

FOCUS

ON EUROPEAN UNION AND CENN JOINING FORCES FOR CLIMATE ACTION IN GEORGIA

A groundbreaking initiative aimed at tackling Georgia's environmental challenges while strengthening civil society and promoting human rights

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Georgian President Salome Zurbashvili Delivers Powerful Address to European Parliament

BY TEAM GT

The President of the European Parliament strongly condemned the repression of opposition and the use of force against peaceful protesters in Georgia, warning that these actions threaten the country's European future. Calling for decisive measures, including sanctions against those responsible, the European Parliament extended an invitation to Georgian President Salome Zurbashvili to address the situation directly. On December 18, Zurbashvili delivered a powerful speech, drawing alarming comparisons between current events in Georgia and the Soviet occupation of 1921, as she outlined the struggle for freedom and democracy facing her country.

"This is a pivotal moment. At times, it feels like we're reliving 1921. This is why the Georgian people are showing such courage in the face of what they see as the theft of their freedom, their future, and their independence," Zurbashvili said.



Continued on page 5 President Salome Zurbashvili. Photo source: FB

GALT & TAGGART CREATING OPPORTUNITIES										
Prepared for Georgia Today Business by										
As of 17-Dec-2024										
Markets					Markets					
BONDS	Price	w/w	m/m	STOCKS	Price	w/w	m/m			
GEORGIA 04/26	94.30 (YTM 7.28%)	-0.0%	-0.1%	Bank of Georgia (BGEO LN)	GBP 40.05	+7.8%	-2.0%			
GBAIL 04/28	87.96 (YTM 8.02%)	-0.2%	-1.0%	Georgia Capital (GCEO LN)	GBP 10.00	+3.5%	-1.0%			
GBGG 9 1/2 PERP	98.15 (YTM 9.70%)	+0.0%	+0.3%	TBC Bank Group (TBGG LN)	GBP 27.05	+6.1%	-4.2%			
SILNET 01/27	100.61 (YTM 8.05%)	+0.1%	+0.0%							
TBC 8.894 PERP	95.77 (YTM 11.79%)	+0.1%	-0.0%							
TBC 10 1/4 PERP	99.23 (YTM 10.61%)	-0.0%	+0.2%							
					COMMODITIES	Price	w/w	m/m		
					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%			



US Senator Ben Cardin. Source: Reuters

Chair Cardin Leads Transatlantic Counterparts in Pledging Continued Support for Ukraine, Belarus' Democratic Forces, and the Georgian People

BY TEAM GT

This week, US Senator Ben Cardin (D-Md.), Chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, led leaders of European foreign affairs committees in a statement of democratic solidarity, pledging continued support for Ukraine, Belarus' democratic forces, and the Georgian people in their efforts against authoritarianism.

Chair Cardin was joined by the Chair of the Estonian European Union Affairs Committee Peeter Tali, Vice President of the Italian Chamber of Deputies' Foreign Affairs Committee Lia Quartapelle, Deputy Chair of the Lithuanian European Committee Ruslanas Baranovas, Deputy Chair of the Lithuanian Foreign Affairs Committee Žygmantas Pavilionis, Deputy Chair of the Polish Foreign Affairs Committee Radoslaw Fogiel, Vice President of the Spanish Congress of Deputies' Foreign Affairs Committee Carlos Rojas Garcia, and Chair of the Ukrainian Verkhovna Rada's Foreign Affairs Committee Oleksandr Merezhko.

"Thirty-four years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, we take pride in the historic levels of freedom across the continent and remain committed to a Europe that is whole, free, democratic, sovereign, and at peace. Yet, that vision faces grave threats as a coalition of forces opposed to Euro-Atlantic democracy - led by

Vladimir Putin and supported by dictatorships in Iran and North Korea, along with the People's Republic of China - continues its brutal assault on Ukraine. Innocent civilians endure bombs and bloodshed, while the stability of Europe hangs in the balance.

"While all wars end around a negotiating table, peace cannot come at the expense of Ukraine's sovereignty. Our governments must ensure Ukraine leads decisions about its own future. This requires urgent security assistance, a clear path towards NATO membership, and meaningful security guarantees, including plans for an international peacekeeping mission should a ceasefire be agreed to.

"Ukraine's fight is also the fight of Belarus' democratic forces and the people of Georgia, and these courageous partner nations have made their desire for democracy and respect for human rights crystal clear. We must reject Aleksandr Lukashenka's sham elections and deny him the legitimacy he seeks. We must stand with Georgians defending their constitutionally enshrined Euro-Atlantic aspirations against the Georgian Dream's violent crackdowns. And we must push back against those directing flagrant assaults on peaceful protesters using tools we know will deal a crippling blow, such as financial sanctions.

"In our shared spirit of democracy and respect for human rights, we proudly declare: Glory to Ukraine. Long Live Belarus. Georgia belongs in Europe!"

NGOs on Pro-European Rallies: Along with the Beatings, the Special Forces Robbed the Detainees

BY TEAM GT

Along with the beatings, the special forces robbed the detainees, took away their clothes, shoes, mobile phones, bags, wallets, glasses, crosses and other personal belongings - they forced them to say derogatory phrases about themselves or to praise head of the Special Tasks Department, Zviad Kharazishvili ("Khareba"). In some cases, Kharazishvili personally recorded videos of the beaten detainees, - reads the joint statement made by the heads of non-governmental sectors.

Transparency International Georgia Executive Director Eka Gigauri, Georgian European Orbit Executive Director Nino Lomjaria and Rule of Law Center Director Londa Toloraia, spoke at the joint press conference about "how the Georgian Dream planned the systemic torture of peaceful demonstrators."

"Based on the information we analyzed, which is based on information provided to lawyers by victims and publicly available sources, we can state that the Ministry of Internal Affairs determined brutal methods of cracking down on the demonstrators and a system of torture

in advance, in order to suppress the peaceful demonstrations that began on November 28.

"To crack down on tens of thousands of peaceful demonstrators, the Ministry of Internal Affairs used special equipment, including unknown substances diluted in water jets, pepper spray, tear gas of an unknown substance, and others.

"In some cases, before the crackdown began, a special water jet vehicle approached the demonstrators, and a special warning/call to disperse was heard. In some cases, the crackdown on demonstrations began with direct pursuit and arrests of demonstrators, and a warning signal and other means of crackdown were used later.

"After using the water jets, the special forces fired a large number of tear gas capsules at tens of thousands of peaceful demonstrators, which made breathing and vision impossible, caused panic, and created a real threat of stampede and chaos.

"In a number of cases, peaceful demonstrators who obeyed the call to disperse were ambushed, surrounded, and detained by special forces.

"Special forces physically abused detainees, and after they were brought into the special forces cordon, law enforcement officers continued to physically abuse

them and then took them to special detention vehicles- minivans.

"The interior of the special detention vehicles was arranged in such a way as to facilitate beatings of detainees; groups of special forces periodically, in turns, entered the minivans and physically abused the detainees held there.

It is clear from the detainees' testimonies that the physical violence, inhuman and degrading treatment and torture against them was supervised by one person, who gave instructions - where, how and with what intensity the detainees should be beaten;

"The detainees were especially beaten in the face, head, eye sockets, ribs, kidneys.

"Along with the beatings, the special forces robbed the detainees - they took their clothes, shoes, mobile phones, bags, wallets, glasses, crosses and other personal belongings;

"There is a known case when special forces threw a gas canister into a minivan where detainees were being beaten, and then closed the door", NGO representatives report.

The Public Defender of Georgia stated that out of 327 detainees visited by representatives of his office, 225 claimed to be victims of ill-treatment, 157 of whom had visible physical injuries.

Georgian PM Meets with TAV Airports to Discuss Ongoing Cooperation and Infrastructure Upgrades

BY TEAM GT

On Thursday, Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze met with the management team of TAV Airports, a subsidiary of the French ADP Group responsible for operating Tbilisi and Batumi international airports. They discussed the potential for continued cooperation.

The Government Administration reported that representatives from the French company congratulated Kobakhidze on his electoral victory in October and his subsequent appointment as Prime Minister, offering their "best wishes for success" in his leadership.

During the meeting, TAV Airports reaffirmed its commitment to continuing



operations at Georgian airports, including the planned new international airport in Tbilisi. They also discussed strategic initiatives to improve the infrastructure of Tbilisi International Airport in antic-

ipation of a significant rise in passenger traffic. By the end of this year, passenger numbers at the airport are expected to increase by one million, reaching a total of nearly five million.

Ukraine Latest: Zelensky Admits Ukraine Is Unable to Push Russian Troops out of Crimea and East

COMPILED BY ANA DUMBADZE

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has admitted that his country's forces are unable to dislodge Russian troops out of the land they occupy in Crimea and the east of the country.

The Ukrainian president said diplomacy was the only remaining option to get Moscow to withdraw its army - though he vowed Kyiv would never recognize Russian rule.

"We cannot give up our territories. The Ukrainian constitution forbids us from doing so. De facto, these territories are now controlled by the Russians. We do not have the strength to recover them," he said in an interview with the French newspaper Le Parisien.

"We can only count on diplomatic pressure from the international community to force Putin to sit down at the negotiating table."

Mr Zelensky made similar remarks in an interview with Sky News's chief correspondent Stuart Ramsay last month, in which he suggested a ceasefire deal could be struck if Ukrainian territory he controls could be taken "under the NATO umbrella" - allowing him to negotiate the return of the rest, later, "in a diplomatic way".

