



A police officer inspects bodies at the site of Russian airstrike in Sumy, Ukraine, on Palm Sunday, April 13, 2025, amid Russia's attack on Ukraine. Source: OSV News photo/Telegram handout via Reuters

Peace on Paper, Pressure in Practice: Why Baku Isn't Rushing the Deal

INTERVIEW BY VAZHA TAVBERIDZE

Armenia is cornered, especially with Georgia pivoting towards Moscow. Without Georgia, there is no Europe for Armenia" - Eugene Kogan, a defense and security expert on Eastern Europe and the Middle East at the Vienna Institute for International Politics, who has lived in Georgia for the past decade, tells Radio Free Europe's Georgian service.

In this wide-ranging conversation, Kogan offers a stark assessment of the much-hyped Armenia-Azerbaijan peace deal. Though labeled "historic," the agreement remains stalled. Baku, holding the stronger hand, is in no rush to finalize it—using the drawn-out process to pressure Armenia into further concessions, including the Zangezur Corridor and constitutional changes on Nagorno-Karabakh. Meanwhile, Armenia, increasingly isolated and eager to sign, lacks meaningful alternatives or strong international backing.

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Image source: gulfif

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Prepared for Georgia Today Business by

GALT & TAGGART
CREATING OPPORTUNITIES

Markets				As of 09-Apr-2025			
BONDS				STOCKS			
	Price	w/w	m/m		Price	w/w	m/m
GEORG 04/26	95.23 (YTM 7.65%)	-0.8%	-0.3%	Lion Finance Group (BGEO LN)	GBP 48.88	-11.7%	-10.1%
GRAIL 06/28	87.79 (YTM 9.45%)	-1.1%	-0.8%	Georgia Capital (GGEO LN)	GBP 12.36	-21.2%	-17.3%
GEORG 9 1/2 PERP	98.29 (YTM 9.43%)	-0.5%	-0.4%	TBC Bank Group (TBCG LN)	GBP 37.15	-12.2%	-15.6%
SILKNET 01/27	100.91 (YTM 7.82%)	-0.6%	-0.4%				
TBC 8.894 PERP	95.88 (YTM 11.70%)	-1.6%	-1.6%	COMMODITIES			
TBC 10 1/4 PERP	97.19 (YTM 10.18%)	-3.5%	-3.8%		Price	w/w	m/m
				Crude Oil, Brent (US\$/bbl)	65.48	-12.6%	-6.9%
				Gold Spot (US\$/OZ)	3 082.70	-1.6%	+6.0%
INDICES				CURRENCIES			
	Price	w/w	m/m		Price	w/w	m/m
SP 500	5 456.90	-3.8%	-5.4%	USD / GEL	2,7600	-	-0.5%
FTSE 250	17 890.64	-9.0%	-11.1%	EUR / GEL	3,0218	+0.9%	+0.5%
DOW JONES 30	40 608.45	-3.8%	-5.1%	GBP / GEL	3,5240	-1.8%	-1.7%
Russell 2000	1 913.16	-6.5%	-7.8%	EUR / USD	1,0949	+0.9%	+1.1%
FTSE 100	7 679.48	-10.8%	-11.5%	GBP / USD	1,2820	-1.4%	-0.8%



Georgia to Introduce Chinese as a Second Language in Schools amid Strengthening Ties with China

BY TEAM GT

In a significant shift in Georgia's educational policy, Minister of Education Aleksandre Tsuladze announced plans to introduce Chinese as a second language in schools. This initiative is part of a broader strategy to enhance foreign language education and deepen bilateral relations with China.

Tsuladze emphasized the importance of providing students with diverse opportunities to learn foreign languages, stating, "Our goal is to equip students with the skills necessary to thrive in a globalized world." He highlighted that the Ministry is also considering establishing a separate standard for the Georgian language, independent of literature, to strengthen its teaching.

The move comes as Georgia seeks to expand its educational cooperation with China. As far back as July 2023, during a visit to Beijing, then Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili and Chinese President Xi Jinping announced a strategic partnership, with education and science identified as key areas for collaboration.

In the statement of the strategic partnership, the following are outlined in sections 3.4, 3.5, and 3.6:

3.4. The two sides will enhance their cooperation in science and higher education. They will promote exchange of teachers and students, strengthen cooperation in science and commercialization of new technologies and implement joint projects.

3.5. The two sides support universities in both countries in carrying out practical cooperation such as joint training programs, and encourage universities to make full use of high-quality digital education resources and combine online and offline channels for cooperation. The two sides will promote student exchange and joint cultivation by making good use of government scholarships and other channels.

3.6. Both sides attach importance to language exchange and cooperation, encourage schools of both countries to carry out Chinese and Georgian language teaching, stand ready to strengthen exchanges and training of language teachers, and support the building of Confucius Institutes (Classrooms).

As part of this partnership, the two countries signed a memorandum of understanding on Chinese language education in primary and secondary schools in Georgia. Chinese Vice Minister of Education Wu Yan expressed China's commitment to supporting educational cooperation, stating that the two nations would work together to implement educational initiatives on a "wider scale" and at "a higher level."

Until 2022, the main foreign language in Georgia's state schools was English, followed by Russian. The following academic year, 5th graders were given the option to choose their third language, with school directors tasked with hiring teachers of that chosen language. While Russian remained popular, Spanish, German and French have also been among pupils' top choices. It is unclear as yet where Chinese will fit into this picture.

Wizz Air Resumes Direct Flights from Kutaisi Airport to Hamburg

BY TEAM GT

Wizz Air has resumed direct regular flights to Hamburg, Germany, operating twice weekly from Davit Aghmashenebeli Kutaisi International Airport, following successful negotiations confirmed by the Union of Georgian Airports.

Kutaisi Airport now offers direct flights to five German cities, while four airlines connect Georgia to eight destinations in Germany. In 2024, a total of 78,644 visitors arrived in Georgia via these routes.

Wizz Air will also resume flights to Madrid on April 29 and launch a new route to Lyon on June 3. Currently, six airlines operate direct flights from Kutaisi to 32 destinations across 18 countries, with 24 of those destinations located in Europe.



Kavelashvili Makes First Official Visit to Azerbaijan, Meets Aliyev



President Kavelashvili. Source: News Central TV

BY MARIAM RAZMADZE

Mikheil Kavelashvili has arrived in Baku on his first official visit as President of Georgia, emphasizing the strategic partnership between Georgia and Azerbaijan.

Kavelashvili is scheduled to meet with President Ilham Aliyev, Prime Minister Ali Asadov, and the Speaker of the National Assembly during this visit. Discussions

will focus on strengthening bilateral ties and regional security.

"This first foreign visit begins in the Republic of Azerbaijan, a strategic partner and friendly country," said Georgia's Ambassador to Azerbaijan, Zurab Pataradze. "High-level meetings will address key issues, from regional security to economic cooperation, including several ongoing mega-projects."

Pataradze pointed out energy as a major point of discussion, emphasizing Georgia's increasing interest in joint sustainable development projects.

The official visit will conclude on April 16.

Tbilisi Offers Free, Extended Transport Services for Easter

BY MARIAM RAZMADZE

Tbilisi City Hall has announced that the public transportation services will be free of charge and the hours of operation will be extended during Easter celebrations.

"On April 20-21, nine temporary bus routes will operate between 08:00 and

20:00, serving cemeteries across the city — free of charge," Tbilisi Mayor Kakha Kaladze stated.

Tbilisi Metro will also extend its hours. On the night of April 20, metro service will run until 04:00 on April 21. Travel on the metro between 23:00 and 04:00 will be free.

Temporary municipal transport will operate from multiple locations including:

Marjanishvili

Delisi
Sarajishvili
Varketili

Station Square
Upper exit of Didube Station
Bessarion Chichinadze Street
Varketili's 3rd microdistrict (Shuamta and Abashvili intersection)

Kaladze emphasized the initiative aims to "ensure smooth and affordable mobility for citizens visiting cemeteries and observing Easter traditions."

WHAT YOU MIGHT ALREADY KNOW

1. China is one of the world's oldest and richest continuous cultures, over 5000 years old.

2. China is the most populous nation in the world, with 1.28 billion people.

3. One fifth of the planet speaks Chinese. Mandarin Chinese is the mother tongue of over 873 million people, making it the most widely spoken first language in the world.

4. In addition to the People's Republic of China and Taiwan, Mandarin Chinese is also spoken in the important and influential Chinese communities of Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, the Philippines, and Mongolia.

5. China is the second largest economy in the world.

Ukraine Latest: ‘Substantial Progress’ on US–Ukraine Minerals Deal; Russian Strikes Escalate

COMPILED BY ANA DUMBADZE

Top aides to former US President Donald Trump, Senator Marco Rubio and ambassador Steve Witkoff, are in Paris for a new round of talks with European leaders aimed at brokering an end to the war in Ukraine. The discussions, scheduled from April 16 to 18, mark a shift in diplomatic dynamics, bringing Europe more directly into a process it has long been sidelined from despite being deeply affected by the ongoing war.

“Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Ambassador Steve Witkoff will travel to Paris, France, 16–18 April for talks with European counterparts to advance President Trump’s goal to end the Russia–Ukraine war and stop the bloodshed,” a statement from the Trump-aligned delegation read.

“While in Paris, they will also discuss ways to advance shared interests in the region.”

Until now, peace initiatives have largely excluded European governments, even as leaders across the continent have insisted they have a vital interest in shaping any post-war security framework. The new initiative appears to offer Europe a larger seat at the table, though critics caution that the talks are still heavily driven by US political agendas.

US AND UKRAINE NEARING AGREEMENT ON STRATEGIC MINERALS

On the economic front, First Deputy Prime Minister Yulia Svyrydenko announced that Ukraine and the United States have made “substantial progress” on a strategic minerals deal. The agree-

ment is part of a broader initiative by Trump to restructure US involvement in Ukraine and to recover part of the military assistance already provided.

“Our technical teams have worked very thoroughly together on the agreement, and there is significant progress,” Svyrydenko said in a post on X (formerly Twitter). “Our legal staff has adjusted several items within the draft agreement.”

She confirmed that both countries have agreed to sign a memorandum in the near future to formally document that progress.

Deputy Ukrainian Economy Minister Taras Kachka echoed her comments during a televised interview: “A final document won’t be signed this week. There is a lot of work to be done because the ideas included in the agreement by the U.S. side need to be developed further.”

The deal is politically sensitive. Trump has reportedly pitched the agreement not only as a tool for future investment, but also as a mechanism to offset what he views as “excessive” past aid to Ukraine. While no repayment will be demanded for past US military support, the minerals deal is seen as an attempt to tie future support to mutual economic benefit.

However, President Volodymyr Zelensky has firmly rejected the notion of treating US aid as debt. “Assistance is not a loan,” he previously stated. “It was given in defense of democracy and our shared values.”

According to Bloomberg News, US officials have recently revised their estimates of total assistance to Ukraine since 2022, lowering the figure from \$300 billion to around \$100 billion.

Last month, the Trump camp proposed an updated version of the minerals deal, which reportedly offers no security guarantees for Ukraine, but requires that revenues from the extraction of natural

resources by both state-owned and private enterprises be deposited in a joint investment fund.

“It will create opportunities for investment and development in Ukraine and establish conditions for tangible economic growth for both Ukraine and the United States,” Svyrydenko added, though she offered no specific terms. The deal would still require approval by Ukraine’s parliament.

PALM SUNDAY MISSILE STRIKE KILLS 34 IN SUMY

On Sunday, April 13, Russia launched a deadly missile strike on the northeastern Ukrainian city of Sumy, killing at least 34 people and injuring over 100 more. The attack occurred at around 10:20 am local time, coinciding with Palm Sunday celebrations, and is the deadliest civilian assault in Ukraine this year.

Two Iskander-M ballistic missiles struck the city center, targeting areas where residents had gathered for religious services. Among those killed was Olena Kohut, a celebrated organist with the Sumy Regional Philharmonic Orchestra.

The attack caused widespread devastation, destroying buildings, vehicles, and a trolleybus filled with civilians. Local authorities have declared three days of mourning.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky condemned the attack as “a terrorist act” and invited Donald Trump to visit the site and witness the destruction firsthand.

“This is what Russian peace looks like,” Zelensky said. “We need the world to see the cost of indifference and the danger of delay.”

In response, Trump commented, “It was a horrible thing,” adding, “I was told they made a mistake. But I think it’s a horrible thing.”

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz denounced the strike, writing on social media: “These attacks show just what Russia’s supposed readiness for peace is worth.”

Friedrich Merz, leader of Germany’s CDU party and Chancellor-in-waiting, was more direct: “This was clearly a war crime. There is no greater example of perfidy: a targeted and planned war crime.”

The strike follows a pattern of Russian attacks on civilian areas in recent months, underscoring the continued escalation despite diplomatic efforts.

UKRAINE RETALIATES AGAINST MISSILE BRIGADES

In what officials are calling a retaliatory strike, Ukrainian drones targeted Russia’s 112th Missile Brigade in the city of Shuya, Ivanovo Oblast, on April 16. According to independent Russian media outlet Astra, the brigade had participated in the Palm Sunday strike on Sumy.

The Russian Ministry of Defense claimed it intercepted seven drones over Ivanovo Oblast, and while local authorities reported no fatalities, two people were injured and received medical attention.

Ukraine’s General Staff confirmed a separate drone strike on April 15 against the 448th Missile Brigade in Russia’s Kursk Oblast—another unit allegedly involved in the Sumy attack.

The operation, coordinated by Ukraine’s Unmanned Systems Forces, Special Operations Forces, and the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU), is part of a broader strategy to hold Russian units accountable for attacks on civilians.

Ukrainian intelligence believes cluster munitions were used in the Sumy strike, which would constitute a grave breach of international humanitarian law when deployed in civilian-populated areas.

Russia Breaches Energy Ceasefire over 30 Times, Ukraine Says

Ukraine’s Foreign Ministry says Russia has violated a partial energy ceasefire more than 30 times since its implementation on March 25. The agreement was supposed to protect critical infrastructure from further attacks.

“Detailed information on each of these violations is regularly shared with partner countries and international organizations,” ministry spokesperson Heorhii Tykhyi said on April 16.

Three additional strikes occurred in the past 24 hours, hitting transformers in Mykolaiv and Kherson oblasts, as well as a power transmission line in Poltava Oblast.


The energy ceasefire was reportedly brokered during a phone call between Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin on March 18. In exchange, the US agreed to support Russian agricultural and fertilizer exports by easing maritime insurance restrictions and improving access to ports and payment systems.

Despite the agreement, Kyiv claims Russia continues to target the power grid, ignoring its own commitments.

Earlier, a broader ceasefire proposal brokered in Jeddah on March 11 called for a full 30-day halt in hostilities. Ukraine agreed, but Russia rejected it, demanding an end to all foreign military aid to Kyiv, a condition Ukraine called unacceptable.


“The only way forward is mutual cessation,” said a senior Ukrainian defense official. “We are ready to stop the fighting, but not to surrender.”




Russia has repeatedly used missile and drone strikes to target Ukraine’s energy infrastructure since the beginning of its full-scale invasion. In response, Ukraine has launched long-range drone operations deep into Russian territory, targeting oil and gas facilities.




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Peace on Paper, Pressure in Practice: Why Baku Isn't Rushing the Deal



Eugene Kogan. Source: Vienna Institute of International Politics

Continued from page 1

Without a neutral mediator and amid shifting regional alliances—especially Georgia's pivot toward Moscow—the deal looks more like a tool of leverage than a step toward lasting peace.

THE DEAL'S BEEN DESCRIBED AS HISTORIC, BUT HOW CLOSE ARE THE SIDES TO ACTUALLY SIGNING AND ENFORCING IT?

I think you're putting the cart before the horse. There's not much to celebrate at this point. Despite all the international encouragement, we're nowhere near the finish line. What we have now is at best a draft of a potential disagreement. One side—Armenia, particularly Prime Minister Pashinyan—is eager to sign. But I don't see the same eagerness from Baku. As the saying goes, it takes two to tango, and the second dancer clearly isn't dancing to the same tune. Azerbaijan keeps presenting new preconditions for Armenia to accept.

SO THEY'RE TRYING TO EXTRACT AS MANY CONCESSIONS AS POSSIBLE BEFORE SIGNING?

Absolutely. Armenia is the weaker party, and when the weaker side shows eagerness, the stronger one exploits it. This is classic salami tactics: slice by slice, demand after demand.

BUT WHAT'S ARMENIA'S ALTERNATIVE? DO THEY HAVE ONE?

Not really, and, what's worse, I don't think the government is even considering any. Pashinyan sees this as the only available option. The opposition, on the other hand, might prefer more Russian involvement. I often hear talk of "Russia returning to the South Caucasus," which I find odd, because Russia never really left.

STILL, PUTTING ALL THE EGGS IN MOSCOW'S BASKET DIDN'T WORK WELL FOR ARMENIA IN THE NOT SO DISTANT PAST. THE EGGS GOT BROKEN.

It didn't, but it's not really about whether it's a better alternative. It's about having some alternative, or at least pretending there is one to improve Armenia's nego-

It would be a ritual humiliation to remind Georgian Dream where they stand. Moscow will squeeze their proverbial balls until they cry, and then "ask" for more concessions

tiating position, to save face. Right now, Armenia is cornered, especially with Georgia pivoting towards Moscow. If Georgia continues in that direction, Armenia's European path effectively disappears. Without Georgia, there is no Europe for Armenia.

BACK TO YOUR TANGO METAPHOR: NOT ONLY IS ONE DANCER OFF-BEAT, THEY'RE THE ONE CHOOSING THE MUSIC. ARMENIA HAS TO FOLLOW, NOT LEAD.

