



A collapsed roof in Supsa. Source: Mtavari TV

FOCUS
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Snow devastates rural Georgia, but community heroes step up as the government struggles to respond **PAGE 2**

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Germany's Latest Election Results: A Turning Point for Domestic and Foreign Policy

INTERVIEW BY VAZHA TAVBERIDZE

Germany is at a crossroads - says Roland Freudenstein, Brussels Bureau Director, as he reflects on the outcomes of Germany's latest elections. "The country is now improving both its domestic and foreign policies, a crucial development after the era of Scholz."

In the wake of the election results, Freudenstein sat down with Radio Free Europe's Georgian Service to discuss the ongoing challenges and opportunities facing Germany, from reinvigorating its foreign policy and addressing pressing domestic issues to navigating the complexities of the Zeitenwende—Germany's moment of reckoning—and the potential impact on international relations, including its stance on Russia and Ukraine. The election results signal both change and continuity, as the country prepares for its next chapter in a rapidly evolving geopolitical environment.

Continued on page 4



The German elections 2025. Image source: Euronews

GALT & TAGGART											
Prepared for Georgia Today Business by											
Markets					Markets						
	Price	w/w	m/m		Price	w/w	m/m		Price	w/w	m/m
BONDS											
GEORGIA 04/26	95.45 (YTM 8.94%)	+0.4%	+0.7%	Lion Finance Group (LFGD LN)	GBP 55.90	+8.1%	+20.7%	Crude Oil, Brent (US\$/bbl)	72.53	-4.6%	-7.6%
GBAIL 04/28	98.20 (YTM 8.14%)	+0.1%	+0.6%	Georgia Capital (GCEO LN)	GBP 14.44	+16.5%	+20.3%	Gold Spot (US\$/OZ)	2 916.39	-0.6%	+5.3%
GEBOG 9/12 PERP	98.34 (YTM 9.64%)	+0.1%	+0.4%	TBC Bank Group (TBCC LN)	GBP 44.10	+10.3%	+37.8%	CURRENCIES			
SILNET 01/27	101.10 (YTM 7.74%)	-0.0%	+0.3%	USD / GEL	2.8160	+0.2%	-2.1%	EUR / GEL	2.9526	+0.7%	-2.2%
TBC 8.894 PERP	96.88 (YTM 11.56%)	-0.2%	+0.8%	GBP / GEL	3.5693	+0.9%	-0.6%	EUR / USD	1.0485	+0.6%	-0.1%
TBC 10 1/4 PERP	100.48 (YTM 8.85%)	+0.3%	+0.9%	GBP / USD	1.2676	+0.7%	+1.5%	INDICES			
SP 500	5 956.06	-3.1%	-2.4%								
FTSE 250	20 595.90	-0.5%	+0.4%								
DOW JONES 30	43 433.12	-2.7%	-2.2%								
Russell 2000	2 174.17	-4.7%	-5.8%								
FTSE 100	8 731.46	+0.2%	+2.7%								



Photo: Sakartvelos Ambebi.

Germany Suspends Scientific Cooperation with Georgia

BY MARIAM RAZMADZE

Germany's Federal Ministry of Education and Research suspended Georgian-German scientific collaboration, including student mobility programs, research initiatives, and Georgia's participation in EU-supported academic projects. This decision is a response to increasing international concerns over Georgia's restrictions on academic freedom, and the country's halting its EU membership process.

Peter Fischer, German Ambassador to Georgia, announced the decision through social media platform X, pointing to its possible impacts on Georgian scholars. "Those who have studied at German universities with German scholarships understand the significance of this loss," he stated.

"The Federal Ministry of Education

and Research of Germany has halted the development of Georgian-German scientific cooperation, including student mobility, research, and Georgia's participation in European Union programs, due to the restriction of academic freedom in Georgia and the suspension of its EU membership process. The current funding allocated by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research, nearly 1 million euros for Georgia, remains unchanged. Additionally, this does not yet affect our scholarship programs, including the DAAD program, but Germany is closely monitoring all aspects of its relationship with Georgia with regret and is considering them," the Ambassador noted.

The existing fund, nearly EUR 1 million, is unchanged and scholarship programs such as DAAD are not yet affected by the decision. However, Fischer noted that "Germany is closely monitoring all aspects of its relationship with Georgia with concern and evaluating its future approach."

Georgian Dream Moves to Erase 'Gender' From Legislation



Photo: Parliament of Georgia.

BY MARIAM RAZMADZE

Georgia's ruling party Georgian Dream (GD) and the 'People's Power' have introduced a bill aiming to remove the terms 'gender' and 'gender identity' from all over Georgian legislation. The proposed changes, presented in the rump parliament on February 24, would also rename the 'Law on Gender Equality' as the 'Law on Equality between Women and Men'.

The bill's explanatory note says that "gender is an artificially created term," further arguing that since Donald Trump's presidency, "discussions about the dishonest motives and directed nature of this artificial process have become increasingly active." The proposal states that eliminating the term is necessary to "reinforce at the legislative level the principle of equality between men and women as recognized by the Constitu-

tion of Georgia."

The legislation also seeks to disintegrate the Parliament's Gender Equality Council, redirecting its 50,000 GEL budget to other parliamentary structures focusing on "equality issues between women and men." It also proposes eliminating Gender Equality Councils in Georgia's Autonomous Republics and municipalities to "reduce administrative expenses."

Among the MPs backing the bill are Archil Gorduladze, Tornike Cheishvili, Rati Ionatamishvili, Davit Matikashvili, Sozar Subari, and Mamuka Mdinaradze, among others.

This is not GD's first attempt to pick out gender-related policies. In September 2024, Parliament passed an anti-LGBTQ+ legislative package on 'Protection of Family Values and Minors', introducing 18 amendments restricting LGBTQ+ rights. The law, in effect since December, was criticized by the Venice Commission and ILGA-Europe.

Read more on page 8.

Snowstorm Devastates Rural Georgia: Community Heroes Step Up as Gov't Struggles to Respond



"My 86-year-old uncle Zauri and my brother," writes photo author Maia Chkhaidze

BY KESARIA KATCHARAVA

The heavy snowstorm that swept through Georgia this week not only isolated entire villages, but also wreaked havoc on infrastructure, claiming lives and causing widespread destruction. As the storm blanketed large portions of the country, with snow accumulation reaching up to 120 centimeters, the Republic of Georgia was plunged into a state of crisis. The intense snowfall not only disrupted transportation but also led to tragic consequences for many residents in the affected areas.

The collapse of poorly constructed buildings, particularly in rural regions like Guria and Imereti, resulted in the tragic loss of life. Heavy snow and ice accumulation caused power lines to snap, plunging entire villages into darkness, and making it even harder for emergency responders to reach those in need.

The storm caused widespread damage to homes, roads, and public infrastructure. Many rural roads, already vulnerable in winter, became completely impassable. The storm's impact was particularly severe in Guria, where entire communities were cut off for days, while, on Wednesday, State Governor of Imereti, Levan Zalkaliani, reported that about 150 villages in the Imereti municipality had been cut off from the outside world due to heavy snowfall. Local businesses, homes, and even essential services like hospitals faced severe disruptions. The situation became even more dire as temperatures plummeted, leaving both humans and animals without heat or access to life-saving resources. The lack of efficient communication from the government added to the chaos, with many families unable to contact loved ones or request assistance.

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

In the wake of the disaster, the government's initial statements and actions suggested an organized plan to clear roads and reach affected villages. Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze's assurances that evacuation was not an immediate priority and that alternative means would be used to access isolated communities indicated a certain level of strategy. However, the actual response was marked by slow action and a lack of preparedness for the scale of the disaster.

The government's response initially focused on road clearing, but this process

was hindered by insufficient resources and equipment. In Sachkhere Municipality, in the Imereti region, for instance, 14 special snow-clearing units were mobilized, but roads remained blocked for days, and the progress was slow. Only three of the twelve affected villages saw traffic restored within the first few days of the storm, leaving the remaining nine villages, including Nigvzara, Shomakheti, and Tskhomareti, isolated. While the Ministry of Defense mobilized military units to assist with relief efforts, they were often called upon to use alternative, less efficient methods of transport due to the lack of adequate road access.

At times, it seemed that the government's efforts were reactive rather than proactive, with several reports pointing to a lack of planning for the magnitude of the snowstorm. In contrast, volunteer groups, who often have to make do with fewer resources, stepped up quickly and filled the gap left by official response efforts.

The local Coordination Headquarters in Ozurgeti in Guria issued a warning about the spread of misinformation through social media, which created unnecessary panic and confusion. While misinformation is always a challenge in disaster situations, the government's failure to provide real-time, transparent communication added to the disarray. This was compounded by the uncoordinated efforts of volunteers, which, despite good intentions, occasionally complicated the official response.

