



## FOCUS

ON MERAB KOPALEISHVILI

"The more Georgians exhibit abroad, the more we introduce our culture to the world, and that's invaluable—especially since we have so much to share" PAGE 10

Photo by Giorgi Shengelia

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## "I'm Not a Dangerous Person"- A British Citizen Recounts Arrest and Detention in Georgia

INTERVIEW BY VAZHA TAVBERIDZE

**D**aniel Travis, a 28-year-old British citizen, found himself unexpectedly at the center of Georgia's political unrest. Detained during mass protests in Tbilisi, Travis was accused of being a "foreign instructor" orchestrating riots—a claim he categorically denies. Speaking to Radio Free Europe/RL's Georgian Service after his release, Travis recounts his ordeal, highlighting the allegations he faced, the treatment he endured, and the toll it has taken on his life.

"The allegation that I was an army instructor is simply ridiculous," Travis begins. "I have never worked in the army and have no intention or interest in working with the army or any special forces. I'm a bar manager in London."

Travis explains that he was on his way home after a night out with friends when he was swept up in the chaos of the protests. "I was not organizing the protests either. I was simply walking home from a bar I was drinking in with friends."

Continued on page 5



Georgian riot police, December 3. Photo by Erekle Poladishvili/GT

GALT & TAGGART									
CREATING OPPORTUNITIES									
Prepared for Georgia Today Business by									
As of 10-Dec-2024									
Markets					STOCKS				
BONDS	Price	w/w	m/m		Price	w/w	m/m		
GEORGIA 04/26	94.32 (YTM 7.20%)	-0.1%	+0.1%	Bank of Georgia (BGSD LN)	GBP 40.05	+7.8%	-2.0%		
GBAIL 04/28	98.17 (YTM 7.92%)	-0.3%	-0.9%	Georgia Capital (CCGO LN)	GBP 10.00	+3.5%	-1.0%		
GBGG 9/12 PERP	98.10 (YTM 5.58%)	-0.2%	+0.2%	TBC Bank Group (TBGG LN)	GBP 27.05	+6.1%	-4.2%		
SILNET 01/27	100.51 (YTM 8.10%)	-0.0%	-0.0%						
TBC 8.894 PERP	95.64 (YTM 11.67%)	-0.3%	-0.2%						
TBC 10 1/4 PERP	99.25 (YTM 10.61%)	-0.2%	+0.7%	Crude Oil, Brent (US\$/bbl)	77.46	-4.3%	+8.2%		
				Gold Spot (US\$/OZ)	2 648.54	+0.2%	+2.7%		
INDICES					CURRENCIES				
	Price	w/w	m/m		Price	w/w	m/m		
SP 500	5 859.85	+2.9%	+4.2%	USD / GEL	2,7230	-0.9%	+1.0%		
FTSE 250	20 817.19	-0.2%	-0.4%	EUR / GEL	2,9705	-1.5%	-0.5%		
DOW JONES 30	43 065.22	+2.6%	+4.0%	GBP / GEL	3,5548	-1.0%	+0.5%		
Russell 2000	2 248.64	+2.5%	+3.0%	EUR / USD	1,0909	-0.6%	-1.5%		
FTSE 100	8 292.66	-0.1%	+0.2%	GBP / USD	1,3059	-0.2%	-0.5%		



Police guard construction workers of Rustaveli Christmas tree, 2024

## "City Full of Victories" Chosen by City Hall as This Year's Christmas Message



BY TEAM GT

Tbilisi City Hall have for the past two weeks sought to maintain tradition by decorating Freedom Square and Rustaveli Avenue with lights. The Freedom Square tree was completed on Monday with the annually-changing message. Last year, it was "City Full of Peace" - judged as insensitive considering the Ukraine-Russia conflict. This year,

City Hall chose to go with the decidedly ambiguous "City Full of Victories." In front of parliament, patrol police stood guard on Sunday as the metal frame for the green tree was constructed, but only the top half could have its "foliage" added before nightfall and the 11th night of rallying kicked off. Once the patrol police moved away, protesters were quick to decorate the tree with the Georgian, EU, Ukraine and US flags, protest messages, and photos of those who have fallen victim to police brutality over the past week.



Photo by: zjavakhadze

# Georgian PM Announces Law to Ban Face-covering at Rallies

BY TEAM GT

On Sunday, Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze revealed that the government plans to introduce a law prohibiting participants at rallies and counter-rallies from covering their faces. This move comes in response to the ongoing protests against the government's decision to delay EU accession talks until 2028. Kobakhidze pointed out that similar laws are already in place in many European Union countries. He emphasized the importance of the law, stating it would help reduce violence during public gatherings. He also confirmed that the government aims to finalize the technical preparations and pass the law by the end of next week, with full enforcement expected by the end of December.

The Prime Minister highlighted the challenges faced by law enforcement officers during the protests, noting that they endured both physical and psychological violence. He condemned the derogatory labels used against the officers, such as "blackshirts" and "Russian OMON [special police units]," describing these as "disgraceful" and an example of double standards.



Photo by Ezz Gaber

Kobakhidze also expressed his gratitude to the police, calling them the true "Europeans" of the protests and acknowledging their heroism. He shared that over ten officers had to undergo surgery due to injuries sustained during the rallies, and several others were injured as well, yet the violence faced by law enforcement had not been condemned.

## Ukraine Latest: Russia Continues to Suffer Record Losses in December, Zelensky Says

COMPILED BY ANA DUMBADZE

Russian forces have incurred record-high casualties in manpower during hostilities in both November and December, President Volodymyr Zelensky said on December 11, after hearing a report from Commander-in-Chief Oleksandr Syrskyi. Moscow's troops are advancing at a rapid pace in Ukraine's east, pushing back outgunned and outnumbered Ukrainian defenders at the cost of staggering losses. "As in November, the Russian military is using a record number of its men in December in battles and assaults," Zelensky said on Telegram. "These months — November and December — saw record Russian losses," the president noted, adding that the Pokrovsk and Kurakhove sectors in Donetsk Oblast remain the active parts of the front.

Ukraine's Defense Ministry said on December 1 that Russian losses throughout November had amounted to 45,720 soldiers wounded, killed, or captured, as well as over \$3 billion worth of equipment. Despite the losses, Russia is still advancing toward key Donetsk Oblast towns like Pokrovsk, and chipping away at the Ukrainian positions in the Russian border region of Kursk.

In his post, Zelensky thanked Ukrainian forces for "tangible hits on Russian targets," namely "military facilities on Russian territory" and "energy and fuel facilities."

The General Staff of Ukraine's Armed Forces reported a successful strike against a Druzhba oil pipeline loading station near the Russian city of Bryansk, resulting in a large-scale fire.

Ukraine's former Prosecutor General said that nine out of 10 Ukrainian prisoners of war are being subjected to physical and moral torture. While Ukraine has managed to bring back home some of the captives, including Azovstal defenders, through prisoner exchanges, many more remain in Russian captivity.

Marchenko's comments come amid growing concern that US President-elect

Donald Trump might withdraw Washington's crucial support for Kyiv after he takes office in January. "I believe that we have enough funds, enough weapons, missiles, and artillery shells to resist at least during the first half of 2025," Marchenko said. Ukraine is allocating necessary funds from its budget to purchase equipment, and continues to receive US arms, the minister explained.

"This means that at least during the first half of the year and beyond, we will be well-equipped to resist this aggression," he added. Marchenko expressed his belief that full NATO membership remains the best possible guarantee to deter Russian aggression, with a "modern and strong Ukrainian military" as the only alternative.

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### RUSSIAN PROXIES SENTENCE 9 AZOVSTAL DEFENDERS TO 24 YEARS, LIFE IN PRISON

Russian occupation authorities in Donetsk jailed nine Ukrainian soldiers captured after defending Mariupol to between 24 years and a life sentence, the city's exiled authorities reported on December 11.

Russia often uses trumped-up charges to jail captured Ukrainian soldiers, activists, journalists, and regular civilians for lengthy terms.

"Moscow's proxies in Donetsk have sentenced soldiers of the 36th Marine Brigade who fell into Russian hands after a gruesome siege of Mariupol and its Azovstal steel plant in the spring of 2022," the exiled Mariupol City Council said on Telegram.

