



# GEORGIA TODAY

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## Belarus in the Caucasus? Luke Coffey on US Sanctions and Georgian Dream's Propaganda & Missteps

INTERVIEW BY VAZHA TAVBERIDZE

**M**any key supporters of President-Elect Donald Trump are the ones who are backing these pieces of legislation in Congress. There is no deep state in the US State Department that's trying to undermine US-Georgian relations, because this is a bipartisan issue. So this is just Georgian Dream propaganda, - says defense and security expert Luke Coffey, Senior Fellow at the Hudson Institute. Long-time Georgia-watcher, Coffey sat down with Radio Free Europe/RL's Georgian Service to answer our questions on the US's recent legislative efforts, including the Megobari Act and the "Georgian Nightmare Non-Recognition Act," as well as what we might expect from Trump's administration with regards Georgia, once he is sworn in.

**WOULD IT BE FAIR TO SAY THAT WE'VE REACHED A POINT WHERE US-GEORGIA RELATIONS ARE AT THEIR LOWEST SINCE GEORGIA GAINED INDEPENDENCE?**

Absolutely, yes, we are at that point. But I'm an optimist, and I like to look at these relationships in the longer term. I'm confident we can get this relationship back on track if both sides pursue the correct policies.



Continued on page 4 Luke Coffey. Source: Hudson Institute



Orthodox Christmas Eve inn Sameba Cathedral. Source: FB

## New Year Messages of Love and Faith from Georgia's Patriarch and PM

BY TEAM GT

On Monday, as the Orthodox Church celebrated Christmas according to the Julian calendar, Ilia II, the Catholicos Patriarch of Georgia's Orthodox Christian Church, delivered his annual Christmas message, affirming that Christianity has been an integral part of Georgia's identity, a "strong civilizational choice" that remains a central pillar of the nation's consciousness. The Patriarch spoke of the humility of Christ, who "descends to earth today, offering the light of life to all who recognize they are created in God's image and seek salvation." He highlighted that the faith has been passed down since Adam, teaching Georgians they are not mere accidental beings, but are destined for eternal life and unity with God.

Christ, the Patriarch said, brings "the heavenly laws" and the virtues of "heavenly citizens" into our lives, "helping us to see sin and guiding us to redemption through repentance." The embrace of Christianity, which led Georgians to reject paganism, is more than a tradition, he said—it is a conscious, foundational decision that has shaped their national character.

The Patriarch emphasized the calling of Christians to serve others, echoing the mission of Christ, and urged that love and loyalty to others lead us to God. He also reminded believers that any talents or gifts they possess come from God, and it is their responsibility to use them wisely.

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Kob-

akhidze echoed similar themes in his New Year message, decrying efforts by "certain forces" attempting to sow division, and calling for a counter-response rooted in love. He stressed the importance of faith, the love of God, and mutual love among people, which, according to him, are under threat by ideologies that distance individuals from both faith and their nation's traditional values. He called on all citizens to stand firm in protecting these beliefs.

Kobakhidze also reflected on Georgia's resilience throughout the challenges of 2024, stressing that the nation had triumphed despite external pressures. In his New Year message, he emphasized the importance of unity in defending Georgia's peace, sovereignty, and European future. He thanked the country's diverse contributors—educators, scientists, soldiers, and citizens—for their roles in securing the nation's progress and success.

He also celebrated Georgia's remarkable achievements in sports, citing the national football team's historic qualification for the European Championship, as well as the nation's best-ever performances in the Olympics, Paralympics, and various other disciplines. The Prime Minister praised the spirit of the Georgian people, underscoring the importance of nurturing this strength for the future.

Concluding his message, Kobakhidze highlighted Georgia's growing economic development, underscoring the solid foundation being laid for the nation's prosperity. Looking forward to 2025, he expressed confidence that the year would see even greater success, stressing that "where love prevails, no external adversary can defeat the Georgian people."

## OSCE PA President Postpones Visit to Georgia

BY TEAM GT

The decision by OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE PA) President Pia Kauma to postpone her planned visit to Georgia was praised by the country's fifth president, Salome Zurbishvili. Zurbishvili called Kauma's choice "very wise" and expressed appreciation for the OSCE PA President's consideration of the concerns surrounding Georgian democracy. In a tweet, she emphasized, "The Georgian people do appreciate your taking into account the concerns and hopes of Georgian democracy. We need OSCE more than ever! And new elections!"

Kauma made the announcement after several discussions, explaining that her visit would be rescheduled to a time when the OSCE PA's involvement could be more impactful. "Following discus-

sions and after close consideration, I've decided to postpone my visit to Georgia until a time when the OSCE PA's engagement would be most effective. We remain ready to listen to all voices and offer assistance in implementing election recommendations," Kauma wrote on X.

In an interview with Radio Tavisupleba, Kauma further elaborated on her decision, revealing that three opposition parties had sent her a letter requesting the postponement. They expressed a desire for certain conditions to be met before her visit, including the setting of a date for new elections and the release of detained protesters. Kauma acknowledged the opposition's concerns but noted the challenge in meeting these specific demands at this point. She also shared that Georgian government officials had been open to discussions and were prepared to address all recommendations put forward by the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR).

## Georgian Parliament Speaker Papuashvili Looks Ahead to 2025 as a Pivotal Year for Peace and Unity



Members of the Georgian Dream party on Orthodox Christmas Eve, Speaker Papuashvili among them (right). Source: FB

BY TEAM GT

Georgian Parliament Speaker Shalva Papuashvili, in his New Year message, reflected on the achievements of 2024 while looking ahead to a potentially "pivotal" 2025. He hailed the past year as one of "numerous triumphs" and expressed hope that the coming year would be the one where Georgia achieves its "ultimate victory."

Papuashvili's message expressed strong hope for the future, focusing on two main goals: peace and unity. He acknowledged that the past year had been particularly challenging, shaped by the global pandemic, ongoing conflicts, and shifting

geopolitical realities. "The challenges of 2024 have reminded us of the fragility of our world," he said. "But in these times, we have gained invaluable insights into the value of peace, wisdom, and foresight."

Reflecting on Georgia's past and its future, Papuashvili underscored the importance of protecting the legacy passed down through the nation's ancestors. "We have inherited a rich history, a vibrant present, and a promising future," he said. "It is our duty to cherish and safeguard what has been entrusted to us."

The Speaker also emphasized that Georgia's path forward must remain firmly rooted in the pursuit of peace. "The only wise course of action is an unwavering commitment to our peace policy," he declared. However, he also

noted that peace must be accompanied by unity. "Unity has always been the bedrock of our strength," Papuashvili said. "When Georgians stand together, we are unstoppable, and that strength leads us to victory."

Looking to the future, he expressed confidence that 2025 would be a turning point. "While 2024 brought important victories, the most significant triumphs lie ahead," he said. "2025 will be the year when Georgia strengthens its sovereignty, fortifies its national identity, and achieves lasting peace."

In closing, Papuashvili called for a united effort to ensure Georgia's prosperity and future. "In the coming year, we must work together, consolidating our efforts to secure a brighter and more unified future," he urged.

## Ukraine Latest: Ukraine Hits Russian Oil Base as State of Emergency Declared



Image source: FB

COMPILED BY ANA DUMBADZE

A state of emergency has been declared in Engels, a western Russian city, following a drone strike by Ukraine on a Russian oil base located approximately 600 kilometers from the frontline. The Ukrainian government confirmed that the attack targeted the Kristall oil base, which has been supplying fuel to Moscow's bomber planes. Ukrainian officials explained that this strike aimed to reduce Russia's ability to strike Ukrainian positions, while also creating logistical difficulties for Russian strategic aviation.

Ukraine's presidential adviser, Oleksandr Kamyshin, stated that the attack was carried out using long-range Ukrainian-made capabilities. Roman Busargin, the regional governor, reported that both Engels and the neighboring Saratov city were subjected to a large-scale drone attack, which resulted in a fire at an industrial site. Fortunately, no casualties have been reported as a result of the strike. Busargin did not confirm whether the Engels airbase itself was targeted in the attack.

This assault on Russian oil infrastructure is viewed as part of Ukraine's ongoing efforts to weaken Russia's warfighting capacity, especially targeting critical resources. The move aligns with Ukraine's broader strategy to disrupt Russian military operations from a distance, even as heavy fighting continues along the frontlines.

### ZAPORIZHZHIA MISSILE ATTACK CLAIMS LIVES

The southern Ukrainian city of Zaporizhzhia was the target of a Russian missile strike on January 8, 2025, resulting in at least 13 civilian deaths and around 30 injuries. Footage shared by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky on his Telegram channel shows civilians lying on the streets amidst rubble, with emergency responders rushing to provide assistance and evacuate the injured. The attack, which occurred in the afternoon, involved glide bombs launched by Russian forces. At least two bombs struck residential buildings, causing widespread destruction in the area.

