



Strategic Allies, Silent Rivals: Dr. Soren Urbansky On What Lies Beneath the China-Russia Partnership

INTERVIEW BY VAZHA TAVBERIDZE

There cannot be friendship if there's a hierarchy. Friends are equals. And there is a rapidly growing asymmetry in the relationship between China and Russia, and both sides know it, - says Professor Sören Urbansky, historian at the Ruhr University Bochum and global fellow at the Wilson Center in Washington, D.C. He is the co-author of Distant Neighbors: A Concise History of Sino-Russian Relations (Suhrkamp, 2025), which traces the complex interactions between the two countries over four centuries.

In the interview with RFE/RL's Georgian Service, Dr. Urbansky discusses why the "No Limits" partnership between Beijing and Moscow

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Dr. Soren Urbansky. Source: news.rub.de

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Prepared for Georgia Today Business by

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CREATING OPPORTUNITIES

Markets				As of 21-May-2025			
BONDS				STOCKS			
	Price	w/w	m/m		Price	w/w	m/m
GEORG 04/26	96.36 (YTM 6.93%)	+0.2%	+0.8%	Lion Finance Group (BGEO LN)	GBP 64.95	-3.8%	+20.7%
GRAIL 06/28	99.03 (YTM 6.11%)	+0.1%	+0.9%	Georgia Capital (CGEO LN)	GBP 19.00	+4.6%	+36.5%
GEORG 9 1/2 PERP	99.06 (YTM 9.47%)	-0.0%	+0.4%	TBC Bank Group (TBCG LN)	GBP 45.05	-2.7%	+5.3%
SILNET 01/27	101.08 (YTM 7.67%)	-0.0%	+0.3%				
TBC 8.894 PERP	97.39 (YTM 11.63%)	+0.1%	+0.7%	COMMODITIES			
TBC 10 1/4 PERP	99.09 (YTM 10.04%)	+0.3%	+2.0%	Crude Oil, Brent (US\$/bbl)	64.91	-1.8%	-2.0%
				Gold Spot (US\$/OZ)	3 314.96	+4.3%	-3.2%
INDICES				CURRENCIES			
	Price	w/w	m/m		Price	w/w	m/m
SP 500	5 844.61	-0.8%	+13.3%	USD / GEL	2,7360	-0.2%	-0.4%
FTSE 250	20 949.67	+0.6%	+8.6%	EUR / GEL	3,0998	+1.2%	-2.0%
DOW JONES 30	41 860.44	-0.5%	+9.7%	GBP / GEL	3,6707	+1.0%	-0.1%
Russell 2000	2 046.56	-1.8%	+11.2%	EUR / USD	1,1331	+1.4%	-1.6%
FTSE 100	8 786.46	+2.3%	+6.2%	GBP / USD	1,3420	+1.2%	+0.3%



PM Kobakhidze with Mayor Kaladze. Source: gov.ge

Kobakhidze Highlights Urban Growth as New Tbilisi Tunnel Opens

BY MARIAM RAZMADZE

Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze praised Tbilisi's development under Mayor Kakha Kaladze, calling the capital "significantly more developed, greener, and more beautiful" than it was eight years ago.

"The transformation is undeniable," Kobakhidze said at the official opening of a new tunnel linking University and Kavtaradze streets. "Today, our capital is far more developed, greener, and more beautiful. This progress is, above all, the result of the mayor's dedicated leadership."

The Prime Minister pointed out several primary infrastructure projects, including the recently completed Bagebi bridge,

which he said has already improved walking in the area. He said that such developments go beyond transportation, also contributing to the creation of public spaces that enhance residents' quality of life.

"Projects like these help develop well-designed public spaces across the city," he said. "We all see how our capital is developing daily, becoming more beautiful and vibrant, which fills us with pride."

Looking ahead, Kobakhidze expressed confidence in Kaladze's vision for the city. "He has ambitious plans for the next four years, and I believe many more projects will transform Tbilisi into an even more developed, greener, and more beautiful city."

