



FOCUS ON PACE

Georgian Dream withdraws from PACE after resolution demands new elections and political reforms

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Thea Tsulukiani. Source: socialjustice and pravda

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The Show Must Go On – Organizers Put Charities First for 15th Tbilisi Burns Supper and Ball

BY CLARE GROGAN

On February 8, the Sheraton Grand Tbilisi Metechi Palace Hotel will stage the 15th edition of a Scottish-themed charity gala event honoring globally revered 18th-century Scottish poet, Robert Burns.

Bringing in thousands of dollars for local charities every year since its inception, the Burns Supper is unquestionably one of the standout landmarks on Tbilisi's social map. The well-established version in the Georgian capital sits proudly alongside the countless Burns Suppers of the world, from Auckland to Aberdeen, from Calgary to Kingussie, which take place on or (relatively) near Burns's birthday – January 25.

Features of a proper Burns Supper include mouthwatering food, plentiful drink, entertaining toasts, and Scottish country dancing, all of which are served up at the Tbilisi event, along with a live auction and a raffle with some magnificent prizes.

Continued on page 9



Tables at the 2024 Burns Supper

GALT & TAGGART												
CREATING OPPORTUNITIES												
Prepared for Georgia Today Business by												
As of 28-Jan-2025												
Markets					Markets							
BONDS	Price	w/w	m/m	STOCKS	Price	w/w	m/m					
GEORGIA 04/26	94.79 (YTM 7.20%)	+0.1%	+0.4%	Bank of Georgia (BGEO LN)	GBP 40.05	+7.8%	-2.0%					
GBAIL 04/28	87.72 (YTM 8.23%)	-0.0%	-0.2%	Georgia Capital (GCEO LN)	GBP 10.00	+3.5%	-1.0%					
GBGG 9/12 PERP	97.87 (YTM 9.81%)	-0.2%	-0.3%	TBC Bank Group (TBCG LN)	GBP 27.05	+6.1%	-4.2%					
SILANET 01/27	100.76 (YTM 7.96%)	+0.0%	+0.1%									
TBC 8.894 PERP	96.06 (YTM 11.85%)	-0.1%	+0.5%									
TBC 10 1/4 PERP	99.61 (YTM 10.61%)	+0.1%	+0.1%									
					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%				
					CURRENCIES	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%

Kobakhidze Claims "Deep State" and Global Influences Are Barriers to US-Georgian Relations

BY TEAM GT

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze on Wednesday identified what he described as the "deep state" and the "informal influences" of the "Global War Party" as the primary obstacles in the relationship between Georgia and the United States.

In an interview with Imedi TV, Kobakhidze stated that the challenges facing global peace—citing the ongoing conflict in Ukraine—are the result of policies driven by these powerful, hidden forces. "If peace has been disturbed in multiple countries, including in Ukraine, our friendly country that is being devastated, this is deep state policy," he asserted.

He emphasized that improving ties between Georgia and the US was "absolutely realistic," but only if these alleged forces were overcome. "Many people are looking at the new [Trump] administration with hope, and, primarily, these hopes are linked to its ambitious goal of defeating the deep state," Kobakhidze noted.



PM Irakli Kobakhidze. Source: france24

The Prime Minister also reiterated his government's commitment to a "qualitative reset" of the US-Georgian partnership, advocating for a fresh start. He proposed renewing the strategic partnership with the US from a "clean slate," alongside a concrete roadmap to guide the relationship moving forward.

Kobakhidze said he seeks a genuine strategic partnership that produces tangible results for both countries. "For years, we had a strategic partnership on paper, but it did not yield any tangible results," he stated, adding that his government seeks to ensure the renewed partnership is linked to specific, measurable outcomes.

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Tragedy in Tbilisi: Teenager Drowns after Falling into Pit in Rike Park



Tragedy in Rike. The victim's mother. Source: Mtavari Arkhi

BY TEAM GT

Tragedy in Tbilisi—a student fell into a pit in Rike Park and drowned. Reportedly, there were no warning signs or safety measures in the area (the area surrounding the 'Rike Jugs') where the tragedy occurred.

On Saturday, January 25, 16-year-old Ioseb Adeishvili, who had just finished his music lesson, went to the park with his friends and accidentally fell into a ditch that had been covered with a wooden board. The board broke open and the teen fell into a hole that was several meters deep and filled with rainwater. His friends tried to save him, but with his wet clothes weighing him down,



Scene of the incident in Rike Park

his mother told journalists, he was too heavy to pull out and slipped into unconsciousness and drowned.

Eyewitnesses claim that police and ambulance services took over 30 minutes to arrive at the scene, and some told TV Pirveli that this is not the first time someone has fallen into the poorly-covered hole.

The tragedy has brought a storm of condemnation, with opposition parties politicizing the fact and blaming the Georgian Dream party and Tbilisi City Hall for corruption and negligence, while they answer with the claim that the death happened "on private property" and so was not within the municipality's jurisdiction to prevent.

An investigation into the incident was launched under Article 115 of the Criminal Code, which refers to incitement to suicide.

Georgian PM Dismisses Opposition Boycott, Claims "Radical Opposition" No Longer Relevant

BY TEAM GT

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze, in an interview with Imedi TV on Wednesday, strongly criticized the ongoing opposition boycott of Parliament, calling the "radical opposition" irrelevant to Georgia's political future. According to Kobakhidze, the opposition's presence, whether inside or outside the legislative body, has no impact on the country's progress.

The boycott, led by four opposition parties who claim the 2024 elections were "rigged," is set against a backdrop of growing public protests, particularly over the government's decision not to prioritize European Union accession talks until 2028. Yet the PM claims that these events have had little effect on the country's trajectory.

"Everything is over for the radical opposition, but everything continues for our country," Kobakhidze stated, emphasizing that the country is on track for sustained growth in various sectors, including the economy. He dismissed the opposition protests, suggesting their influence on the nation's political climate



Anti-government demonstrators protest outside parliament Tbilisi on January 1. Source: AFP

is "minimal."

"Their protests have failed to gain traction," Kobakhidze added. "Since the beginning of January, they have been unable to gather even 500 people per day on average. The rallies are mostly funded, with some of the participants being NGO activists or party members. Genuine, unfunded activists are rare at these events."

The Prime Minister also addressed the potential for unrest, claiming that the government had neutralized any risks posed by opposition-led demonstrations.

"We have already exhausted any potential for violence from the radical opposition," he asserted. "They no longer have the resources to cause harm to the country."

In Kobakhidze's view, the opposition's attempts to delegitimize the government, both inside and outside of Parliament, hold no weight in the context of Georgia's ongoing development. He reiterated that the government's focus remains on the nation's growth and stability, despite the challenges posed by the opposition's actions.

Georgia Plans 70,000-seat Stadium in Tbilisi for UEFA Final Bid

BY MARIAM RAZMADZE

In the framework of enhancing the country's sports infrastructure, Georgia is set to build a new 70,000-capacity stadium on the outskirts of Tbilisi. The goal of the project, announced by Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze, is to distinguish Georgia as one of the major players in international tournaments and will greatly benefit Georgia's chances to host the 2028 UEFA Champions League final.

The stadium will be designed with multifunctional capacities to properly accommodate major football and rugby events, as well as concerts and events of other sorts to attract tourism and investments. Per the announcement, a Dutch company and UEFA experts work



Irakli Kobakhidze presents the project. Source: gov.ge

in collaboration to supervise the process and deliver a product that meets international standards.

"This is more than just a stadium—it's a project that will elevate Georgia's image and strengthen its role in global sports," Kobakhidze stated.

Besides the mentioned stadium, the government is about to launch a large-

scale project aiming to build stadiums in over 40 municipalities. The decision was overviewed at the meeting which included Tbilisi Mayor Kakha Kaladze, Sports Minister Shalva Gogoladze, and Infrastructure Minister Irakli Karseladze, where they discussed the initiative's potential to attract investments and international events.

Ukraine Latest: Russian Losses at over 834,000 as Moscow Claims Capture of Town in Donetsk

COMPILED BY ANA DUMBADZE

Russia has now lost more than 834,000 troops in its invasion of Ukraine, according to Ukrainian military officials. The General Staff of the Ukrainian Armed Forces reported today that Russia has seen a total of 834,670 casualties, including both killed and injured troops. Of these, 1,670 casualties were reported in the past 24 hours.

The Russian losses also include 9,876 tanks, 20,573 armored fighting vehicles, 35,269 vehicles and fuel tanks, 22,366 artillery systems, 1,263 multiple launch rocket systems, 1,050 air defense systems, 369 airplanes, 331 helicopters, 23,399 drones, 28 ships and boats, and one submarine.

RUSSIAN DRONE ATTACK ON MULTI-STORY BUILDING IN SUMY

A Russian drone struck a multi-story apartment building in Sumy early on Thursday, killing four people and injuring nine, including a child, regional authorities said. "This is a terrible tragedy, a terrible Russian crime. It is very important that the world does not stop putting pressure on Russia for this terror," Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said via Telegram.

Russia launched 81 drones at Ukraine overnight, damaging businesses and homes across the country, according to the Ukrainian military. The Ukrainian Air Force shot down 37 drones, while 39 others did not reach their targets. The fate of the remaining five drones was not specified.

Sumy Governor Volodymyr Artyukh,

shown in a video on Telegram standing in front of a crane and piles of rubble, said emergency services were pulling residents out of parts of the building. The attack destroyed five apartments and damaged more than 20 cars. Work continued at the site into Thursday morning, with emergency services sharing pictures of rescuers sifting through the rubble. The region borders Russia's Kursk region, where Ukraine launched an incursion in August 2024, and has been regularly attacked by Russian drones.

NORTH KOREA TROOPS PARTIALLY WITHDRAW FROM FRONTLINE IN KURSK AFTER WEEKS OF HEAVY LOSSES

North Korean soldiers appear to have temporarily withdrawn from one of the sections of the front in Russia's Kursk Oblast, a Special Operations Forces (SOF) spokesperson told the Kyiv Independent on January 27. Pyongyang's troops had reportedly suffered significant losses.