Regional Governor Ivan Fedorov had warned earlier in the day that the Zaporizhzhia region was at risk of high-speed missile attacks, and the warning proved

to be accurate. Zelensky condemned the aerial bombing, calling it "the cruelest act" and stressing the need for international pressure on Russia. "The protection of lives in Ukraine must be supported," he said, emphasizing that only through strength could a lasting peace be achieved.

### RUSSIAN TERRITORY EXPANSION CONTINUES

A recent war tracker update revealed that Russian forces captured an additional 0.5% of Ukrainian territory in 2024. This brings Russia's total control to approximately 18.14% of Ukraine's territory, including the Crimean Peninsula and parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions that were already occupied by Russian troops before the 2022 invasion.

The report also highlighted that much of the Russian territorial gains in 2024 were concentrated in eastern and southern Ukraine, where fighting has remained intense. The war tracker noted that while Russia's territorial advances have slowed in recent months, Moscow's forces continue to solidify their control in key regions. Meanwhile, Ukrainian forces have been engaged in counteroffensives, attempting to reclaim lost ground in areas that are strategically significant to both sides.

This steady loss of territory has contributed to the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Ukraine, with millions of civilians displaced and many regions suffering from the ongoing conflict. As the war approaches its third year, both Ukrainian and Russian forces are bracing for further escalation, particularly in the face of continued international pressure and military support.

# New Year in Tbilisi – One for the History Books

BLOG BY MARIAM AVAKOVA

**N**ew Year 2025 in Tbilisi, Georgia, will indeed go down in history as a historic and unforgettable celebration, so unique and awe-inspiring that it truly was an experience not to be missed. It delivered a once-in-a-lifetime experience, unmatched in its grandeur, leaving an indelible mark on both the country and the world.

There was an ironic twist to the timing of this grand event. Prior to the celebration, the newly elected Georgian Dream president of Georgia, Mikheil Kavelishvili, in his inaugural speech at Parliament, highlighted the profound cultural significance of the Georgian "supra." He stated, "The Georgian 'supra' is not only an expression of our traditions and attitudes, but also an immaterial cultural heritage monument, which best shows our - Georgians' - attitude toward peace."

The Georgian "supra" is a profound symbol of cultural heritage, representing more than just hospitality and celebration. As a UNESCO-recognized tradition, every supra begins with a toast to God and peace, reminding everyone that harmony is essential for a good life. In Georgian culture, shared meals are acts of spiritual and communal significance that bring people together in mutual respect and understanding.

In the context of Georgia's history, the creativity of the Georgian people has always been extraordinary, particularly during these protests advocating for new elections, the freedom of political prisoners, and closer ties between Georgia and the EU. Despite the tensions, the festive and warrior spirit of the nation

remained strong. In this very spirit, on December 31, peaceful protesters set up a long stretch of festive tables, known as a supra, all the way from Freedom Square to Rustaveli Avenue. The tables were decorated in the red and white colors of the Georgian flag. This symbolic act divided the street into two, like the two banks of the Mtkvari River, showcasing unity and resilience. The left and right sides of the tables were more than just places to eat: they were spaces for connecting, respecting traditions, and celebrating shared values.

It was not just an impressive New Year celebration, but a magical and serene evening that will be cherished for a lifetime - an experience that can be passed down through generations. As I wandered along the tables, observing the people and the lively atmosphere, I was struck by the undeniable sense of community. It wasn't just a celebration; it was a moment that transcended the ordinary - a true testament to connection and shared humanity.

The white tablecloths began to be filled with the public's messages and heartfelt wishes, turning the area into a lively canvas of creativity and connection. It became an engaging performance, uniting children who enthusiastically drew and wrote, while adults left their hopes for Georgia's future.

Reaching the section with red tablecloths, the atmosphere shifted. This was where the true festivity began - the supra. Everyone contributed their homemade food and drinks, with wine taking center stage, embodying the spirit of sharing and community; the supra a living, breathing tapestry of unity, spontaneity, and joy that would leave a lasting mark on everyone present. It was inspiring to see how this vibrant expression of solidarity

complemented other powerful acts, such as the human chain that had been created along the entire Mtkvari River on December 28th.

The citizens of Georgia joined together to dance beneath the sparkling New Year decorations in the city, their movements illuminated by lights evoking the colors of the EU flag. It was a magical sight - a vivid reminder that even in the face of challenges, there is always room for joy, hope, and a profound sense of shared humanity.

Near the Kashveti Church, traditional Georgian dances unfolded, creating a mesmerizing scene that captured the essence of the nation's culture. What made the moment even more remarkable was the presence of the President of the People, Salome Zurabishvili, who not only observed the dances, but also participated in the public supra. She graciously accepted a glass of wine offered by strangers, a gesture that symbolized unity and solidarity during this historic celebration.

Another unforgettable highlight came from the Evangelical-Baptist Church of Georgia, whose parishioners warmly distributed sweet rice and hot mushroom pilaf, a simple yet heartfelt gesture of generosity. It was delightful to witness tourists enthusiastically savoring these local dishes, immersing themselves in the rich traditions of Georgian hospitality.

The celebration wasn't solely a gathering of the capital's residents - it was a convergence of people from all corners of Georgia. Among the crowd, I noticed activists from the Tsnori region who had brought their own homemade churchkhela and tataras, adding a heartfelt regional touch to the event. Notable among them were the founders of Knowledge Cafe



The Rustaveli Supra. Photo by Ezz Gaber

Nana Bagalishvili, and Zura Beroshvili, the owner of Terrace Signaghi, and Ketil Molashvili, a key contributor to the platform HappyEUYear, which was established to support local entrepreneurs. This platform played a pivotal role in providing an alternative for those who chose not to participate in the Christmas Village in Orbeliani Square.


A striking contrast to the celebration on Rustaveli was that Christmas Village. As I passed through it, I noticed a quieter, more subdued atmosphere, with mostly tourists and Indian students wandering the area. Many of the market booths were empty, offering a stark difference from the lively, vibrant energy on Rustaveli Avenue. This juxtaposition added an intriguing layer to the evening, emphasizing how different spaces within the city reflected unique facets of the New Year festivities.

The presence of such diverse individuals and regional representatives made the event feel like a true celebration of Georgian unity and culture, transcending the boundaries of geography and bringing everyone together in a shared spirit of joy and community around the public Georgian Supra, which marked the first time in Georgian history. The

supra is more than just a meal - its deep roots in both history and community continue to be a timeless symbol of the spirit that binds the people of Georgia together. This landmark event not only showcased the richness of Georgian traditions, but also highlighted the power of collective celebration in fostering solidarity and strengthening the cultural identity of the nation.


Another magical feeling was observing people bringing toys and placing them under the Christmas Tree near Parliament. This initiative, led by educator and philosopher Levan Gambashidze, aimed to collect toys and distribute them to children in need.




It was a night that reminded us all of the importance of shaping our collective spirit and cultural identity. The celebration stands as a testament to how even small acts of involvement can contribute to the greater cause of building a future where Georgia and the European Union continue to grow together, in peace and prosperity. This extraordinary and meaningful New Year celebration will surely be remembered as a milestone in Georgia's journey toward a European future, reflecting the strength of our shared hopes, dreams, and determination.




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# Belarus in the Caucasus? Luke Coffey on US Sanctions and Georgian Dream's Propaganda & Missteps

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## DO YOU EXPECT THE GEORGIAN DREAM (GD) GOVERNMENT TO COOPERATE WITH YOU IN THAT REGARD?

No, I have low expectations for the Georgian Dream government to do this. I think the best case scenario is that the Georgian Dream government will offer some concessions to the legitimate political opposition and to civil society that can restore trust inside of Georgia, and then maybe in the longer term, when there is a democratic change of government, then we can get the US-Georgian relationship back on track.

## WHAT WOULD THOSE CONCESSIONS LOOK LIKE?

Well, at this point, it's difficult to see any of these concessions happening. Right now, Georgian Dream seems very confident in what they're doing, mainly because they've had such a weak response from the West, and in particular from Washington. But I think the most reasonable and best course of action for the Georgian Dream government would be to acknowledge that there have been some mistakes, acknowledge that the Russian law probably wasn't the best piece of legislation to suit Georgian society, and then call for new elections. But I'm not confident that they will do this. As an American, of course, I'm always optimistic about these matters, but I do realize that the situation on the ground points toward a very difficult situation going forward, not only for Georgia and the Georgian people, but also for the US-Georgian relationship.