Exactly. And I don't see that working out. If you want a historical parallel, think of 1979: Egypt and Israel, under Sadat and Begin, with America playing a crucial role. You need a powerful third party pressuring both sides. That's missing here. There is no such powerful mediator or facilitator involved—those that are would be far happier pressuring only Armenia. Azerbaijan is in no rush. Their key demands—the Zangezur Corridor, dissolution of the Minsk group format and Armenia removing all constitutional claims to Nagorno-Karabakh—are still unresolved. They're willing to achieve their goals by peaceful or military means.

SO WHY TALK PUBLICLY ABOUT A FINALIZED DRAFT IF THERE'S NO REAL INTENTION TO SIGN?

To keep squeezing concessions. Azerbaijan can keep inventing new demands indefinitely.

EVEN IF ARMENIA SAYS YES TO THE MINSK GROUP DISSOLUTION AND THE CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGES, COULDN'T BAKU SEE VALUE IN HAVING ARMENIA AS A PEACEFUL, COOPERATIVE NEIGHBOR?

I don't think so. Look at Baku's rhetoric: they call Armenia a fascist state, and Aliyev routinely humiliates Pashinyan in public. There's no indication they see Armenia as a potential partner. To them, it's a hostile, alien entity wedged between themselves and Turkey.

SO NO REALISTIC PROSPECT FOR A PEACE DEAL, NOT EVEN AN UNFAVORABLE ONE FOR ARMENIA, THAT MIGHT STILL HOLD?

I don't see it. Even if a deal is signed, I doubt it'll last. It'll soon be violated, and Azerbaijan will claim Armenia broke its word and demand more. That's the cycle.

WHAT'S REALLY AT STAKE IN THE ZANGEZUR CORRIDOR? HOW WOULD THAT AFFECT THE REGION AS A WHOLE?

Quite a bit. There's already a pipeline from Turkey to Nakhichevan. What's left is the last 40 kilometers linking Nakhichevan to mainland Azerbaijan. If Baku takes that, the Syunik province could fall under its control too. It offers an alternative to the BTC pipeline and increases Azerbaijan's economic and geopolitical leverage. They can pressure Georgia, renegotiate terms, and assert dominance in the region. This has been Aliyev's long-term goal for years—to emerge as the regional leader and dictate the terms to its two neighbors.

IF WE WERE TO LOOK AT THE EXTERNAL ACTORS, WHO STANDS TO GAIN OR LOSE SHOULD THAT SCENARIO MATERIALIZE?

Iran dislikes it, but lacks sufficient clout

to engage militarily on behalf of Armenia. Russia isn't opposed: it sees this as Armenia's punishment for stepping out of line. The Kremlin's message is clear: "You wanted independence from us? Fine. Now pay the price." By greenlighting Baku's moves, Moscow is trying to push Armenia back into its orbit. Turkey, meanwhile, is on board—they want more gas exports to Europe.

THAT SOUNDS LIKE RUSSIA SURRENDERING INFLUENCE TO TURKEY AND AZERBAIJAN. DOESN'T THAT CONTRADICT THEIR REGIONAL DOCTRINE THAT HELD FOR CENTURIES? THAT NOTHING SHOULD BE DONE WITHOUT MOSCOW'S SAY-SO?

It might seem so, but there's a tacit understanding between Moscow, Ankara, and Baku. Their shared goal is to block the West from gaining a foothold and, what's worse, bringing democracy into the region. That's the logic behind the 3+3 format: the idea that only local players get to decide what happens in the South Caucasus. No role for the US. Even less for the EU. It's ideal for Russia, Turkey, Azerbaijan, and even Iran. Armenia will be pressured to join, and Georgia looks like it will be dragged in too. In fact, Moscow is already suggesting, not so subtly, that there's a seat waiting for Tbilisi.

IF AZERBAIJAN GAINS FULL CONTROL OF THE ZANGEZUR CORRIDOR, WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR GEORGIA?

It's a major blow. Zangezur offers Azerbaijan a bypass that sidelines Georgia as a transit country. That means less revenue and diminished strategic importance. Georgian Dream doesn't seem to grasp this—they operate on short-term thinking. Their policy appears to be enriching themselves while impoverishing the rest. No long-term vision. And when you don't think about consequences, you eventually pay the price. Even if the Kremlin is currently content with Georgian Dream's behavior, it could still tighten the screws—say, demand an apology once this "investigative commission" set up by the Georgian Dream finishes blaming the previous govern-

ment for the 2008 war. It would be a ritual humiliation to remind Georgian Dream where they stand. Moscow will squeeze their proverbial balls until they cry, and then "ask" for more concessions.

HOW DID WE GET HERE? HAS GEORGIA MADE THE RIGHT MOVES SINCE THE START OF THE UKRAINE WAR?

Not at all. Georgian Dream played a foolish hand. It began with that ridiculous claim that the West wanted Georgia to open a second front against Russia. That didn't win them friends: it tied them to Moscow instead. A major blunder.

AND IF IT WASN'T A BLUNDER?

Then it's even worse. Because if it was intentional, it was reckless and dangerous. But honestly, I don't think they even have one person in the party capable of laying out pros and cons before making a decision. They've burned every bridge to the West for no gain and chained themselves to Russia. You might be Pro-Russian but it's still a foolish thing to do, leaving yourself at the Kremlin's mercy. Now they're stuck with Russia, and still think of themselves as strategic geniuses. It's absurd.

By greenlighting Baku's moves, Moscow is trying to push Armenia back into its orbit. Turkey, meanwhile, is on board—they want more gas exports to Europe

Georgia Passes Controversial Law Targeting Foreign-Funded NGOs, Drawing EU, US Condemnation

BY TEAM GT

In a swift and controversial move, Georgia's Parliament has passed a legislative package restricting the activities of international donor organizations, prompting sharp criticism from European and American officials who warn the country is backsliding on democratic reforms.

The law, passed in its third reading under expedited procedures, bans foreign grants from being issued in Georgia without prior approval from the government or an authorized representative. Organizations that violate the rule will face fines amounting to twice the grant's value. Oversight of compliance will be handled by Georgia's Anti-Corruption Bureau.

Additionally, the legislation prohibits international organizations from holding lectures, seminars, or similar public events that support political parties. The bill was adopted unanimously by 80 MPs and amends existing laws, including the Law on Political Associations of Citizens and the Law on Grants.

Exemptions were made for grants issued by international sports organizations, as well as individual scholarships for education or scientific work abroad.

The move immediately sparked outrage from international partners. Member of the European Parliament Richards Kols issued a strongly worded statement condemning the law and warning of growing authoritarianism in Georgia under the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party.

"The new GD law blocks foreign aid to NGOs, media, and civic groups—unless approved by the regime trying to silence them," Kols said. "This is state capture. Straight out of Lukashenka's playbook."

Kols also noted that the European Parliament has rejected the legitimacy of Georgia's upcoming 2024 elections and called for new elections within a year.

"The EU must act," he urged. "Sanctions, a full policy reset, and no more illusions about Georgian Dream's intentions."

US Senator Jeanne Shaheen (D-NH), a member



Georgian parliament. Source: gov.ge

of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, also expressed concern, calling the legislation a serious blow to Georgia's civil society.

"The Georgian Dream fast-tracking another draft law to stifle NGO operations is one more step away from the democratic future the Georgian people want," Shaheen said on X. "Political leaders shouldn't

fear the Georgian people. Georgian civil society are fiercely independent actors."

The Georgian government's push for tighter control over foreign-funded organizations comes amid broader concerns about democratic backsliding in the country. Civic groups and opposition parties have repeatedly accused the ruling party of silenc-

ing dissent and undermining institutions that have long been supported by Western allies.

Observers warn that the new restrictions could significantly hinder the work of NGOs, independent media, and grassroots organizations that have played a vital role in Georgia's democratic development since its independence.

Parliament Supports Legislative Package Related to the Ban on Political Parties in the First Reading



BY ANA DUMBADZE

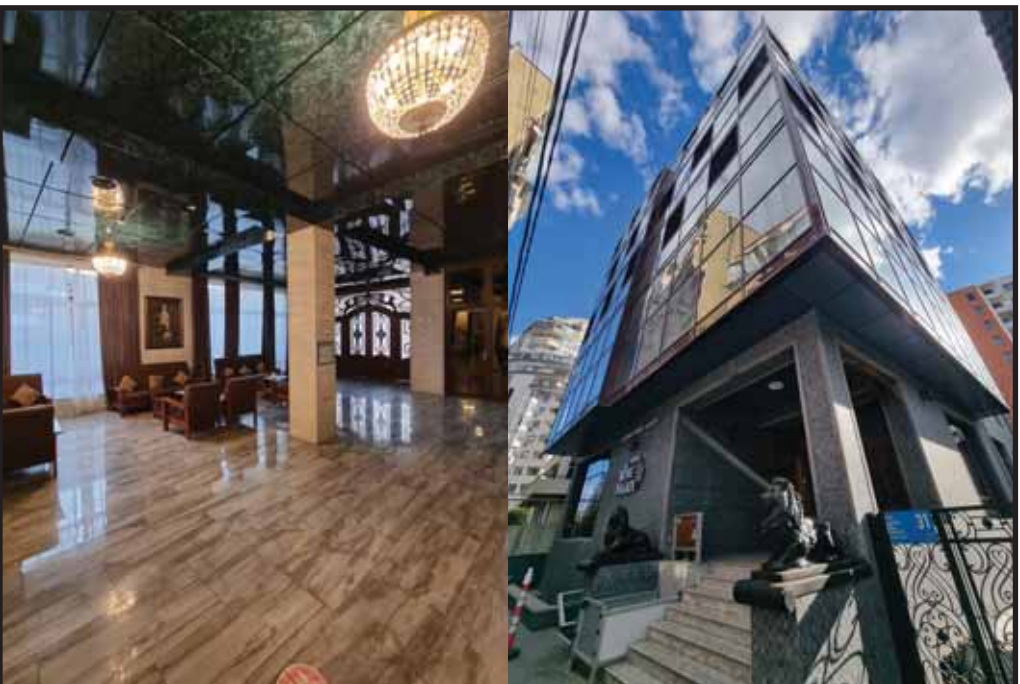
Parliament has unanimously passed in the first reading a legislative package introduced by Georgian Dream, aimed at tightening rules on banning political parties. The amendments affect the Law on Political Associations of Citizens and the Law on the Constitutional Court.