VOLUNTEERS AND COMMUNITY-BASED RELIEF EFFORTS

In the absence of swift government action, community members, volunteers, and local businesses took matters into their own hands. The creation of Moxalise.ge, a website designed to help coordinate volunteer efforts, was a prime example of grassroots mobilization. The site provided real-time information about where aid was needed, helping volunteers organize transportation of food, water, medical supplies, and other essentials to remote villages that were completely cut off.

The Facebook group "Volunteers for Guria" played a key role in organizing the movement of resources. Volunteers from across Georgia - Tbilisi, Kutaisi, Poti, and even further afield, mobilized in groups, using off-road vehicles, snowmobiles, and even snow bikers to navigate the treacherous conditions and deliver supplies. These volunteers were often the first to reach isolated areas, as official rescue operations struggled with

blocked roads and a lack of equipment suited for such extreme conditions.

CORPORATE SUPPORT AND ITS ROLE IN THE RESPONSE

Local businesses contributed significantly to the relief effort. Kiwi Vegan Cafe, for example, launched a collection drive for thermal clothing, power banks, and other necessities, while businesses like PCShop.ge and Wondernet Express Investment Group provided essential logistical support, including communication equipment and vehicles capable of navigating the snow-covered roads, and Tegeta Holding sent heavy machinery to Guria to help clear the way. Although road clearance was the responsibility of the government, the company stepped in to assist where the state's resources were insufficient. Similarly, Wondernet Express Investment Group utilized its logistical capabilities to ensure the timely delivery of food and other emergency supplies to the affected areas. Gulf Oil Company, meanwhile, helped provide fuel to power snow removal equipment and off-road vehicles.

Other smaller organizations and volunteers also played a crucial role: organizations like Off-Road Club Georgia mobilized specialized vehicles to transport aid and people. These efforts showcased the importance of collaboration between government, businesses, and volunteer groups.

A LACK OF PREPAREDNESS

Despite the substantial efforts from the community and volunteers, the overall response to the Guria snowstorm revealed the government's lack of preparedness for such a large-scale natural disaster. While the military's eventual involvement and the mobilization of emergency equipment were important, the slow initial response and lack of coordinated planning left many villages isolated for extended periods. This situation created significant difficulties for the affected population and meant that many essential services could not reach those in need in a timely manner.

The government's failure to anticipate the severity of the storm and mobilize resources in advance stands in stark contrast to the swift action of volunteer groups and businesses that were better equipped to respond on short notice. The need for better disaster preparedness, communication, and coordination between government agencies and the private sector is clear.

The snowstorm in Guria was a reminder of the importance of disaster preparedness, especially in regions prone to extreme weather. While the government's initial response was slow and marked by logistical challenges, it was the swift action of volunteers, local businesses, and the private sector that filled the gap and provided immediate relief. The community's resilience in the face of adversity was remarkable, and the lessons learned from this event should lead to improved coordination, better preparedness, and faster responses in future disasters.



Firefighters help a Gurian resident to safety. Source: Ozurgeti City Hall

Ukraine Latest: Zelensky May Sign Minerals Deal at White House

COMPILED BY ANA DUMBADZE

On the diplomatic front, US President Donald Trump announced that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky is expected to visit the White House on Friday to finalize a significant minerals agreement between the two nations. This development follows intensive negotiations aimed at granting the US access to Ukraine's vast mineral resources, including rare earth elements, in exchange for continued American support amid Ukraine's ongoing conflict with Russia. "I hear that he's coming on Friday," President Trump told reporters in the Oval Office. "Certainly it's okay with me if he'd like to."

The proposed deal has undergone revisions since its initial presentation. Earlier drafts reportedly included a US demand for \$500 billion in potential revenue rights from Ukraine's mineral exploitation—a point of contention for Kyiv. The updated agreement, however, has omitted this demand, focusing instead on joint development and revenue sharing. Specific details regarding the US stake and terms of joint ownership are expected to be determined in future negotiations.

Ukraine possesses significant reserves of critical minerals, such as lithium, graphite, and various rare earth elements, which are essential for advanced technologies and defense applications. However, a substantial portion of these resources is located in regions currently under Russian occupation, posing challenges to their immediate development.

This impending agreement aims to strengthen US-Ukraine economic ties

and provide Ukraine with much-needed support in its defense efforts. While the deal emphasizes economic collaboration, it does not explicitly include security guarantees—a primary concern for Kyiv. Discussions regarding future military aid and security assurances are anticipated to continue alongside the economic negotiations.

The forthcoming meeting between presidents Trump and Zelensky marks a pivotal moment in US-Ukraine relations, especially following recent tensions and public exchanges between the two leaders. The international community will be closely monitoring the outcome of this engagement and its implications for the ongoing conflict in Eastern Europe.

BATTLEFIELD UPDATES

The past week has been marked by significant military engagements, strategic territorial shifts, and critical diplomatic negotiations in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. The situation remains fluid, with both sides experiencing gains and setbacks. The international community continues to monitor developments closely, as the outcomes bear substantial implications for regional security and global geopolitical dynamics.

Ukrainian forces have reported notable successes in the Donetsk region. They have regained control of the settlement of Kotlyne, marking a strategic victory in an area that has been heavily contested. This recapture is part of a broader Ukrainian counteroffensive aimed at reclaiming territories occupied by Russian forces.

In the town of Chasiv Yar, recent geolocated footage has confirmed that Russian forces have taken control of the Kanal Microdistrict. The Russian Ministry of Defense has also claimed the capture of



Trump and Zelensky. Image source: Getty Images

the Novyi Microdistrict. These advancements indicate a concerted effort by Russian troops to secure key urban areas, potentially disrupting Ukrainian supply lines and command structures in the region.

Overnight, Russia attacked Ukraine with nearly 200 drones, targeting the Kyiv region and energy facilities in the east. Officials said at least seven people were killed.

CIVILIAN IMPACT AND INFRASTRUCTURE DAMAGE

The conflict continues to have a deep impact on civilian populations and infrastructure. In the Kyiv region, Russian air attacks have resulted in injuries and property damage. A 19-year-old woman sustained a head injury and was hospi-

talized, and residential houses have been set ablaze due to the shelling.

In Kramatorsk, Russian shelling has led to at least one death and multiple injuries. The governor of the Donetsk region, Vadym Filashkin, reported that 13 individuals were injured in the attack.

NORTH KOREA SENDING MORE TROOPS TO RUSSIA, SEOUL SAYS


South Korea's spy agency says North Korea appears to have sent additional troops to Russia for use in its war in Ukraine. Pyongyang previously provided Moscow with around 10,000-12,000 troops in 2024, according to US, South Korean and Ukrainian intelligence officials.

Seoul's National Intelligence Service

said in a brief statement yesterday that it was trying to determine exactly how many more troops North Korea has deployed to Russia. It also assessed that North Korean troops were redeployed at fronts in Russia's Kursk region in the first week of February, following a reported temporary withdrawal from the area.


Volodymyr Zelensky, in an address on February 7, confirmed a new Ukrainian offensive in Kursk and said North Korean troops were fighting alongside Russian forces there.




Yesterday, South Korea's JoongAng Ilbo newspaper, citing unidentified sources, reported an additional 1,000-3,000 North Korean soldiers were deployed to Kursk between January and February.




EXPLORE OUR BELOVED CITY FROM THE BIRD VIEW

Xeme restaurant is located on the 31st floor in The Biltmore Tbilisi Hotel





The name of the restaurant Xeme speaks for itself, as it means the arctic fork-tailed gull.

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Germany's Latest Election Results: A Turning Point for Domestic and Foreign Policy

Continued from page 1

WHAT TRANSPIRED IN GERMANY'S LATEST ELECTIONS? WHAT ARE THE MAIN TAKEAWAYS?

The CDU received slightly fewer votes than they expected, but the most important thing to come out of these elections is that Germany is now improving both its domestic and foreign policies, and that's really important and, frankly, not too difficult after Scholz. Germany has to reinvent itself on both the foreign and security policy fronts. Three years ago, with the famous *Zeitenwende*, it began reinventing itself, but then it got stuck, so now the train has to be put back on the rails. We'll see much more energy, more leadership and more money put into it.

That's the foreign part. And then the domestic part, and Germany is in trouble. We had three excellent decades, but during the latter half of those 30 years, I would say we began to make mistakes that are coming back to haunt us now, regarding infrastructure, regarding investment, technology, and competition.

And in reform, which is almost on the same magnitude as the international challenges that have multiplied in recent weeks.

THE RADICALS ON THE LEFT AND RIGHT, DIE LINKE AND AFD - CAN THEY CONSIDER THEMSELVES WINNERS IN THESE ELECTIONS?