Mr Zelensky said NATO membership would have to be offered to unoccupied parts of the country in order to end the "hot phase of the war," as long as the NATO invitation itself recognizes Ukraine's internationally recognized borders.

UKRAINE STRIKES ARMY OIL REFINERY, IGNITING BLAZE

The Ukrainian military says it struck the Novoshakhtinsk oil refinery in Russia's Rostov region, which was being used to supply the Russian army.

Russian officials said Ukraine struck Russian territory with at least 13 missiles and 84 drones, triggering a fire at the refinery.

Defenses shot down 84 drones over Russian regions, including 36 over the Rostov region, according to the defense ministry.

Rostov acting governor Yuri Slyusar said Ukraine had struck the region with at least 13 missiles and dozens of drones, triggering a fire at the Novoshakhtinsk oil refinery, which has repeatedly been targeted by Ukraine.

At least one person was injured during the attack, Slyusar said.

Kyiv struck a Russian military airfield earlier this month with US-made ATACMS missiles prompting a major Russian attack on Ukraine's energy infrastructure.

KIM JONG UN 'OVERSEEING TRAINING' AFTER INEXPERIENCED NORTH KOREAN TROOPS KILLED IN RUSSIA

At least 100 North Korean troops have been killed and another 1,000 injured in combat against Ukrainian forces in the Kursk region, a South Korean politician has said.



North Korean troops undergoing combat training. Photo: KCNA

Member of parliament Lee Seong-kweun said a lack of experience in drone warfare and unfamiliarity with open terrain was responsible for the heavy losses, citing the country's spy agency.

He was speaking after a closed-door briefing by the National Intelligence Service (NIS) to parliament.

"There was a report that there have been at least 100 deaths and the injured are approaching 1,000," he said.

There are indications that the North is preparing for additional deployment, Lee said, including intelligence of the country's leader Kim Jong Un overseeing training.

The report echoed comments by US and Ukrainian officials that North Korean losses are heavy and that Russia was using them in large numbers in assaults in Kursk, a Russian region where Ukraine launched a cross-border incursion in August.

More than 10,000 North Korean troops have been deployed to help Russia in the war, said US and South Korean officials.

Pyongyang has also shipped more than 10,000 containers of artillery rounds, anti-tank rockets, mechanized howitzers and rocket launchers.

Vladimir Putin visited Pyongyang in June and signed a "comprehensive strategic partnership" treaty with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un that included a mutual defense pact.

RUSSIA CLAIMS THE CAPTURE OF TWO NEW SETTLEMENTS

Russia's Defense Ministry claimed the capture of two new settlements - Stari Terny and Trudove - in the Donetsk region of east Ukraine. Both are located near the industrial town of Kurakhove, which Russia appears close to capturing.

EU Imposes Historic Sanctions on Russian Officials and Entities, Fails to Agree on Georgia

BY TEAM GT

On December 16, the European Union took historic action by imposing sanctions for the first time ever against individuals and entities linked to Russia's destabilizing activities abroad. This significant move reflects the EU's growing concern over Russia's interference in international affairs, including disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks, and violations of international law. The sanctions, approved by the EU Council, are part of the EU's broader efforts to defend a rules-based international order, uphold its security, and protect the sovereignty of its member states.

The new sanctions target individuals and entities connected to Russian policies that undermine EU values and international stability. Specifically, the measures focus on hybrid activities such as coordinated information manipulation, cyberattacks, and other forms of interference across Europe and beyond. The sanctions framework was established in October 2024 following the intensification of Russian hybrid operations, which the EU condemned in a statement that same month.

Among the key targets of the sanctions are members of the Russian military intelligence agency GRU, particularly GRU Unit 29155, which has been linked to several high-profile destabilizing operations across Europe, including assassinations, bombings, and cyberattacks. Several GRU officers involved in operations in Ukraine, Western Europe, and Africa were also sanctioned, along with a high-ranking GRU official who

took control of Wagner Group operations in Africa after Yevgeny Prigozhin's death.

The EU also sanctioned key figures involved in Russia's digital disinformation campaign, "Doppelganger," which aims to manipulate public opinion in support of Russia's aggression against Ukraine. The campaign has targeted EU member states, the United States, and Ukraine. Sanctions were imposed on Sofia Zakharova, head of the Office for the Development of Information and Communication Technologies in the Russian Presidential Administration, and Nikolai Tupikin, founder of the Russian firm GK Struktura, both of whom have played a pivotal role in these efforts.

Other individuals sanctioned include Vladimir Sergiyenko, a former parliamentary assistant in Germany, who colluded with Russian intelligence officers to leak classified information to the FSB, and Visa Mizaev, a Russian entrepreneur involved in an intelligence operation targeting Germany's Federal Intelligence Service (BND). The sanctions also extended to Alesya Miloradovich, a Russian government employee, and Anatolii Prizenko, a Moldovan businessman facilitating the transfer of Moldovan citizens to France in 2023.

These individuals and entities will face asset freezes, and EU citizens and companies are prohibited from providing them with financial services. Additionally, those sanctioned will be subject to travel bans, preventing them from entering or transiting through EU territories. These measures are designed to limit the financial and diplomatic movement of those who threaten European security and stability.

In parallel with these sanctions, the EU Foreign Ministers met on Monday to dis-



Bidzina Ivanishvili and Irakli Kobakhidze have rejected the sanctions. Source: gov.ge

cus the growing political crisis in Georgia. The ministers considered imposing personal sanctions on officials from Georgia's ruling party, Georgian Dream, as well as suspending the visa liberalization for Georgian diplomats. However, no unanimity was reached on the issue of sanctions, with Hungary and Slovakia vetoing the proposal. As reported by EU correspondent Rikard Jozwiak, "The European Commission will however propose visa liberalization suspension for Georgian diplomats, possibly as early as this week. There is a qualified majority for this."

Tensions over Georgia's political situation have deepened within the EU. Lithuania, in coordination with Estonia, imposed sanctions on 17 additional Georgian politicians, including Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze, in response to violence against protesters, journalists, and opposition figures. Lithuanian Foreign Minister Kestutis Budrys stated, "We will not tolerate the violence and oppression against peaceful protesters,

journalists, and the opposition."

Estonia also expanded its sanctions, adding 13 Georgian officials to its list. The Estonian Foreign Ministry condemned the Georgian government's use of excessive force against opposition groups, journalists, and peaceful protesters, calling it a violation of human rights and democracy. Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia had already imposed visa sanctions on 11 Georgian officials, including Bidzina Ivanishvili, the leader of the ruling Georgian Dream party, and high-ranking members of the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

Despite these measures, the Georgian Dream government has rejected the sanctions. A statement from the Georgian government criticized the actions of Lithuania and Estonia, claiming, "The Governments of Lithuania and Estonia are acting not in accordance with the interests of their own people, but at the behest of the administration of a foreign country." The Georgian authorities fur-

ther stated, "We wish our friendly Estonian and Lithuanian people stronger sovereignty and all the best in the year 2025!"

The debate over how to handle Georgia's political crisis highlights the deep divisions within the EU. While Lithuania and Estonia have been vocal in condemning the Georgian government and expanding their sanctions list, countries like Hungary and Slovakia have blocked stronger actions, reflecting differing views on how to best support democracy and human rights in the region. This division underscores the challenges the EU faces in managing relations with countries seeking to join the Union, especially when issues like democracy, rule of law, and governance are at stake. While the EU has taken a united stance on sanctions against Russia for its destabilizing actions, the disagreement over Georgia shows just how difficult it is for the Union to reach consensus on sensitive geopolitical issues.

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Illuminated Silence: The Tradition of Festive City Decorations amidst Protests and Unrest



Photo by the author

BY IVAN NECHAEV

The glittering lights of Christmas and New Year often symbolize joy, unity, and renewal in European cities. Yet, these luminous displays can contrast starkly with the shadows of unrest, becoming a stage where civic grievances and state narratives coexist in tense juxtaposition. For weeks, Tbilisi has borne witness to this paradox: residents braving sub-zero temperatures and water cannons in protests for a European future, while the city's streets are meticulously adorned with light bulbs, stars, and Christmas trees, as if to shield life from the disruptions of dissent. Such scenes evoke broader questions about the cultural, political, and psychological dimensions of festive urban decorations during periods of societal unrest.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: FESTIVITIES IN THE FACE OF ADVERSITY

The tradition of decorating cities for the Christmas season has roots in religious, social, and economic practices. Originating in the Christian liturgical calendar, public displays of lights and evergreen trees became widespread in Europe during the 19th century. The rise of urbanization and electric lighting transformed these rituals into modern spectacles, fostering civic pride and offering moments of shared beauty. However, these traditions have not always unfolded in times of harmony.

During the First World War, for instance, cities like London and Paris maintained modest Christmas illuminations despite air raids and rationing. Similarly, the Cold War saw divided Berlin illuminated in contrasting narratives: the capitalist West emphasizing festive abundance, while the socialist East framed its decorations as a celebration of the workers' triumphs. In both cases, decorations were used as tools of narrative construction, projecting resilience, continuity, and ideological identity amidst conflict.