He concluded by thanking everyone involved in the city's development, particularly the mayor. "Once again, I extend my heartfelt gratitude to him."

Tbilisi City Hall Plans to Dismantle "Rike Jars"

BY TEAM GT

Tbilisi City Hall has announced plans to dismantle the so-called "Rike Jars," the twin glass-and-steel structures located in Rike Park, near the Bridge of Peace. Mayor Kakha Kaladze described the buildings as "dysfunctional" and "untidy," stating they do not align with the city's urban development goals. He emphasized the need for a new project of similar scale that would be both functional and aesthetically fitting for the area.

Kaladze mentioned that while the exact nature of the replacement project is yet to be determined, possibilities include constructing a hotel. He clarified that the new development would occupy the same footprint as the current structures, rather than expanding into new territory.



The Rike Jars. Source: FB

The Rike Jars, also known as the Rike Concert Hall and Exhibition Center, were part of a series of modern architectural projects initiated in the early 2010s. Despite their distinctive design, the buildings have remained largely unused,

leading to public criticism and debates over their role in Tbilisi's urban landscape.

City Hall has not yet provided a timeline for the demolition or details about the forthcoming project.

EU Steps in with €5.5 Million for RFE/RL After Trump Cuts US funding

BY MARIAM RAZMADZE

US President Donald Trump's administration accused Radio Free Europe of promoting a liberal bias and labeled its content as 'propaganda' when it cut funding. Photo: David W Cerny/Reuters.

After President Donald Trump's decision to halt federal funding to Radio

Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), the European Union will provide EUR 5.5 million to the outlet.

Announced on Tuesday by EU foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas, the decision is seen as a strategic move to support independent journalism in regions where press freedom is under threat. "This support comes at a crucial time," Kallas stated, pointing out the outlet's role in delivering "reliable information in countries where it's needed most."

In March, Trump ordered the termination of U.S. grants to RFE/RL in the

scope of broader efforts to shrink government spending. The move was met with sharp criticism from media freedom advocates who warned that cutting off funds could undermine one of the few credible news sources available in authoritarian regimes.

The EU's intervention shows growing concern in Europe over the global decline in media freedom and disinformation. Kallas emphasized that "independent journalism is a cornerstone of democracy," and that the EU "will not let such vital institutions be weakened."

Efes Special Continues to Support the Restoration of Georgia's Forests



Memorandum signed between EFES Georgia and the National Forestry Agency

BY THE EFES GEORGIA TEAM

A new Memorandum of Cooperation was signed between EFES Georgia and the National Forestry Agency of Georgia. As part of the

agreement, Efes Special will continue its commitment to Georgia's forests in collaboration with the agency in 2025. Efes Special will support the restoration and care of up to 3,000 sq. meters of forest near Jvari Monastery in the Mtskheta Forest District. As part of the project, the existing ecosystem will be restored, and a new green recreational space will

be created near the capital. This area will include 25,306 newly planted trees, which will produce approximately 1,226.4 tons of oxygen.

In addition, Efes Special's communication is fully aligned with its green mission. With a simple scan of the QR code on the bottle, consumers are invited to explore the Forest Friend platform, con-

tribute through a donation, and become active supporters of forest conservation.

EFES Georgia was the first company to join the volunteer program Forest Friend, dedicated to caring for Georgia's forests, in 2023. As part of its corporate responsibility, the Efes Special brand started taking care of the renewal of a 12-hectare forest in the Simonianthkevi quarter of the Tianeti Forest District and taking measures to promote natural forest regeneration in the same year. Employees of the company, together with representatives of the National Forestry Agency and volunteers, participated in the tree-planting activity. They first cleared the area and then planted the trees. As a result, 36,000 trees will grow and greenhouse gas emissions will be reduced. It is important that EFES Georgia will also take care of the long-term

maintenance of the restored area within the framework of the program.