Andrii Shestak, Nazarii Moroz, Vladyslav Yavorskyi, Vadym Shulha, Serhii Yampolskyi, Maksym Kolbasin, Dmytro Shalara, Volodymyr Penzin, and Kostiantyn Romanuk will serve their sentences in a high-security prison, the statement notes.

The occupation authorities accused the soldiers of shelling the village of Staryi Krym, near Mariupol, in March 2022.

Ukraine's former Prosecutor General said that nine out of 10 Ukrainian prisoners of war are being subjected to physical and moral torture. While Ukraine has managed to bring back home some of the captives, including Azovstal defenders, through prisoner exchanges, many more remain in Russian captivity.

### RUSSIA MAY LAUNCH NEW ORESHNIK MISSILE AGAINST

### UKRAINE IN 'COMING DAYS,' US INTELLIGENCE SAYS

Russia may launch its new Oreshnik intermediate-range ballistic missile (IRBM) against Ukraine for the second time "in the coming days," the Associated Press (AP) reported on December 11, citing an unnamed US official.

Russia launched its new intermediate-range ballistic missile at Dnipro in Ukraine on November 21. Russian President Vladimir Putin claimed the strike was in response to Ukraine's use of American and British weapons to target deeper within Russia.

Washington still sees the experimental Oreshnik missile more as "an attempt at intimidation than a game-changer on the battlefield in Ukraine," a US official told reporters on condition of anonymity, referring to a US intelligence assessment.

Russia has only "a handful" of the Oreshnik missiles, and they carry a smaller warhead than other missiles that Russia has regularly launched at Ukraine, AP reported, citing an official.

In early December, the Moscow Times reported, citing four Russian official sources, that the media blitz following the strike on Dnipro was a carefully staged stunt designed to scare off the West.

### RUSSIAN MISSILE ATTACK KILLS 9 IN ZAPORIZHZHIA

A Russian missile attack has killed at least nine people and injured another 22 - including a child - in Ukraine's southern city of Zaporizhzhia, local officials say. As many as five people may still be trapped under rubble after Tuesday's strike on a private clinic and residential buildings in the city center, police say.

A search and rescue operation is continuing. Zaporizhzhia regional head Ivan Fedorov says Russia fired a ballistic missile, most likely an Iskander. Russia's defense ministry has not commented.

Ukraine has repeatedly asked its Western allies to provide more advanced air defense systems to repel almost daily Russian missile and drone attacks.

Shortly after the Zaporizhzhia attack, President Volodymyr Zelensky reiterated that plea.

"We don't have enough systems to protect our country from Russian missiles. But our partners have these systems. Again and again, we repeat that air defense systems should save lives, not gather dust in warehouses," he said.

# Macron and Ivanishvili Hold Key Call on Georgia's Political Crisis and European Values

BY TEAM GT

**O**n December 11, a significant phone call was held between Bidzina Ivanishvili, the Honorary Chairman of the Georgian Dream party, and French President Emmanuel Macron. The conversation, which lasted about an hour, was initiated by Macron, who expressed serious concern over the recent situation in Georgia, especially the violent crackdown on protests and the treatment of demonstrators and journalists. Macron condemned the actions of the Georgian police, calling out the violence and the threats against civil society. According to an official statement from the French presidency, Macron "condemned the threats against representatives of civil society, as well as the violence perpetrated by law enforcement forces against peaceful demonstrators and journalists," and called for the release of those detained "for the respect of freedom of expression and assembly."

Ivanishvili responded by explaining that Georgia is a "legal state" where criminals are held accountable in accordance with the law. He also assured Macron that most of the people arrested were being held under administrative deten-



tion and would soon be released. For those arrested on criminal charges, Ivanishvili emphasized that the legal process would be followed carefully and based on a high standard of evidence. He defended the actions of the Georgian police, stating that they had acted with "a higher standard than European standards" in dealing with the large-scale violence from the protests. Ivanishvili also mentioned that an investigation into individual cases of police misconduct was already underway.

Macron's main concern during the call was the potential shift in Georgia's alignment with European values. He expressed worry that the ongoing situation in the country could affect its relationship with the European Union, stressing that Georgia's actions would have a direct impact on its future ties with Europe. Macron also called for an "inclusive dialogue" that would involve all political groups and civil society representatives in Georgia, underlining the importance of respecting the European aspirations of the

Georgian people. He made it clear that he wanted to contribute to de-escalating the situation, and welcomed any joint efforts to address the crisis.

Ivanishvili thanked Macron for his willingness to engage and expressed his hope for continued dialogue between the two nations. Both sides agreed to stay in touch over the coming days to assess the progress being made in easing tensions.

This phone call came after Georgian President Salome Zurbishvili's visit to

France, where she met with Macron and US President-elect Donald Trump. During her visit, Zurbishvili raised concerns about election integrity and the crackdown on protests in Georgia, describing the elections as "stolen" and the repression as "extremely alarming." She also highlighted the importance of international support for the Georgian people, particularly from the United States.

While the Georgian Dream's press release focused mainly on Ivanishvili's responses to Macron's concerns, the French side provided more detailed context, with Macron's comments condemning the police violence and calling for the release of detainees. Macron's stance emphasized the need for Georgia to respect European democratic principles and to protect the basic rights of its citizens, including the freedom to protest.

In the end, the phone call between Ivanishvili and Macron underscored the growing international concerns about Georgia's political trajectory and how the government is handling protests and civil rights. Both sides agreed on the importance of dialogue and de-escalation, with Macron remaining firm on his call for respect for human rights and European values. The outcome of this conversation may well influence Georgia's future relationship with the European Union and its overall standing on the international stage.

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# Opposition Leader Zurab Japaridze Vows Continued Protests ahead of December 14 Presidential "Elections"



Zurab Japaridze

BY TEAM GT

**O**n December 14, they are going to hold some kind of election in the parliament building, the legitimacy of which no one recognizes—and we are going to continue our protest, -said Zurab Girchi Japaridze, one of the leaders of the Coalition for

Change party, during a press conference on Wednesday.

Japaridze outlined the strategic plan of the opposition parties, emphasizing the goal of preventing international recognition of the upcoming elections. He highlighted the recent comments by EU Ambassador Paweł Herczynski, following his meeting with Georgian Dream's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Maka Bochorishvili. Japaridze noted that Herczynski's meeting "presented a problem."

"We have several strategic directions, and by 'we', I mean the four political groups that received the legitimacy of the people and actually won the elections. We continue to work on preventing the recognition of the Russian regime by political players inside the country. As of this moment, no one is going to enter this parliament," Japaridze stated.

The opposition leader also stressed the ongoing non-recognition of the regime by the Georgian population. He pointed

to the widespread protests, which have spread beyond the capital to major cities across Georgia. "I have been standing in Rustaveli since 1988, and I don't remember so many people coming out together in the city. The non-recognition by the population continues," he said.

Japaridze also condemned the violence against protesters, highlighting the detainment and abuse of over 500 individuals, including 90 media representatives who were physically assaulted by police.

Despite the ongoing repression, Japaridze noted that protests continue unabated. "Every evening, tens of thousands of people come out in Tbilisi alone, and there are protests every day in the capital and other cities as well," he said.

The opposition is also focused on providing legal support for those arrested and injured during the protests. "Within our resources, we provide legal assistance to these people. However, our resources are limited. I would like to thank several funds that are already up and running, helping people to pay for treatment and attorneys' fees," he said. He also commended those offering financial support for individuals who leave the public sector in protest or face termination due to their opposition stance.

Japaridze further discussed the international aspect of the opposition's strategy, noting that no new countries had recognized the Georgian government, aside from Nicaragua, Venezuela, Rus-

sia, and Iran. He criticized the EU ambassador's meeting with Foreign Minister Maka Bochorishvili, calling it problematic. "The EU ambassador must express the common position of the EU member states, which is that no one, except Hungary, recognizes the legitimacy of this government," he explained. "Therefore, it is not clear to us why it was decided to organize this meeting and then post photos, which Georgian Dream now uses for propaganda to convince a part of its voters that 'everything is fine'."

Japaridze concluded Wednesday's press conference by reaffirming the opposition's commitment to continuing the protest.