## YOU MENTIONED WEAKNESS FROM WASHINGTON. CAN YOU ELABORATE ON THAT? WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN DONE AND WAS NOT?

In many ways, it was similar to Biden's approach to Ukraine. It was always to do just enough to make it look like something is being done, but never do enough to be decisive, and never do enough on time. For example, when it comes to the sanctions that the US had to put on certain officials in Georgia, or the travel bans or even the public statements, they have always come too little too late, so they haven't been able to have a meaningful impact on the situation.

## THE MEGOBARI ACT WAS REINTRODUCED IN CONGRESS LAST WEEK, THEN THIS WEEK WE GOT THE BIPARTISAN "GEORGIAN NIGHTMARE NON-RECOGNITION ACT." IF ENFORCED, THE LATTER WOULD EFFECTIVELY MEAN THE US DOES NOT RECOGNIZE THE GD GOVERNMENT. WHAT HAPPENS IF THAT BECOMES A REALITY?

Well, I recently wrote that I think we



I think we should downgrade our diplomatic representation in Georgia to a chargé d'affaires



Georgian Dream party members. Source: gov.ge

should downgrade our diplomatic representation in Georgia. I think we should reduce it to chargé d'affaires. For too long, the Georgian Dream government has openly criticized US ambassadors, and there have been no consequences. But, in practical terms, if we don't recognize Georgian Dream as being the legitimate government, that means America's attention, focus, and resources need to be on those who we think are legitimate, and that is the Georgian people. We have seen a similar situation in Belarus, where the US has focused on civil society organizations, non-governmental organizations, legitimate political opposition groups, and we've supported them in Warsaw, in Vilnius. We have to get creative on how we do this.

## WHAT MESSAGE DOES DOWNGRADING DIPLOMATIC REPRESENTATION CONVEY? "GD OFFENDS OUR AMBASSADORS, SO WE'LL NOT HAVE AN AMBASSADOR AT ALL, SO THAT THEY CANNOT OFFEND THEM"? DOES THAT SEND A MESSAGE OF STRENGTH, DO YOU THINK?

Well, it sends a message that the US doesn't recognize the government as being legitimate; that it's not important enough to warrant an ambassador. And, let's be honest, it's not as if US ambassadors in Georgia in recent years have been all that effective. So in practical terms, I'm not sure what it would actually change on the ground, but on geo-strategic terms, I think it would send the right message.

## AND YET, IT WOULD GIVE THE RULING PARTY A PLATFORM TO SPIN THEIR NARRATIVE ON: "WE SCARED THE US AWAY. LOOK HOW STRONG WE ARE!"

Yes, I know they will spin this for propaganda reasons, or they will say that the ambassador was so weak, they were called back to Washington. But the truth is, for too long, the US ambassador has been disrespected, slighted, offended by Georgian Dream officials. And it was mainly because of the weakness of the Biden administration that it was allowed to happen. The way Georgian Dream officials were speaking about US ambassadors was not how a US partner should talk about an American ambassador. And I think the Georgian Dream officials



It's in America's interest to support the Georgian people through this very difficult time

should understand that this is not going to be tolerated under Donald Trump. I mean, this is a guy who is talking about annexing Canada, okay? Do you think for a second that he is going to tolerate any level of disrespect to an individual that he might appoint to be ambassador to Georgia? Of course not.

## WHY THEN, INSTEAD OF DOWNGRADING, NOT APPOINT SOMEONE WHO WOULD BE FORTHRIGHT AND GIVE IT BACK AS GOOD AS THEY GET?

Yeah, possibly. That could happen. It would be a good approach. My [Hudson Institute] paper, where I suggested the downgrading, was focused on the Biden administration, knowing that when January 20th comes around, there's going to be a clean slate, a new beginning. President Trump can reassess the situation and decide if an ambassador is warranted, but I haven't heard any speculation on if the ambassador will be replaced or by whom. Honestly, I don't think it's being discussed.

## THE BELARUS-LIKE SCENARIO YOU MENTIONED IS NOT EXACTLY ENTICING FOR GEORGIA, AS, DESPITE ALL THE ENERGY AND FUNDS THE US HAS SPENT ON THE BELARUSIAN OPPOSITION AND CIVIL SOCIETY, LUKASHENKO STILL REIGNS SUPREME. NOT EXACTLY A DESIRABLE OUTCOME, IS IT?

No, it's not desirable for the Georgian people at all. If I was a Georgian, I would not want to have a Belarus in the Caucasus. But the sad truth is, this is the way

it's going. Look at the crackdown on civil society. Slowly but surely, this is the way Georgian Dream is taking Georgia.

## ABSOLUTELY. BUT YOU'RE IN CONFRONTATION WITH GEORGIAN DREAM, NOT THE GEORGIAN PEOPLE. IF YOU CHOOSE THIS BELARUS SCENARIO, HOW IS IT BENEFITING GEORGIAN PEOPLE WHEN IT BENEFITS GEORGIAN DREAM?

Well, you would have to then support Georgian civil society, Georgian media, and so on...

## JUST LIKE YOU DID IN BELARUS. DID IT WORK OUT WELL?

It's still ongoing. There's no silver bullet, there's no quick fix. As much as I wish there was a quick fix, there isn't. And a lot of this will have to be down to the Georgian people themselves.

## ARE THERE ANY LESSONS FROM BELARUS' EXPERIENCE THAT THE WEST, AND PARTICULARLY THE US, HAS LEARNED AND CAN NOW EMPLOY IN RELATION TO GEORGIA?

To be decisive and not to dither, and not to base your policy on hope, but instead base it on action and try to develop and engineer an outcome that suits the interests of the United States, but first and foremost of the Georgian people. If the Georgian people wanted to get into Russia's orbit, that's their business, but you can see on the streets that this is not the case. And therefore, I think it's in America's interest to support the Georgian people through this very difficult time.

## ACCORDING TO THE ABOVEMENTIONED BILL, THE US WOULD RECOGNIZE SALOME ZURABISHVILI AS THE ONLY LEGITIMATE LEADER IN GEORGIA. DOES THIS EFFECTIVELY TURN HER INTO A SORT OF TSIKHANOUSKAYA AT HOME, EVEN THOUGH SHE HAS EXPLICITLY SAID SHE DOESN'T WISH TO PLAY SUCH A ROLE?

Well, I think we have to take a step back and understand how US foreign policy is made. Congress sets the parameters, establishes the terms, and then they require the executive branch to act on them. The executive branch has a lot of

leeway on how they interpret the legislation, and on how they want to implement it. The "Georgian Nightmare Non-Recognition Act" will, as it's written in the latest drafts I've seen, do exactly as you just outlined. But how this translates into US policy might be a different story.

## ONTO THE MEGOBARI ACT. ON WHAT BASIS WOULD GEORGIA'S EVENTUAL RETURN TO THAT DEMOCRATIC PATH BE JUDGED? WOULD GEORGIAN DREAM'S REMOVAL BE ENOUGH TO AUTOMATICALLY SECURE SOMETHING LIKE VISA-FREE TRAVEL IN THE US?

Well, it depends on the circumstances in which they are removed. The best course of action is for Georgian Dream to be removed within the existing legal constitutional framework. But, ultimately, this is a matter for the Georgian people to decide. I'm always very careful on this issue, because the propagandists will say that "Luke Coffey is organizing the next color revolution."

## OR THAT YOU ARE A LEADING MEMBER OF THE GLOBAL WAR PARTY.

Yes, which is complete nonsense. So, ultimately, this is a matter for the Georgian people. If Georgian Dream is over, then, of course, we can start the process of getting that relationship back on track.

## THE "GLOBAL WAR PARTY" AND "DEEP STATE" ARE CORNERSTONES OF GD'S NARRATIVE. THIS WEEK THEY ACCUSED REP. JOE WILSON OF BEING THE EMBODIMENT OF "DEEP STATE." IS THIS THE SAME "DEEP STATE" THAT PRESIDENT-ELECT TRUMP REPEATEDLY MENTIONED IN HIS PRE-ELECTION SPEECHES?

No, not at all. This is just Georgian Dream trying to use misinformation, propaganda, to get in good favor with President-Elect Donald Trump. And the reality is, Donald Trump is not going to enter office and automatically side with the Georgian Dream principles, ideas or movement. Many key supporters of Donald Trump are the ones who are backing these pieces of legislation in Congress. There is no "deep state" that's trying to undermine US-Georgian relations - this is just Georgian dream propaganda.

## THEY ALSO CLAIM THE WEST IS TRYING TO FORCE GEORGIA INTO OPENING A SECOND FRONT. LOOKING AT THINGS FROM A PURELY REALPOLITIK PERSPECTIVE, WHAT WOULD THE WEST GAIN BY OPENING A SECOND FRONT AGAINST RUSSIA IN GEORGIA?

