Elements with Jonathan Viner in London, 2010 Laszive Lockungen with Charim Unger in Berlin.

Tamuna Sirbiladze's artistic oeuvre is distinguished by a unique style of abstraction that fuses expressive dynamism with an intimate sensitivity to form and color. Sirbiladze's abstract forms often evoke a sense of organic fluidity, reminiscent of natural phenomena yet firmly rooted in the realm of the abstract. Exploring themes of sexuality and vulnerability, Sirbiladze's works stand as compelling testaments to the power of abstraction to convey the depths of human experience and emotion.

To conclude, Reach Art Visual (R.A.V.) is ready to curate a powerful exhibition at Frieze No.9 Cork Street, illuminating the rich and dynamic world of Georgian abstractionism. This exhibition will not only highlight the unique contributions of these artists but also will underscore the importance of preserving and promoting Georgian art on a global stage.

Reach Art Visual (R.A.V.) is a visual art consulting company specializing in art identity-oriented experiences focused on thematic essence. R.A.V.'s organizational vision is centered on discovering hidden treasures and reflecting on both historical and current dynamics of the Georgian art scene. By providing research-based curatorial and multimedia projects, R.A.V. shares invaluable knowledge about the Georgian artistic field, promoting deeper understanding and appreciation of Georgian art.

This July, Frieze's No.9 Cork Street is set to present a captivating group show featuring Tbilisi based galleries, from the vibrant capital of Georgia. As the world's leading platform for modern and contemporary art, Frieze is dedicated to fostering the talents of artists, galleries, collectors, and art enthusiasts. Located in the historic heart of Mayfair, London, No.9 Cork Street serves as Frieze's first permanent exhibition space for international galleries.

The upcoming exhibition showcases five dynamic, young, female-run galleries in Tbilisi: E.A Shared Space, Gallery 4710, The Why Not Gallery, MAUDI, and CH64 Gallery. In collaboration with Reach Art Visual, the show constructs its narrative around two central pillars in the history of Georgian abstraction. This event not only offers a profound glimpse into Georgian art and culture but also highlights the emerging voices amid the nation's rising political and social upheaval. It stands as a powerful testament to the resilient and vibrant spirit of Georgian artists, celebrating their significant contributions to the global art scene.

In this article we will go deeper and explore Reach Art Visual's concept for the exhibition and the artists they are showcasing at the Frieze No.9 Cork Street.

Reach Art Visual presents a captivating exhibition focusing on the rich and varied world of abstract art through the lens of three distinguished Georgian artists: Alexander Bandzeladze, Lia Bagrationi, and Tamuna Sirbiladze. Drawn from an esteemed private collection, this exhibition celebrates the unique artistic styles and thematic explorations of these artists, offering a profound insight into the dynamic and evolving field of Georgian abstractionism.

The exhibition aims to create a spatial dialogue that showcases the diversity of visual language within Georgian abstractionism. Bandzeladze's sophisticated synthesis of color and form, Bagrationi's

vibrant landscapes, and Sirbiladze's emotive, gestural abstraction provide distinct perspectives and artistic approaches. Each artist's work serves as proof of their individual artistic gaze, environmental observation, and thematic focus, reflecting their contributions to the abstract art movement over the decades.

This exhibition not only highlights the unique contributions of Alexander Bandzeladze, Lia Bagrationi and Tamuna Sirbiladze, but also celebrates the rich diversity and dynamic evolution of abstract art in Georgia. Through the interplay of these artistic techniques and thematic explorations, the R.A.V. curatorial selection offers profound insight into the dynamic and ever-evolving field of Georgian abstractionism.



Alexander Bandzeladze, "COMPOSITION", acrylic on canvas, 1989

Favorite Fortress

BLOG BY TONY HANMER

I had the enormous privilege of spending two winters in Ushguli, Georgia and Europe's highest village at about 2200m, starting in 2007. It went like this: I was still single, and had traveled there several times prior with my Svan blood brother and Georgia-door-opener, Nodar Aprasidze. Then my new friend Peter Nasmyth, who first visited Georgia way back in 1988 and has done many spectacular things here, said to me, "Tony, just DO IT!" So I did.