Efes Special is a special beer series crafted using special brewing techniques. Through long brewing, cold filtering, and careful cultivation, the beverage gains a delicate and smooth flavor. With its distinctive packaging, delightful taste, and light color, this beer promises a new experience for consumers.

Join us and become a Forest Friend together with Efes Special!

Forest Friend was established to unite the public around the care, maintenance, and restoration of Georgia's forests. The initiative was developed with financial support from the UNDP Biodiversity Finance Initiative (BIOFIN), and its main partner is the National Forestry Agency of Georgia.

See you in our restored forest!



Ukraine Latest: Zelensky Reveals ‘Significant’ Russian Losses in Kursk, Trump Tells European Leaders Putin Won’t End Ukraine War

COMPILED BY ANA DUMBADZE

US President Donald Trump has privately acknowledged that Russian President Vladimir Putin has no intention of ending the war in Ukraine, reportedly telling European leaders that Putin believes he's currently winning. The comment, first reported by The Washington Post, was made during a private call on Monday with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, French President Emmanuel Macron, German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen.

The admission marks a shift in Trump's stance. Until now, he has publicly insisted that Putin wants peace. While this recent statement suggests Trump may now recognize that Putin is not ready to end the conflict, it did not lead him to adopt the tougher approach that European leaders, and Zelensky, had hoped for.

ZELENSKY REVEALS ‘SIGNIFICANT’ RUSSIAN LOSSES IN KURSK, SAYS FIGHT CONTINUES

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky says Russia has suffered more than 63,000 casualties in Kursk and that Ukrainian operations there continue, hours after Vladimir Putin made a surprise visit to the region.

“Since the start of the Kursk operation in August, the Russian army has suffered significant losses—more than 63,000 killed and wounded in that area alone,” Zelensky said in his nightly address.

Ukrainian forces made a surprise incursion into Kursk in August 2024, in one of their biggest battlefield successes in the more than three-year war. The incur-

sion marked the first time Russian territory was occupied by an invader since the Second World War and dealt a humiliating blow to the Kremlin.

Earlier, Putin staged a visit to inspect the nuclear plant in Kursk—his first trip since Russian forces claimed they had ejected Ukrainian troops from the area last month. He met volunteers as well as acting local governor Alexander Khinshtein, and toured a nearby nuclear power plant, state media reported.

Zelensky rejected that claim again last night, stating that fighting continues in two Russian regions—Kursk and Belgorod. His comments followed Russia's announcement that it had faced an unprecedented attack from more than 370 Ukrainian drones, including almost two dozen approaching Moscow.

Officials said airports serving the Russian capital were briefly closed to ensure the safety of flights, but there were no reports of casualties.

Ukraine's military partially claimed responsibility and confirmed it had struck the Bolkhov semiconductor plant in Oryol Oblast overnight.

MOST INTENSE FIGHTING IN UKRAINE’S EASTERN DONETSK REGION, SAYS ZELENSKY

The heaviest frontline battles remain in the Pokrovsk region of Ukraine's eastern Donetsk, President Zelensky has said.

“Russian assault operations continue, and our forces maintain all necessary combat activity,” he said in his nightly address.

“The most intense situation remains in the Donetsk region, particularly in the Pokrovsk direction.”

He added that operations are ongoing in Russia's two regions of Kursk and Belgorod, which border Ukraine's northeast. “This is our active and effective defense of the Sumy and Kharkiv regions,” the president added, referring to Ukraine's



President Zelensky. Source: UKRAINIAN PRESIDENTIAL PRESS SERVICE

northeastern territories.

Pokrovsk, a small city with a prewar population of 60,000, has appeared to be the jewel of Russia's creeping advance in the east for more than a year. Ukraine has heavily fortified the area.

MULTIPLE DRONES HEADED FOR MOSCOW DOWNED, SAYS RUSSIA

Multiple drones headed for Moscow have been shot down, according to Mayor Sergei Sobyenin.