Nothing to be gained at all. And that is why I've never heard any think tanker, policymaker, lawmaker, commentator in America suggest this. This is another complete fabrication made up by Georgian Dream officials to scare the Georgian public. They used this talking point very effectively leading up to the elections, and, sadly, the political opposition didn't make any meaningful effort to counter the argument.

## YOU CAN BARELY MANAGE ONE FRONT IN UKRAINE, SO WHY WOULD YOU WANT ANOTHER THAT YOU WERE BOUND TO LOSE IN TWO OR THREE DAYS?

Exactly. Exactly. It's just doesn't make sense. And that's because it's not true.



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# Looking Forward to MEI Happy Moutai

贵州茅台

恭祝您，

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# Keeping Law and Order

OP-ED BY NUGZAR B. RUHADZE

Hundreds of years of civilized life have prompted us to create certain rules of public behavior, a fact which has proved to be helpful in our societal reality. Reasonable and mutually respectful rapport between law enforcement and the public, for instance, is a basis of legal and social context in general. International law, today set and held through documents like the United Nations Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials, outlines the code of ethics for police, dedicated to human rights protection, proportionate use of force, and responsibility for people's safety, especially during public upheavals, when only the balance of rights and restrictions for both police and the public can keep the desired order. The accepted standard suggests that the police should practice force only when strictly needed, and to the extent relative to the circumstance,

so as to protect social dignity and sustain human rights, to remain strictly responsible for their actions, not to use force indiscriminately or disproportionately, to avoid arbitrary arrests, and to eschew violations of freedom of assembly. As such, the behavior of law enforcement during public commotions is a perfect test for a nation's adherence to democratic values.

While Georgian police have made substantial steps forward in reforms, incidents during the recent demonstrations highlight the need for better commitment to globally recognized standards. The interaction between police and the community plays a decisive role in maintaining social order. Police officers are tasked with protecting citizens and ensuring public safety. However, when journalists and opposition leaders embarrass or disregard the police, it undoubtedly challenges their authority and creates a potentially perilous pattern, which can all too easily escalate to violence during public rallies.

Respect for law enforcement should start with influential figures like journal-

ists and politicians. The discourteous actions of journalists and political figures in Tbilisi have contributed to situations where protesters have committed crimes and become the victims of punitive measures. Such actions send a message to the public, particularly to vulnerable youth, that it was acceptable to treat police officers with contempt and derision, thus instigating aggression, perpetuating disrespect to the state, escalating violence, setting unacceptable models of social behavior, endangering public safety, and embarrassing peaceful demonstrators.

Many of the protesters who are now facing sentences of up to several years in prison did not fully comprehend that their actions - hitting, insulting, throwing objects at police, and damaging public property - constituted a grave offence against the law. This lack of awareness should be ascribed to the often unreserved rhetoric of journalists and grandiloquence of opposition leaders who, through their public disrespect of law enforcement, were unable or unwilling to underscore the legal and moral bound-

aries of the protest behavioral model. Instead of educating the public on their rights and responsibilities during demonstrations, they fueled the tendency of disobedience, without regard for its legal consequences. Recent protesters all over Georgia may have believed that insulting or pushing police officers was merely an act of resistance, not appreciating that it was indeed a criminal offense; they perceived throwing objects, including sizable cobble-stones, at policemen, as a justified reaction to a supposed injustice. Yet it is a punishable act of violence under the law.

The failure of public figures to clarify these distinctions has led to calamitous results for many young people, who now find themselves in legal trouble. Police officers are used to being put in challenging conditions. Trying to maintain public order, they are in the first place obligated to protect citizens' rights. Their role is a heavy one, particularly during public disturbances, where they are sandwiched between order and chaos. Disrespect directed toward them undermines their ability to perform these

duties effectively, conducive to the fact of creating a hostile environment, within which trust is no longer a factor.

Respect between the public and law enforcement is a two-way street. Police must demonstrate professionalism, restraint, and fairness in their interactions with citizens, even in tense situations. However, this respect must be reciprocated by the public. When mutual respect is absent, the relationship deteriorates, leading to increased polarization between law enforcement and the public, a breakdown of trust, making effective policing more difficult, and increasing the risks to public safety during protests or public unrest. In actual democracy, constructive criticism is necessary on the part of the media and political forces, but it has to be executed wisely, so that hatred or violence is not triggered. The relationship between police and citizens is a subtle equilibrium of authority and respect for human rights, and the lessons in this delicate matter need to be learned in a fragile and still maturing democracy like that of Sakartvelo. As the saying has it, it is never too late to learn.



Tom Rogan. Courtesy of BL Media Group  
INTERVIEW BY VAZHA TAVBERIDZE

Radio Free Europe/RFI's Georgian Service spoke to Tom Rogan, the foreign policy writer and editor for the Washington Examiner who last year was placed on Russia's terrorist registry as a "wanted" man. In our sit-down with him, we discussed the sanctions against Bidzina Ivanishvili and what to expect from the incoming Trump administration on Ukraine, Georgian Dream, and Georgia's "two president" dilemma.

## IVANISHVILI SANCTIONED - HOW SIGNIFICANT IS THE DECISION? WHAT'S THE IMPACT?

I think it is significant. That it's taken this long is problematic, and is symptomatic of the Biden National Security Council's dithering. It gave the Georgian government and Ivanishvili himself the sense that essentially the United States is going to turn a blind eye to their conduct. But it sets the initiative for the next administration as well.

## WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR IVANISHVILI PERSONALLY? HAS HE BEEN POLITICALLY AND SOCIALLY TAINTED BY THIS?

Yes, I think so. It also serves as a potential precursor to secondary sanctions on his interests. The fundamental point is that he becomes essentially a persona non grata in the Western financial system. And it provides opportunities for the Trump administration, or indeed the Biden administration, in their last 30 days in office, to take other steps towards sanctioning individuals or entities that might continue to do business with Ivanishvili. The important point is signaling to him that he has made his choice - he has closed the door on his engagement with the West. He can't balance what he has been doing with continued essential access and cordial relations with the Western financial system.

## DOES THE MESSAGE ALSO SAY THAT THERE IS NO TURNING BACK?

I think it does. I think it clearly reflects something that should have been quite obvious to the Biden administration weeks ago, that this is not someone who is interested in dialogue or debate. The United States' only recourse with him is to respond in a more forceful manner. And, importantly, these sanctions would not have been introduced if the Biden administration thought that the Trump administration would quickly withdraw them. Because that would obviously be embarrassing and would undermine US foreign policy in a general sense. It is setting what I think is a new course of approach in terms of the US government, and it is likely that the Trump administration will take a whole range of further steps if Ivanishvili and Georgian Dream don't back down and respect the will of the Georgian people and its constitutional obligations.

## YOU'VE WRITTEN THAT GD HOPES TRUMP WILL TREAT THEM THE SAME WAY HE HAS TREATED HUNGARY'S VIKTOR ORBÁN: ACCEPTING THEIR RHETORICAL PRAISE WHILE OVERLOOKING THEIR ACTIONS THAT RUN COUNTER TO US INTERESTS. COULD ORBÁN LIAISE ON GD'S BEHALF, PERHAPS VOUCH FOR THEM? WOULD TRUMP BE INCLINED TO LISTEN?

I think Trump likes "Orbán the Strongman," but he is oblivious to the level of service that Viktor Orbán and Hungary are providing China in blatant contradiction to critical US security interests, getting greater European support to deal with Chinese espionage, intellectual property theft, harassment of Taiwan, Japan, etc. And when some of the financial links below the surface between Orbán and the Chinese, and what he is doing, become apparent to Trump when he starts having to read the detailed security briefings, I think Orbán may have a problem. And, obviously, the natural extension of that is Georgian

# Tom Rogan on the Ivanishvili Sanctions, Orbán's Sweet-Talk, and Trump vs Georgian Dream

Dream's very close relationship - strategic partnership, even - with China and Orbán. What possible rationale do they see beyond them occasionally saying nice things about Trump for him not to take a tough stance towards them? Especially when so many on the streets of Georgia are very pro-American and offer a different path in terms of US-Georgia engagement. So I think there's a lot of delusion on behalf of Georgian Dream that is probably going to get punctured quite quickly.

## COULD IT BE THAT ORBÁN IS A VALUABLE ENOUGH ALLY TO TRUMP THAT HE'D BE WILLING TO OVERLOOK HIS MORE BLOTCHED RECORD? DOES TRUMP CARE ENOUGH ABOUT THIS COUNTRY TO NOT DO ORBÁN A FAVOR IF ASKED?