I asked my host family, Dato Ratiani and Nanuli Chelidze-Ratiani, about spending a winter with them in the village. They said, "Sure, come on up!" I asked them to give me something useful to do as I'll have free time 24/7. After some thought, they got back to me: "Tony, we get a lot of tourists to the village because of its uniqueness. But no one here speaks any English. Why don't you teach it to our whole current population of schoolchildren, for a start?" (51 of them from grades 1-12.) I said OK, and we made it work, an hour a day after school and also on Saturdays. Although I have no formal education past high school, at least English is my native language. So I became an unknowing precursor of TLG, Teach and Learn with Georgia, then-president Mikeil Saakashvili's program to bring English teachers everywhere in Georgia.

I spent very little time preparing les-

sons, as we were starting from zero and I'm not the best planner. But we stuck it out for two amazing winters (when the children have no farming or tourism activities to occupy them) and eventually, after TLG formally got under way and gained the attention of the Ministry of Science and Education, Ushguli also started incorporating English properly into its curriculum.

The other 23/7? I had all the time in the world to walk around, take photos (1st winter on 35mm film, 2nd having switched to digital), meet people, and get to know how the folk of Ushguli made it through their long, deeply snowbound winters. They're ready, let me tell you. Avalanches, rockfalls, cut off for months at a time as we were? Pffff.

I had already ascended to Queen Tamar's Summer Fortress on numerous occasions by the time I moved to Ushguli. It's so named because, high above the village, it's supposed to be accessible only in summer, as opposed to her Winter Fortress, far below it. But I took that name as a challenge. Eventually I did go up it in full winter too, having checked with my host family for avalanche risk. Going up was through nearly waist-deep snow, but so worth it for the views. Descending was, due to the steepness, a series of a few 3-4m strides/slides, 10 times faster.

The Fortress gives, on good-weather days, views not only of upper Ushguli spread out down there, but also of Mts Lamaria to the right and Shkhara, Georgia's highest mountain and source of the Enguri River, at center. If Shkhara



Image source: Tony Hanmer

isn't visible due to cloud, I consider the 45-minute trudge up hardly worth it, and often have had the luxury of waiting for better conditions. Take note! A day trip to Ushguli is not enough for this magnificent little place, it deserves more!

On my last trip to Ushguli, a few weeks ago, Dato also told me that there are firm

plans to renovate the Fortress, which sorely needs it. Of its two main towers, one is complete, the other has less than half remaining. It's a daunting task, given the location, cost, and needs for workers and materials. But one I cheer for. Just DO IT!

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

Georgia Unites: Football Fever Engulfs the Land



Fb: Cafe Mzuri

BY IVAN NECHAEV

The entry of the Georgian national football team into the European Football Championship marks a pivotal moment in the nation's history. Football, often referred to as the world's game, transcends the boundaries of sport, becoming a potent symbol of national pride, unity, and cultural identity. In Georgia, this phenomenon is magnified as citizens gather in iconic locations and urban spaces across its cities to watch and cheer for their national team. In Tbilisi, venues like Stamba, Mtatsminda Park, Orbeliani Bazaar, Mziuri Cafe, and even Mikheil Meskhi Stadium are hosting live screenings of matches featuring the Georgian team. These events transform the city

into a vibrant hub of communal celebration, uniting fans in a shared experience of excitement and pride.

However, communal football viewing transcends mere sports fandom. It stands as a profound cultural phenomenon, rich with sociological, cultural, philosophical, and political implications. By examining this practice, we uncover how it builds community, mirrors societal values, and serves as a platform for political expression.

RITUALISTIC GATHERINGS

Communal football viewing in urban spaces acts as a modern-day ritual, echoing ancient communal practices where people gathered to celebrate significant events. These gatherings are not merely about watching a game but are deeply rooted in the human need for connection and shared experiences. They reinforce social bonds and a collective sense of

belonging, much like traditional rituals.