Under the proposed changes, the Constitutional Court would gain the authority to ban a political party if its goals, activities, or personnel resemble those of a party previously outlawed by the court.

The bill also proposes to shorten decision deadlines for the Constitutional Court. It would require rulings on a party's constitutionality within 9 months, or within 14 days during election periods. Georgian Dream MP Tornike Cheishvili indicated this timeframe may be reduced further in the second reading.

Currently, a party can be banned only if it seeks to violently overthrow the constitutional order, undermine independence, incite strife, or form armed groups. The proposed amendments would broaden the criteria based on resemblance to previously banned parties.

If banned or self-liquidated, a party's remaining assets would go to the state treasury.



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Tbilisi. Source: georgia.travel

FEATURE BY EKATERINE JIKIDZE*

As the founder and director of Guide of Georgia LLC, I have had the privilege to contribute to and witness the growth of Georgia's tourism industry, and its transformation. In this article, I reflect on the core strategies and innovations I have implemented throughout my journey — and how they continue to impact the country's tourism ecosystem today.

PIONEERING NEW TOURISM MARKETS

It is very important to see the opportunities and catch them. This happened when I saw the interest towards Georgia from Gulf countries and decide to use it. With our marketing strategy and customer-oriented approach, we have been successfully operating in this market since 2016.

Building on that success, we have expanded to serve Indian and Chinese travelers, two of the world's fastest-growing outbound tourism markets. By developing targeted packages aligned

with their cultural preferences and travel behaviors — including vegetarian-friendly options, family-centric programs, and shopping and entertainment itineraries — my campaigns helped make Georgia an attractive, accessible destination for these key demographics.

These efforts not only diversified Georgia's visitor base, but also brought year-round revenue to regions previously reliant on seasonal tourism. Today, India and China are actively selling Georgia packages, and our partnerships with tour operators in those countries are helping to further strengthen Georgia's visibility and competitiveness in Asia.

ELEVATING EXPERIENCES THROUGH INNOVATION

My approach to travel has always gone beyond sightseeing. By integrating digital tools, we've streamlined customer journeys and personalized services. Our offerings meet international standards of convenience and quality. These innovations are not just about technology; they are about delivering value, building trust, and creating lasting impressions.

CHAMPIONING SUSTAINABILITY AND RESPONSIBLE GROWTH

As tourism in Georgia grows, so does the need for sustainability. I advocate for balanced development—expanding rural tourism to reduce pressure on overcrowded destinations and working with local communities to support small businesses, traditional artisans, and eco-friendly initiatives. By promoting off-the-beaten-path experiences, we're both preserving natural and cultural heritage and extending economic opportunities across regions.

GLOBAL RECOGNITION AND LEADERSHIP

My contributions have been recognized

on both national and international levels. I've had the honor of serving as a judge for global recognition awards, including the Sustainability & Environmental Innovation Panel at the Global Recognition Awards in Dubai. These roles allow me to evaluate global best practices, promote Georgia's success stories, and build partnerships that enhance our country's global standing.

Awards such as Best Inbound Tour Operator, Leader of the Year, Excellence in Service and Tailor-Made Tour Company of the Year reaffirm that our work is not only impactful, but also held in high regard across borders.

A VISION FOR THE FUTURE

Looking ahead, I see Georgia embracing a bold vision—one rooted in smart tourism, digital transformation, and cultural authenticity. I foresee more collaboration between the public and private sectors, increased investment in tech infra-

structure, and strong policy support for inclusive tourism development.

My goal is to continue leading the development of smart, sustainable, and inclusive tourism in Georgia, while strengthening the country's position on the global tourism map. By fostering international partnerships, expanding digital innovation, and promoting responsible growth, I aim to shape the future direction of the industry both in Georgia and across emerging destinations. My ongoing work reflects a commitment to driving long-term impact, global collaboration, and innovation in tourism.

* Ekaterine Jikidze is the founder and director of Guide of Georgia LLC. She is an award-winning tourism expert, international panel judge, and pioneer of inbound travel development in Georgia. She actively promotes sustainable tourism and cross-cultural engagement through personalized service and innovation.



Guide of Georgia LLC awarded 'Best Inbound Tour Operator 2023'. Source: FB

Keti Zhvania, Public Relations and Digital Communications Manager of EFES Georgia, has been named a UN SDG Pioneer

BY TEAM GT

Keti Zhvania, Public Relations and Digital Communications Manager of EFES Georgia, Named a UNSDG Pioneer 2024 by the UN Global Compact Network Georgia in the category of large local or international companies. The winner was selected by an independent jury composed of representatives from the UN Global Compact Board, the United Nations, and the non-governmental sector.

As a reminder, the 'Corporate Sustainability Award – Business for SDGs' was organized by the UN Global Compact Network Georgia with the financial support of Sweden for the 7th time this year. At the annual ceremony, in addition to the SDG Pioneer Award, winners were recognized across six key categories. Based on the evaluation of an independent jury composed of Georgian and international members, EFES Georgia received awards in two nominations within the large business category – 'Decent Work and Economic Growth' and 'Responsible Consumption and Production'.

We spoke with Keti Zhvania, Public Relations and Digital Communications Manager of EFES Georgia.

KETI, CONGRATULATIONS ON RECEIVING THE 2024 SDG PIONEER AWARD IN THE LARGE BUSINESS CATEGORY FROM THE UN GLOBAL COMPACT NETWORK GEORGIA. WHAT

ADDITIONAL RESPONSIBILITY DOES THIS RECOGNITION BRING FOR YOU?

The 2024 SDG Pioneer Award in the large business category, granted by the UN Global Compact Network Georgia, highlights that EFES Georgia, together with its employees, is actively contributing to the implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals in Georgia. It is especially important that the winners were selected by an independent jury composed of representatives from the UN Global Compact Board, the United Nations, and the non-governmental sector. This recognition is, of course, an additional responsibility. The SDG Pioneer Award is a source of pride for me personally and for EFES Georgia as well. Since joining the EFES Georgia team in 2018, I have shared the values of our company and have been highly motivated to engage in sustainability initiatives — and I intend to continue doing so in the future.

MORE BROADLY, WHAT DOES CORPORATE SUSTAINABILITY MEAN FOR EFES GEORGIA?

For EFES Georgia, corporate sustainability is a declared priority, fully aligned with the UN Sustainable Development Goals. For over 16 years, we have been implementing various projects in the field of corporate responsibility. Therefore, the awards we've received for sustainability reflect the recognition of our ongoing efforts and affirm that we are moving in the right direction. In general, corporate responsibility at EFES Georgia encompasses several key areas, including caring for employees and the community, envi-



ronmental protection and sustainable resource use, ensuring fair labor conditions, ethical business practices, and more. We consistently strive to align our operations with the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

EFES GEORGIA ALSO RECEIVED AWARDS IN TWO LARGE BUSINESS CATEGORY NOMINATIONS: 'DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH' AND 'RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION.' COULD YOU TELL US MORE ABOUT THE COMPANY'S EFFORTS AND ACTIVITIES IN THESE AREAS?

The company continuously strives to ensure that these efforts are not one-off initiatives but rather are embedded in our strategic vision and supported by formal documentation. We were honored to win in two highly significant categories.

For us, our employees and their well-

being are top priorities. EFES Georgia actively supports the professional development of its team members by creating individual growth plans. The company promotes equal opportunities and rights for all employees, ensuring their health, well-being, and safety. For example, EFES Georgia offers a comprehensive health insurance package and covers 100% of maternity leave. We have a formal Code of Ethics and an Ethics Committee in place. We treat all colleagues fairly and equally, regardless of their characteristics.

Regarding the second nomination, this award reflects our ongoing efforts across multiple sustainability projects. The company prioritizes the efficient use of resources during production, the implementation of waste management systems, the reduction of environmental impact, and the development of a sustainable supply chain.

Since 2012, we have been operating a biological Wastewater Treatment Plant, which fully complies with EU standards

and requirements.