I don't think so, because if you look at the key area where Orbán has tried to influence Trump, in terms of Ukraine, Orbán's big thing is "cut military aid to Ukraine immediately and you provide the ingredient for peace" - well, there are increasingly apparent indications from the incoming Trump administration that they are not going to do that, because they understand that the key measure of leverage over Russia is the provision of military aid. And so Orbán is essentially being ignored in the main area where he's trying to have most influence.

I think what Trump likes about Orbán at the moment is that he sees him as someone who speaks very favorably, about him, in a way that many world leaders have not. Trump obviously has a not insignificant ego and that appeals to him. But in the substance of policy, I think Orbán's been lucky in that he's been able to go to Mar-a-Lago or meet Trump and say, "you're the best thing in the universe." Well, when Trump becomes president and starts looking for policy action from Hungary and sees that on basically every point of interest, including Ukraine, Orbán actually offers the countermanding interest to that of the United States, there's going to be a problem.

## AND ONCE HE RETURNS TO THE WHITE HOUSE, THERE'LL BE MUCH STIFFER COMPETITION WHEN IT COMES TO PEOPLE TELLING HIM THAT HE'S THE

## BEST THING IN THE UNIVERSE.

Of course. I mean, look at Emmanuel Macron, who essentially spent the last four years saying that Trump is the end of American democracy, and within one visit to Notre Dame, Trump is saying that Macron is a great guy and they did great things together and they're going to do it again. So, yeah, the competition for Trump's favor will increase. And the Trump administration, as far as foreign policy is concerned, will be countering China. And Georgian Dream, much like Viktor Orbán, is a bought-and-paid-for puppet of China. And again, in the central point, what can Viktor Orbán offer Trump beyond rhetoric?

## SO WHAT'S THEIR "TRUMP" CARD, THEN, SO TO SAY?

They don't have one. And they think they do because they think that all they need to do is keep saying that he's the best thing in the world. But as you pointed out, every foreign leader is essentially saying that now. And those foreign leaders also have policy that serves Trump and America's foreign policy interests in a way that Orbán and Ivanishvili fundamentally do not. They are essentially banking their policy on Trump being stupid. If you look at his political revival, he is not a stupid man. Whatever you think of his character, this is not a stupid person.

## COULD THEY BE BANKING MORE NOT ON HIM BEING STUPID, BUT ON HIM BEING DISINTERESTED ENOUGH AND WILLING TO TOSS THIS MATTER OVER TO RUSSIA AS SOME SORT OF BARGAINING CHIP IN NEGOTIATIONS TO COME?

Well, if they are thinking that, I would say they are even more delusional. I mean look how invested Trump already seems to be in preparing foreign policy action, very bold, risky foreign policy action, in terms of potentially even escalating with Russia in order to get them to make concessions to Ukraine; the policies in regards to tariffs, including with allies like Canada. Anyone who thinks that Trump is not interested in foreign policy is not paying attention to the available facts. And as one example, President Trump speaks often and very favorably about his personal relationship with Xi Jinping. Well, look at what he's saying about tariffs to come on China.

And look who he has appointed to the senior positions at the Pentagon. Marco Rubio, Mike Waltz - these are not individuals who could be described in any other way than China hawks. No one in Beijing is going to be happy about who Trump has appointed and what kind of policies he is promising, even if he says he likes Xi Jinping.

## YOUR ARGUMENT PRESUMES THAT TRUMP WILL BE SO BOORISH AS TO NOT TO MAKE ANY CONCESSIONS TO PUTIN. IS THAT REALISTIC? IF CONCESSIONS ARE TO BE MADE, COULD GEORGIA NOT BE INSIGNIFICANT ENOUGH IN TRUMP'S EYES THAT HE'LL BE WILLING TO MAKE THAT CONCESSION IN FAVOR OF SHINIER AND BRIGHTER THINGS IN RETURN?

Ukraine is going to be asked to make concessions as part of any peace deal. I don't think there's any doubt about that. But at the same time, I don't really see how Georgia would become part of the bargain. What's going to happen with regards to Russia and Ukraine is going to be quite specific to Russia and Ukraine. And to a degree, NATO and America's allies in Europe.

## AMONG OTHER THINGS, GEORGIA FINDS ITSELF TODAY IN A PRESIDENTIAL DILEMMA - SALOME ZURABISHVILI DOESN'T RECOGNIZE HER SUCCESSOR, MIKHEIL KAVELASHVILI, AS LEGITIMATE. HOW ARE THE TWO VIEWED FROM THE US? IS THERE A QUESTION OF LEGITIMACY WHEN IT COMES TO THE TWO?

I think the Biden administration clearly sees the outgoing president as the legitimate president. And while it's unclear where the Trump administration would stand on that question, the incoming Georgian president is clearly a blatant anti-American in terms of his rhetoric and in his views, and so I don't think it realistic that he is going to be someone that the Trump administration are going to look favorably upon, based on what he has said and the interests he serves - it's a very, very delusional point of view. Based on everything we've seen, I don't think it's a stretch to think that Ms. Zurabishvili would retain the Trump administration's support.

# Georgian Dream Calls for Dismantling 'Deep State' Influence to Strengthen Georgian-American Relations and Protect National Sovereignty

BY TEAM GT

The Georgian Dream political council issued a statement on Tuesday, claiming that President Trump's successful dismantling of the "Deep State" could serve as a turning point for Georgian-American relations, aligning both nations' interests. According to the statement, any politician or official making anti-Georgian statements, be they president, prime minister, diplomat, or member of the European Parliament, is a part of the "Deep State" network, which acts in the interests of the Global War Party rather than the people of the US or Europe.

The council also cited Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's view that "Soros lost Washington with the election of President Trump, but Brussels is still in his hands," explaining that the "Deep State" operates through an oligarchic network that undermines both European sovereignty and Georgia's interests. This influence is seen, the council said, as a major factor behind the EU's anti-Georgian policies, including its stance on LGBT rights and migration, which are under-



mining national identities across Europe.

The statement highlighted the importance of dismantling the "Deep State" not just in the US but across Europe, especially as it pertains to Georgia's

relationship with the EU. "Dismantling the European metastases of the 'Deep State' is a necessary condition for resetting Georgia-EU relations," the council wrote, adding that by 2030, the EU should

overcome oligarchic influence, which would create the right conditions for Georgia's EU accession.

The Georgian Dream council also criticized the sanctions imposed on

Georgia by certain states, particularly those aligned with the "Global War Party." It stated that these sanctions, targeting figures like Bidzina Ivanishvili and Georgian officials, are a direct result of the "Deep State's" influence. "The deeper the roots of the Global War Party in a given country, the more anti-Georgian their attitude becomes," the statement reads, noting that they view these sanctions as punitive measures against those in Georgia who have worked to maintain peace and sovereignty.

The statement also contrasted these actions with support for figures like Saakashvili, a key player in the 2008 war with Russia, who "continues to be praised by the Global War Party." "The 'Deep State' labeled Saakashvili a hero, but punishes Ivanishvili for peace," the council claims, stressing that the Georgian people see this double standard clearly.

The political council of Georgian Dream stated that while sanctions have been imposed, they will not deter the Georgian people. "The Georgian people will not allow the Ukrainization of Georgia," the statement concludes. "No sanctions can be compared to the destruction of the country, and the people understand this well. They will not sacrifice their nation for a devastating war."

## Georgian Dream to Launch Parliamentary Probe into United National Movement's Past



Mamuka Mdinardze, Executive Secretary of Georgian Dream. Source: gov.ge

BY TEAM GT

Mamuka Mdinardze, the Executive Secretary of the ruling Georgian Dream party, announced on Thursday the formation of a temporary parliamentary commission tasked with investigating the actions of the United National Movement (UNM) government from 2003 to 2012.

Mdinardze stated that the commission's investigation would span six months, with a report to be presented to Parliament for approval in September. "The final report, once approved by Parliament, will be sent to the Prosecutor's Office and other relevant agencies in line with Georgian law, ensuring that further legal actions are taken and that those responsible face appropriate consequences," Mdinardze stated.

The investigation is expected to focus on a range of systemic crimes commit-

ted by the UNM government, including torture in prisons, violence, media manipulation, extortion of businesses, corruption, and the handling of the 2008 war with Russia. Mdinardze emphasized that the investigation would not extend to military personnel or commanders related to the war.

Mdinardze highlighted that the commission's findings would also include recommendations for political and legal actions against those involved, in accordance with the Georgian Constitution.