CHRISTMAS LIGHTS AS POLITICAL INSTRUMENTS

The act of decorating cities during protests or crises is not a neutral gesture. In contemporary Europe, festive decorations have often coincided with civil unrest, highlighting the tension between state control and citizen dissent. Take the 2018 *Gilets Jaunes* (Yellow Vests) protests in France, for instance. As Paris' Champs-Élysées shimmered with its iconic Christmas lights, weekly protests against economic inequality and government policies continued just blocks away. Many citizens questioned the allocation of funds for such extravagant displays, while social grievances remained unresolved. Yet, others interpreted the decorations as necessary symbols of normalcy and unity in trying times.

Similarly, during Spain's 2019 Catalonia independence protests, Barcelona's festive decorations became entangled in political debates. The city government,

led by Mayor Ada Colau, faced criticism for spending public resources on lights while residents clashed with police over issues of regional autonomy. The decorations, though ostensibly apolitical, became an inadvertent symbol of the state's priorities and its attempt to maintain control over public spaces.

SCIENTIFIC PERSPECTIVES: THE COGNITIVE DISSONANCE OF FESTIVITY AMIDST UNREST

From a psychological standpoint, the simultaneous presence of festive decorations and protests creates cognitive dissonance—a state of mental discomfort caused by conflicting attitudes or realities. Urban decorations are designed to evoke happiness, nostalgia, and a sense of belonging, while protests disrupt these emotions by confronting citizens with the harsh realities of inequality, injustice, or repression.

Research in environmental psychology

suggests that festive lighting can serve as a coping mechanism during periods of stress. In her study on the socio-psychological impact of Christmas lights, environmental psychologist Linda M. Holle found that urban decorations can provide temporary relief from collective anxiety by fostering shared positive experiences. However, this relief is often superficial and does not address underlying grievances, leading to polarized perceptions of such displays as either escapist distractions or cynical manipulations.

THE URBAN STAGE: PROTEST AND DECORATION AS PERFORMATIVE ACTS

Cities function as stages for both celebration and dissent, with each competing for public attention. In times of unrest, urban decorations can be perceived in two opposing ways:

Aesthetic Normalization. Decorations may symbolize continuity, suggesting that the city remains functional and life goes on despite discord. For governments, this approach can project an image of control and stability. However, for protesters, such displays can feel like a denial of their realities, fueling further frustration and accusations of indifference.

Subversive Reappropriation. Protesters often subvert festive spaces to amplify their messages. During the 2013 Euro-aidan protests in Ukraine, activists transformed Kyiv's central Christmas tree into a towering monument of resistance, adorning it with protest banners and flags. This act not only challenged the state's narrative, but also redefined the symbolic function of the tree, turning it into a rallying point for democratic aspirations.

CASE STUDY: TBILISI'S DUAL REALITIES

In Tbilisi, the tension between festive decorations and ongoing protests encapsulates this duality. For many residents, the city's lights and ornaments may offer fleeting comfort amid political uncertainty, evoking a sense of European identity and cultural continuity. Yet, for others, the decorations starkly contrast with the state's use of water cannons and tear gas against peaceful demonstrators, highlighting a dissonance between public celebrations and private suffering.

This phenomenon is not unique to Tbilisi. In Belarus, during the 2020 pro-democracy protests, Christmas markets and decorations in Minsk continued under heavy police surveillance. Activists criticized these displays as attempts to distract from government crackdowns. Similarly, in Istanbul, holiday decorations have often coexisted with political demonstrations, reflecting the city's complex interplay of tradition and dissent.

CULTURAL INTERPRETATIONS: LIGHTS AS SYMBOLS OF HOPE OR HEGEMONY

From a cultural perspective, festive urban decorations can be understood through two lenses:

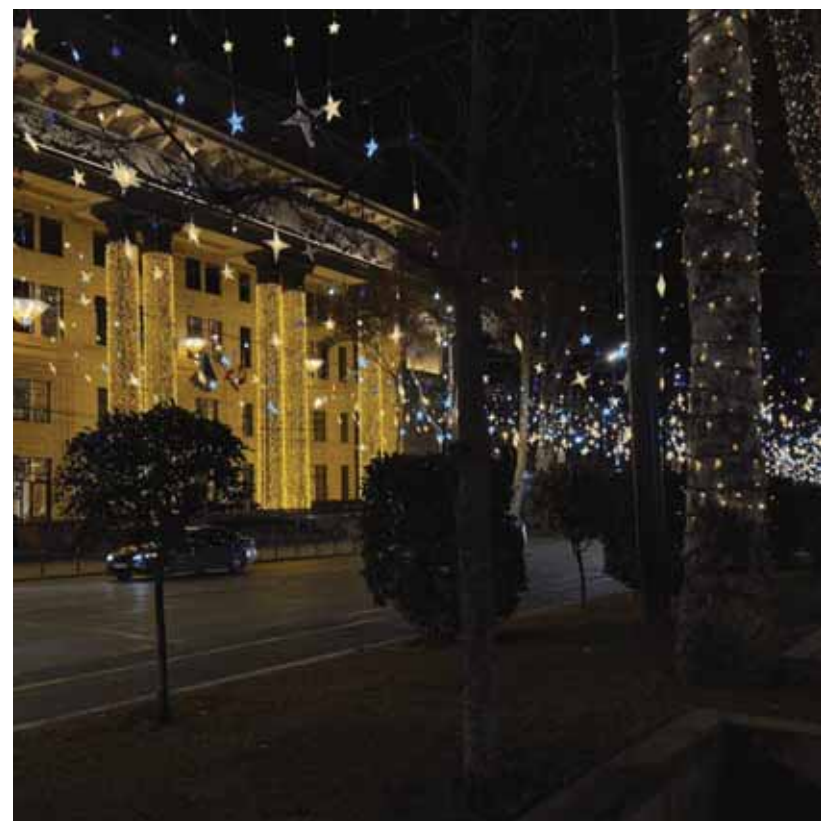
As Symbols of Hope: The lights, trees, and ornaments serve as reminders of shared cultural heritage and the possibility of renewal, even in difficult times. In this sense, they act as a form of collective resilience, offering communities a sense of agency and continuity.

As Symbols of Hegemony: Decorations can also reinforce state narratives, masking societal fractures and promoting a superficial sense of unity. This interpretation aligns with cultural theorist Guy Debord's concept of the "society of the spectacle," where public displays distract from systemic issues and placate dissent through controlled aesthetic experiences.

A REFLECTION ON CONTRADICTIONS

The juxtaposition of festive city decorations and civic unrest is a complex phenomenon, reflecting the contradictions inherent in urban life. While lights and ornaments symbolize joy and renewal, they cannot obscure the realities of inequality, repression, or resistance. In Tbilisi and beyond, this tension reveals the dual role of public spaces as arenas for both celebration and dissent.

Ultimately, how such decorations are perceived depends on the viewer. For some, they may represent hope and continuity; for others, they may underscore the disparities between government priorities and citizens' struggles. As cities across Europe continue to light up for the holidays, they also illuminate the unresolved tensions that define modern urban life—a reminder that beneath the glow of festivity lies the enduring demand for justice and change.



Mikheil Kavelashvili Elected as Georgia's "President" despite Protests and Opposition Boycott

BY TEAM GT

On December 14, Mikheil Kavelashvili was elected the next "President of Georgia" by the 300-member electoral college, which includes members from the parliament, autonomous republics, and city councils. Kavelashvili, a candidate from the ruling Georgian Dream party, received 224 votes in his favor. His election, however, was met with widespread criticism, as opposition parties refused to participate, deeming the process "illegitimate."

The Georgian Dream party, led by honorary chairman Bidzina Ivanishvili, officially presented Kavelashvili as their candidate at the end of November. Ivanishvili emphasized Kavelashvili's background as a successful footballer, who had represented Georgia in various top-tier clubs, including Manchester City and Dinamo Tbilisi. Ivanishvili also praised Kavelashvili's political career, highlighting his contributions to strengthening Georgia's national interests and sovereignty over the past eight years. "Misha [Kavelashvili] was a seasoned member of the Georgian football team, and in the last few years, he has made a great contribution to protecting the national interests of Georgia," Ivanishvili said.

Despite this endorsement, the opposition sharply criticized the electoral process. The 'Gakharia for Georgia' party, along with other opposition groups,



Georgian Dream's president-elect Mikheil Kavelashvili. Photo by Irakli Gedenidze/Reuters

boycotted the election, calling it unconstitutional and undemocratic. The party issued a statement declaring that the election was held outside the constitution, within an illegitimate parliament, and fundamentally contradicted the constitutional principles. They further demanded the release of detainees arrested during protests and the holding of new elections under fair conditions. "The Georgian Dream, together with the Central Election Commission, has stolen the right of free choice from the Georgian people," the statement read. The protests against the elections and Georgian Dream's choice for president continued as citizens gathered outside Parliament, some bringing diplo-

mas to highlight that Kavelashvili lacked the necessary education to hold the office of president—heading for a sporting career, Kavelashvili left school in the 9th grade. Georgian President Salome Zurbishvili also arrived at Parliament to express her opposition to the process, and the police were deployed in full force, with water cannons on standby. Opposition groups argue that the presidential election, being held in an indirect manner, was a violation of Georgia's democratic principles. The electoral college consists of 150 members of parliament, representatives from the autonomous republics of Adjara and Abkhazia, and 109 members from local city councils. To win in the first round, a candidate needed at least two-thirds of the votes from the electoral college, or 200 votes. As the sole candidate, Kavelashvili was elected despite the opposition's absence.