Definitely. I mean, the AFD had no chance of joining a government coalition. This is something my American friends are still reacting to with disbelief. They are asking - why no coalition? The two winners forming a coalition, surely that would be ideal? And I tell them they just don't know Europe. Even the question shows that they have no idea. Because, first of all, the AFD is a pro-Kremlin, partly Nazi party, a fact which is conveniently forgotten or belittled by some Republicans in the US. And AFD in a coalition with the CDU would break the CDU apart. There would be massive, massive numbers of people stepping out. Die Linke, on the other hand, was the only party on election night that was really jubilant. Because even three, four weeks ago, they were polling at or below 5%. It was a last minute surge, thanks to one particular social media savvy young female politician (Heidi Reichinnek) who caused this almost 9 percent result.

AND WHAT ABOUT THE GREENS AND THE SPD?

Well, the Greens and the SPD are in a depression. The SPD can at least comfort itself with the thought that they will be in government, because they are the only option now for the coalition. It will also



During the latter half of those 30 years, we began to make mistakes that are coming back to haunt us now—in infrastructure, investment, technology, and competition.



Roland Freudenstein. Photo by Tomáš Kacmár

make them cockier, it will make the social Democrats harder to get because they know that they're the only option. And they will make this reform process difficult, as their vision on how Germany should be reformed clashes with the CDU/CSU.

On foreign policy, it will be very interesting what Rolf Mützenich, the SPD chief whip, is going to do, seeing as he seems in no hurry to step down - he will be a huge problem for a more robust policy vis-a-vis Russia and Ukraine, because Mützenich comes literally from the peace movement of the 1980s. That's where he's at home. And he's been preaching disarmament all his life. And he was preaching appeasement with Putin even beyond the 24th of February 2022.

Looking at all this, the great hope of AFD is to sit out this term of Bundestag in the opposition, have a governing coalition that doesn't manage to reform Germany, especially because the ideas of what is good for Germany are too different, and then, in 2029, they will become the strongest party.

WHAT'S WITH THE YOUNG GERMANS INCREASINGLY VOTING FOR THE RADICAL LEFT OR RIGHT? AS OPPOSED TO THE OLDER GENERATION PREFERRING THE CENTRISTS?

You can even break it down to gender lines, where young men tend to vote radical right, and young women tend to vote radical left, because they're opposed to the inhumane policies of the radical right.

WHAT DOES IT SPELL FOR GERMANY'S FUTURE?

It can play out two ways. One is that they will take the AFD into the mainstream, which would be a continuation of what has happened over the last five to seven years. Or they can become wiser with age and start seeing the idiocy in the radical right.

LET'S LOOK OUTSIDE OF GERMANY TOO - AT THE EXTERNAL WINNERS AND LOSERS. WHO GOT WHAT?

First of all, I would say it marks Russia as a loser. Dugin even tweeted "Merz is a total disaster." That means Merz must be doing something right.

Ukraine is a winner. France and Poland too: they will breathe a sigh of relief. The Central Europeans want to be taken seriously. France wants a constructive partner who has ideas; the Nordics and the Brits want someone who is talking

clear words and countering Moscow's power games.

WHAT ABOUT THE US?

The jury is out. I would think that anything is better than Schulz's passivity and head in the sand attitude vis-a-vis the United States. But if one were to make a distinction between the US and the Trump administration's interests, then the Trump admin, especially VP Vance and Elon Musk, are coming out of it as losers too.

They don't understand Europe, much like Steve Bannon - they read a couple of headlines, they look at a couple of tweets, and they believe that they know what's what, that in Europe the big popular masses are all opposed to the elites and the elites are protecting themselves at all costs. That's the picture they have of Europe and that's the way JD Vance spoke in Munich. He acted as if he was this great Prophet of Truth, chastising the European elites who are apparently afraid of their own people. That is only true for 10 to maximum 25 percent of the electorate at best, and that depends on which member state you're talking about.

They deliberately decided to turn a blind eye to the neo-Nazi aspect of AFD, and choose to ignore the pro-Kremlin aspect. At least, J. D. Vance does. For Elon Musk, being pro-Kremlin is not a sin anyway. But J. D. Vance, though he's not a fan of Putin's dictatorship, he doesn't mind that these people are actively helping the Kremlin.

LET'S TALK ABOUT THE SCHOLZ LEGACY, ASSUMING HIS TALE IS ALREADY TOLD.

Well, he's absolutely gone. He will give some speeches to the Friedrich Ebert Foundation or something. With Scholz, the most striking thing was his sheer intellectual arrogance. He really, genuinely believed that nobody was as smart as him, and only he saw reality. Second, he was aloof, insensitive and uncommunicative to the Germans: he rarely said what he felt, and he didn't try to engage people. And third, he was incredibly duplicitous. For example, when it came to helping Ukraine, purportedly, he was the big supporter of Ukraine and whenever he was criticized for not doing the right thing at the right time, he said, "but we're doing so much," and then he would rattle out the figures of German assistance. But, in reality, he dragged his feet whenever he could. He probably believed that he was preventing World War III and somehow avoiding a dangerous escalation of the war. But what he did

because his foot dragging, sometimes in lockstep with the Biden administration, also on NATO enlargement, really prolonged the war.

IF I WERE TO PRESS YOU FOR AN EPITAPH FOR HIS POLITICAL GRAVESTONE, WHAT WOULD IT READ?

He thought he knew better.

ONTO HIS SUCCESSOR THEN, THE SOON-TO-BE CHANCELLOR. CAN ONE SAY THAT THE REAL ZEITENWENDE BEGINS NOW? HOW MUCH OF HIS TALK WILL BE TURNED INTO ACTUAL DEEDS?

We can safely trust Merz to be much more serious about changing Germany's posture. That's also because of the change in the US attitude to Russia and Ukraine. Some in the SPD, some of those people who made Schultz's foreign policy, aren't really unhappy. You know, Oscar Wilde called it the love that dared not to speak its name. But Merz is serious. He wants fundamental change.

Now when it comes to foreign policy, the question is to what extent the SPD will, as a coalition partner, let him go all the way or what they will demand in exchange for change, be it Taurus delivery or enhancing assistance for Ukraine and so on.

SO TAURUS WILL BE GIVEN?

Yes. But the question is whether there's still a war going on by the time they're delivered. But they will be delivered, even, and especially, in peacetime or after a ceasefire.

HOW DEDICATED IS MERTZ GOING TO BE TO THE UKRAINE CAUSE? WOULD HE BE WILLING TO SEND PEACEKEEPERS TO UKRAINE?

Absolutely. There is no reason why the biggest and richest country in the European Union should somehow do less in terms of military deployment and securing the eastern flank and assisting Ukraine than the others.

HE DOESN'T SEEM TO BE A HUGE FAN OF THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION. HIS REMARKS ON NATO AND "STEP BY STEP INDEPENDENCE," THAT NOBODY KNOWS WHAT IT WILL BE LIKE COME JUNE - WHAT DO YOU MAKE OF IT?

This is the way disappointed people talk, and I feel his pain, but the fact that he



The Central Europeans want to be taken seriously; France wants a constructive partner; the Nordics and Brits want someone who is talking clear words and countering Moscow's power games.

talks like that doesn't mean that he is abandoning NATO, it's just that we need to prepare for much worse times in NATO, but let's try to save it. Even Macron wants to save NATO, although there was time he considered it brain dead. Today he too thinks a world with NATO is better than a world without.

The same is true for Merz. He is absolutely serious when he says Europe has to take more responsibility. And yes, Europe has to be as far as possible able to take care of its own security.

WHAT CAN GEORGIA EXPECT FROM THE NEW LEADERSHIP IN GERMANY AND THEIR NEW VISION?

I would say much more attention and much more emphasis on defending Western principles and values.

THAT'S FUNNY, CONSIDERING THE PRO-GOVERNMENT MEDIA RAN WITH THE HEADLINE "OLAF SCHOLZ, OPENLY CRITICAL TOWARDS GEORGIAN DREAM, HAS LOST." ARE THEY IN FOR A SURPRISE?

Oh yes. They're in for a big surprise indeed.

The Emerging Multipolarity & Sakartvelo

OP-ED BY NUGZAR B. RUHADZE

The South Caucasus, also known as Transcaucasia, is a complex juncture of strategic corridors, energy resources, and historical ties with the rest of the world, attracting the attention of the world's most dominant powers, such as Russia, the United States, and China. Each of these significant international players has their own interests, attitudes, and tools to deal with the region, which could be seen as one of the symptoms of the return to a multipolar world: Russia will always find it unacceptable to loosen its influence over its neighbor, Transcaucasia, over which it held power for centuries; the United States, geographically as distant as it is from South Caucasus, thinks that the place is a convenient location for proliferating democratic ideals and instruments of governance; while China is promoting its infrastructural projects and trade prospects, aiming to involve the South Caucasus in its wider Eurasian scope.