The statement came after Sky News reported on it, citing a commander of a detachment of the 73rd Naval Special Operations Center with the callsign "Puls," that North Korean troops had temporarily withdrawn from the contact line in the embattled Russian region.

Colonel Oleksandr Kindratenko, a spokesperson for the Special Operations Forces, clarified to the Kyiv Independent that the North Korean troops appear to have temporarily withdrawn only from one of the sections of Kursk Oblast, where the 73rd SOF Center is deployed. North Korean troops were deployed to Kursk Oblast last fall to support Russian forces in countering a Ukrainian incursion launched in early August 2024. Ukrainian forces have continued fighting



A drone view shows Russian service members waving flags on the roof of a building in the settlement of Velyka Novosilka in the Donetsk region, a Russian-controlled part of Ukraine. Source: Russian Defense Ministry/Handout

in the region, hoping to leverage their positions for potential negotiations.

North Korean forces are taking respite from hostilities, presumably to treat the wounded, wait for reinforcements, and address mistakes made during the fighting in this sector, reported Sky News.

NEW SANCTIONS PACKAGE AGAINST RUSSIA: 'WE ARE WORKING FOR IT TO BE READY IN FEBRUARY,' SAYS KALLAS

"We are working on the next sanctions

package and we really want to get it ready by February," EU High Representative Kaja Kallas told journalists on January 28 in Brussels, following an informal breakfast meeting with Olha Stefanishyna, Deputy Prime Minister of Ukraine.

"We are really looking into all types of things that might be helping Russia to wage this war, so as to put them on the sanctions list," Kaja Kallas said. "Even elements like the consoles for video games, because apparently these are the

ones that operate the drones. So, we are really being creative. [Even] chemicals that are needed for the Russian military industry. There are a lot of items. LNG is on this list."

She added that the final list would depend on the agreement reached by the EU Member States. A day earlier, EU Foreign Ministers extended sanctions against Russia due to its unprovoked, unjustified, and illegal military aggression against Ukraine for another six months, until July 31, 2025.

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Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights: Georgia Must Act Now on Human Rights Violations — 'A Matter of Life and Death' for Mzia Amaglobeli



Michael O'Flaherty. Source: roma-sinti-holocaust-memorial-day.eu

INTERVIEW BY VAZHA TAVBERIDZE

Michael O'Flaherty, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, visited Georgia from January 21-23, to engage with Georgian Dream government officials and civil society about the state of human rights in the country. In his interview with Radio Free Europe's Georgian Service, O'Flaherty expressed serious concerns over ongoing human rights abuses, including the lack of accountability for law enforcement and troubling new laws restricting protests and stigmatizing NGOs and LGBTI individuals.

The Commissioner highlighted the urgent situation of journalist Mzia Amaglobeli, who has been on hunger strike since her arrest in early January. O'Flaherty called for her immediate release, stressing that the situation is "a matter of life and death." He further criticized recent legislative developments and urged the Georgian authorities to ensure reforms respect international human rights standards.

LET'S BEGIN WITH THE KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM YOUR RECENT VISIT — YOU ALREADY ISSUED A [RATHER DAMNING] ASSESSMENT OF THE SITUATION, HIGHLIGHTING HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS, AND PROVIDED RECOMMENDATIONS ON HOW TO IMPROVE THINGS. DO YOU SEE THEM BEING IMPLEMENTED?

I've been following the situation very closely since I took up this mandate in April 2024, and I've sent a number of letters expressing concern about legislative developments, among other issues. It is based on these problems, and others that have accumulated over that period, that I went to Georgia last week and spent a few days there. I didn't just go to make recommendations — I went to better understand the situation, to see and experience what's actually going on. I went to show solidarity with civil society, which is under extreme pressure. And, of course, I went to reinforce the recommendations I've been making for some time. Do I see things changing? I very much hope they will. I'm not asking for favors. I'm

I felt it was crucial for me to visit in order to fully understand how bad the situation is and how urgently we need to fix it

asking for respect for international human rights law. I'm asking for the implementation of judgments from the European Court of Human Rights, and all member states of the Council of Europe are duty-bound to respect that law and those judgments.

It's curious that cases against civilians seem to be moving ahead, whereas those against security personnel don't seem to be making progress at all

AND WHERE DOES THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THESE HUMAN RIGHTS SHORTCOMINGS LIE?

The actor with responsibility to deliver respect for human rights is the state. So, I'm speaking to the state. I'm talking about delivering accountability for accusations of criminal acts by police and other security forces. I'm asking for the release of Mzia Amaglobeli, who is currently on hunger strike. I want to return to that case because I'm very worried about her situation. I'm also calling for law reform, asking for necessary changes to the law on foreign influence and foreign funding, and the repeal of the law surrounding so-called family values.

AND WHAT HAS BEEN THEIR RESPONSE SO FAR? DO THEY HAVE ANY COUNTERARGUMENTS?

I can say that during my visit to Georgia last week, when meeting with different ministries and officials, I was listened to respectfully. Some points of view were presented, but nothing has caused me to change my mind on the positions I laid out in the statement I issued at the end of the visit. When I raised issues regarding the failure to deliver justice for accusations against security personnel, the response was that investigations are underway, and that these take time.

That is a reasonable response, but at the same time, I have to observe that a number of cases against civilians have already proceeded to charges and trial. It's curious to me that cases against civilians seem to be moving ahead, whereas those against security personnel don't seem to be making progress at all.

YOU'VE BEEN ISSUING YOUR RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A WHILE NOW. HAVE ANY OF THEM BEEN ACTED UPON? HAVE THEY TAKEN YOUR WORDS TO HEART AND TRIED TO IMPROVE THINGS? DO YOU SEE PROGRESS?

No, I don't. In fact, the situation has worsened since April of last year. I've mentioned some examples, but there's also the law regarding the tenure of public officials. There's the recent changes to the administrative law, which, in some ways, have made protests harder, in a context that's at odds with international human rights standards, including the European Convention on Human Rights. If what I ask for isn't implemented, many of these situations will find their way to the European Court of Human Rights. I can't predict the outcomes of such cases, but I think it would be wise for everyone to avoid having that day come.

IT SEEMS TO ME THAT YOU ARE RETURNING FROM GEORGIA WITH MORE QUESTIONS THAN ANSWERS. IS THAT SO?

I came home with a great sense of concern. I'm very worried about the journalist in jail on hunger strike. We really need to move quickly to have her released. This is a matter of life and death. This is not just about imprisonment and freedom — it's life and death. I very much hope the authorities will engage with the speed necessary in this very sensitive situation. Otherwise, I left Georgia with a sense of the extraordinary pressure being placed on civil society, which is trying to do its essential job. Our societies cannot thrive, they cannot function without a healthy civil society. The people in NGOs and other elements of civil society, including the media, are under dreadful pressure at the moment. I felt it was crucial for me to visit in order to fully understand how bad the situation is and how urgently we need to fix it. I want to assure you that I will stay very closely engaged. The situation of human rights in Georgia is, and will continue to be, a priority issue for me.

Georgian PM: \$6 Billion UAE Investment Will Drive Economic Growth, Advancing Regional Leadership

BY TEAM GT

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze stated that the country is leading economic growth in the region and Europe, emphasizing that the \$6 billion investment agreed on this week with a UAE-based real estate group will significantly boost the nation's development. Kobakhidze spoke about the landmark deal during an interview with Imedi TV on January 30.

Kobakhidze described the \$6 billion investment as representing approximately 20% of Georgia's economy, forecasting an additional \$1 billion in annual investment over the next five years. This unprecedented deal is expected to accelerate economic growth significantly, marking the largest investment in Georgia's history.

gia's history.

The Prime Minister highlighted the scope of the investment, which includes a "multifunctional development project" spanning Tbilisi, Batumi, and Gonio. The project will create thousands of jobs across the country and will feature residential areas, infrastructure, hotels, shopping malls, sports facilities, recreational spaces, and medical-educational buildings. In Tbilisi, 34% of the development area will be dedicated to green spaces.

Kobakhidze also revealed that the founder of the Emaar Group, the real estate developer behind the deal, will personally visit Georgia for a project presentation. He praised the group's track record of timely and successful project completions, adding that the investment represents not just development, but also an emotional connection to the country.

This landmark investment is expected to attract more foreign interest, accord-



PM Kobakhidze with Sheikh Mohamed. Source: WAM

ing to Kobakhidze. He believes that the entry of the Emaar Group into Georgia signals great potential and will increase interest from other countries looking to invest in the country.

The Prime Minister dismissed opposition claims that the \$6 billion investment was unrecorded, calling them baseless. He specifically referenced BMG, a divi-

sion of TV Pirveli, for spreading such misinformation and emphasized the importance of promoting the country's economic growth.

Kobakhidze also highlighted the country's strong economic performance, with Georgia's average growth rate at 9.5% over the past four years. He stated that economic growth could have been even

higher without the opposition's "anti-state actions" that affected the economy and currency exchange rates. Despite these challenges, the country's economy has grown from €50 billion (\$17.36 billion) to nearly €90 billion (\$31.25 billion) over this period.

Looking ahead, Kobakhidze claimed he is confident in maintaining economic growth and intends to build on the progress achieved in recent years. He also emphasized plans to strengthen economic ties with Central Asia and China, which are vital for continued growth. He stressed that economic stability is key to advancing Georgia's European integration ambitions, saying that a strong economy will make European integration discussions more realistic.

Kobakhidze told Imedi TV that he aims for Georgia to be significantly ahead of its current position, ensuring that European integration discussions become not just possible, but realistic.

Georgian Dream Withdraws from PACE after Resolution Demands New Elections and Political Reforms

BY TEAM GT

On January 29, the Georgian Dream party announced its withdrawal from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) after the Assembly passed a resolution calling for new parliamentary elections in Georgia. The resolution, which passed with 114 votes in favor and 13 against, also demanded the release of political prisoners and the revision of controversial laws. In response, Thea Tsulukiani, head of the Georgian delegation and Georgian Dream's Minister of Justice, labeled the resolution as "unacceptable, unfair, and unfounded." She emphasized that accepting these demands would undermine Georgia's sovereignty and betray the over 1.1 million voters "who had supported Georgian Dream in the previous elections". Tsulukiani then announced that the Georgian delegation would cease its participation in PACE with immediate effect.