Following his election, Kavelashvili addressed the nation, reaffirming Georgia's commitment to joining the European Union. However, he also criticized the EU for its treatment of Georgia, accusing the EU of double standards. He referenced the recent postponement of EU accession negotiations until 2028, stating, "In some cases, they insult us and treat us unfairly. We are trying to bring these points back to their attention for a healthy process."

Kavelashvili's presidency is set to begin on December 29, with his inauguration following shortly after. Despite opposition protests and accusations of a flawed electoral process, Kavelashvili remains firmly backed by the Georgian Dream party, which controls the majority of the electoral college.

Georgian President Salome Zurbishvili Delivers Powerful Address to European Parliament

Continued from page 1

She discussed the 21 days of protests sweeping across Georgia, which began after the introduction of a controversial Russian law in 2023. "Large-scale protests in Georgia have never been about social issues. The only time people take to the streets is when they face an existential threat. This is a peaceful civil disobedience movement demanding two things: give us back the votes stolen in the election, and give us back our European future. This is not a revolutionary movement; this is a demand for new elections," she explained.

Zurbishvili also dismissed the narrative of a civil confrontation, stating, "There are not two sides in Georgia: on one side are the people, on the other is the repressive apparatus of a single party."

She noted that while the ruling Georgian Dream party increasingly aligns with Russia, it still feigns a European path, despite the fact that over 80% of Georgians support EU membership. Zurbishvili admitted she had not initially recognized the shift toward Russia, which began with the 2019 Gavrillov incident and accelerated after the 2024 elections. "The creation of a Russian state happens gradually. All institutions are controlled by one party," she said.

Zurbishvili condemned the election fraud that began long before Election Day, highlighting the Russian-style propaganda carried out by Georgian Dream, as well as the absence of police presence during the elections and the violence in certain districts. "I saw the violence firsthand. When I called the Minister of Internal Affairs, I got no response—neither on my mobile nor through the government network. There are no courts to address violations," she said.

She also emphasized two key violations: the exclusion of over a million members of the Georgian diaspora from voting, and the breach of vote secrecy. "Georgia is now under the total control of a single-party regime, with only the opposition

media, NGOs, and the presidency remaining outside of this control," Zurbishvili said.

She condemned the repressive legislative amendments passed by Georgian Dream and called for Western intervention. "This is about Europe's credibility. Europe cannot allow a country that has just received candidate status to violate fundamental democratic principles. It is also a matter of Europe's strategic interests. Georgia has always been a bulwark for the West, and Russia understands that whoever controls Tbilisi controls the Caucasus," she stated.

If Georgia falls under Russian control, she warned, the consequences would be severe. "This affects the security of the Black Sea, the connection to Central and Southeast Asia, and Armenia's European future. There is much more at stake than just Georgia's democracy," she said.

Zurbishvili emphasized that Russia is testing a cheaper form of intervention in Georgia. Addressing the European Parliament, she urged urgent action against Georgian Dream. "Georgians have been fighting tirelessly while Europe has been slow to act. With European flags all but banned in Tbilisi, Georgians are still waiting for decisive measures from Brussels and Washington. We need political support. Georgians need to know they are not alone, that Europe stands with them," she concluded.

French MEP Valérie Hayer afterwards told media: "President Zurbishvili gave Europe a staggering tale of what is happening in Georgia. It should make the blood of every European run cold. And it is not only about Georgia. It is also about Europe. Georgians need new, free and fair elections. There is no other way around it."

The European Commissioner for Defense, Andrius Kubilius noted: "I listened very attentively to Georgian President Zurbishvili's testimony during the European Parliament plenary in Strasbourg. We stand firmly by the Georgian people and their European aspirations for the future of their country."



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Former US Amb to NATO and Ukraine Envoy Kurt Volker on Trump's Peace Deal



Kurt Volker. Source: pbs

INTERVIEW BY VAZHA TAVBERIDZE

Kurt Volker is an experienced American diplomat who served as the US Ambassador to NATO under President George W. Bush. He later held the position of Executive Director at the McCain Institute for International Leadership and, in a voluntary role, served as US Special Representative for Ukraine under President Donald J. Trump until his resignation in September 2019. Radio Free Europe/RL's Georgian Service spoke with him about his views on a variety of geopolitical issues, particularly regarding President Trump's approach to the Ukraine conflict and peace negotiations.

THE UKRAINE PEACE DEAL – WHOM DOES TRUMP LISTEN TO HERE? WHOSE INSIGHT WOULD HE PUT MORE STOCK IN? THAT OF GENERAL KELLOGG OR ELON MUSK?

Trump listens to himself. He's the one who makes the decisions about what he wants to do. He believes he is the best negotiator. He has met with or spoken with President Zelensky multiple times this autumn, so he's had direct, close contact with him. Trump says he will call Putin and tell him to end the war. He will press Putin to just stop the fighting. While Keith Kellogg has been named as special representative for negotiations, and he would be the one physically present to implement the deal, Trump will be the one who decides.

BUT WHO GETS TO INFORM HIS DECISION-MAKING? WHO HAS THE KING'S EAR?

Everybody and nobody. He has different people around him, people with different views. He likes having people with different views and he likes to hear the arguments, but the only one who really makes up his mind is Trump himself.

AND HE WILL PRESS BOTH KYIV AND MOSCOW?

I think so. And I think there's a difference because the Ukrainians want peace. The Ukrainians have always wanted peace. Zelensky has given interviews where he says he's ready to negotiate. He understands he's not going to get all the territory back now, but we can view this as a dispute to be resolved by other means. He is very much aligned with what Trump is saying. The problem is getting Putin to negotiate, or getting Putin to end the war. Putin has maximalist objectives of taking over all of Ukraine,

demilitarizing it and taking over the government. That is clearly not going to be acceptable. And if Putin persists in that, I think Trump's response would be to say, "Well, then we will help Ukraine with all the weapons and support they need."

THERE'S BEEN A NOTICEABLE SHIFT IN PRESIDENT ZELENSKY'S RHETORIC, PARTICULARLY ON LOSING CONTROL OF SOME TERRITORIES. COULD THIS SHIFT REFLECT CONCERNS OVER A POTENTIAL REDUCTION IN US AID, AS SOME HAVE SUGGESTED?

Well, I think that Ukraine's earlier position that it would never consider such a compromise were not very helpful. The rhetoric of "as long as it takes" and "no decision about Ukraine without Ukraine" is no longer politically sustainable, because it lacked a clear objective. We were sending arms and money without a concrete goal in mind. The goal should have been to help Ukraine defeat Russia and recover its territory, but that would have required much more robust support than the Biden administration provided. They didn't do it. Now we face a different situation, where Ukrainian forces are quite exhausted and it's difficult to recruit manpower. The taxpayers in Europe and the United States who provided all this aid want to know how to end the war. Putin is exhausted as well. Russia's forces are exhausted. We just saw them have to withdraw from Syria and [they] failed to support the Assad regime in Syria because they didn't have the means to do so. They didn't have the means to defend Russian territory when Ukraine went into Kursk—they can't do offense and defense at the same time because their forces are stretched. They've had to rely on bringing in North Korean artillery shells and Iranian drones and North Korean soldiers. So their military is really not in good shape, and the way they are using it, losing up to 1500 soldiers every day, that is unsustainable. Russia can't continue this indefinitely. Eventually, Putin will need to settle.

YOU MENTIONED PUTIN'S MAXIMALIST GOALS, WANTING ALL OF UKRAINE. COULD HE SETTLE FOR JUST THE FOUR REGIONS HE ANNEXED, PLUS UKRAINE PLEDGING NOT TO JOIN NATO? CAN HE PRESENT THAT AS A VICTORY TO THE RUSSIAN PUBLIC?

Putin can present anything he wants as a victory because he's a dictator and he

controls all of the information space. If he decides to, he can portray a settlement as a win. However, I don't believe he will ever be content with a limited settlement. He's likely to push to undermine and eventually take over all of Ukraine. The key, then, is to stop him from achieving that through military means, and then do everything possible to help Ukraine reform, to strengthen economically, join the EU, join NATO, so forth, so that he's not able to undermine Ukraine by other means.

WHEN TRUMP SAYS HE COULD END THE WAR IN 24 HOURS, WHAT EXACTLY DOES HE MEAN? IS IT ENDING THE HOT PHASE, THE CONFLICT FOR THE FORESEEABLE FUTURE, OR A PERMANENT PEACE?

I think when Trump says he would end the war in 24 hours, he's referring to stopping the immediate hot phase of fighting. He would focus on stopping the killing, ceasing active combat. Turning that into a permanent peace is a bigger challenge, and it's unclear where Trump stands on that. He has said in the past that if Ukraine were governed well, it would be a rich country. It has all of the natural resources and human capital and talent that a country would need. So I think he thinks they would be successful, but it's going to take more from the West to make sure that that peace is a permanent peace and not just allowing Putin to rest, regroup, and attack again.

THERE ARE REPORTS THAT RUSSIA MAY BE SEEKING SOMETHING LIKE A NEW YALTA SUMMIT. COULD TRUMP GIVE PUTIN THAT?

I don't think so. I think what Trump will need to do, and I believe it's his intention, is just to keep it simple. Just end the war. Just stop the fighting. You know, "you're not going to win this. You're only going to weaken, Russia. Just stop." Trump's approach is to focus on ending the conflict, not to engage in grand summits that give Putin a platform to push his demands.