It's no surprise then that, in the emerging multipolar world, each of these players will operate based on their own strategic concepts, continuing or beginning to shape the future of Transcaucasian sovereignty and how it should behave in the international arena.

For Georgia, the emerging multipolar world may come with significant compromises: there's no question that foreign engagement brings economic opportunities, investments, and access to international platforms. However, it is also accompanied by obvious risks that could increase Georgia's dependence on major powers, potentially undermining its sovereignty to a certain extent.

In the emerging geopolitical configuration of returning multipolarity, Georgia appears to be acquiring a role that could serve its newly-born political targets and commercial prospects. Considering that Georgia is still viewed as an aspiring member of the European Union, it vigorously continues to promote its sovereignty both at the national level and internationally, while facing significant pressure from Russia. Meanwhile, the healthiest and most practical relationship with the European



Image source: cfo.com

Union offers a chance for deeper trade and political ties with advanced economies, which might explain its disagreements with Russia.

Now, the question is whether the presence and forceful activity of major powers in the region can be seen as a benefit or a detriment. There is no simple, unequivocal answer to this question, but no one will doubt that partnerships with foreign players can provide resources, technology, and updated knowledge. At the same time, however, there is a danger that over-dependence could lead to a loss of formal autonomy. This is precisely what the current Georgian government seeks to avoid, yet it must keep the country in good shape. It is definitely not easy to drive this idea home, whether to our own people or to the European powers that be.

China, as one of the leading powers in the rein-

stated global multipolarity, is ready to make significant infrastructural investments in Georgia, creating tremendous potential to improve the country's economic conditions. However, these investments often come with long-term debt obligations. Similarly, while American support has strengthened Georgia's democratic institutions, it has also brought political tensions within the region, with polarized forms that have sparked numerous precarious clashes in Georgian society. Meanwhile, Russian dominance remains a complicating factor, making the situation even more complex. Georgia's current political stance carries the potential for conflict with Russia's intimidating tactics, which aim at securing its long-term presence in Transcaucasia, particularly in Georgia.

Finally, to be more specific, here is a set of steps

Sakartvelo should take to embrace the new era of multipolarity: expand and further develop institutional reforms to demonstrate its commitment to European values; diversify interactions with the external world by intensively cooperating with both Western allies and regional partners; strongly support regional collaboration by working with Armenia and Azerbaijan to promote shared interests in trade and energy sectors; advocate for the South Caucasus region to receive greater attention on the global stage; harmonize soft power and diplomacy; and envision the future of Sakartvelo beyond military or economic strategies, through diplomacy rooted in shared cultural, historical, and economic ties.

If carefully considered, none of these steps is impossible to bring to fruition, so it makes sense to take them seriously.



Photo: United Nations Peacekeeping.

UN Condemns Russia's Invasion in Ukraine-Backed Resolution

BY MARIAM RAZMADZE

The UN General Assembly has passed a resolution condemning Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. 93 countries were in favor while 18 voted against.

The resolution, drafted by Kyiv and supported by all EU states except Hungary, recognizes Ukraine's territorial integrity and directly names Russia as the aggressor.

"The resolution reaffirms Ukraine's territorial integrity and clearly identifies Russia as the aggressor," the text states.

Among those voting against were the US, Israel, Hungary, Russia, and Belarus.

Zurabishvili on the Protester Fines, Ivanishvili's Tax-free Art Import

BY MARIAM RAZMADZE

Georgian President Salome Zurabishvili has criticized unreasonable fines imposed on protesters, revealing that \$300,000 in fines were issued in a single day and \$18 million since the start of demonstrations.

"\$300,000 of fines imposed on peaceful protesters in one day. \$18 million since the start of protests," Zurabishvili stated, condemning it.

She also pointed to billionaire Bidzina Ivanish-



Photo: The President's Administration.

vili's recent tax-free import of an art collection worth \$500 million. "Thanks to the 'offshore' law and avoiding sanctions, Ivanishvili brought to Georgia his art collection worth \$1/2 billion, without paying any customs fees!" she noted.



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"Territorial Integrity No Longer 'Core' to the US" – Ian Bremmer

INTERVIEW BY VAZHA TAVBERIDZE

The fact that the United States is now treating territorial integrity as a negotiable concept, rather than an inviolable one, is a strong message in favor of Putin – says Ian Bremmer, political scientist and founder of the Eurasia Group, in an interview with RFE/RL's Georgian service.

In a conversation with Vazha Tavberidze, Bremmer discusses the impending rehabilitation of Putin, Trump's transactional approach to foreign policy, and what the ongoing negotiations over Ukraine signal for countries in Russia's so-called "near abroad." He warns that Washington's wavering stance on the concept of territorial integrity could have far-reaching consequences for Georgia and Moldova, especially as Europe is left to shoulder the burden of regional stability.

DID YOU EXPECT THIS PUTIN NORMALIZATION PROCESS THAT SEEMS TO BE TAKING SHAPE? IF SO, DID YOU EXPECT IT TO HAPPEN SO QUICKLY?

I expected it as soon as we knew Trump was elected. You remember Trump's meeting in Helsinki in his first term? It went quite well. The interesting thing about Trump is his willingness to talk. His willingness to try to cut a deal has no bearing on what kind of a political system that person represents, whether they're seen as a war criminal, whether they're corrupt – none of that matters. It's just a question of whether he can get to a deal. So it's very clear that he would be happy to talk with Putin, to meet with Putin, but that doesn't mean the deal is going to get done.

We are still at the very early innings of talking about what a ceasefire is like. Trump wants a ceasefire done, but the conditions and the sustainability of that,



For the Americans to concede territorial integrity before negotiations is a strong message in favor of Putin

and Putin's willingness to accept broader terms, are still questions that remain unanswered. I mean, what would it mean for the "denazification" of Ukraine? What would it mean for the demilitarization of Ukraine? Those things are unacceptable for the Ukrainians. Is Putin prepared to back down from that? We don't know.

HOW DOES ONE MAKE SURE THAT WHATEVER DEAL THERE IS, PUTIN HONORS IT?

Well, the way you make sure Putin honors a deal is to ensure there are consequences if he doesn't. So there should be snapback functions. If you're going to say "there's no NATO for Ukraine," then if he decides that he's going to restart an invasion at some point, then NATO will be back on the table. You want to make sure that the assets that have been frozen can be directly seized – and all this before you get to concluding a successful peace agreement. While you're still negotiating and there's a ceasefire, you have to actually have leverage. You need leverage. There's no trust here. Reagan used to say, "trust, but verify." There's no trust. It's just pure verification. You need leverage for verification.

ON THIS CURIOUS "RARE EARTH MINERALS IN EXCHANGE FOR AID" DEAL – WHETHER THIS GETS SIGNED OR NOT, MOST OF THOSE RESOURCES ARE IN TERRITORIES THAT ARE UNDER RUSSIAN CONTROL AT THE MOMENT. SO HOW DO THE AMERICANS PLAN TO EXTRACT THEM?

Right now, it's not a plan, it's a nominal notion. The point, of course, is that there's a quid pro quo. There's a transactional approach. That's what matters to Trump. There are, of course, valuable resources that Ukraine does have: neon, for exam-



Ian Bremmer. Source: worth

ple. Before the war, I think they produced 50% of the world's neon, which is critical for semiconductor production. I suspect that the pointy headed folks that are negotiating will eventually figure out what it is that such deal is meant to include.

SO IT IS ALSO A NARRATIVE DEVICE, AMONG OTHER THINGS.

Yes, and it's a useful one. And Zelensky is smart enough to understand that.

ONTO OTHER COUNTRIES THEN – THE WAY THESE TALKS ARE SHAPING, WHAT DOES IT SPELL FOR COUNTRIES THAT CONSTITUTE WHAT RUSSIA VIEWS AS ITS "NEAR ABROAD"?

The fact that the United States is here to talk about territorial integrity as a negotiable concept, as opposed to an inviolable one... I mean, it was the Americans, of course, that set up the United Nations after World War II, and the con-



Diversity has never been the strength; the strength has been that, in a diverse world, we see each other as interconnected, and that's what the EU has been effective at doing

ans behave. I mean, ultimately, this is a bigger security question for the Europeans than it is for the Americans. The Europeans have spent a lot of money on Ukraine; they are going to be more attentive to Georgia and Moldova. Both have a people who want to attain membership status in the European Union. This is a slow process, faster for Moldova, slower for Georgia. There is a lot of internal politics in Georgia over whether that's even going to continue... But the question is, are the Europeans going to stand up for the rule of law if the Americans refuse to? Are the Europeans going to stand up for territorial integrity if America doesn't? If the Europeans refuse to, what does that mean? I think that this was a wake-up call for the Europeans. For the Europeans as a whole, it has become more challenging.