"The protest will continue. The next important date is December 14, when they are going to hold some kind of election in the parliament building, the legitimacy of which no one recognizes, just as they do not recognize the legitimacy of the parliament that is currently assembled there. We are going to continue the protest. The people who come out on Rustaveli are going to continue their protest," he stated.

The presidential elections are scheduled to begin at 9 am on December 14 in the parliament building. In the first round, the candidate who receives at least two-thirds of the votes from the entire electoral college will be considered elected. Georgian Dream has nominated ex-footballer Mikheil Kavelashvili as their presidential candidate.



Photo: Civil Georgia.

## Georgia's State Security Service on Alleged Coup Plot

BY MARIAM RAZMADZE

**T**he Georgian State Security Service (SSS) on Tuesday released a statement, claiming there are plans to encourage civil unrest and overthrow the government through violent means. The SSS alleges that local figures are cooperating with foreign intelligence services to promote violence and escalate tensions during protests in Tbilisi.

"As protest momentum drops, certain

groups seek to artificially increase unrest to achieve their goal of violently overthrowing the government," the statement reads. The agency claims that attacks on law enforcement and journalists are part of this alleged plan.

The statement further warned of a potential crisis surrounding the presidential election, claiming, "Organizers aim to avert the election of Georgia's sixth president, for the sake of a governance crisis."

The SSS urged citizens to remain attentive, report suspicious activities, and avoid becoming "participants or victims of the criminal plan."

## Mtavari Arkhi's Giorgi Gabunia Accuses Zaza Okuashvili of Serving Ivanishvili's Interests

BY MARIAM RAZMADZE

**G**iorgi Gabunia, the General Director of Mtavari Arkhi, has accused the channel's founder, Zaza Okuashvili, of attempting to further Bidzina Ivanishvili's interests through his decisions, specifically accusing him of trying to shut down the TV station.

"Okuashvili is essentially joining the mass violence initiated by 'Georgian Dream,' targeting journalists with the means at his disposal," Gabunia stated.

This accusation comes amid escalating political tensions in Georgia, where protests against the government have been met with violent repression, detentions, and attacks on journalists.

"We will continue to fight and stay on air for our viewers and the Georgian people. Not even Putin's friend, Bidzina, can stop us," Gabunia declared.



Photo: Publika.

# "I'm Not a Dangerous Person"- A British Citizen Recounts Arrest and Detention in Georgia

Continued from page 1

His account of the arrest paints a grim picture of police impunity. "They ripped my jacket and also beat me before I went to jail. I was beaten by the 'special police with masks,' the 'Robocops,'" he says.

In court, Travis says, no evidence was presented to substantiate the accusations against him. "They just imprisoned me for being a violator at the protest. Only one police officer showed up to court to give evidence, and they did not have any evidence at all that I was doing anything illegal at the protest, but still, they imprisoned me for 10 days."

Travis details the injuries he sustained during his arrest, including severe bruising on his hip. "I had a lot of bruising on my left hip from when they dragged me away. The doctors in the jail took photos. I showed the judge,



They ripped my jacket and beat me before I was put in jail

but he did not care," he says.

The stress of the situation has been immense, not just for Travis but also for his loved ones. "I've been working in England since I was 14 years old. I have always been a law-abiding citizen and have never been in this kind of trouble

before. I have a Georgian girlfriend, and she is very stressed by the whole situation."

After 12 days in detention, Travis was released, only to face deportation. "I have made so many friends here and memories. I have a one-year visa. I wanted to stay for the year and then travel somewhere else," he says, expressing disappointment at how his time in Georgia has come to such an abrupt and bitter end.

Adding to his frustration is an incident with his landlady, who evicted him during his legal ordeal. "She illegally entered without my permission. My dog had taken all the trash out of the bin and made a mess, so she changed the lock on me and kicked the dog onto the streets. Now I cannot find my dog because of her," he said.

"I'm not a dangerous person at all,"



Daniel Travis. Source: FB

Travis insists. "I live in peace. I don't even attend protests in England, never mind in a different country where I don't understand the language."

As Travis waits to see whether the Brit-

ish Government will intervene on his behalf, his story serves as yet another reminder of the ruthless U-turn the Georgian government has taken against Westerners in the country.



Photo: The Parliament of Georgia.

## Ombudsman Demands Justice for Protesters and Journalists

BY MARIAM RAZMADZE

**L**evan Ioseliani, the Georgian Public Defender, made an announcement on Human Rights Day, December 10, addressing growing concerns about recent protests on Rustaveli Avenue and urging the Ministry of Internal

Affairs to "take targeted measures against those who violate the law." He emphasized the right of citizens to protest and journalists to work safely.

Ioseliani highlighted his meeting with detained demonstrators, stating that 225 detained protesters reported poor treatment, while 157 had physical injuries.

"Society has seen the evidence of their suffering, and those responsible must be held accountable," he noted, calling

on the Special Investigation Service to act as soon as possible.

He also addressed attacks on journalists, declaring their role vital in defending human rights. "The government is responsible for ensuring a safe working environment for media workers," Ioseliani said.

"Unidentified, masked aggressors must be investigated and brought to justice," he concluded, addressing the violence at rallies.

## US Embassy: We Condemn the Violence of "Dream" Against the Media and Citizens of Georgia



BY TEAM GT

**U**S Ambassador to Georgia Robin Dunnigan met with Georgian journalists who are "working bravely to inform the public".

As the embassy writes in a statement shared on social media, the media is the cornerstone of democracy. The embassy condemns the "violence against the media and citizens of Georgia" carried out by Georgian Dream in recent days.

"Media is the cornerstone of democracy. Ambassador Dunnigan visited journalists who work bravely to inform

the public and report truths that might otherwise remain hidden. We condemn the violence perpetrated by Georgian Dream on the media and citizens of Georgia in recent days. Media representatives should have the opportunity to carry out their important work without fear of violence and repression," the statement said.



## IT and Tech Reps March from Republic Square to Parliament in Protest

BY TEAM GT

**R**epresentatives of the IT and technological sphere held a protest march from the Republic Square to the Parliament building on Thursday afternoon.

Demonstrators held flags of Georgia and the European Union, as well as banners of various content.

They also chanted: "Georgia", "Long live Georgia".

They say violent actions by law enforcers against rally participants is categorically unacceptable.

Traffic on Rustaveli Avenue was partially blocked.



Photo: National Bank of Georgia.

## Georgian, South Korean Central Banks Discuss Partnership

BY MARIAM RAZMADZE

The National Bank of Georgia announced that its Vice Governor, Ekaterine Galdava, met with Lee Jongyeol, Deputy Governor of the Bank of Korea, to discuss potential future collaborative projects.

The meeting touched upon Georgia's payment systems and the role of the central bank in financial stability as well as the country's macroeconomic policies.

In the scope of NBG's visit to South Korea, the delegation also held discussions with the Bank of Korea's Department of International Relations concerning monetary policy, financial market development, and improvements in payment systems.

## Parliament Unanimously Approves 2025 State Budget



Photo: UNDP.

BY MARIAM RAZMADZE

The Georgian Parliament has unanimously passed the 2025 state budget, with the most important macroeconomic measurements stated below:

- Real GDP growth: 6.0% for 2025, 5.2% forecast in the medium term.
- GDP deflator: 3% for 2025 and subsequent years.

quent years.

- Average inflation: 1.0% for 2024, within a 3% target in the medium term.

The budget allocations reached GEL 895.2 million, and include:

- Health and Social Protection: 8.82 billion GEL (GEL 990.9 million increase).
- Education and Youth: 3.08 billion GEL (GEL 577 million increase).
- Defense: 1.73 billion GEL (GEL 350 million increase).
- Internal Affairs: 1.39 billion GEL (GEL 135 million increase).

## Geostat: FDI in Georgia Drops 55.2% in Q3 24

BY MARIAM RAZMADZE

The National Statistics Office (Geostat) reports that foreign direct investment (FDI) declined by 55.2% in Georgia during the third quarter of 2024 due to reduced equity, reinvestment, and debt.