COLLECTIVE IDENTITY AND SOCIAL INTEGRATION

For many, supporting a football team is an integral aspect of their identity. Communal viewing amplifies this, offering a platform for fans to express their allegiance in a shared space. Major tournaments like the UEFA European Championship elevate this experience, turning it into a national celebration. Furthermore, these gatherings often become melting pots of different socio-economic, ethnic, and age groups, promoting social integration and unity by transcending individual differences.

URBAN EXPERIENCE ENHANCEMENT

The transformation of city spaces for communal viewing events reimagines urban environments, creating vibrant

social hubs. This temporary reconfiguration of public spaces enhances the urban experience, making cities more dynamic and engaging. It demonstrates the potential for urban spaces to foster community and cultural activities, contributing to the city's social and cultural vitality.

COMMUNITAS AND LIMINALITY

Anthropologist Victor Turner's concept of "communitas" perfectly encapsulates the essence of communal football viewing. This sense of equality and togetherness arises during collective experiences, temporarily dissolving social hierarchies and fostering a communal spirit. Turner's notion of liminality is also pertinent here; football matches create a liminal space where ordinary social structures are suspended, allowing for a temporary escape from everyday life and a reimagining of social roles.

AESTHETIC AND SYMBOLIC EXPERIENCE

The act of watching football communally is an aesthetic experience. It is not solely about the game but also about the collective emotions, the shared cheers, and disappointments, which together create a rich tapestry of human expression. Additionally, football often serves as a metaphor for broader societal issues like struggle, triumph, and solidarity. Communal viewing amplifies these symbolic representations, turning the sport into a conduit for discussing and reflecting on larger themes.

NATIONALISM AND PATRIOTISM

During international tournaments, communal viewing spaces become epicenters of nationalistic fervor. These expressions of patriotism, while generally positive, can occasionally verge on exclusionary nationalism. This duality highlights the complex interplay between national pride and identity politics, underscoring the thin line between inclusive patriotism and divisive nationalism.

PUBLIC SPACE AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

The use of public spaces for communal

viewing raises significant questions about urban planning and civic engagement. It brings to the fore issues of accessibility, inclusivity, and the management of public spaces, reflecting broader political dynamics. These gatherings often prompt discussions on the rights of citizens to occupy and use public spaces for communal activities, influencing urban policy and planning.

PROTEST AND SOLIDARITY

Communal viewing spaces can also become platforms for political protest and solidarity. Fans may leverage these gatherings to voice their opinions on various social and political issues, utilizing the large, attentive audience to amplify their message. This was notably seen during the Arab Spring, where football stadiums and viewing areas became sites of political activism, demonstrating the power of sport as a medium for political expression.

GLOBALIZATION

The global nature of football means that communal viewing spaces are not just local phenomena but part of a worldwide network of fans. This interconnectedness reflects the broader processes of globalization, where local and global identities intersect and influence each other. The shared experience of watching football in communal spaces contributes to a global sense of community, illustrating how local practices are embedded within global cultural dynamics.

Communal football viewing in urban spaces is a rich, multifaceted phenomenon that offers valuable insights into contemporary society. It transcends the sport itself, serving as a lens through which we can examine cultural rituals, social dynamics, philosophical concepts, and political expressions. As such, it holds a unique place in the urban fabric, shaping and reflecting the identities and values of those who partake in it. This practice not only enhances the urban experience but also fosters a sense of community, belonging, and shared identity, illustrating the profound impact of football on society.

Tbilisi Open Air 2024: Georgia's Musical Heartbeat and Beacon of Freedom



Photo by the author

BY IVAN NECHAEV

The Tbilisi Open Air Festival, held on June 21-23, 2024, stands as one of the most prominent music festivals in the Caucasus region. Since its inception, the festival has grown significantly in scope and influence, embodying a fusion of music, culture, and social activism. Featuring headliners such as Aurora, Archive, MokuMoku, Mechanical Rainbow, Lebanon Hanover, M.I.A., Circus Mircus, Afternoon Version, Masego, La Femme, The Tiger Lillies, High Fade, and others, this year's festival provided a rich and miscellaneous experience.