The resolution emphasized the need for the Georgian government to take immediate steps to reverse the country's democratic backsliding, including holding new, genuinely democratic elections under international supervision, an immediate end to police brutality and human rights abuses, immediate and effective steps to "enable Georgia to resume the European integration process", and releasing political prisoners before PACE's next session in April 2025. The Assembly had initially approved the credentials of the Georgian delegation, but suspended many of their rights, including participation in five of PACE's nine committees and the ability to observe elections or represent the Assembly at events.

Earlier in the day, the Georgian delegation had pushed for unconditional ratification of their credentials. They argued that there were no legal grounds for new elections and sought to remove the paragraph suspending their rights within the Assembly. However, these amendments, co-authored by several deputies from Hungary, Bulgaria, Armenia, and Turkey, were rejected. There was also a failed proposal to simply not ratify the Georgian delegation's credentials at all, which was supported by members from the EC/DA, SOC, and ALDE groups.

PACE's stance in passing the resolution was backed by several of its members, including Gustaf Gothberg, a Member of the Swedish Parliament and PACE delegate. Speaking to Radio Free Europe's Georgian Service, Gothberg explained that the decision to challenge Georgia's credentials was driven by three main factors: "The first reason is that there were bought-and-stolen elections in Georgia. I was there myself and I saw the local thugs outside the polling stations, teaming up; saw the cameras inside. The second one is what's been happening since - the violent crackdown on protesters, civil society, journalists. And the third one is that the delegation from Georgia now consists of representatives from a one party parliament - and that one party is a one-man show."

Gothberg rejected arguments suggesting that the decision could push Georgia further into Russia's sphere of influence. He firmly stated, "We know that Ivanishvili doesn't need any pushing; he is

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Their withdrawal jeopardizes the dialogue that could help to advance democratic standards in Georgia - PACE President Theodoros Rousopoulos



PM Kobakhidze: Our delegation will not continue participating in the Parliamentary Assembly under these circumstances. Photo by Tobias Schwarz/AFP via Getty Images

already a puppet of Putin. We need to do everything we can to support the democratic forces, which are represented by the Georgian people standing in the streets, people who want to belong to Europe, not to Russia."

The Georgian opposition also welcomed PACE's resolution. Tina Bokuchava, Chair of the Unity-UNM coalition, argued that the resolution sought to overcome the political crisis in the country and aligned with the goals of ongoing pro-European protests in Georgia. "The issue of the ratification of the credentials itself... is only a lever and an instrument to achieve the goal of overcoming the political crisis," she said. Civil society representatives also supported the move. Nino Dolidze, director of the election monitor ISFED, noted that the conditions set by PACE align with the demands of Georgian society: new elections and the release of political prisoners by April.

Yet Georgian Dream officials, including Secretary General Kakha Kaladze, criticized the draft resolution, accusing the Parliamentary Assembly's Monitoring Committee of issuing "blackmail or ultimatums." Kaladze rejected the conditions laid out in the document, including the demand for new elections and the release of political prisoners, stating that such actions were "categorically unacceptable." He emphasized that Georgia sought "friendship and partnership," not coercion.

Georgian Dream Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze also commented on the PACE resolution and Tsulukiani's announcement, supporting the decision to withdraw from the assembly. He criticized the European institutions involved, describing the resolution as a result of bureaucratic inefficiency rather than a meaningful policy response. "These kinds of decisions reveal the dysfunction in European institutions. Ultimately, this will not change anything significant for Georgia," Kobakhidze claimed.

He emphasized that the decision to leave PACE was unavoidable. "What Mrs. Tsulukiani announced was crucial. Of course, this was the only option we had. Our delegation will not continue participating in the Parliamentary Assembly under these circumstances, and we will challenge this issue further," he stated.

While asserting that the withdrawal was final for the time being, Kobakhidze left open the possibility of re-engaging with PACE if the situation changes. "If the attitude toward Georgia shifts, we would naturally reconsider our participation. But given the current context, continuing to work there makes no sense," he explained.

Kobakhidze also minimized the importance of

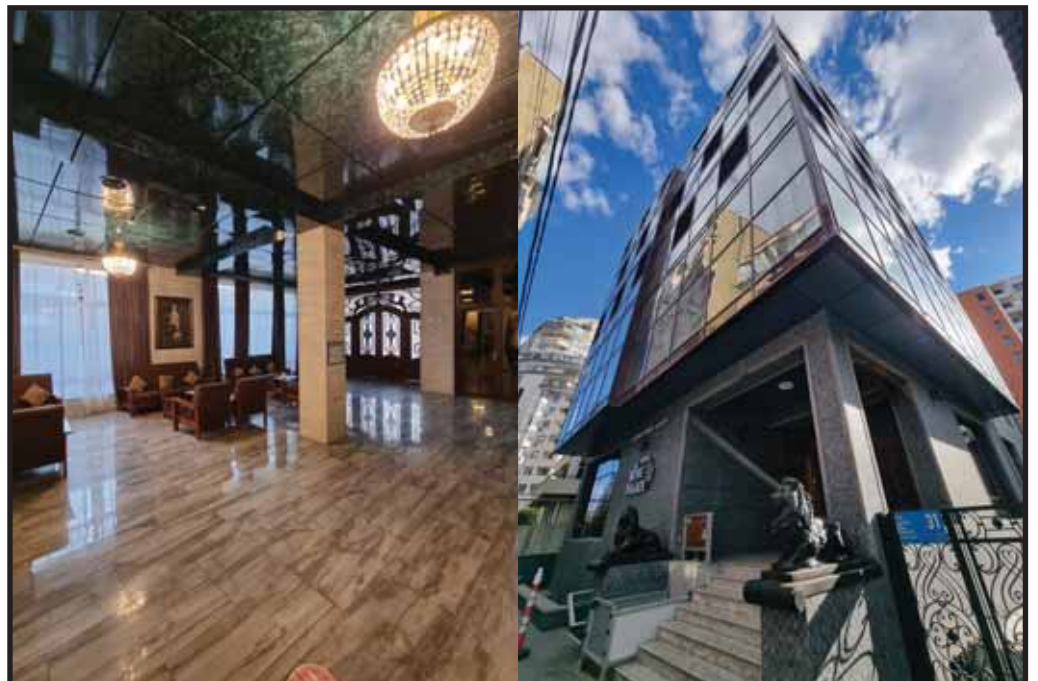


Such decisions reveal the dysfunction in European institutions. Ultimately, this will not change anything significant for Georgia - PM Kobakhidze

the Parliamentary Assembly, arguing that it holds little influence in the broader European political landscape. "The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe is far less significant than the European Parliament, which itself does not hold much power. This is just a parliamentary body with limited influence. Naturally, Georgia remains a member of the Council of Europe," he concluded.

PACE President Theodoros Rousopoulos expressed regret over the Georgian delegation's decision to withdraw, noting that the Assembly had planned to reconsider the delegation's credentials in light of progress made on the mentioned issues.

"[Their withdrawal] jeopardizes the dialogue that could help to advance democratic standards in Georgia," he said.



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Interview with CoE Sec Gen Alain Berset: I Wanted to Show Georgians We are Present to Support their European Aspirations

INTERVIEW BY VAZHA TAVBERIDZE

Radio Free Europe's Georgian Service grabbed a moment with the very busy Alain Berset, Council of Europe Secretary General, during the PACE winter session in Strasbourg. We asked for his take on the developments in Georgia.

YOUR VISIT TO GEORGIA SPARKED SO MUCH DEBATE. YOU DEFENDED THIS DECISION, SAID IT WAS THE RIGHT THING TO DO, BUT MANY ALSO CRITICIZED IT AS CONFERRING LEGITIMACY TO A DISPUTED GOVERNMENT. TWO MONTHS ON, HAS YOUR TAKE ON THAT DECISION CHANGED?

Georgia has been a member state of the Council of Europe for many years now. We have 46 member states. And I think the meaning of multilateralism is to bring contact, to speak to each other. And that's why I was very clear when visiting Georgia. [I said] I want to see everybody, all political actors, as well as civil society. And I started the visit by meeting with

representatives of civil society and also with people who were brutally injured during the demonstrations. It was no legitimization of the elections, because I am not responsible for that, it's not up to me to legitimize, or to not legitimize, an election: I'm just responsible for seeing what's happening with the people on the ground. Almost 4 million people live in Georgia, and they need to understand and to know that they are protected by the European Convention on Human Rights, and they need to know and to see that we are present to support their European aspirations. That's the main message that I wanted to bring to Georgia in December. And it's the same message today.

YOU WERE GIVEN SEVERAL PROMISES BY THE GEORGIAN GOVERNMENT: A RELEASE OF THE POLITICAL PRISONERS, AN INVESTIGATION INTO VIOLATIONS, AND AN AMENDMENT TO THE FOREIGN AGENT LAW. NONE OF THOSE THINGS HAVE HAPPENED. HAVE YOU CHECKED ON THE PROGRESS?

No, but we are monitoring it really closely. On the first element, we had, I would say,

a positive evolution just after the visit, with some releases. But then in January we also had some negative developments. And that's why it's so important to stay in touch. Cutting contact altogether and saying, "Okay, we don't want to engage with Georgia" would not help. We need everyone to understand that a country that is a member of the Council of Europe has certain obligations, first of all human rights.

On the second point, investigating all the allegations of abuse and use of force against protesters, here we are monitoring too, and we can say we aren't seeing enough results. We had a visit of the Commission of Human Rights, the visit of two PACE co-rapporteurs, and a visit of the Committee for the Prevention of Torture.

BUT NONE OF THEM HAD ANYTHING PARTICULARLY POSITIVE TO SAY ABOUT THINGS.

That's why it is so important to be in contact. If we cut this contact, nobody has anything to say. We have something to say where we see the problems and we want to have a discussion with the authorities. And the last point about the working group for amending the Foreign Agents law: we agreed on creating this working group.