- Key data points:
- Equity: \$131.2M (66.4% of total FDI).
  - Reinvestment: \$358.4M (decreased by 13.6% year-on-year).
- Top investing countries:
1. Netherlands: \$60.2M (30.4%).
  2. Malta: \$58.3M (29.5%).
  3. UK: \$55.0M (27.8%).

Combined share: 87.7%.

Primary sectors:

4. Manufacturing: \$63.6M (32.2%).
  5. Energy: \$43.0M (21.8%).
  6. Trade: \$32.1M (16.2%).
- Combined share: 70.2%.

Despite this decline, manufacturing remains the top choice for FDI.



Photo: Global Times.

## Georgian PM Credits Economic Growth to "Clear Policy" and "Effective Management"



Irakli Kobakhidze. Source: gov.ge

BY TEAM GT

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze on Sunday praised the government's "clear economic policy" and "strong management" after

Fitch Ratings affirmed the country's BB sovereign credit rating with a stable outlook. He linked the nation's €40 billion (\$14.2 billion) economic growth to these factors, emphasizing that the country is well-positioned for continued growth.

Fitch Ratings forecasts Georgia's economy will expand by 8.7% this year, with a slight slowdown to 5.3% in 2025 and 5% in 2026. Kobakhidze expressed confidence that the country's economic momentum would persist, stressing the importance of maintaining a strong credit rating for future development.

He assured the public that the government's economic goals, including an additional €40 billion growth over the next four years, would be met. The Prime Minister also addressed concerns about the Lari's recent devaluation, noting the currency's stability and a 10% growth rate

over the past ten months.

Kobakhidze promised that the economy would continue to grow at a fast pace, with a stable exchange rate and favorable conditions for businesses.

In response to the ongoing protests against the government's decision to delay EU accession talks, Kobakhidze rejected opposition claims, referring to the failed attempts to organize a "Maidan-style" protest. He stated that the opposition's efforts to harm the economy had been unsuccessful, and emphasized that the business community was opposed to such disruptions.

## When Theater Becomes an Unaffordable Luxury

BLOG BY NUGZAR B. RUHADZE

Drama, opera, ballet, jazz, pop and symphony music – none of these performing pleasures have desisted in Sakartvelo from being nationally accepted and venerated forms of entertainment. Georgians love to both perform and to enjoy others performing. I remember as a kid I had a season ticket for our famous opera-house, whose pits, stalls and balconies witnessed the first opera season opening as early as 1851. History has it that the tickets were tolerably accessible, especially in soviet times. But things have dramatically changed since. Blame it on inflation if you wish, or the universal jump in prices on everything in general, but theater ticket prices have gone from nadir to zenith in Georgia, hurting the fervid theater-goers in serious measure.

In Tbilisi, experiencing wonder and satisfying your curiosity now comes at a cost nearly identical to off-Broadway ticket prices. Yet, amazingly, the houses are sold out months in advance. Does this mean that our average theater buff is rich enough to afford the runaway prices? The answer is a firm no! Then, how to explain the discrepancy? Easy! The desire to be there is so powerful that no poverty can keep us from attending what we desire to attend. No way to miss the chance even if one is compelled to borrow cash from a neighbor to purchase the cherished patronship.

To our greatest chagrin, the overly high ticket prices can harm theater and opera in several ways. In first place, the drastically abridged accessibility may kill the pleasure so much that a large portion of the population, particularly students, young people, and lower-income individuals, might get thrown off the boat forever; more correctly, until they get wealthier, restricting who gets to see and learn from and grow from the show.

Secondly, we might end up seeing reduced audience engagement. Theater and opera prosper thanks to a wide range of spectators, including those who attend



In Tbilisi, experiencing wonder and satisfying your curiosity now comes at a cost nearly identical to off-Broadway ticket prices. Source: independent

recurrently, as well as those who come rather sporadically. High ticket prices can discourage recurrent presence and lessen overall involvement in the arts as such, something which is indispensable for longstanding attendance.

Another disadvantage that might come from increased ticket prices is the risk of elitism. When ticket prices become unaffordable, art forms like theater and opera risk being seen as exclusive or elitist, rather than as accessible social and educational experiences. This can alienate potential patrons who might otherwise have become dedicated supporters or new audience members.

The "motionless novelty" of cinema is part of the deal too. If only a minor bunch of people is able to afford tickets, there may appear fewer demands for groundbreaking or investigational productions that expand artistic borders. High prices may well create a culture of pecuniary conservatism, where productions are reluctant to take imaginative ventures.

The burden of high ticket prices on future generations seems inevitable, likely limiting young people's exposure to the arts. If theater and opera remain out of reach due to unaffordable costs,

young audiences may not develop a lasting appreciation for these art forms. This lack of familiarity could hinder their personal development and, over time, negatively impact their overall taste in the arts.

Last but not least, diminished turnout may materialize as a result of those skyrocketing prices on theater and opera tickets. It won't surprise you that if prices go up, fewer people will be willing or able to attend, meaning: empty seats! This not only has a deleterious effect on tickets sales, but can also bring about the perception that art is dying out or becoming extraneous, rendering it even more difficult to attract new audiences in the future.

While increased prices provide for a good chance to be financially better off, they can eventually constitute a challenge in terms of capability of theater and opera venues to remain culturally relevant and socially practicable. The simplest explanation for all of this may be that we have blindly allowed ourselves to become victims of consumerism. However, we find ourselves helpless in this situation, as this mindset has become so ingrained in society that it's now completely commonplace.

# Ministry of Justice Raises Budget for International Court Lawyers



Photo: Netgazeti

BY MARIAM RAZMADZE

**T**he National Agency for State Procurement announced that the Ministry of Justice has recently increased its budget to GEL 66 million for hiring international court lawyers.

The increase in legal costs was preceded by the International Chamber of Commerce Arbitration Tribunal's requirement for Georgia to compensate ENKA Renewables with \$383 million for the Namakhvani project.

This dispute was legally represented by White & Case, which has been paid GEL 25 million to date.

The country has overall spent GEL 230 million on arbitration, and the highest

costs are as follows:

- White & Case: GEL 171 million
- AARPI: GEL 31 million
- Dechert: GEL 25 million

Currently, the government has compensation cases amounting to \$1.7 billion, including:

- Zaza Okuashvili vs. Georgia: \$328.2 million
- TELCELL companies: \$154 million
- ENKA Renewables: \$383.2 million



Cigarettes. Source: americaeconomia

# Georgian Dream to Increase Excise Tax on Tobacco

BY TEAM GT

**M**amuka Mdinardze, the Executive Secretary of the ruling Georgian Dream party, announced on Monday that the

party plans to raise the excise tax on tobacco and heated tobacco products.

Mdinardze stated that the new tax rates would be €0.15 (\$0.053) for heated tobacco products and €0.20 (\$0.071) for traditional tobacco products.

He added that the amendments would be incorporated into the country's tax code.

# Shop Eco-Consciously This Holiday to Prevent Unwanted Waste

BY SHELBI R. ANKIEWICZ

**M**ore often than not, people buy products during the holiday season just for the fact of giving a gift. What usually happens is these gifts are thrown away, put on a shelf, or in lucky cases, re-gifted to someone else.

Every year, Christmas and New Year sees some of the highest percentages of waste than any other time throughout the year. This is the case in several countries, and is due to things such as throw-away wrapping paper, unwanted gifts, returned clothing, food scraps, and more. Georgia is no exception with its landfill waste consistently rising since 2015, with the exception of 2020.

According to Geostat, Georgia's website for everything data-related, per unit of 1000 tons, there were 774.7 tons of municipal waste produced in 2015. This is compared to 994.6 in 2019, and 1,045.1 in 2022. Broken down into kilograms per capita, this is 207.8 kg in 2015, 267.6 in 2019, and 279.4 in 2022. Several measures can be taken year-round to drastically lower the amount of waste that enters the local landfills, and starting small with a first step such as eco-conscious gift giving can make a significant impact.

Toma Klepinina has owned Introvert Coffee Bar for a little over a year. When she took ownership of the cafe, she knew

she wanted to make it into a space that was more than just a place to get coffee. She decided to sell small items, all locally or individually sourced, and host frequent events such as swaps, workshops, and festivals, having participated in similar events as a ceramics artist.