The Russian Defense Ministry said it shot down 105 Ukrainian drones over Russian regions, including dozens heading toward Moscow.

Russia only reports the drones that it destroys and does not disclose the total number of drones targeting the country, or how many reach their targets.

The previous day, Russia said it had shot down well over 300 Ukrainian drones.

SIX UKRAINIAN SOLDIERS KILLED IN RUSSIAN STRIKE ON TRAINING EXERCISE

A Russian missile strike on a training exercise in Ukraine's Sumy border region

has killed six servicemen and wounded more than 10 others, according to Ukraine's National Guard.

Russia's Defense Ministry had earlier released a video purporting to show an Iskander missile attack on a training camp, and state news agency TASS claimed up to 70 people had died.

The Sumy region has come under repeated bombardment, and Ukraine launched a months-long occupation of part of Russia's neighboring Kursk region from there.

The Ukrainian military said the aim of the offensive was to help create a buffer zone to protect Sumy, though some have raised concerns about the scale of military losses.

DIPLOMATIC EFFORTS AND PEACE TALKS

Donald Trump has reportedly told European leaders during a private phone call that Russian President Vladimir Putin is unwilling to end the war in Ukraine because he believes he's currently winning. The acknowledgement from Trump came during a Monday call with European leaders, including Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, French President Emmanuel Macron, German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, according to a report by The Washington Post.

Hopes of an imminent ceasefire in the war are fading, despite low-level talks between Ukraine and Russia in Istanbul last Friday.

Although US President Donald Trump suggested the Vatican might mediate further talks, the Vatican said the idea of hosting—or even mediating—talks was more of a hope than a concrete plan.

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio said he expected Russia to present its “broad terms that would allow us to move

towards a ceasefire.” However, Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky has said Russia is merely “trying to buy time in order to continue its war and occupation.”

On May 19, President Trump announced that Russia and Ukraine would “immediately” commence ceasefire negotiations following a two-hour phone call with Putin. Trump described the conversation as having gone “very well” and expressed optimism about ending the ongoing war.

However, the Kremlin tempered expectations. Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov stated that while Russia is open to discussing a peace memorandum with Ukraine, no specific timeline has been established for the talks. Putin emphasized the need to address the “root causes” of the conflict, including Ukraine's military status and its relationship with NATO.

Volodymyr Zelensky reiterated Ukraine's readiness for an unconditional ceasefire and called for increased global pressure on Russia to pursue genuine peace. He also expressed willingness to meet Putin in a neutral location, such as the Vatican, which has offered to host the talks.

INTERNATIONAL RESPONSES AND SANCTIONS

In response to ongoing aggression, the European Union and the United Kingdom imposed new sanctions on Russia, targeting its shadow oil fleet and military-industrial complex. Ukraine plans to push the EU for more aggressive measures, especially as the U.S. shows reluctance to take further action. The G7 finance ministers convened in Canada to reaffirm support for Ukraine.

Furthermore, Iran's parliament ratified a 20-year strategic partnership with Russia, deepening defense and economic ties between the two nations.

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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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Strategic Allies, Silent Rivals: Dr. Soren Urbansky On What Lies Beneath the China-Russia Partnership

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is built more on convenience than lasting trust. He highlights the growing asymmetry between the two countries, diverging interests in Ukraine, the Arctic, and Central Asia, and longstanding historical tensions, among other things, addressing what China's increasing role means for Russia's traditional sphere of influence – including Georgia.

LET'S BEGIN WITH THIS MARRIAGE OF CONVENIENCE THAT CHINA AND RUSSIA HAVE GOING ON – WHAT FOUNDATIONS IS IT BUILT ON?