WITH THESE PROCESSES GOING ON, DO YOU FORESEE GEORGIA ENDING UP IN THE RUSSIAN SPHERE OF INFLUENCE FOR GOOD, PERHAPS USED AS A MINOR BARGAINING CHIP IN THE EVENTUAL NEGOTIATIONS ON UKRAINE?

I hope not. When we talk about the European Union, we're not talking about integrating into a security alliance; we're talking about something that creates sustainable economic development and rule of law, which is essential for the well-being of the people in these countries. The Europeans made a big mistake, in my view, by inviting the Turks and then never actually going through with welcoming them in. The EU is a mechanism that creates stability, a level of integration that makes people think of each other as more alike. Diversity has never been the strength; the strength has been that, in a diverse world, we see each other as interconnected, and that's what the EU has been effective at doing. They said it can do that with Georgia. That would be a good thing, but at this moment, it's less about Brussels and more about the Georgian government, which is utterly critical to this process of finding eventual destination, much more so than Brussels at this point.

cept of territorial integrity was absolutely core to that. Apparently it no longer is. I mean, there is a level of appeasement that's going on here. I accept that there is no way for the Ukrainians to retake their territory. Ukraine will be partitioned. I wrote that at the beginning of 2024. But for the Americans to concede that, to give that up before negotiations, of course, is a strong message in favor of Putin. It's a weak message to the Moldovans, a weak message to the Georgians, to others in Russia's orbit, but not necessarily voluntarily in their orbit, that it's going to be harder for them to maintain their sovereignty.

SINCE YOU MENTIONED GEORGIA AND MOLDOVA, WHAT DO YOU THINK AWAITS THEM ONCE A TRUCE IS SIGNED? UNLIKE THE BALTICS, THEY HAVE NO LUXURY OF NATO PROTECTION.

I guess what I would say is that so much is going to depend on how the Europe-



The way you make sure Putin honors a deal is to ensure there are consequences if he doesn't



Putin, Trump and Zelensky. Source: theaustralian

Airbnb Faces Backlash over Co-Founder's Ties to Musk's DOGE Initiative. Will Tbilisi's Growing Market Remain Resilient?



about more than the viewpoint of any one person.”

While the boycott's impact remains uncertain, Airbnb continues to operate in various markets, including the Republic of Georgia.

According to airdna.co, as of August 2023, Tbilisi, the capital city of Georgia, had approximately 10,634 active Airbnb listings, with an average occupancy rate of 46%.

The occupancy rate in Tbilisi exhibits seasonal fluctuations, with higher rates during peak tourist months. For instance, in August 2023, cushwake.ge recorded an occupancy rate of 59%, indicating increased demand during the summer season.

Regarding the distribution of listings, the same site informs us that 66% of Tbilisi's Airbnb properties are one-bedroom apartments, 23% are two-bedroom flats, and 7% are three-bedroom apartments.

In terms of revenue, the average monthly revenue per rental in Tbilisi is approximately \$3,433, with an average daily rate of \$50.

We have yet to see if the global boycott continues and how it will impact Georgia.

BY TEAM GT

Airbnb has been facing calls for a boycott following the appointment of its co-founder, Joe Gebbia, to Elon Musk's Department of

Government Efficiency (DOGE), an initiative aimed at reducing federal spending. DOGE has proposed measures such as dissolving agencies like the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and restructuring others. While some support these efforts, a Reuters/Ipsos poll indicates that 61% of US adults back President Donald Trump's plan to down-

size the federal government.

In response to the backlash, social media users on platforms like TikTok and X have called for a boycott of Airbnb, with one viral post stating: "Boycott Airbnb! There are other vacation rentals."

Gebbia, who also serves on Tesla's board, recently revealed that he voted Republi-

can in the 2024 US elections. The criticism intensified, prompting Airbnb to clarify that Gebbia has not been involved in daily operations since 2022.

An official statement from the company reads: "Joe serves on Airbnb's Board of Directors, but he has not been involved in day-to-day operations since he stepped down in 2022. Airbnb has always been

Georgian Dream to Ban Foreign Funding for Broadcasters, Introduce Media Coverage Rules

BY GEORGIA TODAY

In line with a wider trend of restricting foreign assistance, amendments to Georgia's broadcasting law introduced by members of the one-party parliament will ban foreign funding and set rules on coverage for broadcasters, based on official drafts registered on the parliament's website on February 24.

Georgia's ruling party, Georgian Dream, is pushing forward a new legislative ini-

tiative to ban foreign funding for broadcasters and set stricter regulations on media coverage. The proposed law, which has already sparked controversy, is expected to significantly impact independent media outlets that rely on international financial support.

Government officials claim that the restrictions aim to reduce external influence on Georgia's information space and ensure media independence. However, critics argue that the move is an attempt to silence critical voices and tighten control over the press ahead of upcoming elections.

In addition to financial restrictions, the

draft law also includes provisions for regulating content and coverage guidelines, which opponents say could be used to censor political opposition and dissenting views. Media watchdogs and civil society organizations have already voiced concerns, warning that such measures could undermine press freedom and democracy in the country.

International organizations and Western partners are closely monitoring the situation, as Georgia's media landscape faces increasing pressure from government policies. The law is expected to be debated in parliament in the coming weeks.



Photo: Patriot Software.

Tax Revenue Rises in January Despite Decline in VAT

BY MARIAM RAZMADZE

The Ministry of Finance reported data revealing that tax revenue equaled GEL 1.82 billion in January 2025. This reflects an increase of GEL 180 million compared to the same timeframe of last year.

Despite such growth, primary tax categories still declined:

Value-added tax (VAT) - GEL 14 million decrease to GEL 644 million;

Excise tax collections - decreased by GEL 68 million equaling GEL 110 million.

The decline, specifically in tax revenue, is related to a rise in tobacco excise prices, which began in January 2025. As companies expected such a shift, they piled up tobacco products in advance.



Erasing 'Gender': A Linguistic Shift or a Cultural Turning Point for Georgia?

BY IVAN NECHAEV

Language is more than just words—it is the scaffolding of society's values, norms, and structures. Every legal term is a carefully placed brick in the edifice of governance, shaping not just policies but the very way a nation understands itself. So what happens when a word disappears from the law? In Georgia, the ruling party Georgian Dream has introduced amendments that will erase the term "gender" from all legal documents, replacing it with variations of "equality between women and men." Georgia's move is not happening in a vacuum. Across the world, debates over gender, identity, and language have ignited cultural and political battles. The erasure of gender from legal discourse touches on issues of human rights, national identity, and the role of tradition in a rapidly changing world. What does this shift signal for Georgia's future? And what can history teach us about the consequences of rewording reality?

A WAR OVER WORDS: WHY LEGAL TERMINOLOGY MATTERS

This is not the first time that words have been weaponized in politics. Throughout history, the evolution—or removal—of terms from legal and social discourse has had far-reaching implications. Consider how the language around race has shifted in the United States. The transition from Negro to African American was not just a linguistic update; it reflected the civil rights movement's push for self-determination and respect. Similarly, the introduction of terms like "sexual harassment" into legal systems worldwide made previously invisible injustices actionable under the law.

Georgia's decision to replace "gender issues" with "issues of equality between women and men" may seem like a minor edit, but it fundamentally alters the scope of legal protections. "Gender" as a concept allows for discussions about inequality beyond biological sex—it acknowl-



Photo by the author

edges social constructs, the experiences of non-binary and transgender individuals, and the ways in which power dynamics operate beyond simple male-female distinctions. By removing it, the government is effectively narrowing the legal framework for discussing discrimination.

FROM FRANCE TO RUSSIA: HOW THE POLITICS OF LANGUAGE SHAPE NATIONAL IDENTITY

Georgia is not alone in using language as a battleground for national values. France has long insisted on maintaining strict linguistic and cultural boundaries through its concept of *laïcité* (secularism). Laws banning religious symbols in public schools and workplaces have been justified as measures to protect national identity, though critics argue they disproportionately target Muslim communities.

In Russia, the 2013 law against "propaganda of non-traditional sexual relationships" also framed itself as a defense of national traditions. By controlling language around LGBTQ+ identities, the Russian government reinforced conservative social norms and effectively

silenced discussions about sexual and gender diversity. Could Georgia's erasure of "gender" be taking a similar path?

The tension between traditionalism and modernity is a global phenomenon, and Georgia finds itself at a crossroads. The country has long positioned itself as a bridge between Europe and its more conservative post-Soviet neighbors. This latest legislative move raises a fundamental question: Is Georgia retreating from its aspirations of European integration in favor of a more nationalistic, traditionalist identity?