The swaps are the coffee bar's most frequent event, happening once a month. They are a place where people can exchange good-condition clothes, accessories, art supplies, and books. If there are any items left over, they are sent to the 'Choose to Help' Foundation, which provides items to Ukrainian refugees in Tbilisi. Then, if there are excess items of less or poorer quality, they are sent to people who can recycle them, or to the landfill.

According to Klepinina, the workshops are held regularly, changing between various topics, such as collage or candle making. On December 7 and 8, the coffee bar had a Winter Fair Market for guests to participate in various events and workshops, including screen printing, crochet ornament making, plate painting, and collage making, all of which serve as fantastic gifts for the holiday season. Klepinina said she has always had a love of things that are homemade because of their durability and uniqueness.

"Not always, but often, I find that handmade things have a higher quality. Especially if it's knitwear or something similar, because machine-produced tends to stop looking good the more you wear



Eco-friendly products for this holiday season. Image from Green Urban Living.

it," Klepinina tells GEORGIA TODAY. "Also in the case of less functional items that are more decorative - I enjoy them because they have more personality."

There are numerous ways to be more eco-friendly about shopping this holiday season to prevent unwanted waste in landfills. Here are some ideas:

1. Create something homemade. Whether it's from a workshop or a DIY project created at home, homemade items reduce spending costs, the purchase of random items bought moderately from larger stores, and are usually more heartfelt than a shirt or other mass-produced item.

2. Buy something durable. When buying items, pay attention to their quality. More often than not, if a pair of shoes or jeans costs less than 20 lari, they will not last long and the fabric will quickly be sent to the landfills. When buying a product made to good quality, it can be expected to last several years, making it a good investment.

3. Gift an experience. Rather than giving something physical, gift someone an experience - the chance to go to the theater or cinema, a restaurant date night, a sporting event, a festival, a conference, or something else that might interest them. This automatically eliminates

physical waste and is a good way to create memories.

4. Buy local. Buying from local craftspersons reduces the packaging and transportation costs of sending something from several countries away. It also gives back to the community, rather than giving funds to larger corporations that do not struggle with profits.

5. Alternative wrapping methods. To reduce paper waste, gift items in the bag or package they were bought in. If the labeling or brand shows, it can easily be colored with pens or markers, or covered with small decorations such as bows. Alternatively, use a paper-based wrapping so it can easily be reused. Wrapping paper cannot usually be recycled because it has additional products mixed into the paper fibers. Therefore, doing anything to prevent its use is a big help. Save and reuse wrapping paper for next year.

6. Know what people want. This sounds like a no-brainer, but sometimes it's difficult to think of what to buy people during the holiday season. Seek answers directly from the person or their friends or family. This will give a clear idea of what to buy, so additional or unnecessary costs don't get put into the mix.

These are a few ways to start being more sustainable during the holiday season. Klepinina recognizes that due to transportation, proximity, and costs, not everyone has the means to shop locally or to choose eco-friendly, but every little helps, so if the means are available, do take them.

# Staying Sane in the “Worst of Times...” \*



BLOG BY TONY HANMER

Does it feel like a fragment of that famous longer quote which opens the book, citizens and guests of Georgia? Day after day for a couple of weeks now, all-night protests in the center of Tbilisi, elsewhere, and in other towns and cities too. Violent pushback, enraged response, more determination. Confusion, beatings, trauma. Technology being used in new ways. Tactics changing on both (or all) sides. All of it live-streamed into our devices and TVs. Hardly touched by world media, eclipsed by Middle East and Ukraine horrors; languishing next to Sudan, Myanmar and other mostly ignored tragedies. But here, at ground zero, it's almost the only news item at all. Different every day, evolving, influenced by what worked or didn't previously.

When my wife started getting really stressed at the nine simultaneous screens showing different locations of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, I urged her to turn away, get news only from text only once a day, and leave it at that. My Georgian friends are also now complaining of PTSD-like symptoms from just having their TVs on so much.

So... ignore the news? When some of you, dear readers, are even participating in protest events, or witnessing them in person, on-site? No, I'm not saying that. What's the answer? Foreigners, too, are getting arrested for their simple presence. Of course, my wife and I are praying about the situation; as believers in God, we could hardly do otherwise.

I haven't gone downtown at all these weeks, but I might, once, with careful preparation. I want to be a witness. But I'll need to detox afterwards, I'm sure, whatever happens.

Not even arrest or a beating are the worst things that can happen to someone

who's made Georgia his home for 25 years. If I had to choose getting locked into this country, or locked out of it... I would choose the former. It's home. Deportation, or denial of re-entry if I go anywhere and try to return, are my own worst-case scenarios.

Fine, so I stay, and try to make choices which will keep me informed and also not get me thrown out. And which will also help me not lose my mind from shock, fear, worry, anger, despair.

When I feel these things, I need to withdraw for a bit. For me this is easy: I walk out of the apartment to a nearby set of ponds, hemmed in by reeds and bulrushes. On a still day, the reflections can be spectacular. I have my camera, and new images abound. I fall into delight in the relative silence, and rediscover art. Restoration comes to my soul.

Without this, I fear I would indeed build up a surplus of the bad feelings mentioned above, and begin lashing out at my wife, friends, family. Really, there's enough trouble going on around us without adding to it as reactions to collective and individual trauma! All that would result would be a vicious cycle downwards into more chaos. I NEED to balance all the bad stuff with something to lift me up: prayer, reading my Bible, time with dear people, and the sheer glories with which even tiny patches of nature, anywhere even in a big city, dazzle my ready eyes and mind.

If we despair, they've won, whoever they are. This recharging, too, is part of the battle.

\*Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*

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



## The Stage Goes Dark: How Cultural Strikes Illuminate Georgia's Fight for Justice

BY IVAN NECHAEV

In December 2024, Georgia's cultural institutions joined the frontlines of a nationwide protest against the government's controversial actions: the freezing of Georgia's EU accession process and the announcement of disputed election results. Theaters, concert halls, and festivals became silent, not from a lack of purpose, but as an act of deliberate resistance. From the Baroque Festival to the Royal District Theater, the cancellations of performances, exhibitions, and tours resonated as powerful symbols of dissent, underscoring the unique role of culture in political advocacy.

### WHEN ART STOPS: THE POWER OF CULTURAL STRIKES

The cessation of cultural activities disrupts more than calendars and ticket sales—it unsettles the emotional and intellectual rhythms of society. Georgia's cultural strikes have proven that silence can speak volumes. By pausing their offerings, institutions have forced both the public and policymakers to confront the void left by their absence. This tactic leverages the unique societal role of culture: a provider of solace, a platform for reflection, and a space for dialogue.

The symbolic weight of a cultural strike stems from the essential nature of art itself. Unlike industrial strikes, which halt tangible production, cultural strikes withhold the intangible yet indispensable—the shared experience of beauty, creativity, and humanity. In a society as deeply tied to its artistic heritage as Georgia, this absence becomes a profound statement.

### HISTORICAL ROOTS OF RESISTANCE IN GEORGIAN CULTURE

Georgia has long used culture as a weapon of resistance. During the Soviet era, art was both a refuge and a rebellion against ideological conformity. Plays, poetry, and visual art carried encoded messages of national identity and dissent. Today's cultural strikes draw from this legacy, not only protesting immediate political grievances but also asserting broader principles of freedom and justice.

The current wave of cultural protests underscores a historic continuity: the artist as activist. This role is vividly embodied in the actions of Georgia's leading institutions and figures, who have stepped beyond their creative domains to demand systemic change.

### LET'S TALK TO OTHERS: A BEACON OF DEFIANCE

Actors and theater workers have rallied to demand the release of their colleague, Andro Chichinadze, and other detainees arrested during protests. The theater's actions exemplify the unity of purpose within Georgia's cultural sector.

In a striking public address, an actor called on the The Marjanishvili Theater director to support a collective shutdown of all Georgian theaters. "Let's talk to other theaters so that it is announced that until Andro Chichinadze and the other detainees are released, the theaters will be closed," he urged. This call to action has galvanized broader support, transforming individual grievances into a unified demand for justice.