MORE THAN AN OPEN AIR FESTIVAL

The mission of Tbilisi Open Air Festival is multi-faceted, focusing on promoting musical diversity, fostering a sense of community, and providing a platform for social and political expression. Central to its mission is the celebration of freedom, creativity, and nonconformity. The festival seeks to bridge cultural divides and promote understanding through the universal language of music, thereby contributing to the cultural enrichment of the region.

The festival plays a crucial role in the Georgian music scene. It provides a rare opportunity for local artists to perform alongside international acts, fostering a creative exchange that enriches the local music culture. The festival has featured a variety of performers, from globally renowned artists to emerging local talents, thus supporting the development of Georgia's music industry. Furthermore, the festival acts as a cultural melting pot, attracting attendees from different parts of the world. This diversity not only enhances the cultural fabric of Tbilisi, but also positions the city as a burgeoning hub for international cultural exchange.

Tbilisi Open Air Festival has often been a venue for expression and protest. Georgia's turbulent political landscape, characterized by its struggle for democratic reform and independence from Russian influence, has found an outlet in the festival. Themes of freedom and resistance are commonly reflected in the performances and the overall ambiance of the event. The festival also advocates for various causes, including LGBTQ+ rights, environmental sustainability, and social justice. It provides a platform for activists and organizations to reach a wider audience, thus amplifying their messages.

This aspect of the festival is particularly significant in a country where social and political activism can often be suppressed. The inclusive and progressive nature of the festival also fosters a sense of community among attendees. It is a space where people can come together to celebrate diversity, creativity, and mutual respect, which is especially important in a society that continues to grapple with issues of inequality and division.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE 2024 TBILISI OPEN AIR FESTIVAL

The political undertones of Tbilisi Open Air 2024 are unmistakable. The festival acts as a platform for political expression. This year, M.I.A. and The Tiger Lillies performed with the Georgian flag on stage, symbolizing solidarity with Georgia. Both M.I.A. and Aurora made statements supporting Georgia's recognition and struggle against Russian oppression. The metaphorical and allusive nature of many statements, especially from international artists, underscores a troubling trend. Direct and explicit political statements are increasingly seen as risky, potentially jeopardizing the festival's future and its organizers. This shift reflects broader concerns about freedom of expression in politically volatile environments. The festival, therefore, becomes a battleground for advocating and protecting civil liberties, emphasizing the importance of political activism through cultural events.

Philosophically, Tbilisi Open Air Festival embodies the principles of freedom and equality. The inclusion of "Freedom Village" within the festival grounds, where discussions on topics like "From Keep-to-Protect" and "Civil Society and European Way" take place, encourages philosophical discourse. These conver-

sations are pivotal in fostering a deeper understanding of freedom, not just as a political concept but as a fundamental human right.

From a sociological perspective, Tbilisi Open Air 2024 functions as a microcosm of societal values and tensions. The festival's focus on freedom, equality, and diversity reflects the aspirations and struggles of contemporary society. The collaboration with the Georgian UN Association and other partners to promote civil activism and diversity indicates a strong commitment to social justice and inclusion.

However, the cautious approach to political statements by international artists highlights a sociological dilemma. It points to the pervasive fear of repercussions for speaking out against oppressive regimes. This phenomenon is not unique to Georgia but resonates globally, where freedom of expression is increasingly under threat. The festival, therefore, becomes a sociological study of how cultural events navigate political landscapes and advocate for social change within constrained environments.

AURORA: ETHEREAL SOUNDSCAPES AND EMOTIONAL DEPTH

Aurora's music is characterized by its ethereal and haunting qualities, blending elements of folk, electronic, and pop. Her use of lush, layered soundscapes combined with poignant lyrics creates an immersive auditory experience. Songs like "Runaway" and "Cure for Me" showcase her ability to blend melancholic melodies with powerful, uplifting beats. Aurora's performance was an emotional journey, offering introspection and a sense of connection to the natural and spiritual worlds.