WITH REGARD TO A POTENTIAL PEACE DEAL, SOME REPORTS SUGGEST THAT IT MIGHT REQUIRE UKRAINE TO DE FACTO LOSE CONTROL OF SOME TERRITORIES AND AGREE NOT TO JOIN NATO. IS THE ONLY THING UKRAINE STANDS TO GAIN 'SURVIVAL AS AN INDEPENDENT STATE'?

Yes, I think survival as an independent state would be the main gain for Ukraine. If peace is achieved, it would also allow for the return of Ukrainian refugees, economic growth, and rapid progress toward EU membership. Eventually, I believe Ukraine should be brought into NATO as well. While that's not currently part of Trump's position, I think it's crucial because Putin won't respect any other security guarantees. NATO membership is the only guarantee that actually works.

WILL PUTIN ACCEPT ANYTHING THAT DOESN'T INVOLVE UKRAINE PLEDGING NOT TO JOIN NATO?

Hopefully, we won't ask Putin for his opinion on Ukraine's NATO membership. It's not his decision. If he demands it as part of a peace deal, any such provision should be time-limited. We cannot abandon Ukraine's aspirations for NATO membership or its security in the future.

LET'S TALK HYPOTHETICALS. IF A DEAL IS MADE, AND PUTIN—KNOWN FOR NOT HONORING AGREEMENTS—VIOLATES THE TERMS, HOW LONG WOULD THAT PEACE DEAL LAST? WHO WOULD ENFORCE IT, GIVEN THAT PUTIN IS NOTORIOUS FOR BREAKING AGREEMENTS?

That's a crucial point. It shouldn't be about trust. The key is to put enough capability on the table that Putin knows he can't restart the war. If there's an end to the fighting, the US and its allies must lean in to strengthen Ukraine—making sure it is well-armed, well-trained, and economically secure. Security guarantees for Ukraine will be necessary to prevent future aggression.

IS THAT THE VISION THAT'S SHARED IN THE TRUMP CAMP, DO YOU THINK?

It's hard to say. They haven't spoken much about it. Kellogg has said that Ukraine needs to be fully armed both before and after a settlement, and that the US would do so as long as Ukraine is negotiating. But Trump has not really talked about that part of it. He's kept the emphasis on just ending the fighting.

IF THE NECESSARY MEASURES ARE NOT TAKEN, COULD THERE BE DARKER SCENARIOS, WHERE A DEAL IS MADE AND LASTS JUST LONG ENOUGH FOR TRUMP TO EXIT OFFICE, LEAVING RUSSIA TIME TO REARM AND RESUME HOSTILITIES?

Unfortunately, I think that's a real possibility. Trump may be very happy to take credit for ending the fighting, but without proper enforcement, Russia could regroup and attack again. The challenge will be to make sure Ukraine—and other countries in the region—are strong enough to withstand Russian efforts to destabilize them.

ON THE QUAIN SUBJECT OF WHO ACTUALLY GETS TO CLAIM VICTORY IN THIS. HISTORY IS WRITTEN BY THE VICTORIOUS, THEY SAY. WHO WILL GET TO WRITE THIS CHAPTER? OR WILL IT BE DIFFERENT PRINTING HOUSES, ONE IN MOSCOW, ONE IN DC, ONE IN KYIV?

That's exactly right. Russia makes up its own history all the time. It's not going to change. They're going to say that Ukraine started the war. They're going to say that NATO poured fuel on the fire and encouraged them, that they proudly and successfully defended Russian speakers and Russian citizens. And they would have done even more, but the West intervened to fight against Russian forces. They'll say that they successfully secured their territory and are now ready to negotiate for peace. The West, on the other hand, will have a very different interpretation of events, and so will Ukraine.

WITH THAT IN MIND, DO YOU SEE ANOTHER "RESET" HAPPENING WITH, PERHAPS, SOME ICONIC IMAGERY OF PUTIN AND TRUMP EATING BURGERS IN VKUSNO I TOCHKA?

No, I don't think so. I don't think that would serve Trump's interests to be seen as a buddy of Putin. He has been accused his entire political career of being a Russian stooge, something he hotly denies. So, I don't think he wants those images.



Trump listens to himself. He believes he is the best negotiator

DO YOU THINK RUSSIA'S EVENTUAL RETURN TO GLOBAL DIPLOMACY IS INEVITABLE? WILL PUTIN'S REGIME MAKE A COMEBACK?

Unfortunately, I do think it's likely. And I'd say that will be largely driven by Europe. I see countries like Germany and France wanting to establish a normal relationship with Russia again. Maybe they won't be having hamburgers with Putin either, he's an indicted war criminal after all, but they're going to want to lift the sanctions and engage in trade, especially as they face pressure to rebuild Russian energy infrastructure and other parts of the Russian economy. It will create business opportunities, and there will be calls for a return to engagement with Russia, despite its actions.

WHEN THE UKRAINE WAR STARTED, WESTERN DIPLOMATS AND GENERALS WARNED THAT GEORGIA NEEDED TO CAREFULLY NAVIGATE THE SITUATION TO ENSURE IT STAYED IN THE WESTERN CAMP AND WASN'T USED AS A BARGAINING CHIP WITH RUSSIA. HAS THE SITUATION NOW WORSENER, TO THE POINT WHERE GEORGIA ISN'T EVEN A BARGAINING CHIP ANYMORE?

Yes, and it's incredibly sad. It is shocking to see how far Georgian Dream is willing to go against the aspirations of the Georgian people. They have fully removed Georgia from any progress or process of joining the European Union. They have not said anything about NATO, they have called the US, and others, members of a "global war party," and they say that they need to be aligning with Russia, and they are actively undermining the institutions of governance in Georgia.

THE US SUSPENDED ITS STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP WITH GEORGIA. PM KOBAKHIDZE, UNDETERRED, SAID "IT WILL BE AS TRUMP SAYS." WHAT SHOULD THE GEORGIAN DREAM EXPECT FROM PRESIDENT TRUMP AND HIS NEW ADMINISTRATION?

The Georgian Dream's expectations are wrong if they think Trump will be their savior. Trump will likely put pressure on them to restore democracy and address their growing ties with China. We had American companies seeking to build the port in Anaklia, that's now being handed over to the Chinese. It's a Chinese company that's building the new airport. You had the prime minister of Georgia go and mourn the death of the President of Iran and standing alongside the leaders of Hamas and Hezbollah in Tehran. These are all things that are going to be very much singled out and of concern to a Trump administration.

Strengthening the Production Capacity of Georgia's Wine Sector



In November 2024, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), through the European Union (EU) and Sweden-funded IV phase of the European Neighborhood Program for Agriculture and Development (ENPARD), delivered a series of practical and theoretical winter pruning training modules. The educational program aimed to strengthen the safe grapevine production capacity and, consequently, the competitiveness of Georgia's wine sector on national and international levels.

Led by FAO's International Expert – Julio Prieto Diaz, the training series consisted of field-level practical pruning exercises, as well as theoretical presentations on the topic. While in Georgia, Mr. Prieto Diaz held educational meetings with a selected group of professional viticulturists, university students, and other wine producers and

agronomists who expressed interest in advancing their knowledge in specialized grapevine winter pruning techniques.

The skills and knowledge transferred during the training are important to ensure grapevine health and improve grape quality, safety, and yield.

The activities implemented for the selected group of 15 viticulturists followed the Training of Trainers format to ensure a spillover effect of Prieto Diaz's knowledge-sharing modules. Subsequently, the participants of these capacity-building sessions will train additional viticulturists on the notions acquired, particularly advanced winter pruning practices and formation across vineyards of varying ages. Notably, FAO plans to provide the 15 Training of Trainers participants with the opportunity to gain more in-depth knowledge on green pruning in Spring 2025.

FAO's International Expert also con-

ducted lectures for 75 students of the Georgian Technical University and Caucasus International University to equip the new generation of agronomists with the capacity to advance the country's wine sector.

Finally, Prieto Diaz led the Pruning Festival, during which around 80 Georgian professionals interested in advanced winter pruning techniques had the opportunity to do so in the field. The practical sessions were held at the Crush 525 vineyards in Saguramo, in the Mtskheta Mtianeti region of Georgia.

"FAO, through the support of the EU and Sweden, has been meeting the continued interest and demand from wineries across the country on knowledge-sharing about modern grapevine pruning techniques and the related phytosanitary implications," says Guido Agostinucci, FAO Program Manager. "These educational modules have been successfully providing the country's viticulturists with the necessary knowledge and skills to ensure better quality and safer production, both being essential for the competitiveness of the Georgian wine sector. On this specific occasion, the training series included a Training of Trainers component to foster the spread of knowledge throughout the country, while also providing access to valuable vineyard pruning insights to Georgian students who will soon enter the job market. Considering the impact that these knowledge-sharing meetings have been having, FAO plans to further expand such opportunities for the Georgian wine producers and viticulturists under ENPARD IV."

"Wine is an integral part of the Georgian identity, and it is the backbone of its agricultural sector, connected to

country's rich and diverse history. I am glad to see that viticulturists from all generations were actively engaged in these training series, since their expertise lays the foundation for a more competitive wine sector with more export opportunities, opening doors for introducing the uniqueness of Georgian culture and traditions to EU consumers," says Denis Reiss, Program Officer for Sustainable Food Systems at the Delegation of the European Union to Georgia.