Mark Zuckerberg announces latest plans. Source: FB

## Georgia's Ruling Party Celebrates Meta's Upcoming Shift away from Independent Fact-Checkers

BY TEAM GT

Georgia's ruling political party has expressed approval over Meta's recent announcement to move away from independent fact-checkers on its Facebook and Instagram platforms, a decision that aligns with X's "community notes" system. However, the excitement may be somewhat premature, as Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg clarified that this shift will initially only apply in the United States.

Shalva Papuashvili, Speaker of the Georgian Parliament and member of the Georgian Dream (GD) party, took to social media to commend the move. "Facebook's new approach to fact-checking, similar to X's Community Notes, is a step forward in prioritizing the truth over disinformation," Papuashvili wrote.

However, Tamar Kintsurashvili, the head of the Media Development Foundation (MDF) and the Myth Detector project, disagreed. In a Facebook post, she cautioned that Papuashvili's praise misinter-

prets the situation, as the new model from Meta does not affect the role of European fact-checkers, who will continue their work of exposing misinformation.

While GD's positive reaction to Meta's decision is understandable given their frequent clashes with fact-checking practices, it reflects their ongoing frustration with content removals. Meta has previously taken down media associated with the ruling party, often citing disinformation as the reason. One notable incident occurred last August when Meta removed pages and accounts, many of which supported the GD, for spreading disinformation, particularly concerning protests against Georgia's controversial Foreign Agents Law. Meta has also targeted inauthentic channels connected to GD-affiliated content.

GD's celebration, then, may be linked to their desire for more lenient moderation on platforms like Facebook and Instagram, especially as the new model may reduce the scrutiny of their content. Yet, with Meta's new system still in its early stages, it is uncertain how the shift will affect European operations and the broader fight against disinformation.

# Beka's School: Empowering Georgian Businesses with Tailored Corporate English Courses



English is the language of the world, and it has taken over the business scene. If you want your company to thrive internationally and handle the challenges of a global market, understanding how important English is can make all the difference.

This is where Beka's School steps in. With their innovative teaching methods and tailored corporate English courses, they guarantee to equip your team with all the necessary English language skills. Over 50 businesses and non-profits, both local and international, have already trusted Beka's School, including well-

known names like Bank of Georgia, TBC Bank, UNDP, Foodmart, and more.

Here's what some of these companies have to say about their experience:

"We are very lucky to have found Beka's School. Their professional teachers and excellent staff are always ready for productive cooperation." – McDonald's

"The courses are comfortable, fully tailored to our schedule, and really fun. Beka's School makes the whole learning process smooth and enjoyable." – Finbureau

"This experience taught us how valuable it is to work with professionals who truly understand their client's

goals, are flexible, and can design a course that helps achieve the desired results." – BDO

This short interview with Beka Berikashvili and Natali Kenkadze, the co-founders of Beka's School, will give you more information about their corporate English courses.

### COULD YOU TELL US WHAT SETS YOUR CORPORATE ENGLISH COURSES APART FROM TRADITIONAL LANGUAGE CLASSES?

Natali: Certainly! What makes our courses stand out is that they are fully customiz-

able to the company's needs and objectives. For example, during the course, we can focus on industry-specific terminology, business communication and presentation skills, email writing, and so on.

We also try to be as flexible as possible for our corporate clients, both in the preparation and teaching phases. Companies can choose the exact schedule for classes, and they can decide whether lessons happen in their office or online.

To keep the company updated regarding their employees' progress, we send an attendance list and individual progress reports for each employee at the end of every month.

But what we're really proud of is our amazing team of native-speaker teachers, cutting-edge teaching tools, and a blend of academic and non-formal teaching methods that's perfectly tailored to

Georgian learners.

### WHAT'S NEW AT THE SCHOOL? WHAT NEW INITIATIVES ARE YOU PARTICULARLY EXCITED ABOUT?

Beka: We are super excited to share that we've just published new English Grammar books for Georgians, covering the intermediate and advanced levels. These books include diagrams to make grammar easier to understand, interactive quizzes, flashcards, and exercises. They're also really fun and easy to use for self-study.

### TO WRAP UP, TELL US ABOUT YOUR FUTURE PLANS.

Natali: At the moment, we are planning to expand our corporate services internationally, offering tailored English courses to companies all over the world.



# The Khachapuri Index Soars: What the Rising Prices of Georgia's Beloved Dish Reveal about the Economy

BY IVAN NECHAEV

The "Khachapuri Index," Georgia's answer to the global "Big Mac Index," has risen by 8.4% over the past year, reflecting the challenges of inflation and shifting consumer behaviors in 2024. According to research conducted by ISET, the average cost of preparing one standard Imeretian khachapuri reached 7.03 GEL in December 2024, marking a 3.8% increase from November and a significant leap compared to December 2023.

### BREAKING DOWN THE INFLATION

The data highlights a complex picture of food price inflation. While the cost of most ingredients remained relatively stable, cheese prices skyrocketed by 8.8% in December alone, driving the monthly spike. Over the year, cheese—a key ingredient in khachapuri—saw an even more staggering increase of 12.3%, outpacing all other components.

Other essentials such as butter (+11.3%), yeast (+9.3%), milk (+8.9%), and flour (+3%) also recorded notable annual increases. Interestingly, the only ingredient to defy the trend was eggs, whose



Adjarian khachapuri at Gunda restaurant

prices fell by 8.4%, providing a rare relief to consumers.

The rise in December prices coincided with the festive season, when demand traditionally spikes as families prepare

for the Christmas and New Year celebrations. This seasonal surge underscores how cultural and social customs intertwine with economic trends, shaping consumer spending.

### A CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC BAROMETER

Introduced as a playful yet insightful tool, the Khachapuri Index is more than just a measure of the cost of Georgia's iconic

dish. Much like its Western counterpart, the Big Mac Index, it offers a window into purchasing power and inflation trends in a uniquely Georgian context.

The sharp annual increase raises questions about the broader economic environment. Inflationary pressures on dairy products, a staple in Georgian cuisine, could reflect rising production costs or supply chain inefficiencies. This not only impacts households, but also small businesses, including bakeries and restaurants, that rely on khachapuri as a menu staple.

### BEYOND THE NUMBERS

Despite its economic implications, the Khachapuri Index also underscores the enduring cultural significance of this dish. In the face of rising costs, khachapuri remains a symbol of Georgian identity and hospitality—a culinary constant that unites communities across the country.

As we step into 2025, the Khachapuri Index serves as a reminder of the broader economic challenges Georgians face. Policymakers and producers must find ways to address rising costs without compromising access to traditional foods that hold deep cultural significance.

For now, khachapuri remains more than just a meal—it is a mirror reflecting the interplay of culture, economics, and tradition in Georgia's evolving landscape.





# Salome Zourabichvili Made Kissinger Fellow

refusing their mandates. Following GD's announcement to suspend the country's EU accession process, the Georgian people have taken to the streets in widespread protests across the country. They have been met with violence and arrests. Zourabichvili has expressed support for the democratic movement in her country and joined the protest movement.

"Per constitutional changes, the next president of Georgia was to be elected in 2024 through an electoral college comprised of local officials and the parliament. On December 14, the parliament, which was illegally convened due to outstanding electoral fraud cases and failure to receive presidential endorsement, participated in the election of a new president, footballer Mikheil Kavelashvili, infamous for his anti-Western rhetoric. He assumed office on December 29. Democracy activists have declared this process illegal and have continued to protest.

"Zourabichvili has refused to step down, describing the illegitimate takeover of her country. Like McCain and Kissinger, she embodies tenacious statesmanship and defense of her country's democratic values. Senator McCain stood in solidarity with Georgians against Russia's 2008 invasion; as a Kissinger Fellow, Zourabichvili would continue the tradition of principled, strategic leadership in one of the world's most consequential democratic battlegrounds.

"As the McCain Institute's Kissinger Fellow, Zourabichvili will use her vast diplomatic, leadership, and policymaking experience to push for new elections and a democratic path forward in her country."

"President Zourabichvili embodies political courage and the Kissinger Fellowship's ideals of statesmanship," said McCain Institute Executive Director Dr. Evelyn Farkas. "She has shown demo-

cratic strength and a forceful defense of her country's democratic place in Europe in the face of violent repression and autocratic takeover. As the McCain Institute's 2025 Kissinger Fellow, she can continue to lead efforts to return Georgia to a democratic path."

"It is a distinction to be offered the Kissinger Fellowship," said President Salome Zourabichvili. "In a time of struggle between autocracies and democracies, it is critical that we stand for democratic actors fighting on the frontlines, and Georgia embodies this struggle, which Senator John McCain worked a lifetime to defend."

View Zourabichvili's bio here.