In addition, we have a very important update, which refers to the company's transition to the use of renewable energy. This implies transferring all energy sources and the production process to electricity obtained from renewable sources.

Among other environmental initiatives, EFES Georgia was the first company in Georgia to join the National Forestry Agency's program 'Forest Friend', and we fully fund the restoration and maintenance of approximately 12 hectares of forest land.

For years, we've also implemented a variety of environmental protection initiatives, including energy efficiency and conservation programs, waste management, sustainable use of natural resources, and awareness campaigns on environmental issues.

Additionally, I'd like to highlight our GO Green entrepreneurship program, which we launched in partnership with Impact Hub Tbilisi and Startup Büro. The program aimed to promote sustainable entrepreneurship in Georgia and empower startups and individuals working in this direction.

WHAT OTHER UPCOMING INITIATIVES DO YOU HAVE PLANNED IN THE AREA OF CORPORATE RESPONSIBILITY?

Going forward, we are committed to continuing and expanding our activities aimed at strengthening a decent work environment, contributing to the economic growth of both the company and the country, and further promoting responsible consumption and production.

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FANTA



Georgia's Gastronomic Adventures Must Go Beyond Meat



Image source: Beyond Meat

BLOG BY HELENA BEDWELL

My passion for animals began in childhood. My father—although quite the culinary connoisseur—planted the idea early in my mind that the fewer animals we consume, the better. He also quietly questioned the old Georgian traditions of home-based animal slaughter, a custom that, for many, symbolized both celebration and survival.

Ironically, back in Soviet school days, our cafeteria burgers barely resembled meat. Meanwhile, my grandmother scolded me for refusing meat at home, unaware I was already happily munching on nearly all-veggie patties at school.

Everyone who knows me knows this: I promote Georgian cuisine. I write about it, I cook it, I celebrate it. That's why it felt natural—perhaps even necessary—to create the first all-vegan Georgian cookbook. I named it *Eat Georgian, Feel Good*, inspired by the richness of our culinary heritage, that can nourish both body and soul without animal products.

Historically, Georgians consumed meat primarily for celebratory purposes. But the modern push for meat-heavy dishes, led by consumer trends and tourism demands, is steering our food identity

away from our abundant plant-based roots. And this comes at a cost, not just to our health, but to our planet.

WHERE DOES GEORGIA STAND?

Frankly, I'm disappointed. Georgia, a country with a treasure trove of vegan, lent-season, and monastery-inspired dishes, continues to spotlight meat and cheese-laden plates as the main attraction for tourists and locals alike. They're delicious, yes, but the global statistics tell a different story.

Today, 46% of people have already significantly reduced their meat consumption, and 40% plan to reduce it in the near future, according to Smart Protein's European consumer survey. The demand is here. The opportunity is now.

I was about 22 years old when I first tried plant-based meat in the UK. Years later, I was thrilled to see the globally recognized Beyond Meat brand finally arrive in Georgia. It felt like a step forward, aligning our traditions with the needs of the planet.

Founded in 2009 in the United States by Ethan Brown, Beyond Meat is a pioneer in plant-based protein. The company's mission is simple: to enable people to eat fewer animal products without sacrificing flavor or satisfaction. Their motto? *Eat What You Love™*.

Beyond Meat products are now produced for Europe in The Netherlands

using innovative food technology that transforms plants into meat-like textures and tastes. Their proteins come mainly from peas, faba beans, and brown rice. Natural ingredients like beetroot extract give their products an authentic "meaty" color, while minerals and plant fibers help recreate the structure and flavor of traditional meat.

TIME FOR A SHIFT

Georgia has all the ingredients, literally and culturally, to lead in plant-based gastronomy. We've done it before. From lobio to pkhali, our culinary DNA is deeply rooted in plants. So why not reimagine our food tourism and hospitality to reflect that legacy while protecting our future?

It's time to go beyond tradition.

It's time to go Beyond Meat.

RECIPES FROM EAT GEORGIAN, FEEL GOOD

Beyond Meat Chicken Tenders in Bajhe (Walnut Sauce), Serves: 6

Ingredients: 1 packet of Beyond Meat chicken tenders
150g walnuts
4 cloves garlic (mature, not fresh)
10g blue fenugreek
10g dried coriander
5g marigold
Red chili to taste
Salt to taste

300ml pre-boiled water
1 tsp vinegar or pomegranate juice (optional)

Instructions: You'll need a good blender for this. Combine all ingredients (except salt and vinegar) and blend until smooth. Slowly add the boiled water to achieve a thick paste. Stir in salt at the end and chili if desired. For extra depth, blend again with a teaspoon of warmed vinegar or pomegranate juice.

Use a wooden spoon when stirring by hand to preserve texture. This sauce pairs wonderfully with Beyond Meat chicken tenders, as well as with baked or fried vegetables like eggplant or cauliflower. A perfect vegan delight.

VEGAN KUBDARI (MEAT PIE)

For the Dough: 900g flour

400ml warm water
1 tbsp yeast
1 tsp sugar
1 tsp salt
1 egg (optional, for non-vegan version)
200g all-purpose flour (for dusting and kneading)

Vegan butter (for glazing)

For the Filling: 1 packet Beyond Meat steak or meat pieces

1 medium onion (finely chopped)
2 cloves garlic (minced)
½ tsp ground cumin
¼ tsp ground dill
1 tsp dried coriander
½ tsp blue fenugreek
1 tsp red pepper
Salt to taste

Instructions: Begin by preparing the dough. It should be slightly firmer than that used for khachapuri. Allow it to rest while preparing the filling.

Sauté the onion and garlic until soft, then add the Beyond Meat pieces and spices. Mix well and let the filling cool.

Divide the dough into equal pieces, roll each into a round shape, and place the filling in the center. Gather the edges and seal tightly, then gently flatten the pie. Bake at 200°C (390°F) until golden brown, brushing with vegan butter for shine.

Dedicated to Nana Janashia, lover of animals.



Article dedicated to Nana Janashia

Our Lovely Niche in the Global Showground

BLOG BY NUGZAR B. RUHADZE

Experts maintain that Sakartvelo, as small and inconsequential as it might seem, is still playing its affordable and commensurable role on the international stage. Our Georgia appears attractive in many different ways: its geographical location, ancient history, fascinating culture, religious relics, unique language with its own writing system, fabulous wines, delicious cuisine, polyphonic singing, national dances, geopolitical value, and what not.

The only thing its good people might be lacking is an acute sense of history, which hampers our best judgment on current issues, along with the political acumen that has always stood in the way of making the best and most favorable national decisions. Otherwise, we are in tolerable shape as a nation.

Time passes, and the distance between the tragic post-Soviet era and today grows longer, blurring the memory of the dark days we endured in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Many young men and women around me, who know this part of Georgia's history only by word of mouth or through the still-developing historical record, keep asking the same question: Could the disastrous 9th of April, 1989, and the subsequent heart-breaking loss of our territories to Russia have been avoided?



Image source: FMM graphics studio

There are no wise men around who could give an unequivocal answer to that bitter question of the century. I once heard a more or less straightforward reply:

"Yes, those catastrophes could have been avoided had the Soviet Union not collapsed. As evil as it was, it was also powerful."

There is something diabolically true

in that statement, but it also carries an air of nostalgia for a wrong time, making it of little value or relevance today.

We are where we are now, and we need to live up to the expectations of the best, happiest, richest, and most successful part of the world. But does anyone in this country truly know how to achieve that? Any guesses might be irrelevant. So, let's listen carefully to the demands

of time and circumstance.

Sakartvelo needs to feed its people and make practical decisions that can lead to a better life for its citizens. It would certainly be an exaggeration to say we've already arrived, but, giving to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God, we might not be all that far from our cherished goal.

The intricate international game Geor-

gia is currently playing could, possibly, lead us to where we have long aspired to be. And the game is called neutrality - balancing between global decision-makers, maintaining firm peace, and, in the meantime, holding on to our national values and traditions. Isn't that ideal?

This is exactly what Thomas Friedman speaks to in his bestselling opus *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* — make good use of modernity, but never relinquish your roots. Isn't that a supreme formula for human life? No doubt, if only there were a real way to bring it to life anytime soon.

America and China, both of whose hands Georgia is trying to shake in a friendly manner, are locked in furious conflict, and this little darling called Sakartvelo may be forced to take sides. Too bad. We can't afford to take sides.

Another painful twist: Russia, our frightening neighbor, and the European Union, our final destination, are at daggers drawn. Again, what to do? How to behave without bungling it?

Funny, but let me shoot straight: If I had the model for the Republic's most rational behavior at this complicated crossroads, I wouldn't be spending time writing this piece. I'd be sitting where the powers that be make those decisions.

And yet, I do have some idea of how to proceed: Keep going as we are, working with every nation and useful union around us so that no one wants to fight us, and everyone wants to cooperate.

Plain, cogent, and rational, isn't it?

Dighome Denizens



Photo by the author

BLOG BY TONY HANMER

It has been my great privilege, over the last couple of months, to shift from photographing only the land- and waterscapes of Dighomi Meadows to hunting, with my lens, its fauna. My efforts are amateur, but not without success.