ABOUT THE EUROPEAN UNION

For more than 30 years, the European Union has built a close partnership with Georgia, supporting its development through knowledge and experience sharing, expertise, innovation and financial support. The relationship between the EU and Georgia is based on shared values of peace, freedom, democracy,

human rights and inclusive economic growth. More about the EU's support in Georgia <https://eu4georgia.eu/the-european-union-in-georgia/>

ABOUT ENPARD

The European Union supports rural development in Georgia through its ENPARD Programme. Aiming to reduce rural poverty, ENPARD has been implemented since 2013. The Programme started by supporting the development of national agriculture potential. Subsequently, it also concentrated on creating economic opportunities for rural populations in Georgia. Since 2021, the Programme has also been working on improving food safety in the country, with additional support from Sweden and with FAO and the Czech Development Agency as the main implementers of this food safety component under ENPARD IV.



TBC Bank: Significant Growth in Non-cash Spending

BY MARIAM RAZMADZE

TBC Bank's non-cash spending increased by 21% compared to the same period last year, whereas the number of transactions grew by 13%, per the TBC Capital report.

The most important aspects of the report are as follows:

Groceries: Non-cash spending increased by 22% annually, with average spending per transaction at GEL16.

Hotels: Non-cash spending increased by 42%, with average spending per transaction dropping to GEL 359.

Non-Residents: Non-cash spending by non-residents increased by 39% year-



Photo: Nexi Group.

on-year. Inflation on food and non-alcoholic beverages rose to 3.1% during this period,

while the data supports that the trend shifted toward digital payments in various sectors.

Georgia's GDP Grows by 11% in Q3 2024



Photo: Global Times.

BY MARIAM RAZMADZE

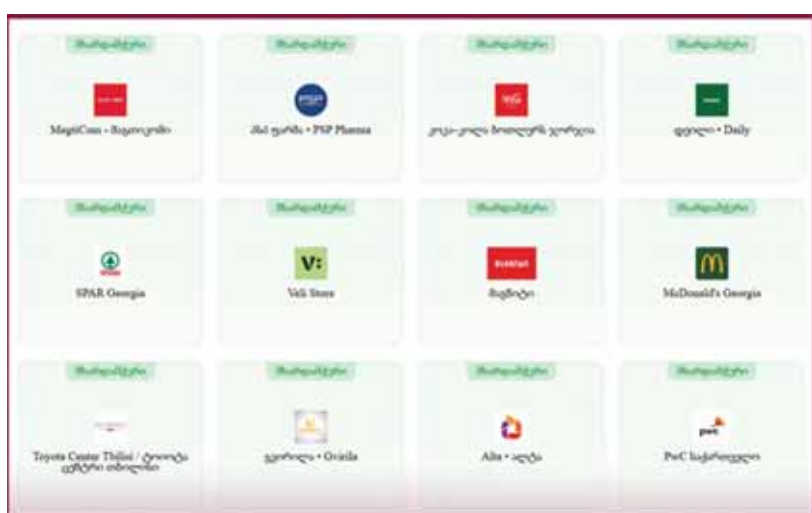
The National Statistics Office of Georgia (Geostat) has published preliminary data for the third quarter of 2024, revealing that the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) increased by 11%, reaching GEL 24,855.7 million.

The primary industries contributing to this growth are:

Information and Communication: 32.8%

Construction: 30.9%

Trade: 11.0%



Source: Mtavari Arkhi

Georgian Businesses Call for New Elections

BY MARIAM RAZMADZE

Over 800 businesses, among them MagtiCom, PSP Pharma, Daily, McDonald's, SPAR, Veli Store, Magniti, Toyota Center Tbilisi, Alta, PwC Georgia, and Gvirila, this week signed a statement, urging new elections and the release of

unlawfully detained citizens amid the recent protests in Georgia. The statement calls for the importance of quick actions to address the situation.

The statement mentions that the best solution is 'to call new elections and release those arrested during the recent events before the New Year.'

The representatives of Georgian businesses say they take 'responsibility for the fate of the country and its irreversible progress.'

European Union and CENN Joined Forces for Climate Action in Georgia

BY KESARIA KATCHARAVA

The Georgia Climate Action Project, implemented over four years with financial support from the European Union, and led by the CENN, is a groundbreaking initiative aimed at tackling Georgia's environmental challenges while strengthening civil society and promoting human rights. The project, which was executed in partnership with the Kakheti Regional Development Foundation (KRDF), Association of Chiaturians Union (ACU), Racha-Lechkhumi and Low Svaneti Agrotourism Development Association (RLS-ADA), and the Young Pedagogues' Union (YPU), was designed to focus on issues like water security and a healthy environment. Megi Gamtkistulashvili, the Project Manager, provided GEORGIA TODAY with key insights into the initiative's goals, implementation, and the lessons learned from engaging with communities across Georgia's diverse regions.

STRENGTHENING CIVIL SOCIETY FOR CLIMATE ACTION

One of the core aims of the Georgia Climate Action Project was to empower civil society organizations (CSOs) and engage them in policy advocacy, particularly in the context of climate change and environmental protection. Megi Gamtkistulashvili explains that the project was driven by the understanding that CSOs play a crucial role in shaping national policies, especially those related to climate action and human rights. "Our project focused on empowering CSOs to be able to participate effectively in national climate policy design," she says. This approach was particularly important given that many local organizations in Georgia had limited experience in policy advocacy and a weaker understanding of the complex processes involved in national-level policy-making.

The project aimed to fill gaps in CSOs' capacity, particularly in terms of policy processes, communication strategies, and collaboration with stakeholders. Megi highlighted that CSOs were traditionally service-focused, often addressing immediate community needs but not necessarily engaging in long-term policy advocacy. By building their capacity to influence decisions at the municipal and national level, the Georgia Climate Action Project sought to integrate local environmental challenges and community needs into the broader climate agenda. "Our goal was to not only support organizations in their existing work but also to help them understand how to advocate for environmental issues at the highest levels of governance," she adds.

In line with this goal, the Racha Youth Assembly contributed to the development of the Green Concept Document for Oni and Ambrolauri municipalities. This document proposed sustainable development strategies, including renewable energy and waste management initiatives, based on successful European



CSO Study Tour in Brussels. Photo: CENN

examples. It exemplified how local actors, particularly youth and community groups, can contribute meaningfully to the creation of policies that align with sustainable, climate-resilient development.

LOCAL ENGAGEMENT AND EMPOWERING GRASSROOTS MOVEMENTS

An essential component of the project's strategy was the engagement of local communities, which was a key aspect of ensuring its long-term success. Megi emphasized that, to be truly effective, the project needed to directly involve local CSOs, municipalities, and community members in addressing climate-related challenges. The initiative worked to strengthen up to 50 CSOs across Georgia, helping them develop new projects that promoted water security, climate change mitigation, and adaptation strategies.

The project also included a grant competition for local CSOs, which were encouraged to propose innovative, community-driven projects. Megi explains that local CSOs had an unparalleled understanding of their communities' needs, allowing them to develop solutions tailored to local contexts. "We gave local organizations the freedom to choose their partners and implement projects that directly addressed the issues they saw in their regions. This grassroots approach made a real difference," she says.

The grants, totaling 9,000 EUR, were awarded in two rounds, funding a total of 20 regional projects. The initiatives funded through these grants focused on a range of critical themes, including climate change mitigation, renewable energy and energy efficiency, water security, climate-smart agriculture, and ecosystem restoration. By addressing pressing environmental challenges, these projects not only improved local resilience but also raised awareness about the importance of climate action and environmental protection.

A nice example of local community engagement was a project in Ambrolauri Municipality, Racha, which focused on strengthening farmers' skills in climate-smart agriculture to support local farming communities. A total of 60 local farmers were trained in viticulture, horticulture, and beekeeping, with additional outreach through informational brochures distributed in remote villages.



Kasristskhali Kindergarten. Photo: Maiko Gagua

FOCUS ON RENEWABLE ENERGY AND CLIMATE-SMART AGRICULTURE

The project paid particular attention to promoting renewable energy and climate-smart agriculture, two sectors deemed crucial to building resilience in Georgia's rural communities. Megi explains that both sectors offer practical, sustainable solutions for local communities, particularly those in rural areas where agricultural practices heavily influence environmental outcomes.

In addition, promoting renewable energy solutions, particularly in remote areas, was a key strategy for reducing dependence on traditional energy sources. Megi emphasizes that local farmers and rural communities were encouraged to adopt energy-efficient technologies and explore alternative energy sources like solar power. "By introducing renewable energy technologies, we aimed to provide local communities with not just environmental benefits but also economic ones. These projects create local jobs and help communities become more self-sufficient," she explains.

One notable initiative led by the Kakheti NGO was the installation of a 3-kilowatt solar power station in the village of Kasristskali, Akhmeta Municipality. This project provided a reliable, sustainable energy source to the newly renovated kindergarten, addressing the community's long-standing issues with unstable power supply. In addition to providing the community with a dependable energy solution, the initiative also served as an educational tool, raising awareness about climate change and renewable energy through training sessions for local youth. The success of this project has sparked interest in similar renewable energy initiatives in other remote villages, showcasing the potential for solar power to improve infrastructure and promote sustainability in underserved areas.