UNIVERSAL RIGHTS VS. CULTURAL RELATIVISM

At the heart of this debate is a clash between two worldviews. Universalists argue that certain concepts—such as gender equality—are fundamental and should be protected across all cultures. The United Nations, for example, actively promotes the use of gender-inclusive language as a tool for achieving social justice.

Cultural relativists, on the other hand, claim that each society has the right to define its own values without external

pressure. Georgia's government might argue that it is simply tailoring its legal language to fit national traditions. But does this mean that certain forms of inequality could be justified under the guise of cultural preservation?

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz warned against imposing external frameworks on cultures without understanding their internal logic. However, history has also shown that human rights progress often requires challenging traditional norms. The abolition of slavery, women's suffrage, and LGBTQ+ rights all faced resistance on cultural grounds before becoming widely accepted.

THE SILENT VICTIMS: WHO STANDS TO LOSE?

For many Georgians, this linguistic shift may seem abstract, but its real-world effects could be profound. The removal of "gender" from legislation could make it harder for marginalized groups to seek legal protection. Without language that acknowledges gender as a social construct, issues such as workplace discrimination, domestic violence, and LGBTQ+ rights may become harder to address within the legal system.

Women's rights activists in Georgia have already expressed concerns. Will gender-sensitive policies on domestic violence and equal pay be weakened under the new terminology? Will discussions about sexual harassment be reframed solely in terms of biological sex, ignoring the nuances of power dynamics in the workplace?

For LGBTQ+ individuals, the shift may be even more severe. If legal discourse only recognizes male-female equality, where does that leave those who do not fit neatly into those categories? In countries where similar linguistic changes have taken place, such as Hungary and Poland, LGBTQ+ rights have come under increasing pressure.

A POLITICAL POWER PLAY: WHY NOW?

Why is this change happening now? The timing is no coincidence. Georgian politics have been marked by deep polari-

zation, with the ruling Georgian Dream party consolidating power after the opposition boycotted parliament. With no significant political resistance, the government has the freedom to push forward policies that reflect its ideological stance.

There is also an international dimension. With rising skepticism towards Western liberal values, some post-Soviet states have embraced a more conservative, nationalist rhetoric. Georgia's ruling party may be using this linguistic shift as a way to align itself with similar trends in Russia, Hungary, and other countries that have pushed back against progressive social policies.

At the same time, Georgia is still seeking closer ties with the European Union, which strongly promotes gender equality. Could this move jeopardize its ambitions for EU membership? Or is it a strategic balancing act, appealing to both conservative domestic audiences and international partners?

THE FUTURE OF GENDER DISCOURSE IN GEORGIA

The battle over language is ultimately a battle over values. By removing "gender" from its laws, Georgia is making a statement about how it sees its national identity, its approach to human rights, and its place in the world. But language is not static—public discourse, activism, and international pressures will continue to shape the conversation.

Will this legislative change mark the beginning of a broader rollback of gender-related rights? Or will Georgian society push back, insisting that language should evolve to reflect the realities of the 21st century? One thing is certain: the words we use matter. And when governments rewrite language, they are not just editing laws—they are rewriting the cultural DNA of a nation. And yet, a nation can resist such changes just as easily—by actively using and engaging with the very terms and topics being erased. In doing so, it can avoid becoming a victim of political ambitions and ensure it does not fall behind in its social and intellectual development.

Long Way (from) Home

BLOG BY TONY HANMER

It was time to leave Svaneti and head back to Tbilisi, along with the remaining team of seven young volunteers who had been with me there for a couple of weeks. (Our two Dutch couples had left a few days earlier). We had experienced the Svan festival of Lamproba together, and also been involved in cutting people's firewood and shoveling snow off a roof; but the vast bulk of the month's snow was due to arrive as we wrapped up.

I had warned the team to expect power outages in snowfalls, and indeed our last two days proved this accurate. We doubled down on burning time in the big wood stove, as well as blankets on beds in now unheated rooms, also sharing power banks to charge our phones. The snow fell in buckets for our last three days, although the temperature warmed up to just around freezing, even at night. The flakes were impossibly soft and light, not at all like the heavy wet stuff at our October departure, which had threatened to break the branches of our fruit trees unless I knocked it off. The half-snowless landscape quickly transformed into pure white.

We now had to clean the house in daylight (about 9am to 6:30pm); but there were many of us, so this was not a problem. Pack, carefully, not forgetting any-

thing. Re-order the separate cafe building we had also been using for kids' clubs; foosball table back from there to the house, long dining table from house back to cafe.

Important was the re-winterizing of the house's water system, so it would not freeze: shutting off water to the house, draining as much interior water as possible from faucets and toilets so these could not freeze and crack at the approaching -20 degrees.

I also had to get in a few half-hour outdoor photo shoots of the new snow, which had radically changed the appearance of everything, silently and completely. It really was now a winter wonderland; though few villagers could appreciate it the way I always do. For virtually all of the adults, this amount of new snow simply means extra work shoveling; for the children and young people, true, the joy of extended winter sports, at which most of them excel. But for me, beauty, beauty, everywhere.

We had a neighbor's 8am Delica minivan arranged for six of the team, while another had driven up his own Toyota Rav4 and would now take me back to Tbilisi in it. We took all the extra food they had bought, made sure the freezer was plugged in to await power coming back on, locked the main door, packed the two vehicles, and were off. Our trip down the first few tens of kilometers to a breakfast stop would be in convoy, just in case either of us got stuck and needed

help. We had a shovel, winter tires and chains ready if required too.

Our Delica guy actually did need a shoveling out and pushing once. He swerved to miss a low-hanging power line across the road, and even in such a good car couldn't get out alone. We soon set him right and continued.

My driver had never driven in such deep snow, but he handled it very well, being over-careful instead of cavalier. But there were a number of road closures between us and breakfast, which soon became brunch, then lunch.

The first barrier was a high-up tree which had fallen onto the road from its shallow roots and the extra sudden snow burden, with rocks and snow added. Its trunk had broken into several pieces from the huge impact. We called a tractor driver, who was apparently half an hour away, and hunkered down for his arrival and an expected hour or more of road clearing. But two Slovenians in another car, satisfied with their Svaneti skiing holiday, now had a plane to catch from Kutaisi. So they borrowed our shovel, enlisted another for the tree pieces, and had us all snaking through the mess before the tractor even appeared. I shot what video and photos I could.

There were four other closures, all avalanches, needing only time and shovel work to get us through them. Then lunch in Barjashi (a kubbardi pie each, coffee or tea), and back on our way. A final stop at my favorite waterfall on the way down,



then after Zugdidi our two vehicles were able to find their own speed onwards to Tbilisi.

It ended up being a 12-hour journey, lengthened mostly because of the slowness of those first 100 km of the 450 or so total; but uneventful, despite being the most snowed-in and avalanched trip I have ever made in Svaneti. I reminded myself to be glad for us being prepared with equipment for the exigencies which did arise, and thankful for a journey which was, for me, long but not terrifying. Just as well my wife was not with us: she had been urging us to turn back having seen my posted videos in Face-

book! She is not a fan of winter travel in Svaneti. I, however, had had my winter batteries recharged, and now the snow is following us east to Tbilisi and beyond as I write this...

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

CENN Hosts Final Multi-Stakeholder Meeting as Part of the "End Plastic Pollution" Initiative in Georgia

BY KESARIA KATCHARAVA

CENN, with support from UNDP and Norway, recently hosted a pivotal multi-stakeholder meeting as the final event of its "End Plastic Pollution" initiative in Georgia. This meeting, which marked the culmination of a one-year project aimed at reducing plastic pollution and advancing circular economy principles in the country, brought together a diverse group of stakeholders from across different sectors. The event was a significant step forward in assessing Georgia's progress toward a more sustainable and circular economy, highlighting achievements and setting the stage for future actions.

A LOOK BACK AT THE PROGRESS MADE

As part of the final phase of the "End Plastic Pollution" initiative, CENN organized the meeting to summarize the cooperation between stakeholders over the past few years and assess the collective efforts to reduce plastic waste and promote sustainability. The event served as a reflection on the ongoing activities, successes, and lessons learned, as well as a chance to strategize on the way forward.

CENN's goal for the event was not only to evaluate the progress made but also to create a platform for dialogue, exchange, and collaboration between industries. Participants were divided into groups according to their sectors to reflect on their respective sustainability practices, assess their current stage in adopting circular economy principles, and identify areas for improvement. The sectors represented included HORECA (hotels, restaurants, and cafes), retailers, producers, supply chain operators (SCOs), and bars and clubs.

This approach enabled participants to discuss the specific challenges their sectors face in transitioning to more sustainable practices, as well as the opportunities for collaboration across industries that could help address shared challenges. The goal was to gather concrete insights that could help refine strategies and identify synergies that would further advance the circular economy agenda.