First were terrapins: not, apparently, turtles, though I had to look up their differences, as well as contrast them with tortoises. All three are related, but turtles are entirely aquatic, tortoises entirely land-dwelling (they would die in water over their heads), and terrapins water-loving but also to be found on land. Ter-

rapins and turtles are both omnivores, eating everything, both animals and vegetation; turtles have flippers and live mostly in seas and oceans, whereas terrapins live in ponds and have clawed toes on webbed feet. I quietly found a few specimens sunning themselves on pond logs or shores, and one on the sidewalk near one of the ponds.

Then came the muskrat/otter/nutria debate, not yet entirely solved locally. Otter Island on the Mtkvari may well house actual otters: proving or disproving this is beyond me at present, needing a quiet drone perhaps, and lots of patience and batteries. Indeed, never seeing an otter on or near that island would not disprove their existence there, whereas seeing one would prove it. Beavers and

water voles have also been suggested to be what I saw and photographed, but the diminutive size of the latter and wide flat tail of the former have eliminated them to my satisfaction. Nutrias are about twice the size of muskrats, so all I really need to do is accurately estimate the size of what I have seen, which (in their current pond location) are clearly not otters, by head and body shape.

Birds? These have ranged from common small birds like wrens, through water birds (mallard ducks and possibly velvet scoters), crows or ravens, magpies, woodpeckers, the sound only of kingfishers, right up to the 11 herons I counted in the sky together this morning. Having only a 300mm lens for longest reach, I struggled both to focus and to shoot



Photo by the author

them. But I managed a few frames, one really sharp enough, and will try for more soon: panning, different lighting, wings motion-blurred. These heron images are crops of 24-megapixel frames, but they'll do. (Note to self: change the autofocus zone to a wider one, and the shooting mode from single shot to burst...). Birds are such quick movers!

I don't expect to have much luck at all shooting a kingfisher. I would need a much longer lens than 300mm, more like 1000, with a nice wide aperture to let in as much light as possible for a fast enough shutter speed to catch its zippy darts. Very expensive glass. Trust me, those kingfisher shots you see online are each one in a thousand images using top equipment.

Snails with a shell about the size of a large walnut are everywhere on the roads and paths.

Frogs I have only heard, one type with a loud croaking call and the other with a much sweeter chirp, as they call for mates. I have seen the odd splash, and never yet the live amphibian. But they forcefully make themselves known.

Pairs of white butterflies: you see how vague I am with species identification? This is the best I can do at the moment. Specialists will have to bring more precision.

The thing I am learning is that Dighomi Meadows, with all its tortured, dug-out and dumped-on landscape, both its more natural and stagnating man-made ponds,

is crawling and flying with all sorts of wildlife. Nature is saying, "Even here, where you humans have brought great pollution and spoilage, we can survive. You can find us here, either oblivious to your messes of garbage or clinging on in spite of them. If you stopped for a moment, you would hear and see us in the silence. And if you stayed away for just a little while, you would find that we have re-wilded the whole place, much more to our liking."

Some of what we humans have dumped here, especially the plastics, may last for decades or longer, hopefully not leaching too much into the land. The cement and metal will be less harmful if taking even longer to melt away. Glass? Millennia, easily, though it's nearly perfectly inert. Same for ceramics. There don't seem to be too many liquid chemicals, thank God. But the war between humanity at its trashy worst and nature at its best is ongoing in Dighomi Meadows. It's a reversible sacrilege, too: what we dumped, we can also commit to removing...

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

Hungary's Parliament Votes to Limit Rights of Dual Nationals and LGBTQ+ People



Hungarian police take a protester. Source: Getty Images

BY TEAM GT

Hungary's parliament has approved a series of constitutional amendments that curb the rights of LGBTQ+ individuals and dual nationals, drawing sharp criticism from human rights groups.

The government claims the changes are intended to protect children's

physical and moral development, granting it the authority to ban public LGBTQ+ gatherings, including Pride events.

Hundreds protested outside parliament as the bill passed with 140 votes in favor and 21 against. Activists called it a pivotal moment in Hungary's slide toward illiberalism.

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, whose ruling Fidesz party backed the amendments, previously warned of an "Easter cleanup" targeting his critics.

The legislation also allows the state to suspend the citizenship of dual nationals deemed threats to national security or sovereignty. Fidesz has framed this as a measure against foreign influence, singling out figures like Hungarian-American philanthropist George Soros.

These constitutional changes follow a recent law that banned LGBTQ+ Pride marches, which Orbán defended as necessary to shield children from "woke ideology."



Beka Jaiani and Kesaria Abramidze. Source: FB

Beka Jaiani, Accused of Murder of Transgender Kesaria Abramidze, Sentenced to Life

BY TEAM GT

The Tbilisi City Court, with Judge Nino Galustashvili presiding, found 26-year-old Beka Jaiani guilty on all charges related to the murder of 37-year-old transgender woman Kesaria Abramidze, and sentenced him to life imprisonment.

Judge Galustashvili fully granted the prosecutor's motion, convicting Jaiani of murder with particular cruelty on the basis of gender, and of systematic beat-

ings motivated by intolerance toward gender identity.

Jaiani did not attend the verdict announcement. Although he was scheduled to make a final statement, he sent a letter explaining that his absence was due to his psycho-emotional state and expressed regret for his actions. Despite partially admitting guilt, Jaiani did not dispute any of the charges.

He was charged under Article 109, Subsections "t" and "m," and Article 126, Part 1, Second Part of the Criminal Code of Georgia, offenses that carry a sentence of 16 to 20 years or life imprisonment.

Springtime for Resistance: Cinema as Civil Disobedience in DOCA Film Club's Radical Revival



Photo by the author

BY IVAN NECHAEV

After a months-long silence that mirrored Georgia's own uneasy winter — marked by protests against police brutality, disillusionment with electoral outcomes, and the freeze of Euro-integration hopes — the DOCA Film Club has reemerged with a quietly incendiary response: a documentary program titled Spring. But unlike the buds of spring in nature, this season's bloom comes not from warmth, but from pressure — the kind that builds up under regimes of surveillance, violence, climate despair, and ideological warfare.

DOCA's Spring is not just a screening series. It is a cultural intervention that interrogates the social architectures of power and resistance. These are not films that ask you to "watch and feel." They ask you to listen, question, and choose sides. From Beijing to Khartoum, from Tehran to the American Midwest — The DOCA Film Club's new program, fully subtitled in English, explores the anatomy of protest, trust, and transformation through the lens of global documentary filmmaking.

THE SPECTER OF SURVEILLANCE: "TOTAL TRUST" AND THE POST-PRIVATE WORLD

The Spring program officially began on April 14, 2025, with the screening of Zhang Jialing's *Total Trust* — a docu-

mentary that can only be described as a quiet detonation. The audience at Amirani Cinema watched in tense silence as the film peeled back the layers of modern authoritarianism, revealing the terrifying intimacy of digital control. The film does not rely on abstract warnings or distant predictions — it presents lived experience. We meet women whose every move is tracked; activists whose phones become instruments of harassment; citizens who wake up to find their digital social credit scores erased, their existence algorithmically undone. What *Total Trust* shows is that surveillance is not just a form of watching — it is a form of writing people into silence.

In many ways, the film functions like a cinematic companion to Zuboff's *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, but here, surveillance is not driven by consumerism — it is deeply state-driven, culturally normalized, and enforced with surgical precision. There is no place for error, no space for ambiguity. To dissent is not to speak against power; it is to disappear from the space of the visible.

Importantly, *Total Trust* does not stop at diagnosis. It also quietly documents micro-acts of resistance: encrypted conversations, clandestine support groups, and children being taught how to avoid facial recognition software. These are not dramatic protests. They are subtle refusals — the kind of disobedience James C. Scott called "the weapons of the weak." By opening the Spring program with this film, DOCA Film Club redefined the stakes. This is not merely a program about

injustice. It is about the architecture of modern control and the fragile infrastructures of resistance that still remain.

After the analytical and emotional weight of *Total Trust*, the remaining films in the Spring program will continue this exploration of how systems of power infiltrate the most intimate parts of life: from the family home to the protest camp, from legislative bodies to emotional relationships. Each Monday in May, the Spring series will continue to unfold like a political map of contemporary resistance: in France, *Monopoly of Violence* (May 12) asks whether the state can ever justify force; in Sudan, *Madaniya* (May 19) traces the hopeful rhythms of youth-led revolution. And in the upcoming American film *Evidence*, the battlefield becomes ideological, as dark money and family values collide in the most personal way imaginable.

DOMESTIC IDEOLOGIES: "EVIDENCE" AND THE LOGIC OF DARK MONEY

If *Total Trust* exposes external surveillance, *Evidence* (2025, USA) investigates internal colonization — how ideologies creep into family dynamics and personal identities. By connecting "dark money" politics to the beliefs of families and communities, this film offers a poignant reflection on what Antonio Gramsci called cultural hegemony — the invisible dominance of ruling-class ideologies over everyday life.