### ART AND ABSENCE: THE SILENT PROTEST

The deliberate cancellation of cultural events transforms absence into presence. When institutions like Opera Theater,



Marjanishvili Theater. Source: [tbiliselocalguide](http://tbiliselocalguide)

Haraki, Conservatory, and Factory 42 go dark, they amplify the stakes of the moment. The silence of a closed theater or the emptiness of an unlit stage becomes a haunting reminder of what is at risk: the freedom to create, to critique, and to connect.

The decision to strike is not without sacrifice. For many cultural organizations, cancellations mean financial loss and uncertainty. Yet, this very vulnerability underscores the moral urgency driving their actions. By choosing solidarity over stability, Georgia's cultural institutions reaffirm their commitment to societal values above commercial interests.

### A NEW KIND OF AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT

Cultural strikes also redefine the relationship between art and its audience. In this moment, the public becomes not just consumers of culture, but participants in its creation and preservation. By aligning themselves with the broader protest movement, cultural institutions invite audiences to see them not merely as providers of entertainment, but as ethical leaders.

This shift in audience engagement is particularly potent in Georgia, where cultural life is deeply woven into the fabric of national identity. The closure

of theaters and festivals disrupts not just leisure but the collective conscience, prompting citizens to reflect on the essential role of culture in civic life.

### STRIKING FOR PEACE: ART AS RECONCILIATION

While cultural strikes are acts of defiance, they also embody the potential for reconciliation. Theaters and cultural workers are not merely protesting against something; they are advocating for a vision of society where dialogue and creativity thrive. By pausing their activities, they create a space for reflection and negotiation, offering a peaceful yet forceful way to demand accountability.

This duality—resistance through withdrawal—is uniquely suited to the arts. It reflects the transformative power of culture to challenge and inspire, to critique and heal. In Georgia's current crisis, cultural strikes are not just acts of protest; they are calls to imagine a more just and equitable future.

### THE STAKES OF CULTURAL SILENCE

The ongoing cultural strikes in Georgia highlight the profound impact of artistic absence. As theaters close their doors and stages go dark, they transform voids into spaces of resistance. This strategy draws attention not only to the immediate political crisis but also to the broader question of what society loses when art is silenced.

In a country where culture has always been a cornerstone of identity and resilience, these strikes are more than acts of defiance—they are declarations of hope. They remind us that art is not just a reflection of society, but a catalyst for change. As Georgia's cultural institutions continue their strike, they reaffirm the enduring power of creativity to challenge oppression and envision a brighter future.



# New Pyrotechnics Law in Georgia Set to Take Effect February 1

BY TEAM GT

Starting February 1, new regulations in Georgia will restrict the import, use, and sale of pyrotechnics, following their use in protests against the government's suspension of EU accession talks. Demonstrators will be banned from possessing fireworks and other pyrotechnic items during rallies.

The regulations will require permits for the import, export, production, and sale of pyrotechnic products, which will be issued by the State Reserves and Civil Security Services Agency. Businesses operating in this sector will have until March 1, 2025, to comply with the new rules.

A license will cost €200 (\$73.13), with higher fees for expedited services. Violations will result in fines, with repeat offenders facing fines of up to €6,000 (\$2,193.78) and possible confiscation of



Fireworks used during the Tbilisi protests. Photo by Erekle Poladishvili/GT

pyrotechnic items. Unauthorized imports or sales can lead to fines of €5,000 (\$1,828.15).

Additional penalties include fines for

selling to unauthorized individuals, with harsher fines for repeat offenses. Unauthorized possession or use of pyrotechnics will result in fines of €1,000 (\$365.63),

increasing to €2,000 for repeat violations.

Severe violations related to explosives, flammable materials, or illegal pyrotechnic shipments could lead to criminal

charges, including imprisonment.

The new laws, designed to enhance public safety, are expected to be fast-tracked through Parliament this week.

## CULTURE

# Medea the Healer: Georgian artists at Frauenmuseum Bonn



Medea Healer surati: Medea the Healer by Maka Dalakishvili. Source: e-mergingartists.art

BY LILY FÜRSTENOW

In war times, art remains the only hope and means of last resort. All the more so in the case of work made by women artists, because women and artists are those who suffer most from the adversities of wars. No wonder that Frauenmuseum Bonn - an institution dedicated solely to promoting women artists - organized an exhibition on peace, presenting various visions of hope, solidarity, compassion and love. Steine Räumen für den Frieden

(Removing Stones for Peace) is a result of intensive work of a group of international curators group coordinated by Marianne Pitzen, the museum director, who runs the place with exceptional love and care. For the first time in recent history Georgian women artists selected by Lily Fürstenow-Khositashvili, the co-curator of the exhibition, have had the chance of their lifetime to show their pieces to the museum audiences within this unconventional display of art. Side by side with installations, videos, paintings and slogans by women artists representing the Kurdish regions of Turkey, Afganistan, the Ukraine, Iran, Syria and

more war-affected parts, artists from the Georgian Artists House selected by the curators showed their paintings on the theme of Medea.

This is the second Medea exhibition curated by Lily Fürstenow-Khositashvili exploring this centuries-old legend dating back to antiquity. Wars, refugees and prejudices against women persisted in ancient times the way they persist today. It is the task of art to revive our cultural memories in order to learn from the past for the sake of the present. The myth of Medea originated in Georgia during the reign of King Ayeti in his Kingdom of Kolchis, in times immemorial, and has fascinated the minds of people since then across Europe. Who wouldn't know of Pasolini's film version of Medea: the jealous and passionate character incarnated by the legendary Maria Callas, or the numerous operas created by the French Baroque and Italian composers who portrayed this mythical princess of Kolchis as a dark sorceress and killer. Little is known, however, about the true story of Medea that is irrevocably connected to Kolchis, now western Georgia.

In the process of preparing this exhibition, the curator's research revealed that, according to scientific sources, Medea never murdered her children out of jealousy of Jason, her husband, who left her for another woman. According to Robert von Ranke-Graves in his Greek Mythology from 1960 issued in Hamburg by Rowolt, Medea's children were killed by the Corinthians because they hated her, since she was a refugee, a foreigner in Greece, and a woman. Yet as the facts show, the people of Corinth wouldn't wish to go into history as murderers of the under-aged, so they offered a considerable sum of cash to the famous Euripides to change the facts and present in his play Medea as the mother of all the evils.

Few might know that, consequently, Jason was punished by the gods for his betrayal of Medea, and that he died alone, forgotten by gods and folks alike, whereas Medea was granted eternal life and rule over the Elysian fields. Since the winners of the ancient Greek tragedy contests

acquired the status of religious truths, Euripide's version of Medea acquired the status of the unquestionable established narrative, leaving the truth in dark oblivion.

For Georgians, however, Medea has always been a healer and a caring, loving mother, which is obvious from the impressive paintings made by Georgian women artists portraying her on the shores of the Black Sea, picking medicinal plants from the Kolchian meadows or brewing her healing potions to cure the sick.

Spreading the truth questioning and reframing conventional male-dominated narratives is one of the important tasks of contemporary art and would save us

from conflicts by producing knowledge and new perspectives. It is within the powers of arts to reveal the truth and within the possibilities of curating to cure the evils, as the Latin for "cura" is "cure." Medea - the Healer has been realised in close cooperation with artists La Arsenishvili, Mze Berdzenishvili, Irma Bibiluri to name but a few, whom we'd like to sincerely thank here. To see the works as well as exhibition views head to [www.e-mergingartists.art](http://www.e-mergingartists.art) Or see the whole thing at the Frauenmuseum Bonn to experience female creativity and peace activism. Steine Räumen für den Frieden continues till March 8, 2025. Frauenmuseum. Im Krausfeld 10, 53111 Bonn.



Medea Healing. By Madonna Menteshashvili. Source: e-mergingartists.art

# A Conversation with Merab Kopaleishvili



BY TEAM GT

**W**e began our conversation with Merab Kopaleishvili by discussing his impressions of his latest exhibition—a milestone moment in his career. Recently, Merab made his debut in the Parisian art scene with his works showcased at the prestigious Asia Now art fair, one of the key highlights of Paris Modern Art Week. Held annually in October, this renowned event attracts art enthusiasts and industry professionals from around the world. His participation was made possible

through a collaboration between Gallery 4710 and Reach Art Visual, which provided curatorial support and guidance. Merab's works were displayed alongside pieces by two other renowned Georgian artists, Tamar Nadiradze and Merab Gugunashvili.