## ABOUT THE KISSINGER FELLOWSHIP

The Kissinger Fellowship upholds the core values of the McCain Institute's character-driven leadership programs. It focuses on developing the strategic skills of foreign policy and national security leaders with the kind of principles that are the hallmark of Dr. Henry A. Kissinger's career.

## ABOUT THE MCCAIN INSTITUTE AT ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

The McCain Institute is a nonpartisan organization inspired by Senator John McCain and his family's dedication to public service. We are part of Arizona State University and based in Washington, D.C. Our programs advance democracy and human rights, empower character-driven leaders, combat human trafficking, and prevent targeted violence. Our unique power to convene leaders across the global political spectrum enables us to make a real impact on the world's most pressing challenges. Our goal is action, not talk, and like Senator McCain, we are fighting to create a free, safe, and just world for all.

BY TEAM GT

The McCain Institute at Arizona State University (ASU) on Monday announced President Salome Zourabichvili as its 2025 Kissinger Fellow. Their statement reads:

"Zourabichvili has served as president of Georgia since 2018. She previously served as Georgia's first female minister of foreign affairs, where in 2005, she negotiated the withdrawal of Russian military bases from Georgia. She also was elected as a majoritarian member of parliament in 2016. During her tenure as president, Zourabichvili has forcefully defended Georgia's path to European Union (EU) and NATO integration and supported democratic reform, famously vetoing the Georgian Dream (GD) government's Kremlin-modeled "foreign agent law" and standing against the party's autocratic turn.

"Zourabichvili has declared the recent October 2024 parliamentary election illegitimate due to widespread intimidation and manipulation by GD and has stood behind the opposition parties



Photo: Emerging Europe.

# Georgia Declares January 9 Day of Mourning Following Gali Fire

BY MARIAM RAZMADZE

Following a tragic house fire in Saberio, Gali district, Abkhazia, which took the lives of five children on Sunday, the Georgian Government announced Thursday, January 9, a national day of mourning. The government administration

reported that Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze ordered the flags to be flown at half-mast at all government buildings across the country.

The tragedy occurred after a woodstove fire raged out of control, consuming the house before the children's grandmother could save them.

The government has expressed condolences to the families and friends of the victims.

# Wood be Success Story

BLOG BY TONY HANMER

Today, Orthodox Christmas Day (January 7) as I write this, I met a man who really deserves to become a Georgian sensation through his

handiwork. His name is Taniel Zakalashvili.

I was visiting my wife's mother's sister with the ladies on this day, in Gurjaani, Kakheti (eastern Georgia), famous for its brand of creamy ice cream of the same name. After a nice festive meal and some good catching up, we said our goodbyes and got up to leave.

My wife's cousin had just returned from his daily bread-baking job, which we had calculated sees him produce about 90,000 loaves of Shoti bread on the vertical surface of a traditional tone (cylindrical clay oven). He told us as we were leaving, "You have to meet my neighbor and see his woodwork!" So we went over with him to meet the fellow.

The first thing we saw was a couple of little "glamping" cabins, all of wood inside and out, the large of which has a solar panel outside for power. Beautiful curves, and a cute interior.

The second cabin was a bit smaller, but it's of a special kind, meant for what is called "apitherapy", a thing which I had heard of recently. The idea is that the client shares air with several hives of bees (hence the "api"). It's supposed to be quite a good kind of health holiday, up and coming.

Then he showed us the back of his house, which is full of large, good-quality woodworking machines, in part bought through small business grants. My father, in his heyday a good carpenter, would have been quite impressed. Taniel even has a lathe, which we never did. Another, larger cabin came next, which will house a jacuzzi and sports equipment. He has no shortage of designs of his own.

Then inside... to see a whole set of intricately assembled decorative cutting boards in contrasting shades and colors of wood. Beautiful geometric designs played tricks with the eye, turning two dimensions into three and back again. This kind of thing I have seen plenty of in Facebook posts... but always in English, until today.

A puzzle box; hot-plate holders; a set of folding chairs and table with the latter making a carry-case for the former. Other pieces involving wood cross-sections set together in clear epoxy. Lathed-turned bowls and lamp-bases, either from a single piece of wood or may sections precisely glued together. All perfectly made by this self-confessed fanatic, who can't but do what he does. He clearly knows and loves his stuff.

Taniel has his own Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/tanielizl>, and his phone number is 577962875, in Geor-



gian. I'm thinking of sending him some new geometric design ideas, just in case he needs more inspiration from elsewhere; maybe including my own infinite sets of fractal tiles for the square and equilateral triangle, in 2, 3, 4, 6 and 8 colors. I would love to see him become successful and famous for the fine form and care of his work, in scales from sub-millimeter to several meters, but all exact, and all beautiful. I'm also thinking of a commission for myself, something unique and special. I have the ideas; he has the means (which I do not) to bring them into reality, whether they are purely decorative or functional as well. I would love to see him busy with more commissions; he also has students or apprentices, another good and praiseworthy sign in my eyes. Taniel, here's to you and future success, on the birthday of the most famous carpenter in history!

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/hammer.house.svaneti](http://www.facebook.com/hammer.house.svaneti)



# Panagia Sumela: Discovering the Spiritual and Artistic Wonder near Batumi



Photo by the author

BY IVAN NECHAEV

Situated in the heart of Turkey's Pontic Mountains, the Panagia Sumela Monastery, often referred to as the "Monastery on the Mountain's Edge," is more than just an architectural marvel. For Georgians, this Byzantine-era monastery holds profound historical and spiritual significance. Its location, accessible from Batumi within a few hours by car, transforms the journey into a pilgrimage that intertwines geography, art, and the shared cultural histories of Georgia and the Eastern Christian world.

## A PILGRIMAGE THROUGH SHARED HISTORY

The relationship between Georgia and the Byzantine Empire is rooted in centuries of cultural exchange, trade, and spiritual dialogue. The Monastery of Panagia Sumela, dedicated to the Virgin Mary (Panagia in Greek), was established in the 4th century CE by two Athenian monks, Barnabas and Sophronios. It served as a vital hub for Orthodox Christianity in the region, fostering ties between the Georgian and Greek Orthodox Churches.

For Georgian pilgrims, the journey to Sumela transcends physical boundaries. It echoes the historical connection between the Georgian and Byzantine

monastic traditions, visible in the architectural designs of remote monasteries like Davit Gareji and Gelati. These shared ecclesiastical principles—seclusion, asceticism, and art as devotion—find a common voice at Sumela.

## THE FRESCOS: A DIVINE ART GALLERY IN THE SKY

The frescos adorning the walls and ceilings of Panagia Sumela represent a pinnacle of Byzantine artistry, blending theological narratives with stunning visual craftsmanship. They are not merely decorative; they are a theological text rendered in pigment and plaster, meant to educate and inspire the faithful.

The frescos primarily depict scenes from the life of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and key moments from the New Testament. Among the most striking is the Dormition of the Theotokos, a common theme in Orthodox art. The Virgin Mary is shown surrounded by apostles, with Christ holding her soul in the form of a luminous infant—a poignant symbol of the cyclical nature of life and death.

These frescos also include portrayals of saints revered across the Orthodox world, such as St. George, who holds a special place in Georgian spirituality. The presence of these saints further reinforces the shared cultural and religious tapestry of the region.

The frescos demonstrate a mastery of Byzantine art's hallmark features: elongated figures, hierarchical perspective, and an ethereal use of gold leaf to evoke divine light. Unlike Renaissance realism, these frescos prioritize the spiritual over the material. The lack of naturalistic depth forces the viewer to focus on the transcendence of the divine realm.

The Sumela frescos also exhibit traces



Photo by the author

of regional influence, possibly from Georgian, Armenian, and local Pontic artists, who contributed to the monastery's embellishment during its long history. The layering of styles over centuries reflects the fluid cultural dynamics of the Black Sea region.

## THE MONASTERY AS A CULTURAL NEXUS

For Georgians, the monastery is not merely a relic of the Byzantine past but a living testament to the interconnectedness of the Eastern Christian world. The Virgin Mary, to whom the monastery is dedicated, holds a central role in Georgian Orthodoxy as an intercessor and protector. Pilgrimage to Sumela thus becomes a way to honor her, as well as to reconnect with a shared spiritual heritage that transcends borders. The proximity of Sumela to Batumi also offers modern-day Georgians a tangible link to their historical neighbors. The jour-

ney recalls the ancient trade and pilgrimage routes that once connected Georgia to Anatolia and beyond, fostering not just commerce but also the exchange of ideas, art, and spirituality.