At the moment, there is a great deal of strategic interest overlap on both sides: they both see the United States as their main opponent. They both oppose the liberal post-World War order, seeing themselves as belonging more to an imperial model based on spheres of influence. They both have their Near Abroad, to use the Russian term: in the Chinese case, it's Taiwan and the South China Sea; in the Russian case, Ukraine and the rest of the post-Soviet space. Economically, the relationship is mutually beneficial – Russia, since the full-scale invasion, is heavily dependent on China for nearly everything it can no longer get from the West, be it cars, dual-use goods, machinery, and so forth. Meanwhile, China profits from lower prices of raw materials and has more leverage in negotiations with Russia than ever before.

HOW STRONG IS THIS BOND? THE MUCH-VAUNTED “NO LIMITS PARTNERSHIP” BETWEEN CHINA AND RUSSIA – ARE THERE TRULY NO LIMITS IN THIS PARTNERSHIP?

The short answer is no – this “No Limits” partnership has many limits. Both sides want to portray it as such, but there are certain areas where they are bound to experience friction in the long run. One of the main ones, interestingly, is the eventual outcome of the Ukraine war – the ongoing conflict benefits China in many ways, not least because it ties up the American military in Europe. And while Russia wants the Americans out of Europe, China doesn't.

The second significant point of difference would be the Arctic. China portrays itself as an Arctic neighbor. Now, if you look at the globe, there is scarce geographical evidence to support this claim. Meanwhile, Russia sees the Northeast Sea Passage as its exclusive sphere of influence, including all the raw materials there. In this context, Donald Trump's desire to “buy” Greenland becomes somewhat understandable – it's a move aimed not only against Russia but also against China.

Another area of potential discord is Central Asia. Since the end of the Soviet Union, there has been a sort of gentleman's agreement between China and



Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping meet in February 2022. Photo by Aleksey Druzhinin/Kremlin/Reuters

Russia: China could invest economically in the region, while Russia would retain military control and clout. But now, China is not only the largest trading partner of all five Central Asian countries, it is also slowly expanding militarily. It's starting with the weakest link, both economically and geopolitically – Tajikistan – which is, from the Chinese perspective, one of, if not the most crucial of the five, as it borders Afghanistan and is a direct neighbor of China. So you now have military or quasi-military bases built by China, officially staffed by Tajik soldiers – but there's also a Chinese military and police presence there. China is testing the waters with Russia, in a way.

Then there are matters of historical legacies – or rather, claims that arise from them. While the entire debate about Taiwan in China is framed as the last piece of the jigsaw in restoring “One Great China,” if you look at historical maps, and have a quiet chat with Chinese politicians or historians, they will tell you: “Of course, Siberia – or the Russian Far East – was also taken from us by Russia, less than 200 years ago.” That's far from ancient history. I'm not saying China will annex Siberia tomorrow. This will not happen – Russia is a nuclear power. But China will try to gain more influence in that region. If you look at past moments of cordial relations between China and Russia, they turned cold very quickly, and old historical rivalries resurfaced. So for now, both sides are playing nice – because it's convenient and worth it. For now.

HOW LONG DO YOU EXPECT THAT “NOW” TO LAST?

I think the big problem is the growing asymmetry in this relationship. There cannot be friendship if there's a hierarchy. Friends are equals. And of course, on the surface – if you look at the TV coverage or the photos – it's always presented as very equal. Putin always gets a red carpet in Beijing. But behind closed doors, there is a rapidly growing asym-

metry in the relationship, which is keenly felt by Russian politicians, government officials, and so on.

SO RUSSIA, ALWAYS BENT ON BEING THE BIGGER BROTHER TO EVERYONE, IS TURNING INTO THE YOUNGER BROTHER.

Precisely. And it's an open secret – everybody in Russia and in China understands who is the elder and who is the younger brother. Had Putin actually succeeded in Ukraine with his initial plans, his position would have become stronger toward China as well. But the exact opposite happened. Russia and Putin have become dependent on China, and this asymmetry is growing. China's long-term plans – of becoming either the sole world power or at the very least having the US as its only peer – don't involve Russia as an equal. So they will have to find a new kind of arrangement and framework.