"Paris? How could anyone possibly say anything bad about Paris? Especially an artist? But to be honest, I wasn't exactly spoiled by exhibitions before this," Kopaleishvili tells us. "One day, as I was sitting and sketching, I got an unexpected call. They said, 'You need to fly to Paris.' Two days later, there I was, with my work in tow. As Hemingway said, Paris is a 'moveable feast' that stays with you for the rest of your life. It has this rich cul-

tural tradition—a kind of ark that has gathered strands of modern culture from all over the world. Georgians were part of that story, too. Together, artists from all corners have built what we now call the 'Parisian School.' Each person has contributed their part, like adding their own stone to the grand structure of culture and world heritage. And when you add your own little pebble—no matter how small—it fills you with a sense of pride, a pleasant warmth inside."

"I had read so much about Paris growing up, and when I finally walked its streets and visited its museums, everything felt oddly familiar. Every street, every painting, felt like an old friend. I had first encountered these masterpieces in books when I was 12, but seeing the originals in person is an entirely different experience. You notice the brushstrokes, the cracks in the canvas—it feels alive. Take Veronese's *The Wedding at Cana*, for example—the largest canvas in the Louvre. I've known that painting since childhood, but standing before it in person? It was surreal. It's more than just a painting; it feels like an opera, with Verdi's music filling the air and the characters singing their parts. Paris has a personal story for everyone, and I have mine too.

"The next day, Paris felt like mine—I'd domesticated it, so to speak. I walked the streets, explored as if I had always lived there. I'd seen it all in books, on TV, and in reproductions, but standing in front of the originals gave me a whole new experience. As an artist, it added layers to what I already knew. These impressions and feelings are now a big part of my work. I even brought back an album of sketches from Paris. What I thought would be a fleeting moment of inspiration turned into a whole series, which I think will evolve into a complete cycle of Parisian travels."

**YOUR WORKS REFLECT THE INFLUENCE OF GEORGIAN TRADITIONS OF EXPRESSION AND VISUAL CULTURE, WHILE ALSO INTERSECTING WITH EUROPEAN MODERNIST PAINTING AND BEYOND. HOW WOULD YOU COMPARE YOUR ART TO THE PIECES EXHIBITED IN PARIS, AND WHERE DO YOU SEE IT FITTING WITHIN SUCH A DIVERSE VISUAL AND CULTURAL KALEIDOSCOPE?**

There's a unique genetic code that runs through your bones and flesh—something that cannot be erased or changed, no matter what. It might add something to you, just like a shell attaches to the bottom of a ship, but the ship itself remains unchanged. This genetic code stays with us across generations. So, it's entirely possible that an artist from the early 20th century and one from today could channel the same idea, despite the difference in time.

At the exhibition, there were artists from all over the world, each with their own unique perspective, their own personal struggles, their distinct characters and visions. It was like seeing someone's childhood imagination come to life—the creatures they've invented, maybe something they dreamt up when they were young. For instance, there was an artist from Japan who shared fragments of his distant childhood, offering a glimpse of his world. It was a reminder that experience, in all its forms, shapes how we see the world.

Art isn't like sports where you compete for an Olympic gold medal. It's not about who's better than whom. Instead, it's simply another color being added to the vast canvas of world culture. And the beauty of culture is that it has no boundaries. It's not that one culture starts here and ends there—it's all interconnected, and each part nourishes the other.

**WHAT DO YOU THINK GEORGIAN ARTISTS BRING TO THE GLOBAL ART SCENE?**

You know, Georgian art has always found itself in a unique position—right at the crossroads of European and Asian cultures. And it's fascinating because all



these different influences don't compete with each other; they actually enhance and complement one another. Our deep roots in Hellenistic culture, the way we're connected to it and carry it forward, is something that feels very natural to me. It's inseparable from what it means to be Georgian. Despite everything—centuries of war, changes in fortune, and so on—that connection has never really been broken. It's like, no matter what you do, you're part of it. Even if you try to push it away, you can't really escape it. You can't change your blood. That's why, consciously or unconsciously, your work always reflects what you've been raised with, what you've grown up around. It comes from childhood memories, from those early experiences.

When you think about it, we're all connected to generations of ancestors who shaped who we are. They've passed down their essence, their history, bit by bit, and that's embedded in your very DNA. That's what fuels creativity. You keep creating, keep experimenting, and then, one day, something meaningful just comes out. But here's the thing: how much of that is really "Georgian"? When you're an artist, there's this supranational feeling that you can't ignore. Art, like color or music, doesn't need translation—it's universal. It goes beyond borders. But even as you explore different influences, something of your roots always remains with you. No matter how far you go or how much you evolve, you're still a Georgian artist at heart. Your temperament, your climate, your mood—everything that makes you who you are, it's all reflected in your work.

The more Georgians exhibit abroad, the more we introduce our culture to the world, and that's invaluable—especially since we have so much to share. I'm truly grateful to Reach Art Visuals for organizing the exhibition in Paris. Their work made it possible for us to

showcase our art on such an important international stage.

**CREATING SOMETHING TRULY NEW AND POWERFUL MUST BE CHALLENGING. HOW DO YOU NAVIGATE THE PROCESS AND FIND YOUR WAY FORWARD?**

Indeed, it is hard to create something significant after *The Angel of Kintsvi* was painted. I mean, Galaktion used to walk these streets. How do you create something after that? But, I think that's the thing with art—it's not about one painting following the next. It's about the process, about walking in the dark, not knowing exactly what you'll come across. That's what the creative journey feels like. Sometimes, it's like you're feeling your way through, and it's a bit uncertain. But even when it feels like you're lost, you trust your craft. You trust in your own process.

**SO YOU THINK IT'S MORE ABOUT THE JOURNEY THAN THE OUTCOME?**

Absolutely. The process is everything. There's always that moment of uncertainty, that little agony of thinking, "Maybe this is where it all falls apart." But it never does. As a professional, you have a foundation, something that helps you stay grounded and focused, but there's always this feeling of searching. It's like a constant crisis—but that's what keeps art alive, right? It's always in this perpetual cycle of rebirth, constantly evolving. And I think that's the mission of humanity, really: culture. It's not about the end result, the finished work. It's about the path you take to get there. A city might be destroyed, but in its ruins, they'll still find remnants of its culture—artifacts, poems, paintings. That's what matters. It's not about where you end up; it's about the journey. And as long as you have the strength, you just keep going.



Photo by Giorgi Shengelia

# The Power of Protest: Five Films at the 25th Tbilisi Int'l Film Festival Reflect Society's Struggles



Maria's Silence by Davis Simanis

BY IVAN NECHAEV

Amid the tense atmosphere of street protests in Tbilisi against police violence, the stagnation of Georgia's EU accession, and disputed election results, the 25th Tbilisi International Film Festival became an unintentional battleground for artistic expression and civic unrest. While the Georgian Panorama program was canceled in solidarity with the protests, the international section proceeded, offering audiences a striking array of films that resonate deeply with the current sociopolitical climate. These five cinematic masterpieces provided a mirror to contemporary struggles, each in their unique way illuminating the complex dynamics of power, resistance, and individual agency.

## LOVE BY DAG JOHAN HAUGERUD: REDEFINING HUMAN CONNECTIONS

Dag Johan Haugerud's *Love*, the final installment in his trilogy, is a profound exploration of human relationships and the art of conversation. It eschews grandiose drama for subtle, authentic interactions, showing how understanding, empathy, and tactful dialogue can lead to meaningful connections. In a society often driven by polarization and confrontation, the film becomes a quiet yet powerful manifesto for creating a more mentally resilient and emotionally intelligent community.

At its core, *Love* underscores the importance of communication. Haugerud's characters engage in conversations that are neither overly dramatic nor intellectualized but are rooted in honesty and openness. These dialogues illuminate the diverse ways people approach relationships, sexuality, and societal norms. For instance, the interactions between Marianne and Ole Harald, or Tor and Björn, demonstrate the transformative power of respect and vulnerability. These moments showcase how human connection can transcend societal prejudices and expectations, offering a path to deeper understanding. This message is especially relevant today, as con-

temporary societies grapple with increasing divides—whether along political, cultural, or ideological lines. The film suggests that fostering respectful, non-judgmental spaces for dialogue can help bridge these divides.