It's not just about billionaires buying elections. It's about how neoliberal indi-

vidualism and conservative values reframe care, kinship, and civic duty in the service of empire. Through an intimate lens, the film repositions American conservatism not as political preference but as a carefully engineered ecosystem.

PARANOIA AND PATRIARCHY: "THE SEED OF THE SACRED FIG" AND THE FRAGILITY OF POWER

Mohammad Rasoulof's *The Seed of the Sacred Fig* is a masterclass in portraying the corrosion of trust within the domestic space under political duress. Here, resistance is not only seen in the streets, but also within the walls of a Tehran household, where a father's moral and ideological collapse mirrors a nation's crisis of conscience.

Anthropologists studying Iran have long pointed to the family as a contested site between state and citizen. Rasoulof stages this beautifully: a judge begins to suspect his own daughters of betrayal, transforming the father into a miniature authoritarian. The loss of his weapon becomes a metaphor — he has lost control, and what remains is fear.

This is not only a story about Iran. It resonates with philosopher Michel Foucault's theories of bio-power: the regulation of life through institutions like the family, the court, and the state. When trust collapses within these structures, so too does the legitimacy of governance.

ECOLOGY OF PROTEST: "STICK TOGETHER" AND THE ETHICS OF CLIMATE RESISTANCE

Stick Together (Germany, 2023) trades talking heads for handheld honesty. By immersing us in the lives of climate activists, it offers an anthropology of modern protest: its exhaustion, its digital choreography, and its emotional labor.

The film implicitly dialogues with Bruno Latour's concept of "political ecology" — that climate change is not only about the planet, but about redefining democracy. These young activists are not just protecting trees. They are protesting an epistemology — the capitalist logic that renders ecosystems disposable.

Their resistance is embodied, nonlinear, and often improvisational. This is not the idealistic protest of 1968. This is protest in the age of burnout, where commitment is measured in court summons and collective therapy.

STATE VIOLENCE AND ITS MIRRORS: "MONOPOLY OF VIOLENCE" AND THE AMBIGUITY OF FORCE

David Dufresne's *Monopoly of Violence*

(France, 2020) poses a brutal question: Who polices the police? Through a nonlinear editing style that juxtaposes civilian and police testimonies and footage, the film problematizes Max Weber's classical definition of the state — as the entity with a legitimate monopoly on violence. But legitimacy, the film suggests, is not inherited. It is contested, narrated, and performed.

This film belongs in a tradition of European political thought that includes Jacques Rancière's concept of the "distribution of the sensible" — how the state determines what can be seen, heard, or counted as political. Here, the Yellow Vest protests become not just about wages or fuel prices, but about the right to appear as a political subject.

REVOLUTION AS REHEARSAL: "MADANIYA" AND THE DREAM OF CIVILIAN GOVERNMENT

In *Madaniya* (Sudan, 2024), we'll meet Django, Esra, and Mou'men — young people who remake resistance as creative labor. One organizes rap battles. Another leads workshops. A third mobilizes women in peripheral towns. They resist not through ideology, but through practice.

Here, the revolution is not a moment, but a process — a rehearsal of futures. Anthropologist Asef Bayat, writing on post-revolutionary Egypt, might call this "non-movements": the everyday practices of reclaiming space and time from authoritarianism. The Sudanese call it *Madaniya* — civilian rule. But in this film, it becomes something deeper: a cultural ethos, an insistence on pluralism, mutuality, and dignity.

FROM SPECTATORS TO PARTICIPANTS

DOCA's Spring is not asking its viewers to merely watch oppression unfold. It invites us to recognize that we, too, are implicated — as workers, citizens, parents, siblings, and data producers. These films are not stories from elsewhere. They are mirrors with subtitles. In a Georgian context, where the line between civic participation and political suppression is increasingly fraught, this program offers more than solidarity. It offers tools: aesthetic, ethical, and tactical. And in doing so, it restores one radical truth: resistance, before it becomes a movement, is an act of seeing.

The full program and tickets are available on the official websites of DOCA Film Club (<https://www.doca.ge/en/film-club>) and at Amirani Cinema.

Theater University Abruptly Shuts Down Temur Chkheidze's Workshop

BY MARIAM RAZMADZE

The Rector of the Shota Rustaveli Theater and Film University, Giorgi Shalutashvili, signed an order to shut down the Center for the Development of Contemporary Theatrical Art, also known as "Temur Chkheidze's Workshop."

The workshop, long considered a necessary space for innovation and mentorship in Georgian theater, now faces unforeseen closure, with no clear justification provided by the university.

Director Data Tavadze said the decision came right after the university's

board was restructured. "To close the workshop, Rector Shalutashvili rushed to appoint three new board members: directors Andro Enukidze, Giorgi Sikharulidze, and theater critic Gia Tskitishvili," Tavadze wrote on social media.

Gia Tskitishvili was named the chairman of the board during the same session. Without any explanation, he quickly announced the decision regarding the workshop.

The decision sparked backlash in Georgia's theater community. Revered director Temur Chkheidze, whose name the workshop carries, responded with a sharp statement: "No political or state formation can ever absolve a person of their conscience."

Ministry of Culture Dismisses Theater Director Davit Doiashvili

BY TEAM GT

The Ministry of Culture has dismissed director David Doiashvili from his position as the head of the Vaso Abashidze Music and Drama Theater. The decision comes as the theater and its troupe have played a prominent role in ongoing pro-European, anti-GD protests.

In an official statement, the Ministry of Culture cited ongoing concerns, noting that despite multiple warnings, the theater's management had failed to meet the obligations outlined in its founding mission. Additionally, the Ministry emphasized that the theater's creative activities have been at a standstill for several months.

The Ministry of Culture's statement reads:

"The Vaso Abashidze State Professional Music Comedy and Drama Theater is a legal entity of public law (LEPL) established by the state.

As a state professional theater, like any other LEPL, it is accountable and has a legal obligation to fulfill the objectives for which it was founded by the state.

Specifically, the theater's creative activity must be carried out continuously, just as it receives continuous funding from the state budget.

Despite multiple warnings from the Ministry of Culture of Georgia, unfortunately, the management of the Vaso Abashidze State Professional Music Comedy and Drama Theater failed to meet this foundational obligation. While the theater was receiving uninterrupted funding from the state budget, the creative process had been halted for months.

Therefore, as the founding body of the LEPL Vaso Abashidze Music and Drama Theater, the Ministry of Culture made a lawful decision to dismiss David Doiashvili, the individual responsible for the theater's continuous and proper functioning, from his position as director."

Since December 5, actor Andro Chichinadze has been in detention following his arrest during the pro-EU protests. In

response, the Vaso Abashidze Theater launched a strike and issued an ultimatum to the ruling Georgian Dream party, demanding Chichinadze's release by January 21 — a deadline that passed without any response.

On January 23, artists gathered at the theater to stage a symbolic performance and unveil a manifesto condemning Chichinadze's arrest. Theater director David Doiashvili announced that the institution would suspend its regular programming and upcoming productions, opting instead to tour across Georgia, meet with citizens, and advocate for freedom of expression. "Georgian culture is also imprisoned," he declared, standing in solidarity with the detained protesters. Since then, the theater has performed in numerous regions as part of its ongoing protest.

Doiashvili's recent dismissal has sparked swift backlash from artists, cultural figures, and civil society members, many of whom see the move as politically motivated. Supporters gathered outside the theater to express their solidarity with Doiashvili and protest the decision.

Architecture of Breath: Inside the Soundworld of the Sameba Chamber Choir

BY IVAN NECHAEV

In the small hall of the Rustaveli Theater, the air was heavy not with theatrical drama, but with something subtler, more ancient—an invocation. As the Patriarchal Chamber Choir of the Sameba Cathedral, under the direction of Svimon Jangulashvili, moved through a ‘Lamento’ program spanning the Renaissance to the contemporary, from the hallowed voices of Palestrina to the haunting landscapes of Giya Kancheli, the concert became more than a performance: it was an act of cultural and spiritual archeology, a sociological ritual, and an anthropological window into the enduring politics of the human voice.

Let us ask not what the audience heard, but what we witnessed: a reassembly of Europe’s sacred past, reimagined through Georgia’s unique choral identity. The program was a dialogue across centuries, languages, empires, and belief systems—a horizontal liturgy for a vertical age.

POLYPHONY AS POLITICS: FROM COUNCIL OF TRENT TO THE CAUCASUS

Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina, often mythologized as the composer who “saved church music” during the Counter-Reformation, emphasized the evening’s metaphysical inquiry. In the wake of the Council of Trent (1545–1563), Catholic liturgical music faced existential threat: deemed too elaborate and theatrical, polyphony risked suppression. Palestrina’s crystalline vocal architecture offered a compromise—complex enough to elevate, clear enough to sanctify. In this Tbilisi performance, his music was more than Renaissance revivalism; it was a reenactment of how institutions negotiate between order and expression.