FOSTERING SECTOR-SPECIFIC AND CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION

A central theme of the meeting was the importance of collaboration - both within individual sectors and across different industries. CENN highlighted the need for a collective effort in the transition to a circular economy, where sectors can work together to reduce waste, improve resource efficiency, and adopt more sustainable practices. A key concept dis-

cussed was that of industrial symbiosis, where waste or by-products from one sector can be used as valuable resources by another sector. By fostering collaboration between industries, stakeholders can create closed-loop systems that reduce the overall environmental impact and enhance the sustainability of business practices.

Throughout the event key principles of the circular economy and the role of collaboration between businesses was highlighted. An emphasis was drawn to the fact that a traditional linear economy characterized by the "take, make, dispose" model was inherently wasteful and unsustainable. In contrast, the circular economy seeks to keep products and materials in use for as long as possible by designing systems that reduce waste and regenerate natural systems.

The meeting underscored the need for stakeholders from various sectors to engage in discussions about potential opportunities for cross-sector collaboration. By sharing knowledge and expertise, businesses can identify shared challenges and work together to find creative solutions. In particular, opportunities for improving waste management, adopting sustainable packaging solutions, and rethinking supply chains were highlighted as key areas where collaboration could yield significant environmental benefits.

SECTORAL INSIGHTS AND IDENTIFYING CHALLENGES

Throughout the meeting, participants were encouraged to engage in group discussions to assess the current state of circular economy practices within their respective sectors. These discussions provided valuable insights into the challenges each sector faces when it comes to reducing plastic pollution and implementing circular economy principles.

For example, the HORECA sector highlighted the difficulties in sourcing sustainable packaging and effectively managing food waste, while retailers discussed the challenges of transitioning to more sustainable supply chains and reducing single-use plastics in retail settings. Producers emphasized the need for better waste management infrastructure and the importance of eco-design in manufacturing processes, while bars and clubs discussed strategies for reducing plastic waste in their operations.

While many challenges were identified, the discussions also brought forward several opportunities for improvement. By recognizing the barriers and brainstorming potential solutions, participants left the meeting with a clearer understanding of how their sectors could adopt more sustainable practices and contribute to the broader effort to reduce plastic pollution in Georgia.

"We have worked extensively with different sectors with a vision to identify



specific opportunities for circularity and merge forces where there are clear gaps and needs. We are now seeing the emergence of circular supply chain development and improvement of supplier landscape" Noted Nana Takvarelia, CENN's project manager.

THE ROLE OF EDUCATION AND AWARENESS

In addition to sector-specific discussions, CENN also emphasized the importance of raising awareness and educating the public - particularly younger generations - about the importance of waste reduction and sustainability. CENN has been actively working with schools and young people through campaigns and educational programs aimed at encouraging students to take concrete steps to reduce waste. This work aligns with the larger goals of the "End Plastic Pollution" initiative, which seeks to engage individuals and communities in the effort to create a more sustainable future.

"Civil society plays a vital role in addressing social, economic, and environmental challenges while driving meaningful change. The right to a healthy environment is a fundamental human right. With Norway's support, the End Plastic Pollution Campaign successfully combined expertise, advocacy, and community engagement to promote a circular economy and sustainable solutions. Most importantly, the campaign empowered school students, youth, businesses, and communities across Georgia to take action and become agents of change for a cleaner environment." - says Lela Akishvili, UNDP Project Manager.

At the meeting, participants were encouraged to consider how they could engage with their own communities and educate their customers, employees, and stakeholders on the importance of sustainability. This emphasis on education and outreach will continue to be a key component of CENN's efforts as the project moves forward.

LOOKING AT BUSINESS CAMPAIGN PROGRESS

CENN also presented 10 businesses and organisations involved in the business campaign that was running throughout the year. The businesses received technical trainings and mentorship to help them reduce plastic waste. The presentations clearly demonstrated extremely high figures of plastic waste reduced in each company and organisation through green procurement, reuse and refill models and repurposing and recycling efforts.

LOOKING TOWARD THE FUTURE

As the meeting concluded, there was a shared sense of optimism about the future of sustainability in Georgia. The "End Plastic Pollution" initiative has made significant strides in raising awareness, fostering collaboration, and promoting circular economy principles. However, it was clear that there is still much work to be done. The meeting served as a reminder that plastic pollution is a complex issue that requires ongoing effort, innovation, and cross-sector cooperation.

Looking ahead, CENN called on all stakeholders to continue their efforts in reducing plastic waste, improving sustainability practices, and fostering collaboration across industries. The final event of the "End Plastic Pollution" initiative was not only a reflection of the progress made but also a launchpad for the next phase of action - a commitment to a more sustainable, circular economy in Georgia.



Curtain Call for Artistic Freedom? The Georgian Theater Reform and Its Cultural Consequences

BY IVAN NECHAEV

Theater has always been more than just a stage with actors: it is a battleground of ideas; a space where artistic and social tensions play out in real time. In Georgia, the proposed amendments to the Law on Professional Theaters—which eliminate the role of the artistic director and consolidate all power under a single administrative director—mark a profound shift not just in the management of cultural institutions but in the very philosophy of theater itself. Is this reform truly a response to inefficiency, or does it signal a deeper attempt to bureaucratize, depoliticize, and ultimately control the creative process?

With theaters in Georgia responding through protests, cancelled performances, and direct appeals to audiences, the question is no longer just about management structures: it is about the future of theatrical art in a society where power struggles between artists and the state have historically shaped national identity.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN ART BECOMES ADMINISTRATION?

At the heart of this reform is the abolition of the role of artistic director. Traditionally, the artistic director is not just a manager but a visionary figure responsible for setting the creative agenda of a theater. The new law consolidates both administrative and artistic control under a single director, ostensibly to eliminate what the government calls “dual power” inefficiency. But does such an approach truly benefit the theater, or does it strip

away the very essence of artistic leadership?

To understand the implications, we must look at historical and global precedents:

Soviet Theatrical Centralization (1930s-1950s): The Soviet Union implemented strict state control over theaters, making artistic directors personally responsible for ideological compliance. Theaters lost their autonomy, and directors were often removed—or worse—if their productions were deemed politically inappropriate. This created an atmosphere of fear and self-censorship, which ultimately stifled artistic innovation.

The Managerial Takeover in the West (1990s-Present): In some Western countries, particularly the UK and US, there has been a shift toward corporate-style governance in theater, where administrative executives wield more power than creative leaders. Theaters must meet financial and marketing goals, leading to more commercial programming and fewer experimental productions.

The French Resistance Model: In contrast, France has historically protected the independence of its theater institutions. The *Théâtres Nationaux* model ensures that artistic directors, not bureaucrats, have the final say in programming. The state funds culture but does not dictate its content, maintaining a healthy balance between support and creative freedom.

If Georgia follows the managerial model rather than the artistic one, it risks turning theaters into bureaucratic institutions rather than spaces for artistic innovation.

WHY THIS REFORM MATTERS BEYOND THEATER

This law does not exist in a vacuum. It



Photo by the author

follows a broader pattern of government attempts to centralize cultural control, a strategy that can be observed in various authoritarian-leaning regimes throughout history. Theater has always been a powerful space for dissent, protest, and national identity. Theater was central to Georgia's independence movement in the late Soviet era, and today, it remains one of the few public forums where politically and socially charged conversations can still take place outside government control.

Consider the Polish theater crisis (2016-2018), where the government attempted to place more conservative, state-friendly figures in charge of major cultural institutions. The backlash was immediate: protests, resignations, and boycotts by artists and audiences alike. Theaters in Poland have since become hotbeds of

political resistance, showing that artistic institutions, when challenged, can become powerful symbols of defiance.

Similarly, the proposed Georgian reform arrives in the context of ongoing political struggles. With theaters actively joining the protests, cancelling shows, and directly addressing audiences, it is clear that artists see this not as a simple managerial restructuring, but as an existential threat to artistic independence.

A STAGE WITHOUT A DIRECTOR: THE END OF THE ARTISTIC DIRECTOR MODEL?

With the new law set to remove current directors and consolidate power under a competitive appointment system, several key questions arise.

Who will be chosen to lead these theat-

ers? If appointment processes become politically influenced, theaters risk being staffed with administrators who prioritize government loyalty over artistic vision.

What happens to theater as a political space? If artistic autonomy is diminished, will politically engaged performances disappear? Will censorship become indirect but pervasive?

How will audiences respond? Georgian audiences have historically supported theater as a space for cultural and political discourse. If theaters lose their independence, will the public disengage, or will resistance movements gain traction?

FINAL ACT: A POLITICAL OR CULTURAL DECISION?

This reform is being framed as a necessary modernization to improve efficiency in theater governance. However, history teaches us that efficiency is rarely the true goal when governments interfere with artistic institutions. Whether in the Soviet Union, modern Poland, or corporatized Western theater models, the removal of independent artistic leadership has always led to a decline in creative boldness.