Journalist Vazha Tavberidze with Alain Berset

IS IT WORKING?

It is starting to work. And, you know, the good thing—I was present, and I addressed all the issues with all the people ready to speak with me. Being present allowed me to have high expectations and to expect that they will deliver. And if they don't, then we will have a new discussion. But not to come at all and to abandon

Georgia in this situation would not help, I think. We need to make sure we try and make progress together.

We care about the Georgian people. That's why we are so invested and so emotionally engaged in seeing progress. And that's why I was present. If not everyone understands this, that's not my problem."

Georgia's Bus Fare Hack: A Digital Prank Turns Public Transport into a Global Sensation

BLOG BY MARIAM AVAKOVA

In today's tech-driven and AI-powered world, the boundaries between the digital and physical realms have blurred. The internet era has given citizens unprecedented platforms like Twitter, TikTok, and Facebook to voice their opinions and share news instantly. As a result, e-protests have become an increasingly common and impactful way to express dissent: creative, bold, and at times, even humorous.

On January 24, one example of just that captured global attention from Georgia, seeing the public transport fare machine system falling victim to a cyberattack. This act, while disruptive, seemed to carry a mischievous tone rather than malicious intent. It's what some might call the work of "green-hat" or "white-hat" hackers, aiming to make a statement rather than cause harm. Interestingly, the renowned hacking group Anonymous later confirmed that Georgian hackers, affiliated with their larger network, had orchestrated the attack. It's a vivid reminder of how interconnected and unpredictable our digital world has become.

This wasn't the first time such an incident occurred in Georgia. Just a few months ago, Anonymous claimed responsibility for hacking several government websites, leaving a bold message: "Citizens should not fear their government; instead, the government should fear its citizens." What follows is an exploration of how technology and e-protests have reshaped the way people demand change, through innovation, humor, and a touch of rebellion—a call for change and action.

On January 24, the payment machines on Tbilisi's buses and minibuses suddenly started playing some rather unexpected tunes. Passengers woke up to a reality that was as surprising as it was entertaining. While some were understandably concerned, others couldn't



A Tbilisi bus and fare box. Source: redfedoradiary.com

help but laugh and enjoy the unexpected free rides. Apparently, someone decided to pull off a digital prank by hacking into the system. But instead of chaos, they delivered a unique and, dare we say, curated playlist. Imagine hearing speeches from past Georgian presidents, political rants, billionaire pledges, and even the Georgian and EU anthems, all while riding the bus.

Who needs a regular commute when you can have a soundtrack like that? Of course, the incident caused a bit of a stir and required some quick tech support to set things right. But it also served as a reminder that even the most routine aspects of our daily lives can turn extraordinary in the digital age.

And it wasn't just commuters who got creative; small entrepreneurs joined the fun too! Companies like Altersocks made a playful statement that sparked a discussion about printing fare machine designs on socks. Meanwhile, Gani Handmades introduced fare machine keychains. These quirky creations turned a moment of digital mischief into a source of inspiration for art and business alike.

This unexpected prank might not have been part of anyone's plans, but it certainly added a bit of excitement to the everyday hustle of public transport. For a brief moment, Tbilisi's buses and minibuses didn't just get people from A to

B—they brought a little humor and creativity to the whole city. If you take a quick look at Twitter, you'll see how international media and foreigners are retweeting and sharing the story—it's spread across the globe, seeing the buses of Tbilisi becoming unlikely influencers in their own right!

The buzz around this digital prank has turned into a worldwide sensation, showing how a little creativity and technology can go a long way in the age of social media. A simple hack on a public transport system became a symbol of resistance, a spark of defiance in the digital realm. This prank might have been unplanned, but it brought a much-needed dose of laughter and joy to the city. And more importantly, it served as a powerful reminder that even in the face of adversity, creativity and resistance can find the most unexpected ways to thrive. The hacked fare machines on Tbilisi's buses truly outdid themselves, becoming the city's most unexpected performers: Passengers were treated to an unforgettable soundtrack filled with memorable quotes, historic moments, and even a touch of cheeky humor.

Zurab Zhvania's iconic declaration: "I am Georgian and therefore I am European," was heard; a historic quote, first spoken at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in 1999, that

brought a sense of pride and nostalgia to riders as it echoed through the buses. The machines didn't stop there; they played the national anthems of Georgia and the European Union, adding a touch of grandeur to the daily commute. And to top it all off, the fare machines played chants of "Glory to Georgia! Glory to Ukraine!", bringing a unifying and uplifting message to everyone onboard.

This unexpected mix of sound bites turned ordinary bus rides into a unique mix of history lesson, political theater, and comedy hour. Who knew a simple transport system could create such an unforgettable experience?

But just as suddenly as it began, the surreal bus ride experience came to an end. So, what happened next?

AnonymousTV delivered a powerful message on Twitter: "This is a warning to the oppressors: your crimes against democracy and your people will not go unanswered. To the people of Georgia: Rise, resist, and reclaim your freedom. You are not alone in this fight."

The government's response: A few hours later, the fare payment system was restored.

Tbilisi City Hall explained: "A fault was detected on the devices installed in public transport, which are supported by the Bank of Georgia's contractor companies, LLC 'MS+' and LLC 'Azri.' As a result, an audio recording was activated. Representatives from the relevant companies immediately began working to resolve the issue. The devices will be reactivated as soon as the fault is corrected. In the meantime, public transport will operate without charging passengers."

Tbilisi Mayor Kakha Kaladze emphasized the seriousness of the incident, stating: "The investigation will definitely determine where the cyberattack came from, with whose involvement, and how it was carried out. An investigation into the cyberattack must be launched."

The Interior Ministry has since initiated an investigation under Article 284 of the

Criminal Code, which pertains to unauthorized access to a computer system.

By the early afternoon, the passenger payment systems were back. However, questions remain about who was responsible for the audio material and whether the incident was linked to another cyberattack the day prior, one that targeted the website of Tbilisi City Mall, displaying hateful messages and obscenities.

This curious mix of entertainment, disruption, and investigation has left Tbilisi residents wondering what the next twist in the story will be! What started as an unexpected disruption, quickly became an inspiring moment. Never in our wildest dreams would we have thought that simple devices, built to process payments, could transform into something so imaginative; turning signals into sound, history, and even humor. This wasn't just a glitch or a cyberattack; it was a spark of brilliance, a reminder of how even the most mundane technology can surprise and inspire. The individual behind this is undeniably talented. Their ability to make machines in buses "talk" was not only a technical triumph but also a stroke of creative genius. Imagine if such systems could be repurposed to share educational messages, greetings, or even emergency updates. This innovative approach could redefine the way we see public infrastructure worldwide. And let's be honest, was anyone really that upset? No. Some even appreciated the unexpected bonus of free rides. And when the Georgian and EU anthems started playing? That was a masterstroke, showing us the power of a small device to evoke pride and unity. This moment proved that technology, when combined with creativity, can open new doors. Whether it's sharing important information or making someone smile during their daily commute, the possibilities are endless. This wasn't just about hacked fare machines; it was about seeing potential where no one else had, and inspiring others to think differently.

Igrika - Crafting Meaningful Stories through Georgian Heritage

BY KESARIA KATCHARAVA

Igrika is not just a brand, it's a journey into the mystical and symbolic world of ancient Georgian culture. Founded by Grigol Dalakishvili and Baia Lomsadze, Igrika carries a rich heritage embedded in the stories, symbols, and traditions of Georgia. The name "Igrika" itself is a nod to the old Georgian word for April, the month when Grigol and Baia first crossed paths. Since that fateful meeting, they have been on a mission to bring the deep, symbolic beauty of Georgia's past into the present, creating products that are far more than just items—they are experiences.

Grigol and Baia's shared passion for symbolism and exploration of the unknown naturally led them to start Igrika. "We were always attracted to the mysterious world full of symbolism," they explain. "We became explorers at heart, and now, we invite you to join us on this adventure." At Igrika, they believe that their creations are more than just physical objects: they are vehicles for stories, history, and meaning that pass from their hands to yours.

Their slogan, "The story will keep narrating through you," encapsulates the essence of Igrika's mission. They don't just want to share their discoveries with you - they want you to carry the stories forward. "When you encounter these treasures, it's impossible not to become a keeper of them," they explain, emphasizing the deep emotional connection they hope their products will inspire in



those who experience them.

In today's world of mass production, where items are made quickly and without personal connection, Igrika offers a refreshing alternative. Their products are hand-crafted, thoughtfully designed, and steeped in the cultural richness of Georgia. "In the 21st century, mass production has reached its peak, but people are beginning to realize that these machine-made products often lack authenticity," says Grigol. "Our goal is to create things that resonate with people on a deeper level—pieces that carry meaning and warmth."

Each Igrika product tells a story, whether through hand block printing, wood carving, or painting. The craftsmanship is not just in the finished piece, but in the process itself—researching ancient symbols, interpreting their meanings, and breathing life into them through design. One of the most striking aspects of

Igrika's work is its focus on ancient symbols. A prime example is the "Moon Guard," an emblem dating back to the 2nd millennium BC. This iconic figure is depicted as a warrior armed with two swords on his arms and two on his waist, with two dots on either side, symbolizing blessings. The Moon Guard is not just a symbol of strength, but represents both the Moon God and the God of War, making him the supreme deity in Georgian mythology.

Following the arrival of Christianity, the Moon Guard became associated with St. George, the revered protector and leader of the Georgians in every battle. This symbol is a powerful reminder of protection, courage, and spiritual strength, qualities Igrika aims to preserve through its creations. The Moon Guard is featured in several of Igrika's products, making it a central figure in their collection and an enduring part of Georgia's rich history.

Another standout offering from Igrika is the Ex Libris, a custom personal library stamp that represents a centuries-old tradition. These stamps, often featuring a monogram of the owner's initials, carry a sense of pride and individuality. More than just a functional tool, an Ex Libris embodies one's identity and a personal connection to the legacy of those who came before.

Igrika's Ex Libris stamps can be customized and ordered through their website, offering a unique and meaningful addition to any library. It's more than just a stamp; it's a piece of history that reflects the owner's personal story and legacy.