This struggle for spiritual intelligibility echoed in Tomás Luis de Victoria and Thomas Tallis, whose music stood on opposite sides of Europe’s Reformation divide. Victoria, the Spanish mystic, wove a Catholic interiority that contrasted with Tallis’s English pragmatism under Queen Elizabeth I—a Protestant composer who nevertheless maintained Catholic sympathies. Their inclusion in the program was not mere historic sampling; it was a cultural diagnosis: Europe’s sacred choral tradition is not monolithic, but fractal, shaped by schism as much as synthesis.

THE POST-BAROQUE ECHO CHAMBER: MONTEVERDI, PURCELL, AND THE RISE OF INDIVIDUALISM

If Renaissance polyphony embodies collective devotion, the Baroque introduced affect, ornament, and the soloist. Claudio Monteverdi’s madrigal-inflected spirituality and Henry Purcell’s Anglican subtlety shifted the emphasis from sacred transcendence to emotional immediacy. In the Rustaveli Theater, this sonic transformation unfolded with a philosophical edge—offering a historiography of how the sacred became theatrical, and how theology yielded to psychology.

This was the century when the Enlightenment loomed and the subject emerged as a central actor in the moral universe. In anthropology, this maps onto a broader evolution—from ritual society to theat-



Photo by the author

rical society, from communal rites to aesthetic displays. When soprano Ana Palavandishvili soared above the ensemble, she wasn’t just singing a part of Dido; she was embodying a seismic civilizational shift: from choral collectivity to the individuated voice.

MODERNITY IN THE MINOR KEY: KANCHELI AND WHITACRE AS SPIRITUAL RESISTANCE

To leap from Purcell to Eric Whitacre is to traverse not just time but metaphysics. Whitacre’s postmodern choral works, infused with cluster chords, glacial pacing, and textural nuance, speak to our

atomized, digital world. His pieces are often described as “ambient sacred,” a descriptor that resonates with what anthropologist Victor Turner might call *communitas*—a liminal, collective space where structure dissolves, if briefly, into shared intensity.

But if Whitacre’s modern sacredness is gentle, Giya Kancheli’s is defiantly apocalyptic. A Georgian composer shaped by suppression and exile, Kancheli never wrote explicitly religious music, but his oeuvre is drenched in spiritual longing. In the performance of his choral works at this concert, one could hear echoes of trauma, memory, and moral rupture.

His dissonances are not musical accidents; they are ontological alarms.

It is in the works of Ioseb Kechakmadze and Zviad Bolkvadze that the concert found its most urgent cultural task. These Georgian composers do not merely imitate the Western sacred tradition; they respond to it.

THE CHOIR’S SIGNATURE: INTONATION, CLARITY, AND DISCIPLINE

What sets the Sameba Cathedral Chamber Choir apart is its approach to intonational purity and structural balance. The ensemble performs with an ear for

inner architecture—each voice is placed in relationship not only to pitch, but to spatial and spiritual orientation. This precision is particularly evident in the choir’s interpretations of early polyphony (Palestrina, Tallis, Victoria), where blend and harmonic transparency are essential.

The singers work with remarkable vocal restraint, particularly in sacred repertoire. Instead of romanticized dynamics or operatic projection, they offer a clear, focused tone, often with minimal vibrato—allowing vertical harmonies to ring without interference. This technique evokes Georgian traditional singing, where the physical properties of the voice are secondary to harmonic clarity and communal unity.

In performance, the choir functions like a single organic structure—an aural dome in which each line supports the whole. Whether navigating the luminous suspensions of Whitacre or the modal swells of Kancheli, the Sameba ensemble listens inwardly, shaping their collective sound with architectural intent. With soloists like Zviad Michilashvili, Tornike Papidze, and Irakli Tkvatseria stepping in and out of the collective fabric, the evening constantly negotiated between the communal and the personal, the ecclesial and the secular, the old and the unfolding.

SVIMON JANGULASHVILI: THE SILENT ARCHITECT

Artistic Director and conductor Svimon Jangulashvili is not a flamboyant figure on the podium. His gestures are minimal, almost ascetic, but carry extraordinary clarity. He does not sculpt the sound from the outside; rather, he appears to unlock it from within the ensemble.

Jangulashvili’s background—deeply embedded in the ecclesiastical tradition, yet informed by Western choral scholarship—makes him uniquely suited to a repertoire that spans both Orthodox chant and European sacred polyphony. He is known among colleagues for his precise ear, his exacting rehearsal standards, and his insistence on musical integrity over surface affect.

Under his leadership, the choir has developed an approach that prioritizes listening over projecting, structure over emotion, and intentional silence over embellishment. His programming choices—such as combining Whitacre with Monteverdi, or Bolkvadze with Victoria—are never random juxtapositions, but crafted dialogues between spiritual epochs.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO LAMENT TOGETHER TODAY?

In an age of political turmoil, algorithmic individualism and cultural fragmentation, to sing together—especially sacred music from diverse times and geographies—is a radical act. The concert at the Rustaveli Theater was not merely a celebration of musical beauty; it was a statement: that in a world of noise, harmony still matters. That in a world of borders, polyphony transcends.

In Palestrina, we heard the birth of sonic clarity amid dogma. In Whitacre, the weightless yearning of the digital soul. In Kancheli and the Georgian composers, the choral tradition becomes a vessel not of answers, but of questions.

And maybe that is what choral music, at its best, does: it stages the eternal conversation between heaven and earth—not as resolution, but as resonance.



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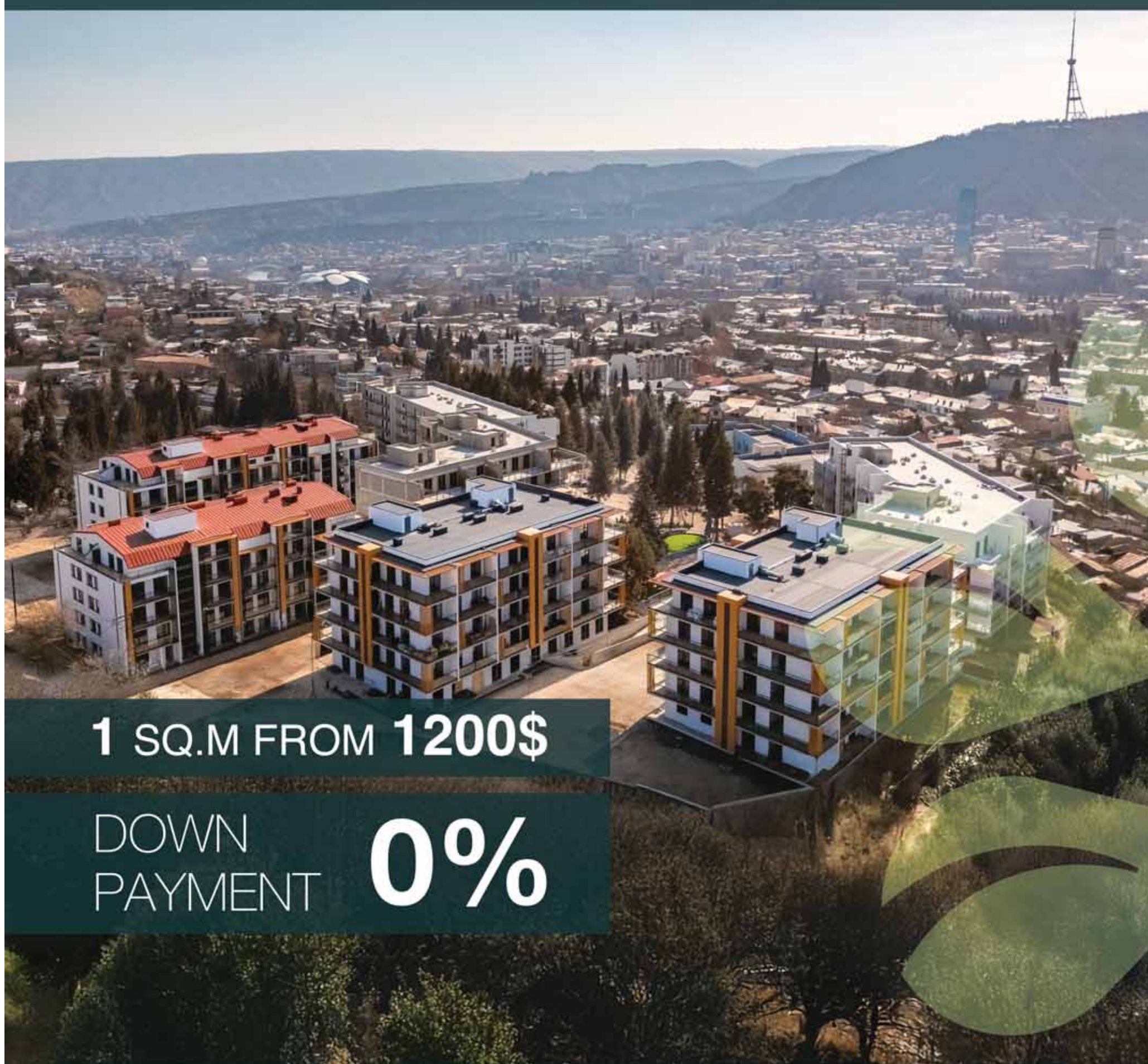
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