By responding with protests and cancelled performances, Georgia's theater community is sending a clear message: this is not just about management—it is about the soul of theater itself. Theaters are not merely buildings with actors; they are spaces where national identity, political resistance, and creative freedom intersect.

As the final curtain falls on the artistic director model in Georgia, the real question remains: will this be the beginning of a new era of control, or will artists and audiences resist the transformation of theater into a bureaucratic machine?

Eyewitness

BY TONY HANMER

Eyewitness is the name of a gripping new exhibition running at Fotografia Gallery in Tbilisi, to the opening of which I went on February 22; it runs until March 30, all details below.

The show, featuring about 25 works framed and for sale by six local photographers, has new street photography from the last few months in Tbilisi, concentrating on the protests and demonstrations in the city during this period. The Gallery offers this statement regarding the exhibition:

“Within the context of the current protests, photographers have uniquely positioned themselves to showcase the unfiltered reality of today's Georgia. We invite viewers to engage with these works not only for their socio-political relevance but also for their sheer visual impact.” Fotografia Gallery notes that it is not aligned with any aspect of the protests or participants themselves; it is merely displaying this set of images of them.

The photographers are: Dina Oganova, David Grigoryan, Tbel Abuseridze, Dato Koridze, Giorgi Kiknadze and Davit Sitchinava.

The turnout at the opening evening of the show was very good, with over 50 people attending over several hours, examining the photographs with great interest, as I did. We also had the chance to meet all four of the photographers who were present for the event.

Most of the protests in Tbilisi have been happening from late evening into the night, offering harsh and contrasty lighting of the captured scenes by fire,

fireworks, phone flashlights, car headlights: almost anything but daylight. It is a powerful testimony of what the city (along with other cities and towns all over Georgia) has been experiencing since the second half of last year. I have stayed away...but these people have not.

I appreciate the bravery and commitment of these photographers to attend, witness, and record the events, often in cold, usually in darkness, sometimes in bad weather also, and always at times of greatly heightened tension and unpredictable outcomes as each evening pro-

gressed. There must be a record.

Fotografia Gallery
Revaz Tabukashvili St. 21, Tbilisi (parallel to Rustaveli Avenue, behind and near the back of the State Opera House)
Open Wednesdays through Sundays 12:00-19:00

On until March 30, 2025
+995 591 12 85 78
info@fotografia-gallery.com
<https://www.facebook.com/FotografiaTbilisi>
fotografia-gallery.com



FOTOGRAFIA Gallery

Eyewitness

თვითმხილველი

Dina Oganova
David Grigoryan
Tbel Abuseridze
Dato Koridze
Giorgi Kiknadze
Davit Sitchinava

opening: 22.02.2025
22.02.2025 - 30.03.2025
revaz tabukashvili st.21

How to Launder Culture: The Surrealist Boom in Georgia's Art Imports



Image source: bm.ge

OP-ED BY IVAN NECHAEV

In an unexpected turn of economic and artistic history, Georgia has made headlines with an astronomical surge in the import of paintings and sculptures. According to recent data from Sakstat, January 2025 saw a staggering 2 million percent increase in the import of paintings, totaling \$481 million, and a 75,000 percent rise in the import of sculptures, amounting to \$33 million. Together, these purchases accounted for almost a third of the country's total imports for the month—a surrealist leap into the global art market.

But who is buying? The official importer remains a mystery, yet all signs point toward Bidzina Ivanishvili, Georgia's wealthiest individual and de facto power broker. If so, this is not just a story about art; it is a case study in how economic policy, oligarchic influence, and art markets intertwine

in the global financial ecosystem.

ART AS AN ECONOMIC ANOMALY: WHEN IMPORTS OUTPACE LOGIC

Art is, by its nature, an elite commodity. The staggering increase in imports—occurring just months after Georgia passed a law exempting offshore asset transfers from taxation—suggests that these purchases are less about artistic appreciation and more about financial strategy. The sheer scale of this transaction forces us to ask: Is this an instance of asset laundering through art? Why would an individual or entity need to move half a billion dollars through paintings and sculptures? What does this tell us about the intersection of culture, finance, and political power? To answer these questions, we must turn to history.

FROM NAPOLEON TO FREEPORTS: THE ART OF MOVING WEALTH

The practice of using art as a vehicle for financial and political maneuvering is

nothing new. Napoleon Bonaparte's looting of Europe's masterpieces was not merely an act of cultural theft—it was an economic and ideological conquest. The Nazi regime refined this process in the 20th century, systematically seizing artworks to both finance and justify their ideological project.

In more recent decades, the international art market has become a primary tool for wealth concealment and tax avoidance. Art is a unique asset class: it is highly valuable, easily transportable, and notoriously difficult to appraise. This makes it a perfect instrument for those seeking to move large sums of money without triggering traditional financial oversight mechanisms.

The rise of freeports, tax-free storage facilities in Geneva, Luxembourg, and Singapore, has allowed collectors (and oligarchs) to buy, sell, and store art without the burden of taxation. The anonymity of these transactions means that art sales can serve as a front for capital movement. In 2016, the Panama Papers revealed how Russian billionaire Dmitry

Rybolovlev used offshore accounts to trade art while avoiding taxes and scrutiny.

WHY GEORGIA? THE ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

Georgia's rapidly shifting tax laws create the perfect environment for such maneuvers. In April 2024, the Georgian Parliament passed a law that allows assets transferred from offshore accounts to be tax-free until 2028. This coincided with Ivanishvili's sudden increase in wealth—up \$955 million in 2024 alone.

The January 2025 import surge appears to be a direct consequence of this legal loophole. By importing half a billion dollars' worth of paintings and sculptures, the importer has effectively converted offshore wealth into tangible, domestic assets—without triggering tax liabilities.

Furthermore, the decline in VAT revenue despite the massive spike in imports suggests that these transactions were either structured in a way to minimize taxable value or classified under exemptions. In many countries, including the US and UK (where the artworks reportedly originated), art transactions can be structured to limit taxation through

charitable donations, museum loans, or deferred sales agreements.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT? WHEN ART CEASES TO BE ART

Could this be the beginning of Tbilisi as a financial art hub, akin to Geneva's freeports? If so, this would mark a shift in Georgia's global economic role—from a post-Soviet transition economy to a key player in art-based financial engineering. When art is treated primarily as a financial instrument, its cultural and societal roles are distorted. Who gets to see these paintings? Who decides their value? Is this art destined for public museums, private collections, or discreet storage units?

The Georgian art import boom is not simply a statistical anomaly—it is a case study in how culture is instrumentalized for economic and political ends. If art's primary function shifts from aesthetic and cultural enrichment to financial engineering, we risk turning paintings into banknotes, sculptures into ledgers, and galleries into vaults. What is happening in Georgia today is not just a matter of economic policy. It is a question of what culture means in an era when capital moves faster than meaning itself.



Bidzina Ivanishvili with one of his paintings. Source: georgianjournal



BY GEORGIA TODAY

Natakhtari beer turns 20! The brand started celebrating this milestone with the Rugby Europe Championship and is offering consumers a special edition of Natakhtari

beer in championship-themed packaging.

For over a decade, Natakhtari has been actively supporting the development and promotion of Georgian sports. To encourage fans and strengthen the culture of support, the brand has updated its special platform Komagebi.ge for rugby enthusiasts.

You may be wondering, how you can participate in the Natakhtari beer game.

SPORTS

Natakhtari Kicks Off its 20th-Anniversary Celebration With Fans – #20YearsTogether

Start by visiting the Natakhtari website and creating an account in just a few seconds. Then, you will find yourself in the world of rugby, where every game brings a new challenge. The key is to predict match results and watch your points add up after each correct guess. The leaderboard will be your guide, showing you just how close you are to victory! But that's not all—besides earning points, you also get the chance to win special prizes from Natakhtari! "We first brewed Natakhtari beer 20

years ago, and since then, we have remained the market leader," says Aneta Demurishvili, Brand Manager of Natakhtari. "With this status comes great responsibility—not only towards our consumers but also to the Georgian beer industry as a whole. It also means we need to engage even more with our consumers. That's why we kicked off our 20-year celebration with the biggest sporting event of the year—the Rugby Europe Championship—and offered Natakhtari beer to consumers in rugby-

themed packaging. This special edition will be available in all sales channels throughout the entire championship.

"Beyond that, the campaign is all about positive energy. Stock up on Natakhtari, learn the rules of the game, share your emotions, support Georgian rugby, and cheer for our team's victory!"

Share Komagebi.ge with your friends! Let's cheer together for the Georgian national rugby union team and wish them victory!

#TogetherWeWin #20YearsTogether



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I am Georgian and therefore I am European

Zurab Zhvania, Council of Europe, 1999