The Panagia Sumela Monastery stands as a crossroads of art, faith, and cultural identity. Its frescos, blending Byzantine orthodoxy with regional influences, serve as a testament to the universality of spiritual art. For Georgians, the monastery is a reminder of their place within a broader Christian and cultural tradition that extends beyond national boundaries. In an age when the preservation of shared cultural heritage is increasingly vital, the journey from Batumi to Sumela is more than a tourist excursion—it is an act of remembrance and a celebration of interconnected histories. To visit Sumela is to stand on a precipice, not just of a mountain, but of time itself, where the past and present converge in awe-inspiring beauty.

# Michael Bachtadze and Lilit Davtyan - Voices from the Caucasus Starring at the Deutsche Oper in Rossini's Il Viaggio a Reims

BY LILY FÜRSTENOW

Operas have always been occasions for high society gatherings among cultural elites: in the previous centuries, monarchs and aristocracy, high ranking government officials and the like would present themselves during the premieres, on top of the world; pretending to enjoy the happy marriage of arts and politics in celebration of music, pompous luxury and diplomatic relations. Gioacchino Rossini's opera *Il Viaggio a Reims* was commissioned to glorify the coronation of Charles X as the King of France in 1825. The opera's libretto, by Luigi Balocchi, revolves around a group of aristocrats traveling to the coronation but becoming stranded at a resort hotel. This fictional gathering of European characters allowed Rossini to weave in themes of unity and cultural diversity, fitting for the celebratory occasion. *Il Viaggio a Reims* is designed as a showcase of vocal brilliance and ensemble artistry rather than as a traditional opera with a long-term repertory life. Due to its specific purpose and the immense technical demands of the score, *Il Viaggio a Reims* was not intended for frequent revival. Therefore its staging at the Deutsche Oper Berlin has been a milestone event for audiences. The music of *Il Viaggio a Reims* is a testament to Rossini's genius as a composer. Its combination of technical brilliance, emotional nuance and sheer theatricality creates an exhilarating experience that continues to captivate. This opera is not only a celebration of the voice, but also a testament to Rossini's ability to transform an occasional piece into a masterpiece of the operatic repertoire.

*Il Viaggio a Reims* was created in the



Il Viaggio a Reims. Photo by Thomas Aurin

best traditions of opera buffa, a genre characterized by its comedic and light-hearted nature, which originated in Italy during the 18th century. Rossini wrote his masterpiece to showcase the exceptional talents of the leading singers of the day, resulting in highly demanding arias and ensembles. Each role features intricate coloratura, wide vocal ranges, and ornamentation. Highlights include Corinna's lyrical and meditative arias brilliantly performed in the Deutsche Oper production by Lilit Davtyan - a young soprano singer from Armenia, now a Theodora Schnauk-Betow Scholarship holder performing in Berlin and world-wide. Davtyan's singular performance was characterized by delicate phrasing and emotional depth, precision and coordination.

Unlike Corinna who is, according to

the storyline, a poetess, the rest of the opera protagonists represent various European nations, and their musical styles subtly reflect their cultural identities: the British and German protagonists are characterized by respective national anthem motives that Rossini orchestrated without changes (coincidentally, the music of the German anthem is almost the same as the current Georgian one), the Italian character's musical line is evocative of Rossini's previous opera characters, emphasizing the composer's psychological sophistication and wit in portraying people. The English character, Lord Sydney, for one, stood out due to a stunning performance by Georgian Baritone Michael Bachtadze, who studied in Tbilisi and now works in Berlin. Bachtadze won the International 'Open Opera' Competition Berlin

2012. He was awarded a guest contract at the Berliner Seefestspiele, where he took on the role of Escamillo in the opera *Carmen*, to great acclaim. The premiere was broadcast on the cultural TV channel Arte in France and Germany. Bachtadze's first engagement was at the Stadttheater Bielefeld as a bass-baritone, where he enjoyed outstanding success as Mozart's Figaro (title role), Amonasro, Golaud and Ruslan in Glinka's opera *Rusland und Liudmilla*. In 2007, he was awarded the Operntaler 2007 for his work and was nominated as the best young singer in the NRW 2007 Critics' Poll - Music Theater. Lord Sydney's arias performed by Bachtadze at the Deutsche Oper were deeply poignant. Traditionally a melancholic love lament, they had fresh significance, framed as an introspective soliloquy. His character, though

understated, became one of the emotional anchors of the production, embodying both the longing and compassion that make *Il Viaggio a Reims* so enduringly human.

The whole opera is conceived as a revue consisting of a series of numbers: arias by the protagonists, the ballet interlude that used to be a characteristic feature of most Paris operas of the time but which was sadly replaced in the German production by occasional background video snippets of slo-mo dance-like move sequences of Corinna and other protagonists. To make it worse, the stage director had the unfortunate idea of setting the whole thing not at a high end resort hotel, as the original libretto had it, but in the mirror-hall of a hospital of some sorts, with the characters partly attached to beds, or wearing most of the time white hospital nursery clothing—lingerie, sleepwear, nightgowns or bra-and-panty sets. For sure, all of this was meant as satire, with characters singing in lab coats and underwear adorned with EU or national state symbols, embodying both the grandeur and absurdity of the opera's original premise, all hinting at the challenges of unity and identity within Europe's current complex socio-political landscape. Yet Director Jan Bosse's attempt at provocative staging is unlikely to hit the point, because dismissing contemporary elites as a superficial, sex-obsessed, sick crowd locked away is a vision both naive and unreal. Contrary to being confined to asylum beds, contemporary folks of power, corrupt as they are, exercise enormous power and influence on European and world affairs. It is only through art that hypocrisy can be revealed: Rossini's witty characters and vibrant music help us to see the true from the untrue, and to rethink the misfortunes of the European past for the sake of the present.

# Alilo: The Living Tradition of Christmas in Georgia



Alilo 2025. Photos by Ezz Gaber

BY IVAN NECHAEV

Every January 7th, the streets of Tbilisi and cities across Georgia come alive with the vibrant and deeply symbolic Alilo procession—a cherished Christmas tradition that intertwines faith, culture, and community. This annual celebration, which has become a cornerstone of Georgian Christmas since its official institutionalization in 2000, brings together hundreds of adults and children in a vivid display of devotion and unity.

## A PAGEANT OF FAITH AND HERITAGE

The Alilo parade is a living tapestry of biblical imagery and Georgian cultural identity. Participants don costumes reminiscent of shepherds, wise men, and angels, transforming the urban landscape into a moving Nativity scene. The route winds through Tbilisi, beginning at Republic Square and traversing iconic landmarks such as Rustaveli Avenue, Freedom Square, and the Baratashvili Bridge before culminating at the towering Sameba Holy Trinity Cathedral.

Each step of the procession is imbued with meaning. Rustaveli Avenue, the city's cultural artery, bridges the past and present of Georgian society, while Freedom Square underscores the message of spiritual liberation. The Sameba Cathedral, the final destination, serves as a beacon of faith and the heart of Georgian Orthodoxy, where partici-

pants gather to share blessings and charity.

## FROM TRADITION TO MODERNITY

Although its roots reach deep into Georgia's ecclesiastical history, Alilo has grown into a contemporary celebration

of unity and generosity. The modern revival of the tradition in 2000 marked a turning point, transforming it into a nationwide event that resonates across generations. In Tbilisi, the parade's festive spirit transcends religious practice, drawing spectators and participants alike into its fold.

The costumes, hymns, and offerings of Alilo are not merely performances; they reflect the collective memory and faith of a nation that has weathered centuries of challenges while preserving its traditions. For children, the procession is an opportunity to engage with their heritage in a tactile and meaningful way, while adults find in it a reaffirmation of their spiritual and cultural values.

## CHARITY AND COMMUNITY: THE HEART OF ALILO

Central to Alilo is the spirit of giving. Participants collect donations of food, clothing, and money along the route, which are later distributed to orphanages, shelters, and families in need. This act of charity reinforces the communal ethos that underpins Georgian society, turning the pageantry into a vehicle for kindness and solidarity.

The songs of Alilo, sung in unison, carry the essence of Georgian polyphony—a UNESCO-recognized tradition. These hymns, both solemn and celebratory, echo through the streets, connecting the spiritual to the earthly and the individual to the collective.

## A CELEBRATION THAT UNITES

Alilo is more than a religious observance; it is a cultural phenomenon that bridges the sacred and the secular, the ancient and the modern. For Georgians, it is a moment to reflect on shared values and celebrate their unique heritage in an increasingly globalized world. For visitors, witnessing the Alilo procession offers a glimpse into the soul of Georgia—a nation where tradition and modernity coexist in harmony.

As the procession winds its way through Tbilisi, the city transforms into a living celebration of faith, hope, and love. In a world often divided, Alilo serves as a poignant reminder of the power of unity and the enduring significance of tradition.



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**I am Georgian and therefore I am European**

Zurab Zhvania, Council of Europe, 1999