SPEAKING OF THE US AND THE POSSIBILITIES FOR NEW FRAMEWORKS – WHAT DO YOU MAKE OF WHAT'S BEEN TERMED “REVERSE KISSINGER,” I.E., THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION'S ATTEMPT TO DECOUPLE CHINA AND RUSSIA? CAN IT WORK?

No, it won't. And I don't think the historical parallel with Kissinger really works either. It's just not a good comparison, for the simple reason that when Kissinger traveled to Beijing, China and the Soviet Union had already clashed – three years earlier. Right now, we have a very strong China-Russia relationship. So the timing isn't right. I just don't see, in the near future, a split between Beijing and Moscow that would allow Washington to drive a wedge between them.

IT'S OBVIOUS THAT THERE IS A STRONG PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE TWO LEADERS, PUTIN AND XI. BUT A GREAT ALLIANCE

BETWEEN TWO GREAT COUNTRIES SHOULD BE ABLE TO SURVIVE ITS LEADERS, RIGHT? DOES THEIR FRIENDSHIP EXTEND TO THEIR NATIONS?

If we look back into the past – as any historian would – there were periods of similarly strong strategic interest overlap, but it didn't necessarily lead to long-lasting kinship between the two nations. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, especially in shared border regions, there was a sizable Russian diaspora in China and a huge Chinese community in the Soviet Far East. So there were everyday encounters. But these were dismantled in the early 20th century, for various reasons, including Stalin's forced deportations.

One very telling example of the lingering distance: China and Russia now share a border of 4,000 kilometers. Of that, 2,000 kilometers follow the Amur River. And yet, there are only two bridges across the Amur River. The Chinese offered to build more. The Russians said, “Thank you. Spasibo, ne nado.” So to this day, there are just two bridges. Even if both countries continue moving closer politically, there is still a long way to go before their peoples start holding hands. Especially with the growing asymmetry, the Chinese increasingly view Russia as a backward country.

WHAT DOES CHINA'S INCREASED PRESENCE MEAN FOR RUSSIA'S NEAR ABROAD? IN GEORGIA, WE'VE KEENLY FELT CHINA BECOMING MORE PROMINENT. IS IT DOUBLE THE TROUBLE OR A CHANCE TO COUNTERBALANCE THE TWO GREAT POWERS AGAINST EACH OTHER?

A bit of both, I would say. In a way, that's what Mongolia has done – or has had to do – for a long time. Mongolia was never part of the Soviet Union, but it was a Soviet satellite. Before that, it had been part of the Chinese Empire. Since its

The Chinese increasingly view Russia as a backward country

independence, it's played a double game. It wants to maintain equally good relations with both countries and also include Western powers – Japan, Canada, the US – especially in sectors like mining.

HAS IT BEEN SUCCESSFUL IN THIS JUGGLING ACT?

Well, it has been successful in the sense that, you know, neither Russia nor China has annexed it yet. So it's at least nominally independent.

IS THAT A HIGH BAR TO CLEAR?

That's the question, isn't it? Such a high bar. But of course, the game in Central Asia and the Caucasus is different, since Russia – as you rightly pointed out – regards these countries as its historical sphere of influence, not just from Soviet times, but also from the Russian Imperial era. And yet we see that there has been no official reaction from Russia so far – which again demonstrates the extent of the asymmetry between the two sides. Russia has remained silent. How far China can go before Russia feels it has no choice but to speak out or react is hard to say. So in that sense, it creates unease in Moscow, but also opportunity in the capitals of those countries. To a certain degree – and with caution – one could try to play Moscow and Beijing against each other. So in a way, yes, it's also an opportunity for these countries. But in the long term, it may prepare the ground for a new area of conflict between China and Moscow.