Similarly, in Akhmeta Municipality, the AAIP Matani XXI led an initiative that focused on integrating solar energy into local schools, promoting climate change awareness among students. The project involved installing solar panels in five schools, conducting training sessions on climate change, and organizing an art competition on environmental issues. These efforts not only demonstrated the practical use of renewable energy but also inspired the next generation to become active participants in environmental conservation. The initiative has received widespread support, with plans to expand the program across the region.

In Kakheti, the Georgian Civil Development Association (SAGA) launched a project at Velistsikhe Public School that aimed to enhance environmental education and energy efficiency. SAGA established an energy efficiency laboratory equipped with renewable energy devices, allowing students to gain hands-on experience in sustainability. In addition to providing students with valuable knowledge, the project also trained teachers on how to integrate energy efficiency topics into their curricula. The project became a model for other schools in the region, helping to create a more informed and proactive community

around renewable energy.

ENGAGING LOCAL COMMUNITIES AND YOUTH IN CLIMATE ACTION

Another focal point of the Georgia Climate Action Project was engaging young people and educational institutions in climate action. However, a key component of the project was the establishment of Climate Action Groups (CAGs), which brought together representatives from local CSOs, municipalities, youth organizations, and educational institutions. These groups were instrumental in advocating for policy change, raising awareness, and encouraging collaborative action on climate issues. "The creation of these Climate Action Groups was one of the most important mechanisms for community involvement," Megi says. Through their active involvement in advocacy and collaboration, the CAGs played a key role in shaping local and national dialogues around climate change.

Youth empowerment was also a central aspect of the project. Megi highlights that empowering youth was not only about providing them with knowledge but also about giving them the tools to take action. The project organized youth-focused green camps, which offered a platform for young people to learn about climate action and work on environmental projects. Megi explains that the green camps provided a space for youth empowerment, helping participants to develop leadership skills and environmental initiatives. Following the camps, youth grants were awarded to support outstanding projects, providing young people with the resources to implement their ideas. "These grants allowed young people to implement their own projects, which in turn inspired broader community participation in climate initiatives," she says. A total of 60 youth participants were divided into groups to implement 12 innovative projects across their regions. Each project was valued at 1,000 EUR, enabling the participants to bring their environmental ideas to life.

OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

While the project achieved significant success, it also faced challenges, particularly related to the regional diversity within Georgia. Megi explains that the project's success varied across different regions, as some areas, like Racha, were less familiar with development initiatives. This meant that additional efforts were needed to engage local communities, build trust, and encourage participation. "In regions where there was less previous exposure to development work, we had to make extra efforts to build awareness and gain trust," she notes.

Another significant challenge came from the introduction of the "foreign agent" law, which created political tensions in the country. The law, which viewed certain CSOs as foreign agents, undermined the trust between the public and civil society. Megi explains that the project had to navigate this complicated political landscape and adapt its strategy to continue working effectively. "The law introduced new divisions, making it harder for CSOs to operate freely. But we remained committed to fostering trust and col-



Nana Nikolashvili, civics teacher at Velistsikhe Public School. Photo: Maiko Gagua

laboration, especially at the local level," she shares.

INTERNATIONAL EXPERTISE AND PARTNERSHIPS

The support from international experts and the EU partnership was vital to the project's success. Megi explains that international partners brought essential expertise in climate action, sustainable development, and civil society engagement, which greatly enhanced the project's impact. "The international community provided critical guidance and expertise, ensuring that we were using the best possible approaches in our work," she says. "In addition to the invaluable support from international experts and the EU partnership, we actively shared the experience of European organizations with representatives from regional organizations. This exchange of knowledge helped to align local strategies with best practices from across Europe, enhancing the overall impact of our climate action efforts."

The partnership with the European Union was particularly important in securing funding and enabling the scale of the project. Megi emphasizes that this partnership played a central role in ensuring the project's success, providing both financial resources and technical guidance to strengthen local efforts in climate action.

EVALUATING SUCCESS AND SUSTAINABILITY

Looking back on the project, Megi expresses pride in the empowerment of local CSOs and youth, which were the project's most significant achievements. The project successfully helped strengthen CSOs' capacity to advocate for climate policies, engage in environmental projects, and collaborate with other stakeholders. "We've built a foundation for ongoing advocacy, which will continue to shape policy and action on climate change in Georgia," she concludes.

The project's sustainability is ensured through the networks it created among CSOs, local governments, and youth groups. These multi-stakeholder networks are equipped to continue driving climate resilience efforts long after the project's formal conclusion. Megi emphasizes that CSOs and youth empowerment, would have a lasting impact. "By investing in youth and civil society, we have created a generation of climate leaders who will continue to push for change," she says.

A LEGACY OF CHANGE AND CLIMATE RESILIENCE

The Georgia Climate Action Project stands as a model of how community-driven initiatives can lead to meaningful change. By empowering local CSOs, engaging youth, and promoting renewable energy and climate-smart agriculture, the project has helped create the foundation for long-term climate resilience in Georgia. As the project concludes, its impact will continue to resonate, driven by the networks it has built, the youth it has empowered, and the policies it has influenced. Ultimately, it has laid the groundwork for a more sustainable and equitable future for Georgia, ensuring that climate action remains a priority for years to come.

UAE Embassy in Georgia, Emirates Red Crescent Organize Charitable Event to Support Those Affected by the Cold Wave in Tbilisi

BY TEAM GT

On 13 December, The UAE Embassy in Georgia, in collaboration with the Emirates Red Crescent, organized the charitable event 'Winter Clothing' to support those affected by the cold wave in Tbilisi, capital of Georgia. This initiative is part of the UAE's ongoing commitment to global humanitarian efforts.

The event involved distributing winter clothing to children at an orphanage and providing essential support to families in need. The primary objective was to ease the suffering of the most vulnerable groups during the harsh winter months. This charitable initiative underscores the UAE's dedication to humanitarian work both regionally and internationally.

Additionally, the event reflects the UAE's strong values of solidarity, social responsibility, and mutual support, while further strengthening the relationship between the UAE and Georgia in the field of humanitarian assistance.



How Schools Are Harming Our Kids



Joy Pullmann. Source: FB

OP-ED BY NUGZAR B. RUHADZE

Conventional wisdom would have it that education in general finds it difficult to catch up with the madly accelerated stream of life on the planet. This concerns any member-country of the United Nations, including Sakartvelo. Indeed, education itself lags behind, yet it still manages to drive progress, though this is often at the expense of a few geniuses who have always pushed civilizations forward. In Georgia, it has become a common saying that our education system needs change, but how many reforms can one system endure before the expected results are truly achieved? The Georgian education system has undergone several reforms, some sweeping, but none have brought a diploma closer to actual well-being. Nobody has managed so far to put education where the money is. It remains largely education for education's sake. It's said that

things are not much better elsewhere, so it might be useful to look at the situation in, for example, the United States.

Joy Pullmann is managing editor of The Federalist, and an education research fellow at the Heartland Institute in America. She has taught at grade levels from preschool to high school, tutored college students, and has written a public-speaking curriculum. In one of her recent articles, Pullman ardently advises her fellow Americans that the lies spread about US education are so flagrant that the misled American society should make an immediate decision to stop listening to the popular gibberish, as these lies harm both children and their parents simultaneously. One of the worst habits of American parents, created by these lies, is that they feel quite comfortable when their children receive increasingly frequent diagnoses of ADHD—Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, one of the most common mental disorders affecting children. Specialists say that symptoms of ADHD include inattention (an inability to keep focus); hyperactivity

(excess movement that is irrelevant to the academic process); and impulsivity, meaning hurried performances happening momentarily without any forethought. It is said that one in five boys are currently suffering the problem. Joy Pullmann connects the quality of education to future possibilities, such as "delaying life milestones like marriage and buying a house, entering a crippled workforce, and facing the biggest debt in the history of humankind while receiving no government benefits in return." Below, she reveals the lies she believes are being propagated and puts them forward for discussion by the unsuspecting American public, whom she urges to remain alert. She argues that these lies serve as driving forces behind education policy: most Americans believe they live in a rich country, that suburban schools are

of high quality, that poverty is the root of America's education problems, that schools should teach generic skills like critical thinking and real-world application, that teachers are well-prepared professionals, that education is nonpartisan and moral, and that practically everyone should go to college. While some of these "lies" may align with our reality here in Georgia, that is not the point I wish to emphasize. What I want to underline first is that there is an American out there with the courage and qualifications to offer something truly useful and specific to her people. This example is both enviable and deserving of emulation.

The article reads on: "the impetus that unites these lies is that they promote ideas people want to believe, but lies, however pleasant for one's peace of mind

in the short run, damage people; those who run our schools say they care about children but year after year they continue to perpetuate systems that are demonstrably harmful to our kids. Those damaged kids will one day grow up to be citizens who are ill-prepared to face our nation's challenges."

These golden words may very well be used to describe the situation in Sakartvelo, but again, my main conclusive deduction is that serious change is ripe in the system of education, in the attitude of parents and children, in balancing the roles of government and society, and finally, in the style of teaching the kids how to treat time and information, analyzing the world experience, like the one presented in this piece. The small world gives us a huge chance to become better. Let's grab it!



A classroom. Source: skynews



This Delicate Balance

BLOG BY TONY HANMER

This delicate balance between the depressing, shocking daily news in Georgia, and the daily foraging for art in the details to pull me back to joy.

Frost has come. Great for me, as I head off towards the Mtkvari River in search of ice in both puddles and calm inlets. The pond reeds I shot with their reflections are giving way to this new subject; the reflections will temporarily vanish as surface water solidifies, inch by inch.