ARCHIVE: SONIC COMPLEXITY AND THEMATIC DEPTH

Archive's music embodies a complex amalgamation of progressive rock, electronica, and trip-hop. Their sound is often described as cinematic, with albums like "Londinium" and "Controlling Crowds" exploring themes of dystopia, human emotion, and societal critique. Archive's inclusion in the festival underscored a commitment to deep, reflective music that challenges the listener both sonically and intellectually.

MOKUMOKU, AFTERNOON VERSION, CIRCUS MIRCUS, AND MECHANICAL RAINBOW: GEORGIAN INNOVATION



Photo by the author

MokuMoku and Circus Mircus represent the cutting edge of the Georgian music scene. Afternoon Version's experimental rock pushes the boundaries of traditional rock with innovative structures and unconventional rhythms, while Mechanical Rainbow's eclectic soundscapes blend various genres to create a unique auditory experience. These bands highlight the local musical creativity and the festival's support for homegrown talent, fostering a sense of national pride and cultural identity.

LEBANON HANOVER: POST-PUNK MINIMALISM AND DARK AESTHETICS

Lebanon Hanover's music is characterized by its minimalist instrumentation and melancholic tones, drawing heavily from the post-punk and gothic rock traditions. Their sound, which includes stark basslines and haunting vocals, evokes a sense of nostalgia and existential contemplation. Tracks like "Gallowdance" and "Babes of the 80s" offer a glimpse into their dark, yet strangely comforting, musical world. Their presence at the festival catered to a niche audience that appreciates the depth and raw emotion of post-punk music.

M.I.A.: POLITICAL PROVOCATEUR AND GLOBAL FUSION

M.I.A.'s music is a bold fusion of hip-hop, electronic, and world music elements, often accompanied by politically charged lyrics. Her songs such as "Paper Planes" and "Borders" tackle issues of immigration, identity, and global inequality. M.I.A.'s performance was a high-energy, provocative affair that not only entertained but also stimulated political discourse. Her inclusion highlighted the festival's commitment to artists who use their platform to address pressing social and political issues.

MASEGO: JAZZ FUSION AND SMOOTH GROOVES

Masego's music is a sophisticated blend of jazz, soul, and R&B, characterized by his smooth saxophone playing and charismatic stage presence. Tracks like "Tadow" and "Navajo" highlighted his ability to seamlessly blend genres, creating a sound that is both modern and timeless. Masego's performance was a highlight for those who appreciate musi-

cal virtuosity and genre fusion.

LA FEMME: PSYCHEDELIC ELEGANCE

La Femme's music is a vibrant mix of psychedelic pop and new wave, with a distinctly French flair. Their sound is both retro and futuristic, combining catchy melodies with experimental elements. Songs like "Sur La Planche" and "Tatiana" exemplify their ability to create music that is both accessible and avant-garde. La Femme's inclusion underscored the festival's appreciation for eclectic and innovative sounds.

THE TIGER LILLIES: DARK CABARET

The Tiger Lillies are known for their dark cabaret style, which combines elements of punk, opera, and vaudeville. Their music often explores macabre themes with a theatrical flair, creating a unique and engaging performance experience. Tracks like "Start a Fire" and "Banging in the Nails" exemplify their ability to blend dark humor with poignant social commentary. Their presence at the festival added a touch of theatricality and dark humor.

CULTURAL PHENOMENON

Tbilisi Open Air Festival 2024 is not just a musical event but a cultural phenomenon that reflects and engages with contemporary social and political issues. The inclusion of artists like M.I.A. emphasizes the festival's role as a platform for political expression and activism. M.I.A.'s music, which addresses themes of immigration and global inequality, resonates with ongoing debates about these issues worldwide.

Furthermore, the festival's support for local Georgian artists like MokuMoku, Afternoon Version and Mechanical Rainbow highlights the importance of fostering national talent and cultural identity in an increasingly globalized world. Their performances celebrate Georgian creativity and provide a platform for local voices on an international stage.

In addition, the diverse lineup underscores the festival's commitment to inclusivity and diversity, showcasing a wide range of musical genres and cultural backgrounds. This diversity not only enriches the festival experience but also promotes cross-cultural understanding and appreciation.



M.I.A. at Tbilisi Open Air 2024 / Photo by the author



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