What sets *Love* apart is its celebration of tactful, mentally resilient individuals who prioritize care and respect in their relationships and interactions. The film doesn't advocate for radical actions, but rather for the quiet revolution of understanding and kindness. This ethos is particularly poignant in the context of social movements, where the balance between passion and tact is critical. The conversations in *Love* remind us that sustainable change often starts with individual choices to listen, empathize, and connect. This approach can help mitigate the cycle of violence and alienation, fostering a culture of solidarity and mutual respect—a necessity for both personal and societal growth.

## SOULEYMANE'S STORY BY BORIS LOJKINE: MIGRATION AND THE HUMAN CONDITION

Boris Lojkine's *The Story of Souleymane* is a gripping social drama that delves into themes of systemic injustice, per-

sonal integrity, and survival in the face of relentless institutional indifference. With an electrifying performance by Abou Sangare, the film sheds light on the plight of asylum seekers, their precarious existence, and their entanglement with exploitative intermediaries.

One of the film's central narratives is the breakdown of trust in state institutions, represented by Souleymane's reliance on a broker, Barry, to navigate the opaque and often hostile asylum process. Souleymane's real story, marked by hardship and perseverance, is deemed insufficient by Barry, who fabricates a politically charged narrative to ensure success. This reliance on deception is born not out of malice, but out of a lack of faith in a system that prioritizes bureaucracy over humanity. A common thread is the erosion of public confidence in institutions meant to uphold justice, democracy, and progress. When systems fail to deliver fairness, individuals and groups often turn to alternative—sometimes morally ambiguous—means to protect their interests. Souleymane's Story starkly illustrates the human cost of this dynamic, showing how systemic failures force individuals to compromise their values just to survive.

The film also highlights how institutional neglect creates fertile ground for exploitation. Barry's role as an intermediary, profiting from Souleymane's desperation, mirrors the broader issue of predatory practices thriving in spaces where governance is weak or corrupt. The delivery app system in the film, which prioritizes consumer convenience over the well-being of its workers, offers another layer of critique. It underscores how systemic disregard for vulnerable individuals perpetuates cycles of exploitation.

At the heart of *Souleymane's Story* lies a profound moral conflict: the choice between honesty and expediency. Souleymane's hesitation to embrace Barry's fabricated story reflects a universal struggle between maintaining personal integrity and navigating a system rigged against the vulnerable. This internal battle mirrors the broader societal challenge of pursuing truth and justice in the face of overwhelming systemic obstacles. *Souleymane's Story* serves as a powerful indictment of systemic failures and a call to action for societies worldwide. It

challenges audiences to confront the human cost of broken institutions and to strive for systems that uphold fairness, transparency, and dignity.

## THE SEED OF THE SACRED FIG BY MOHAMMAD RASOULOF: PHILOSOPHY AS RESISTANCE

Mohammad Rasoulof's *The Seed of the Sacred Fig* offers an urgent and powerful lesson for grappling with authoritarianism, systemic injustice, and the collective struggle for freedom. By exploring themes of moral compromise, generational divides, and resistance, the film resonates deeply with the ongoing protests in Tbilisi. Iman's journey from reluctant investigator to an enforcer of authoritarianism illustrates the devastating effects of moral surrender. His initial unease about signing death warrants is overtaken by fear and self-preservation, highlighting how authoritarian regimes sustain themselves through the quiet compliance of ordinary people. As Rasoulof suggests, "Our power is in our refusal." The stark generational divide in Iman's household mirrors broader societal fractures. His daughters embody youthful defiance and hope, while his wife Najmeh represents survival through compromise. The gun in *The Seed of the Sacred Fig* serves as a chilling symbol of state violence, always present and ready to suppress dissent. The parallels to brutality in Tbilisi's streets are undeniable. As demonstrators face tear gas, arrests, and physical violence, the film underscores how these tools of repression are universally employed to quash resistance and intimidate movements for change.

Rasoulof's incorporation of real footage from Iran's 2022 protests adds a visceral authenticity to his narrative, reminding viewers that art and reality are deeply intertwined. Ultimately, *The Seed of the Sacred Fig* is not just about Iran—it's a universal critique of authoritarianism and a rallying cry for ordinary people to assert their agency. The film reinforces the message that refusal—of complicity, of silence, of fear—is the foundation of any meaningful change. By connecting personal morality to systemic resistance, Rasoulof's work offers a cinematic blueprint for resilience and rebellion in the face of state violence.

## MARIA'S SILENCE BY DAVIS SIMANIS JR.: THE COST OF COURAGE

Davis Simanis Jr.'s *Maria's Silence* offers a reflection on the devastating impact of totalitarian regimes, personal courage in the face of authoritarian oppression, and the resilience of art as a tool for resistance. While rooted in the tragic story of Latvian actress Marija Leiko during Stalin's Great Purge, the film's themes resonate profoundly with contemporary struggles.

Marija Leiko's eventual realization of the Soviet regime's cruelty and her reluctant complicity highlight the perils of remaining silent. In *Maria's Silence*, silence becomes a symbol of complicity, a weapon wielded by authoritarian systems to suppress dissent. Leiko, a celebrated actress, finds herself caught in the machinery of a totalitarian regime, her art weaponized to serve propaganda. Yet her life story, as depicted by Simanis, underscores the transformative power of art and intellectual resistance.

Simanis's meticulous historical reconstruction of Stalinist Moscow highlights

the enduring shadow of totalitarianism in modern politics. The chilling continuity between the USSR's tactics of silencing dissent and the modern-day repression in Russia calls for vigilance. *Maria's Silence* suggests that the historical atrocities of regimes like Stalin's remain alarmingly relevant, challenging societies to confront these patterns in their own contexts. Through its black-and-white cinematography and homage to German Expressionism, *Maria's Silence* also becomes a metaphor for the survival of art amid oppression. It is not just a historical tale but a cautionary narrative for societies grappling with authoritarian threats. Simanis's work resonates as both a historical indictment and a timeless rallying cry, urging modern audiences to resist silence, remember history, and fight for justice.

## UNDER THE VOLCANO BY DAMIAN KOCUR: CHOICES IN TIMES OF CRISIS

Damian Kocur's *Under the Volcano* masterfully avoids simplistic propaganda or overt hatred, even as it navigates the harrowing realities of war. Set against the backdrop of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the film delves into the personal and emotional consequences of global catastrophe, asking profound questions about guilt, anger, and individual agency.

The film centers on the Ukrainian family's abrupt transformation of a holiday into a permanent exile, illustrating how global crises force individuals into unexpected and often excruciating moral dilemmas. As the family struggles with their disconnection and the uncertainty of their future, Nastya's determination to maintain stability serves as a metaphor for societal efforts to preserve cohesion during crises. Kocur skillfully juxtaposes the mundane—like a conga line of oblivious tourists—with the profound emotional weight of war. This contrast captures the absurdity of a world continuing as if unaffected by unfolding disasters. This cinematic irony compels viewers to confront the disparity between awareness and action.

A crucial strength of *Under the Volcano* lies in its refusal to reduce complex realities to a simple narrative of enmity. Instead of fostering hatred, it examines how catastrophic events force individuals to wrestle with guilt, anger, and the morality of their choices. Kocur's film emphasizes how individuals interpret shared events differently, as highlighted in a lighthearted yet poignant debate about Brad Pitt's presence in *Titanic*. This idea underscores the need for empathy and understanding in times of crisis—a lesson critical for both the family in the film and the fractured political landscapes. By focusing on individual agency, resilience, and shared humanity, Kocur's film serves as a vital reminder of the power of personal and collective action in shaping the course of history.

The 25th Tbilisi International Film Festival will be remembered not only for its cinematic offerings but also for its profound connection to the city's unfolding story of resistance. These five films transcended the screen, offering lessons in resilience, solidarity, and the enduring fight for justice. For audiences in Tbilisi and beyond, they served as both a reflection of current struggles and a source of inspiration for the path ahead. In a time of turmoil, art once again proved its power to unite, provoke, and transform.



Souleymane's Story by Boris Lojkine



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