In 2024, Igrika expanded its reach with



a new venture for children - RTO. This branch brings together educational games, memorable gifts, and an artistic world full of wonder. RTO's debut product, a matching game featuring characters from Georgian folk tales, introduces children to the rich narratives of their cultural heritage. The game not only sparks curiosity, but also teaches valuable life lessons such as kindness, loyalty, wisdom, and humor.

The game's design is available in eight languages, including Georgian, English, Polish, German, Italian, Spanish, Chinese, and Japanese, making it accessible to a global audience. Crafted from sustainably sourced paper and meeting European Union safety standards (EN-71), the RTO products are both safe and environmentally friendly, offering children a fun,

educational, and meaningful experience.

CRAFTING EXPERIENCES, NOT JUST PRODUCTS

For Grigol and Baia, Igrika is about creating more than just aesthetically pleasing products; it's about crafting experiences that transport people into a world of meaning and connection. "When you open our packages, you don't just receive a product - you uncover a story," they say. Each product is thoughtfully packaged with informational cards in both Georgian and English, allowing customers to explore the mystical tales behind each design. This immersive experience helps people connect with the deeper meanings of the products, making them more than just objects to own, they become treasures to cherish.

National Bank of Georgia Hosts Seminar on Global Economic Trends and Financial Stability



David Vavra and Douglas Laxton, international advisors to the NBG. Source: FB

BY TEAM GT

The National Bank of Georgia (NBG) hosted an international seminar on Wednesday titled 'Impact and Risks of Global Economic Trends', focusing on regional challenges and strategies for ensuring financial stability.

The event brought together experts and officials to discuss current economic trends and assess future risks impacting both Georgia and the global economy, according to the central bank.

In her opening remarks, NBG Vice Governor Ekaterine Mikabadze emphasized the Bank's commitment to maintaining macroeconomic stability and sustainability.

"Flexibility, transparency, and trust are the cornerstones of a successful monetary policy," Mikabadze stated.

She further underscored the central bank's responsibility to maintain price stability as a critical foundation for long-term economic growth.

"Since the start of 2023, we've seen a slowing pace of price growth, with inflation remaining under the three percent

target since March. This achievement is a direct result of our proactive monetary policy," the Vice Governor added.

The seminar featured presentations from global economic experts, including

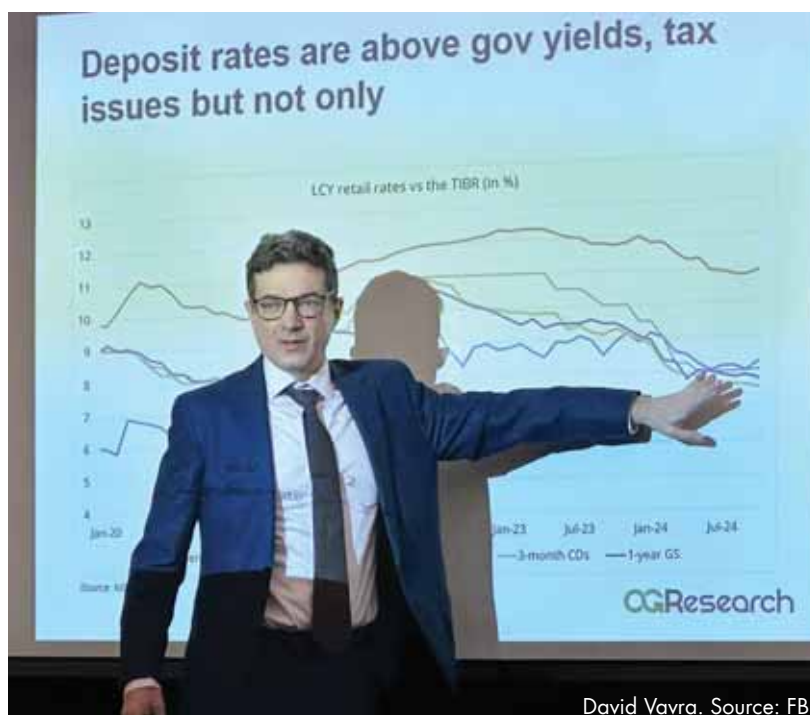
Douglas Laxton and David Vavra, who serve as international advisors to the NBG.

Vavra addressed current challenges within Georgia's domestic financial sector and evaluated the "effectiveness" of the NBG's monetary policy framework in managing these risks.

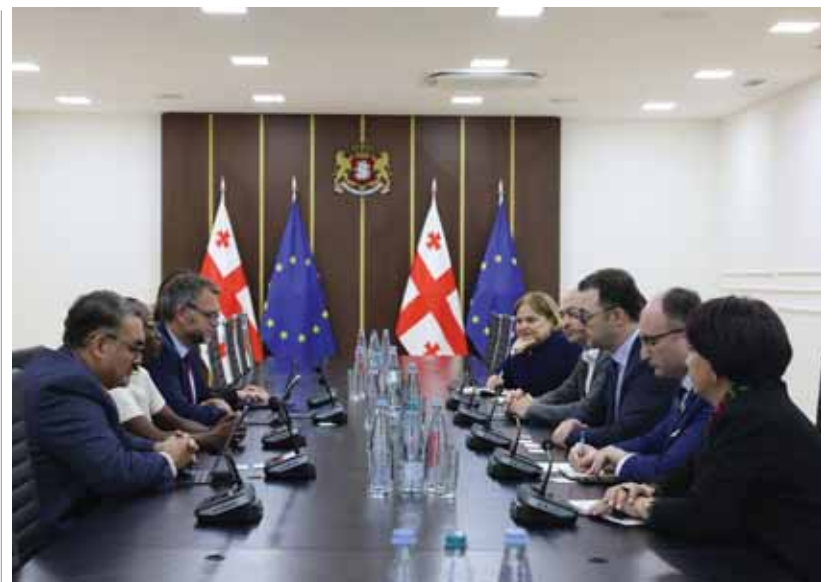
Laxton, drawing on his experience with the International Monetary Fund and the Bank of Canada, commended the NBG for its success in managing price stability.

"Georgia's central bank has navigated the challenges of maintaining price stability more effectively than many advanced economies. The open communication between the NBG and commercial banks is highly commendable and should serve as a model for central banks globally," he noted.

The seminar was attended by officials from the Georgian Parliament, the Government, the financial sector, analytical centers, research organizations, and academia.



David Vavra. Source: FB



The Ministry of Agriculture and Sustainable Development of Georgia.

Georgia and World Bank Meet to Strengthen Collaboration on Sustainable Agriculture

BY MARIAM RAZMADZE

David Songulashvili, Georgia's Minister of Environmental Protection and Agriculture, met with Dr. Holger Kray, the World Bank's Agriculture and Food Practice Manager for Europe and Central Asia, to discuss future cooperation in irrigation development and sustainable land management practices. Their talks focused on climate-conscious agriculture, particularly the ways to improve farmers' access to modern technology in the climate battle.

"Several key initiatives are being implemented in Georgia with the support of

the World Bank, contributing to sustainable agricultural development," said Songulashvili, emphasizing the importance of the World Bank's collaboration in sharing advanced technologies.

Dr. Kray thanked the Minister for the ongoing cooperation, saying, "Climate-smart agriculture initiatives will be more efficiently implemented since environmental protection and agricultural development are merged under one Ministry in Georgia."

The meeting also touched upon the Georgia Resilient Agriculture, Irrigation and Land (GRAIL) project, financially supported by the World Bank with a total cost of \$150 million. The initiative aims to improve irrigation systems, agricultural productivity, and institutional capacity for land management.

Currency of Dissent: How Banknotes Became a Medium of Protest

BY IVAN NECHAEV

In a world where cash transactions are slowly giving way to digital payments, physical currency remains a powerful symbol of state authority. It is adorned with the faces of national leaders, historical figures, and patriotic motifs, serving as both a medium of exchange and an instrument of ideological representation. Yet, for some, banknotes have become more than just money; they have transformed into a canvas for protest. Across social media, particularly in groups like Daitove on Facebook, activists are posting images of banknotes inscribed with the phrase: "Freedom to political prisoners."

DEFACING OR DEFYING?

The act of writing on currency has a long history, straddling the line between defacement and defiance. From the countercultural messages of the 1960s to subversive graffiti in authoritarian regimes, the financial system has always been an arena of political struggle. Writing a protest slogan on a banknote is an act of subversion precisely because money is a state-controlled object, yet it circulates freely, slipping from hand to hand, crossing borders, and infiltrating every level of society. Unlike social media posts, which can be censored or deleted, physical money remains in circulation, carrying its message like a secret pamphlet passed through invisible networks.

A PROTEST BEYOND THE ALGORITHMIC EYE

In an age where digital surveillance is omnipresent, activists are seeking alternative forms of resistance that evade algorithmic control. Social media plat-



Georgian Lari shown on Daitove's Facebook page

forms can suppress or shadowban political content, and authoritarian governments can monitor online dissent. However, writing on cash bypasses these digital controls. A marked banknote exists outside of cyberspace, eluding bots and firewalls, becoming an undetectable agent of protest that remains effective for as long as it remains in circulation.

As one user, Diana Burnadze, noted in a Facebook post: "I wrote this on every bill I could find in the cash register." Another user commented wryly: "I think we'll transition to digital money soon. The government will ban this."

This humorous but sharp observation points to a deeper concern: the potential disappearance of cash as a means of unmonitored exchange. Digital payments, while convenient, leave an indelible trail, allowing governments and corporations

to track financial activity. Cash, on the other hand, retains a degree of anonymity, making it a more subversive tool for dissent.

FROM COUNTERCULTURE TO COVERT RESISTANCE

Historically, money has often been co-opted for political messaging. During the Second World War, anti-Nazi activists in occupied Europe stamped "Freedom!" and "Resist!" onto banknotes, ensuring their messages circulated beyond their immediate circles. In 1980s Argentina, during the military dictatorship, activists wrote the names of the disappeared on peso notes, turning a financial instrument into a memorial of state violence. Similar tactics were used during the 2019 Hong Kong protests, where pro-democracy messages were scrawled onto banknotes

before being spent in everyday transactions.