One could try to play Moscow and Beijing against each other... but in the long term, it may prepare the ground for a new area of conflict between them

Role of Cultural Values in the Peace Process

OP-ED BY NUGZAR B. RUHADZE

The United States President Dwight Eisenhower once said: “Indeed, I think that people want peace so much that one of these days governments had better get out of their way and let them have it.” Wow! Aren’t these words by one of the greatest politicians of the 20th century the most meticulous reflection of what the current administration of this nation is doing in real life? Yes, the government of Sakartvelo has truly bent over backwards to maintain peace in this land, even when the flames of war seemed dangerously imminent.

On the other hand, peace cannot happen without certain prerequisites that must be included in the process. Governmental effort is one thing—but naturally existing conditions and preconditions, such as cultural and ideological structures, are something entirely different. These can be identified as the characteristic features of a given society, tending to suggest a particular model of peaceful conduct. This includes values, beliefs, attitudes, and officially perpetuated societal and institutional patterns that favor peaceful existence in general, and conflict resolution efforts and skills in particular.

With all that in place, it becomes not only imaginable but also achievable to handle differences between conflicting parties—openly and unrestrainedly sharing peace-oriented resources with one another. Ignoring the impact of ideology on the peace process and its substantial components can be catastrophic for any society and its government. Such denial



The Georgian flag at a peaceful protest. Image source: Reuters

may negatively influence a potential peace agreement and jeopardize the prospect of peacebuilding efforts.

It is generally accepted that leftist, reformist, and progressive regimes tend to have a sharper inclination toward instigating peace arrangements than rightist, traditionalist, and conservative administrations. Yet, this notion could be debated in the case of Georgia’s current government. Judging by its cultural stance, real-time behavior, and the ideology it is poised to implement, one might conclude otherwise. Despite its being traditionally oriented, it is hard not to feel grateful for everything this government has undertaken to keep the country steady and resolute on the complicated path of building and upholding a peace process—even as flimsy and fragile as it may seem.

On the other hand, exaggerated cultural and ideological grandiloquence could place the participants in the peace process in a state of limbo. It may serve as an obstacle on the thorny road to peace,

harboring the latent power to ignite new rounds of violence—something that has not always been easy to avoid in the country’s recent history.

Therefore, if the cultural and ideological strengths we possess as a nation can contribute positively to keeping our peace-loving people out of harm’s way, those merits must be upheld and utilized to the utmost of our national ability—so that we may survive. Doubts are high, and fears are real, that the well-constructed but precarious peace process in this land can be maintained solely through cultural and ideological means. Ignoring the powerful and ever-present geopolitical and strategic variables would be unwise. Yet, one thing is certain: the cherished environment of peace—so essential for future development—will never be sustained without our people’s and leaders’ spiritual balance and cultural dedication to the ongoing peace process. This must come in addition to political acumen, diplomatic skill, and relevant educational assets.

Rubio Confirms US Reviewing Possible Measures against Georgian Dream amid Rising Tensions

BY TEAM GT

During a House Foreign Affairs Committee hearing this week, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio confirmed that Washington is actively reviewing potential measures against Georgia’s ruling party, Georgian Dream, although no official decisions have been made. His comments came in response to pointed criticism from Congressman Joe Wilson, who labeled Georgian Dream an “anti-American regime.”

“That is something that’s being discussed,” Rubio said, acknowledging that the situation is under active consideration. He stressed that any action would be guided by US national interests, adding: “We will look at that and say, is it our national interest to have an anti-American government governing an important part of the world? And if not, we’ll take appropriate actions to impose costs on that government.”

Congressman Wilson accused the Georgian government of a range of offenses, including election manipulation, criminalizing pro-US affiliations, undermining American businesses, obstructing trade through the Middle Corridor, and cooperating with the Chinese Communist Party. He cited a recent Rondeli Foundation report on Chinese influence in Georgia and praised the ongoing pro-Western demonstrations, where protesters have waved American flags and displayed posters of the US president.



US Secretary of State Marco Rubio. Source: FB

Rubio reiterated that the US is closely monitoring developments in Georgia, and that decisions will be informed by guidance from regional experts and the US diplomatic mission on the ground. These inputs, he said, would help determine what forms of pressure the Georgian government might be most responsive to.