I am joined by several local stray dogs; none of whom are ferocious, just inquisitive. Some bark a bit as I approach or pass by, but a few stay with me on this jaunt, and aren't threatening. I wish they wouldn't hang around: I'm not a dog person much, although neither do I fear them. But they happily, nonchalantly dash through the delicate ice I am trying to capture with my camera; or they just intrude into the frame. I can't shoo them off, so I resign myself to having them along.

Meanwhile, the thousands of protesters have to put up with this cold plunge, some of them out on Rustaveli Avenue and other locations all night. I sympathize. My ice-seeking expeditions are limited to mornings, before the sun can melt the unbelievable artistry wrought by cold, wind or lack of it, water, and leaves. Those trying to out-wait the so far implacable government have a much longer, harder slog.

Miraculously, the dogs don't crash their uncaring paws through the very best ice find of the day, some puddles down at the river's edge. I shoot away as fast as I can, not believing the small spectacles displayed in a foot or two of frozen water, 1 mm or less thick, some of it so delicate that a single breath would dissolve it. Chaos and order mingle with uninhibited abandon, each a foil for the other. Is there a metaphor here too?

I think I've got it all, and am satisfied. Next morning, however, as the temperature has remained below freezing and the wind has dropped, I find new jack-

pots of ice glory, again where water's and wind's motion are absent, letting the ice do its thing and transform everything into landscapes unimaginable, unearthly. This day the dogs are mercifully quite absent, and I relish the opportunity to work unhindered.

A new president is chosen. The previous one refuses to concede. The stand-off continues. The tension is high.

As I walk back home in a daze of visions, I revisit some of the puddles closer to "civilization". Here, autumn-hued leaves of the surrounding trees lie captures in bubbly layers of ice; and I realize that

some of my finished frames will have to be in color, not the monochrome I've been using up to now to bring the eye to view only form and contrast.

Out there, on the streets, a silent or furious war is waging between police/ unidentified masked men and protesters/onlookers. Tactics change. Lasers and fireworks are outlawed, as are protests wearing any kind of mask. Arrests, beatings and simple torture are employed. Presidential medals are also given to some of the beleaguered journalists. New apps identify trouble spots in real-time. Tech is available to both sides in ways

unheard of just a few years ago. Drones overhead capture this unique viewpoint.

Now, as I write this, the temperature has risen a bit again (it was -25 in our Svan village of Etseri a few days ago, a cold we never saw there!). I have time to process and finish the several hundred ice images I shot recently.

The protests continue, as do the refusals to back down. We wait, and pray, and hope, for what needs to happen. I've been in Georgia long enough to remember the end of the Shevardnadze era (though not its worst point): dark, dangerous city, long power outages, kerosene

heaters, corrupt police. Please, no return to that; or to something much worse.

Merry (western) Christmas, Georgia. Peace on earth, goodwill to all.

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



The Phantom Ticket: Art, Resistance, and Solidarity in the Face of Crisis

BY IVAN NECHAEV

In the midst of political strikes and protests sweeping Tbilisi, a unique phenomenon has emerged in the cultural sphere: the “phantom ticket.” Inspired by the principle of solidarity, this initiative allows audiences to support artists and institutions by purchasing tickets for events that will never take place. What might seem a symbolic gesture at first glance reveals deeper cultural, economic, and sociological dimensions. By examining the example of Tbilisi’s artistic community and the global history of art and resistance, we uncover how such initiatives blend creativity and activism, shaping collective memory and reinforcing social cohesion.

TBILISI’S CULTURAL CRISIS: STRIKES, PROTESTS, AND PRECARIETY

The weeks leading up to Christmas and New Year are typically a golden period for artists and cultural institutions in Tbilisi, as festive performances, concerts, and exhibitions attract full houses. How-



As Tbilisi’s streets fill with protests and its theaters remain dark, the city’s cultural workers remind us that art is not merely a commodity but a vital part of public life

ever, ongoing protests have brought cultural life to a standstill. Artists have chosen to halt performances, not wishing to distract the public from their shared cause.

Yet this choice comes with devastating financial consequences. Recognizing the precarious position of many cultural workers, the Union of Musicians launched a donation campaign to provide financial relief. Similarly, ticketing platform Biletebi created a new section where patrons could purchase tickets for canceled events, with all proceeds going to the institutions involved. The “phantom ticket” initiative has become a symbol of resilience, showing how collective action can mitigate economic hardship and preserve cultural life during a crisis.

PHANTOM TICKETS IN CONTEXT: HISTORICAL AND GLOBAL PARALLELS

The concept of phantom tickets resonates with historical and global examples of creative resistance, where art has served as both a tool for survival and a form of protest. From wartime solidarity campaigns to digital crowdfunding efforts, the use of symbolic transactions to support cultural causes is well established.

During World War II, underground theater flourished in occupied Europe as a means of resistance. Performances often relied on secret ticket sales and donations, with audiences paying not only for entertainment, but also to support artists who risked their lives to defy oppressive regimes. In Nazi-occupied Poland, for instance, clandestine performances of national plays became a powerful act of cultural preservation and defiance. Tbilisi’s phantom tickets echo this tradition, transforming the act of buying a ticket into a statement of solidarity. Just as wartime theater audiences sought to uphold cultural identity, today’s Georgian audiences demonstrate their commitment to cultural survival amid political upheaval.

The rise of digital platforms has also enabled new forms of cultural solidarity. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, many theaters, orchestras, and art galleries turned to online crowdfunding to sustain operations. In New York, the Public Theater launched a “Digital Pass” program, allowing patrons to donate in exchange for access to virtual performances. Similarly, Berlin’s Club Com-



Biletebi Facebook page

mission encouraged supporters to buy “tickets” for livestreamed DJ sets, raising funds to prevent the closure of iconic clubs like Berghain. The phantom tickets in Tbilisi align with this global trend, but with a crucial difference: rather than offering a digital substitute for canceled events, they emphasize the symbolic act of purchasing a ticket as a gesture of solidarity, even in the absence of a performance.

THE SOCIOLOGY OF PHANTOM TICKETS: RITUAL, SYMBOLISM, AND SOLIDARITY

The phenomenon of phantom tickets can be understood through the lens of sociological theories on ritual, symbolism, and solidarity. Émile Durkheim’s concept of “collective effervescence” highlights how shared rituals foster social cohesion. In this case, the act of buying a phantom ticket becomes a communal ritual, uniting audiences and artists in a shared commitment to cultural and political causes.

Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital also offers insight. By purchasing phantom tickets, patrons signal their investment in cultural life as a collective good, rather than a commodity. This act redefines the economic relationship between artists and audiences, emphasizing mutual responsibility over trans-

actional exchange.

ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS: ART AS LABOR AND PUBLIC GOOD

The phantom ticket initiative also raises important questions about the economic role of art. Cultural labor is often undervalued, viewed as secondary to “productive” industries. Yet crises like the Tbilisi protests reveal how deeply societies depend on cultural workers—not only for entertainment, but also for identity, resilience, and solidarity.

Globally, governments have adopted various measures to support cultural workers during crises. In Canada, the Emergency Support Fund for Cultural, Heritage, and Sport Organizations provided financial relief to artists during the pandemic. In Georgia, however, support for cultural institutions remains limited, making grassroots initiatives like phantom tickets all the more vital.

PHANTOM TICKETS AS RESISTANCE: TRANSFORMING ECONOMIC LOSS INTO COLLECTIVE ACTION

Phantom tickets are not merely a response to economic loss; they are a form of resistance. By refusing to perform during protests, Tbilisi’s artists assert the primacy of public interests over personal gain. The phantom ticket initiative trans-

forms this sacrifice into a shared burden, allowing audiences to actively participate in the preservation of cultural life.

Moreover, the initiative challenges conventional notions of economic value. A canceled performance typically represents a financial loss, but phantom tickets reframe this loss as an opportunity for collective action. This approach echoes broader trends in social economies, where value is measured not only in monetary terms, but also in social impact.

THE ENDURING POWER OF CULTURAL SOLIDARITY

The phantom ticket phenomenon in Tbilisi is a testament to the resilience and ingenuity of the city’s cultural community. By turning canceled performances into opportunities for solidarity, Georgian artists and audiences demonstrate the enduring power of art to unite, inspire, and resist.

As Tbilisi’s streets fill with protests and its theaters remain dark, the city’s cultural workers remind us that art is not merely a commodity but a vital part of public life. Whether through canceled performances, donation campaigns, or symbolic transactions, the phantom ticket initiative offers a powerful example of how creativity and solidarity can sustain cultural life in times of crisis.



Still from Tengiz Abuladze’s ‘Other People’s Children.’ Photo: GNFC.

Restored ‘Other People’s Children’ to Premiere at Rotterdam Festival

BY MARIAM RAZMZADZE

30 to February 9, 2025.

The restoration, completed in 2023, was supported by GNFC and the Georgian Ministry of Culture and Sports. Negotiations between the festival’s representatives and the GNFC resulted in its world premiere being held in Rotterdam. The screening will be part of the ‘Cinema Regained’ section, showcasing restored and rediscovered masterpieces.

The Georgian National Film Center (GNFC) announced that the restored version of Tengiz Abuladze’s classic ‘Other People’s Children’ will premiere at the 54th Rotterdam International Film Festival, from January



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