During the Russian Revolution of 1917, anti-Bolshevik forces defaced banknotes with messages denouncing Lenin and his policies, using the ruble as a battleground for ideological warfare. Likewise, in Francoist Spain, dissidents wrote slogans on pesetas to spread underground resistance against the dictatorship. In the United States during the Vietnam War, some activists wrote anti-war slogans on dollar bills, ensuring their opposition reached unsuspecting individuals.

In Zimbabwe, during the economic collapse of the 2000s, hyperinflation turned banknotes into political statements. Citizens stamped and scribbled anti-government messages on trillion-dollar bills, an act of both protest and dark humor in the face of economic disaster. The phenomenon was similar in Venezuela, where the devaluation of the bolívar led people to use currency as a medium for protest, writing criticisms of Nicolás Maduro's government directly onto nearly worthless notes.

Even earlier, during the French Revolution, political propaganda was spread through the inscription of radical slogans on assignats, the paper money issued by the revolutionary government. These messages called for liberty and equality, reflecting the ideological fervor of the time and demonstrating how financial instruments could serve as tools for mass mobilization.

Georgia's current wave of protest inscriptions echoes these past movements, but also underscores a tension between physical and digital resistance. As societies move toward cashless economies, the disappearance of paper money could mark the loss of an important grassroots tool for dissent.

CAN THE STATE CONTROL THE NARRATIVE ON CASH?

Despite government attempts to regulate or discourage writing on money, such acts of resistance persist. Legally, many countries consider defacing currency to be an offense, yet enforcement is inconsistent. The effectiveness of this form of protest lies precisely in its ordinariness: a banknote with a handwritten message is easy to miss, yet once noticed, it cannot be unseen.

Moreover, this movement raises larger philosophical and sociological questions: To whom does money belong once it is in circulation? If a state issues currency as legal tender, but citizens can alter it with political messages, does the very nature of ownership shift? Does a protest message on a banknote alter the social contract between the issuer (the state) and the user (the people)?

THE FUTURE OF FINANCIAL DISSENT

As digital transactions become the norm, the power of physical currency as a vehicle for protest may diminish. Yet, this only pushes dissenters to seek new means of resistance. Perhaps, as that Facebook user joked, the government will move to ban cash to suppress such subversive messages. But history suggests that dissent always finds a way—whether through anonymous cryptocurrency transactions, alternative currencies, or new forms of symbolic protest.

The act of writing "Freedom to political prisoners" on a banknote is a small but potent reminder that even within systems designed for control, there remain cracks through which defiance can slip. The question remains: how long will such cracks exist, and what new forms of financial resistance will emerge as the physical fades into the digital?

SOCIETY

The Nation is Learning English Fast

BLOG BY NUGZAR B. RUHADZE

Last Sunday, January 26th, the chic, well-lit main hall of events at the Biltmore Hotel in Tbilisi was filled with joy and excitement in anticipation of something big. A couple of hundred young boys and girls from all over Sakartvelo, along with their dedicated parents and success-driven teachers, gathered together in one eager group of English-language learners, providers, and instructors, to witness the solemn award ceremony of the national linguistic competition, organized by LINGOSTAR, an English-language program of International Edu for Georgia, in cooperation with the Speak Up London international language school.

Says the enthusiastic and emotionally overwhelmed Sophia Kvartskhava, the founder and owner of the event-organizing company: "Our main goal is to help the youngsters of this country acquire the skills that are clearly indispensable for surviving in the 21st century." And this is a huge task that can greatly benefit this nation because English, as the most powerful linguistic tool of communication worldwide, must be mastered by our younger generation, if not the entire population. Otherwise, our national progress may be hard to imagine. Georgia's youth, in order to stay in meaningful contact with their peers in the international arena, must double down on learning English to meet the monumental challenges and

expectations of the modern world.

Incidentally, LINGOSTAR defines itself as an English-language Olympiad and a youth international project that strives to provide young men and women in this country with contemporary international experience, to introduce them to various cultures around the world, and ultimately prepare them to become knowledgeable and qualified participants in what we call intercultural communication. Achieving this is no easy feat, and it won't happen without the effort of professionals like Sophia Kvartskhava and her dedicated, results-oriented team. Moreover, her project not only helps young people improve their English—the most advantageous foreign language—but also supports those ready to plunge into hard work, helping them develop their careers and eventually find employment in the globalized world, wherever their talent and knowledge may take them.

Thousands of children, eager to test their knowledge, skills, and determination, volunteered to participate in this year's Olympiad, the concluding event of which took place at the Biltmore Hotel. The nationwide competition was held online on a specially selected platform and was divided into two age groups: 7th to 9th grades and 10th to 12th grades. This division made sense, ensuring a fair and reasonable opportunity for all participants. And all this was available for an almost negligible enrollment fee that any parent could easily afford. Each subgroup selected one winner, and the winners will receive full funding to attend the renowned



The national linguistic competition at Biltmore Hotel. Source: FB

Speak Up London School in the UK, where they will continue to improve their English. Not only that, but they will undoubtedly forge many lasting friendships that could accompany them throughout their lives or even present opportunities to collaborate with their international peers to make the world a better place to live. There could be no greater dream than this.

The competition was no easy feat and was organized as a two-round contest,

giving prominence to as many as 690 students out of 4,200 participants. After that, the participants went through a difficult live audition, conducted in English by local, British, and American teachers, which resulted in the selection of the 180 best students. This group was then narrowed down to 17 finalists, and ultimately, two winners emerged: Nika Chikviladze from the junior group and Mariam Azumelashvili from the senior group.

The Biltmore Event Hall was packed to the brim, with about 500 people eagerly watching the festive award ceremony, beaming with the radiant, happy faces of the children. Both the participants and their supporters filled the hall. Speeches and performances took place, as is customary, but nothing was ordinary or trivial that joyous evening. Everything felt elevated in that rare, yet increasingly popular, educational trend. Bravo, LINGOSTAR!

Still Waters

BLOG BY TONY HANMER

After a couple of days of heavier-than-usual winds in Tbilisi, calm fell. Having not been out for a while to my ponds with their reeds and rushes near the apartment, I set off with camera, mid-afternoon.

While the pools are usually garbage-tainted anyway, this time it was noticeably worse, the gales having knocked over three dumpsters in the area and scattered their contents far and wide. So much plastic! What a curse. A couple of days after my expedition, true, city workers did come and start picking up the rubbish on land; but they were not equipped to wade into the waters and clean them up too. So I must shoot around the invasive materials.

The water was practically mirror-calm,

rarer still for it being late in the day. Nights here, and early mornings, are usually stiller than this time of day. I walked around the ponds with my 70-300mm long lens, relishing the perfect reflections of mixed chaos and order which the reeds gave me.

Some, indeed, looked just like little spaceships (my sci-fi eyes are always attuned to these), the stems bent back into the water and reflected into diamond shapes or others more fantastic. Mostly the out of focus background to these was more nature, rushes and trees; but sometimes I saw and shot cranes and other big machinery, because that was what was there. A single step in a different direction, up or down or to the side, would completely change the relationships and positions of these elements to each other, as happens in mirrors. I kept my camera's aperture (light-gathering hole) large, to keep the focus tightly on what I wanted, and let everything else



Photo by Tony Hanmer



Photo by Tony Hanmer

blur and not distract.

You can't fight what the world gives you to photograph; you can choose either to shoot it or not. But you can choose every part of the camera's controls. Shutter speed fast (to freeze things) or slow (to show motion), the latter handheld or tripod-mounted. Aperture wide for the narrow focus or narrow for the wide. ISO: sensitivity to light, introducing more grain as this get higher. Color space, or choice of black and white. Where and when you shoot, the local conditions.

Having grown up on fantasy and sci-fi as well as non-fiction, I am happy to turn the real world into the otherworldly via my camera. The idea is not always to represent hard reality, but to evoke a response in the viewer: not, as Ansel

Adams wrote, what they really saw, more what they expect or want to see. Sometimes to bring forth nostalgia, or wonder, or sometimes even unease or horror if necessary. We CAN'T see motion blurred, or a scene with one part or none sharply in focus and the rest out of focus; our eyes don't work like that. This is the fictional side of photography, as opposed to the documentary. I delight in it. The world has much amazement to offer the seeking eye.

I remember the furor when photography began to gain a foothold in the art world (its bicentennial will be next year!). It would be the death of painting! That never happened; the two flourished side by side in the 19th and 20th centuries as the new medium gained its masters and its media of capture advanced in capa-

bility. They are still advancing; and now we have billions of photographers, most armed with smartphones if nothing else. I don't feel the urge to stand out. I'm just photographing what I love. If others like it too, that's a bonus. Same if they want to buy it. But (hopefully not sounding too selfish), I'm doing what brings me joy.

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 Show Must Go On – Organizers Put Charities First for 15th Tbilisi Burns Supper and Ball

Continued from page 1

The holding of this year's milestone supper had been in some doubt, given the backdrop of widespread peaceful protest against disputed election results, the Georgian government reversing on the country's path toward European integration, and the ongoing detainment of pro-democracy activists.

Alastair Watt, master of ceremonies and co-organizer of the event alongside Sara Kemecei, explained the organizing committee's decision to go ahead with the event: "We know that, due to the situation and out of respect for those detained, many large-scale celebrations have been postponed or cancelled over the last few months. We fully respect such decisions, and deeply considered following suit. However, we concluded that, in these ambiguous times, perhaps more so than in any of the previous 14 years, our charities need us. Above all, this is a charity project, and we're proud of what the event and its generous sponsors, donors, guests, and volunteers have contributed over the years."

Watt continued: "Sara and I have been in Georgia a long time. We both have half-Georgian children growing up here, and feel deeply connected to the country. So this wasn't a decision taken lightly – but the firm and widespread support we've received since suggests it was the right one."

Guests this year will once more be greeted by the unique blast of traditional Scottish bagpipes, played by Richard Jasper, who has piped at the world-famous Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo for the last three summers.

With the occasion delivering authenticity at every turn, supper-goers can also look forward to a parade of the haggis (a Scottish delicacy), some poetry from the incomparable Burns, and toasts including the Selkirk Grace, the Immor-



Scottish poet, Robert Burns

tal Memory, as well as the Address to the Lassies and the Reply.

A sumptuous four-course helping of Scottish-themed dishes will also be served, including the heavenly haggis, while an additional genuine touch of Scottishness comes from the live music performed by the Glencraig Band, who fly in yearly, made up of Nicol McLaren (accordion), Isobelle Hodgson (piano), and Maggie Adamson (fiddle).

The gleesome threesome, led by McLaren, will lure punters on to the dance floor to perform Scottish country dances such as the Gay Gordons, the Dashing White Sergeant, and Strip the Willow.

A charity auction – one of the key money-makers for the event and its charities – will also be held, orchestrated masterfully as always by Cliff Isaak, who invites bidding contests for artworks and other precious items.

This year, the Tbilisi Burns Supper and Ball is supporting:

Tem Community (caring for a wide range of vulnerable people) – www.temcommunity.org;

The International Women's Association of Georgia (supporting small local

organizations, families, and individuals for over 25 years) – www.iwa.ge; and Dog Organization Georgia (providing

shelter for stray animals along with sterilization, vaccination and adoption programs) – dog.org.ge.

"All three of our charities have great reputations and are broadly admired for the life-changing work they do, so everyone attending the event is in no doubt that they are helping truly valuable causes," Watt told GEORGIA TODAY.

"When putting together an event of this scale, it's vital to have total faith in the beneficiaries, and we absolutely do. The chosen causes also cover a wide range of areas, meaning that the money raised has a transformative effect on all sorts of Georgian lives" he added.

Reflecting on the history of the event in Tbilisi as it hits a milestone 15th edition, Watt took a moment to praise the Burns Supper's organizers-in-chief, both past and present: "I say this every year, but make no apology for repeating myself.

The existence of the event as we know it in Tbilisi is owed to Fiona Coxshall – her passion, commitment, high standards, and friendliness made the Tbilisi Burns Supper a roaring success for pretty much the entire 2010s. A level of preparation that'd make a royal wedding look like a farmers' market! We'd dearly love to have her back one of these years. Her influence remains vivid in so many aspects of the occasion, not least the world-class napkin decorations.

"Fiona left some wee but multi-talented shoes to fill, and Sara really has stepped up to do so magnificently. As a relatively long-term Scot, I was perhaps expected to keep Burns going here after Fiona left, but that would never have happened without Sara – she has to take the credit here."

Before reeling off to administer the first dance practice, Watt noted somberly that this year's supper would be missing one of its biggest characters and contributors over the years, namely Rod Mackenzie, who passed away in May 2024.

Watt explained: "I remember Rod giving a toast at the first supper I attended in 2011. He made quite the impression. He was a legendary figure not only at Burns Suppers but across Tbilisi's expat scene for decades. Clearly, he was proud of his Scottish roots, cloaked by a thick West Midlands accent. I knew him only a little, but many of our regular guests were fortunate to know him very well and will be missing him dearly. It seems only appropriate that a glass or two be raised in his memory this year."

Tickets are selling rapidly for what will be another unforgettable evening, so those interested are advised to get moving and email burnstbilisi@gmail.com to reserve their place. Meanwhile, updates regarding the event are posted on the event's Facebook page – Burns Supper & Ball Tbilisi – and the official website: www.burnstbilisi.com.



Scottish dancing at the Burns Gala

How I Learned to See: The Eye, the Imagination, and the Camera – A ‘Paraskevi Social Gathering’ with Tony Hanmer

BY KESARIA KATCHARAVA

On the evening of January 24th, photography enthusiasts, artists, and curious minds gathered at Fotografia Gallery at 21 Tabukashvili St. for a captivating ‘Paraskevi Social’ event titled ‘How I Learned to See: The Eye, the Imagination, and the Camera’ with British photographer and long-time Georgia resident Tony Hanmer. The intimate setting of the gallery, known for its dedication to showcasing the art of photography, provided the perfect backdrop for an evening of storytelling, artistic insight, and a deep-dive into the philosophy of seeing.

Tony Hanmer, a photographer with over four decades of experience, took the audience on a visual and philosophical journey through his evolution as an artist. Born in England with Welsh ancestry, raised in Zimbabwe and Canada, and now a resident of Georgia for 25 years, Hanmer’s life has been one of movement, observation, and adaptation. His love affair with photography began at the age of 11, and since then, his camera has been both a tool and a companion in his exploration of the world.

He began his talk with a personal anecdote, sharing a childhood image of himself on his way to school, books in hand. “The first really important thing that

shaped my life was books instead of TV,” he explained. “And I’m very glad about that.” This early exposure to literature not only nurtured his creative mind but also instilled in him an appreciation for patterns, both in language and in the visual world.

One of the recurring themes of the evening was Hanmer’s fascination with patterns—both natural and man-made. He presented stunning images of intricate designs created by tiny crabs on sandy beaches, transient water ripples that vanished in seconds, and reflections distorted by movement. “Nature is the greatest artist,” he remarked. “I’m always looking for what nature gives me in terms of pattern or design—sometimes chaotic, sometimes perfectly structured.”

His keen eye for detail extends beyond landscapes. He shared his experience of being in Moscow during the failed coup against Mikhail Gorbachev in 1991, where he instinctively grabbed his camera to document tanks and crowds. “I wouldn’t call myself a journalist photographer, but history was happening right in front of me—I had to capture it.” The audience was visibly engaged, leaning in as he described the adrenaline of the moment, the rush to buy more film, and the realization that he was witnessing a pivotal moment in world history.

A significant part of Hanmer’s work delves into the interplay between reality and abstraction. He showcased images where reflections, shadows, and blurred

motion transformed the ordinary into the surreal. One particularly striking example was a shot taken in Moscow, where a Coca-Cola sign appeared to be advertising against the backdrop of Lenin’s legacy. “Sometimes, you don’t see something until the camera shows it to you,” he mused. “That’s the magic of photography—it reveals things beyond the limits of our own eyes.”

The audience was mesmerized as he described his process, from experimenting with solarization techniques to capturing dance and motion in ways that defied conventional photographic composition. He demonstrated how breaking the traditional rules of photography—blurring, overexposing, or playing with perspective—could lead to striking artistic results.

A LIFE SHAPED BY ART

Hanmer’s wife, Lali Hanmer, who shared insights into her own artistic journey and the role of art in their lives. “Art is very important to me—it’s difficult to live without it,” she said. “I see God in art. God gave us eyes as a gift, and through them, we experience the pleasure of beauty.”

Lali spoke about her husband’s lifelong passion for capturing the natural world, from childhood sketches to photography and clay work. “Even in the smallest things—a leaf, a river’s shape, the way snow settles—he finds something wonderful.” She revealed that Tony keeps

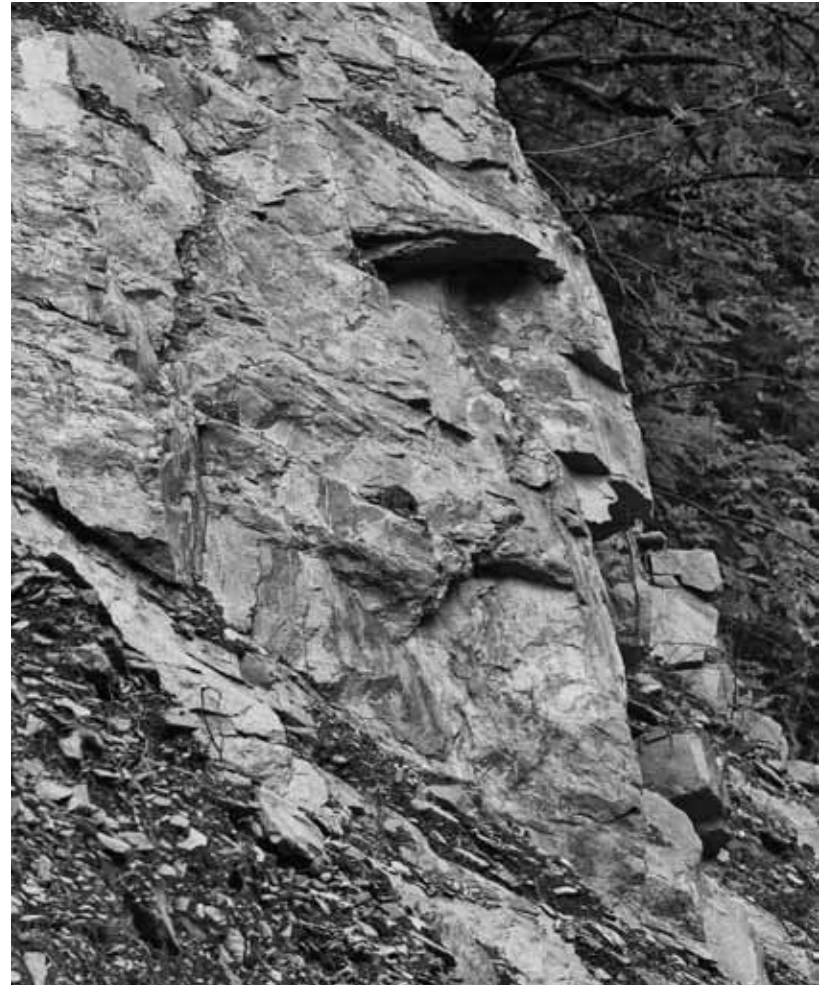


Photo by Tony Hanmer

his photographs—some going right back to when he first started in the craft aged 11, as cherished records of his journey, and noted that his work has appeared on book covers and postcards. “It’s interesting for both the younger and older generation to see how someone got to this point in their artistic journey,” she added, emphasizing the continuous nature of artistic development.

THE ATMOSPHERE OF THE EVENT

Throughout the evening, Fotografia Gallery buzzed with discussion. Attendees—some professional photographers, others hobbyists, and many simply lovers of art—engaged in lively conversation about the nature of photography. Many were seen exchanging thoughts on Hanmer’s work, analyzing his use of light and shadow, and sharing their own experiences behind the lens.

Jason Escalante, manager of Fotografia Gallery, praised Hanmer’s ability to see beyond the ordinary and bring new perspectives to his photography. “Fotografia Gallery exists to support Georgian art photography, including everything

from street and documentary photography, all the way to conceptual,” he said. One particularly engaging moment came during the Q&A session, when an audience member asked Hanmer how he decides what to shoot. “You shoot what you love,” he answered simply. “And if you don’t know what you love yet, shoot everything until you find out.” This advice struck a chord, sparking a dialogue about personal vision and artistic growth.

As the event drew to a close, attendees lingered, sipping wine and continuing conversations. Hanmer’s words had sparked something—a reconsideration of how they looked at the world, how they framed their own realities through a lens, and how seeing is, in itself, an evolving skill.

For many, ‘How I Learned to See’ was not just a presentation on photography, but an invitation to reconsider their own ways of observing and capturing the world. And for those lucky enough to be there, it was an evening that left them inspired; eager to pick up a camera and see anew.



Tony Hanmer talking at Fotografia Gallery. Source: FB

Mirian Khukhunaishvili and Wrocław Opera: A Georgian Conductor at the Helm of a European Opera House

BY IVAN NECHAEV

In a significant cultural development, Georgian conductor Mirian Khukhunaishvili has been appointed as the musical director of Wrocław Opera, a major institution in Poland’s operatic landscape. He will assume his new role in the 2025/2026 artistic season, bringing with him a fresh perspective, a commitment to excellence, and an ambition to bridge traditions with innovation.

THE WEIGHT OF JOY IN TROUBLED TIMES

Khukhunaishvili’s announcement on social media carried a poignant note: “Due to the events unfolding in my homeland, my joy is bittersweet. However, I still want to share that from September 2025, I will be the musical director of one of Poland’s most distinguished theaters, Wrocław Opera.”

This statement reflects a broader truth about artists who navigate between their national identity and global recognition. What does it mean for a Georgian conductor to take the helm of a European opera house? How does cultural diplomacy operate in an era of geopolitical uncertainty? And what can Wrocław expect from this “new-generation conductor,” as the opera house itself describes him?

WROCLAW OPERA: A THEATER AT THE CROSSROADS OF

HISTORY AND INNOVATION

Wrocław, a city with a complex historical trajectory—having belonged to Bohemia, Austria, Prussia, Germany, and now Poland—has long been a cultural crossroads. Its opera house, founded in the 19th century, carries a legacy that intertwines German Romanticism, Polish national identity, and broader European avant-garde movements.

Khukhunaishvili’s appointment signals an opportunity to reimagine this legacy. As he stated during the official press conference: “It is a great honor to be appointed as the musical director of Wrocław Opera. My goal is not only to continue the tradition of grand concerts but also to introduce new ideas, support young talent, and explore new musical directions. Together with my team, we will work tirelessly to achieve the highest artistic standards.”

This vision suggests an engagement with both the opera’s historic repertoire and contemporary experimentation. It also aligns with broader European trends in opera management, where theaters strive to balance tradition with bold artistic choices, appealing to both classical purists and modern audiences.

THE ARTISTIC JOURNEY OF MIRIAN KHUKHUNAISHVILI

Born in 1989 in Tbilisi, Georgia, Khukhunaishvili began his musical education at the Tbilisi State Conservatoire, where he earned both bachelor’s and master’s degrees in choral conducting under the mentorship of Liana Chonishvili. He



Mirian Khukhunaishvili / Facebook

continued his studies in orchestral conducting at the Academy of Music in Kraków, Poland, where he is pursuing a doctoral degree.

Since 2012, he has collaborated with numerous ensembles, including the Tbilisi Opera and Ballet Theatre Orchestra and Choir, the Georgian National Symphony Orchestra, the Tbilisi State Orchestra, the Tbilisi State Chamber Orchestra ‘Georgian Sinfonietta,’ the student orchestra of the Tbilisi Conservatoire, the Beethoven Academy Orchestra, the National Cappella of Georgia, and the Choir of the Gdansk Music Academy. His experience spans prestigious national and international festivals, reflecting a diverse and enriched musical background.

Between 2016 and 2017, he served as

chief conductor of the student orchestra of the Tbilisi Conservatoire, further solidifying his reputation as a leader in musical education and orchestral direction. Khukhunaishvili’s conducting style is characterized by a profound respect for tradition, combined with technical precision and emotional expressiveness. His interpretations are marked by an acute attention to detail and a drive to evoke deep emotional responses from audiences.

THE GLOBALIZATION OF CLASSICAL MUSIC

Khukhunaishvili’s career trajectory exemplifies the increasing globalization of classical music. Educated in Georgia, with international experience conduct-

ing in major concert halls, he represents a generation of musicians who move fluidly between cultural spheres. This mobility reflects a broader shift in how opera houses operate today: they seek conductors who are not only musically gifted, but also capable of understanding diverse audiences and repertoires.

Poland, like Georgia, has a rich yet often turbulent musical history. Both countries have experienced cultural suppression and revival, making their musical traditions deeply intertwined with national identity. What happens when a Georgian musician takes charge of one of Poland’s leading opera institutions? This intersection of cultures could lead to exciting collaborations, unexpected programming choices, and a reinvigoration of how Eastern European opera is perceived globally.

Khukhunaishvili’s upcoming concerts in March and April at Wrocław Opera will offer audiences a glimpse into his musical approach. These performances will serve as both an introduction and a promise of what is to come when he officially assumes leadership in the 2025/2026 season.

His appointment is not just a personal achievement; it is a moment that encapsulates the evolving landscape of European opera. As borders blur and musical traditions intertwine, the question remains: how will this Georgian maestro reshape one of Poland’s most esteemed cultural institutions? One thing is certain—his journey will be closely watched by opera lovers and cultural observers alike.

What Scares Georgian Dream? The Student Protest Exhibition at Ilia State University

BY IVAN NECHAEV

On a crisp winter morning, passersby on Chavchavadze Avenue were drawn to an unexpected exhibition outside Ilia State University's main building. Students had arranged a striking display of objects—banned fireworks, lasers, balaclavas, gas masks, and even a seemingly innocuous blank sheet of paper—transforming these ordinary items into potent symbols of dissent. The student-led initiative was more than an act of artistic defiance: it was a statement on the absurdities, contradictions, and authoritarian tendencies of Georgia's ruling party, Georgian Dream. This provocative installation was not merely about the items on display but what they signify: fear, repression, and resistance. Each object carried a story; a sociopolitical resonance that critiques the government's paranoia and its attempts to control public discourse. Below, we delve into the layers of meaning behind these objects, and explore why they have become symbols of fear for Georgia's ruling elite.

OBJECTS OF FEAR: A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS

Fireworks, Lasers, and Balaclavas: Recently banned by Georgian Dream, fireworks and lasers have been redefined as tools of rebellion. Their prohibition speaks to a deeper anxiety: the unpredictability of mass gatherings. These



bans recall the June 2019 protests, where lasers were used to disorient riot police, and the government retaliated by categorizing these harmless lights as weapons. Similarly, the balaclava, a garment associated with both protestors and masked repression, stands as a dual symbol of anonymity and defiance.

The "Male Milk" Controversy: One of the most surreal elements of the exhibition references Georgian oligarch and former Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili's assertion that "in the West, male milk is equated with female milk." This bizarre statement, which sparked ridicule across social media, epitomizes the anti-Western rhetoric employed by the ruling party. The students' inclusion of this reference underscores the absurdity of such moral panics, framing them as distractions from real issues like economic stagnation and democratic backsliding.

The Blank Sheet of Paper: Perhaps the most potent symbol in the exhibition is the blank sheet of paper. Protestors, arrested for simply holding empty sheets, demonstrated the absurd lengths to which the government would go to suppress dissent. The paper is a paradox: simultaneously nothing and everything. It is an empty canvas for resistance, a haunting reminder of the state's fear of free thought.

THE POLITICS OF FEAR: A BROADER PERSPECTIVE

Georgian Dream's responses to these symbols reflect a broader trend in authoritarian governance: the weaponization of fear. In sociological terms, fear serves as a tool to consolidate power by creating an "us vs. them" narrative. Here, the "us" represents the guardians of Georgian tradition, while the "them" becomes an ever-expanding list: protestors, Western liberal values, and even mundane objects like fireworks or blank sheets.

This phenomenon can be understood through anthropologist Mary Douglas's theory of 'purity and danger,' which posits that societies create taboos to reinforce boundaries. For Georgian Dream, these boundaries are ideological—protecting a vision of Georgian identity that is both nostalgic and exclusionary. Anything that challenges this narrative, even humor or satire, is perceived as a threat.

PROTEST AS PERFORMANCE: THE POWER OF SATIRE

By turning everyday objects into political statements, the students of Ilia State University were engaging in a form of carnivalesque protest. Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnival—where hierarchies are temporarily overturned and the absurd is celebrated—aptly describes their approach. Through satire and subversion, they expose the fragility of power structures that cannot tolerate even symbolic challenges.

The humor inherent in the exhibition ("Georgian Dream Fears Male Milk!")



"Man's Milk". Photo by Giorgi Romelashvili

was a powerful counterbalance to the oppressive seriousness of the state's rhetoric. It disrupts the language of fear and replaces it with ridicule, a strategy historically effective in challenging authoritarian regimes.

THE REAL FEAR

The objects displayed at Ilia State University's exhibition were not inherently

dangerous. What makes them frightening to Georgian Dream is the meaning ascribed to them by a generation that refuses to be silenced. Fireworks, blank sheets, and balaclavas become emblems of a broader struggle: the fight for free expression, accountability, and a vision of Georgia that is open, democratic, and inclusive.

In the end, it is not the objects them-

selves that Georgian Dream fears: it is the students—their creativity, their courage, and their ability to transform fear into resistance—that pose the greatest threat. As the exhibition boldly proclaims, "Georgian Dream fears your voice, your knowledge, your whistle, and your blank page." What they fear most, however, is the unstoppable momentum of a generation unwilling to live in silence.



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I am Georgian and therefore I am European

Zurab Zhvania, Council of Europe, 1999