In response, Georgian Dream Foreign Minister Maka Bochorishvili dismissed the hearing’s discussion as lacking any clear or official stance on Georgia. She emphasized that the conversation primarily reinforced that US foreign policy is driven by its own national interests.

“The only conclusion we can draw from today’s response is that there is no defined stance regarding Georgia—particularly in discussions framed around US national interests,” Bochorishvili stated, referencing Rubio’s remarks.

She also sharply criticized Congressman Wilson’s comments, describing them as “entirely disinformative” and detached from reality. “Before analyzing Rubio’s response, we must first examine how the question was posed. Joe Wilson, whose views are familiar to us, based his comments on a narrative full of misinformation. Every statement about Georgia was misleading and inaccurate,” she told Rustavi 2.

Bochorishvili rejected the notion that the Georgian government is anti-American, asserting that its policies remain aligned with the values and priorities of the current US administration. “When evaluating Rubio’s remarks, the full context of the hearing must be considered—what was being discussed and emphasized,” she said.

Happenings at Sheraton

- **Sheraton Garden Party:** Every Saturday, from 2 PM to 5 PM at Craft House Garden Terrace from May 24th.
- **P’auza Spa:** Book any treatment of your choice and receive a complimentary voucher for Garden Party.
- **P’auza Spa:** Get summer-ready – book any Hammam treatment and enjoy a complimentary 30-minute facial treatment.
- **Craft House Terrace Grand Opening:** Join us for live jazz, BBQ on the terrace, and beer on May 17th, from 4 PM to 7 PM.
- **Georgian Experience:** Enjoy a buffet-style Georgian dinner with wine selection, soft drinks, and live music at Feast, on May 24th.
- **After-Work Cocktails at ATI Rooftop:** Unwind with after-work cocktails and spectacular views of Old Tbilisi, enjoy 50% off for cocktails every Friday from 6 PM to 8 PM.
- **Saturday Night Vibes at ATI:** Chill beats, smooth grooves, and delicious tapas set the mood – every Saturday from 10 PM to 1 AM.

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Ekaterine Jikidze. Source: Guide of Georgia

FEATURE BY EKATERINE
JIKIDZE, DIRECTOR OF
GUIDE OF GEORGIA LLC

As the global tourism landscape shifts towards meaningful experiences and sustainability, Georgia finds itself at a critical inflection point. Long regarded for its dramatic landscapes and rich traditions, our nation is now gaining recognition not just as a destination—but as a story worth telling. At the heart of that story is a growing inbound tourism movement, one I've had the privilege of helping shape since the early days of my career.

Through my work as the founder and director of Guide of Georgia LLC, I have focused on building a bridge between Georgia and the world—particularly with underserved, high-potential markets. Our vision is clear: create culturally

sensitive, sustainable, and personalized travel experiences that deepen international appreciation for Georgia while ensuring benefits flow back to our local communities.

THE FIRST TO OPEN THE GATE: BRINGING ARAB AND INDIAN TOURISTS TO GEORGIA

When I entered the tourism sector, Georgia had not yet tapped into the massive potential of inbound travel from the Arab Gulf and South Asia. Recognizing a gap in the market, I pioneered tailored services that catered to the unique cultural and logistical needs of travelers from the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, and India.

From offering Arabic-speaking guides and halal-certified dining to organizing private family tours and luxury wellness getaways, our approach was not transactional—it was transformational. We became the first tour operator in Georgia to focus strategically on these regions,

Reshaping Inbound Tourism in Georgia through Sustainability, Innovation, and Cultural Diplomacy

leading to a dramatic shift in the industry. Airlines added direct routes, hotels upgraded amenities, and government agencies began exploring diplomatic and economic ties with these countries.

Today, Arab and Indian travelers are among the most valuable visitor segments to Georgia, and I'm proud that our work helped lay the foundation for that evolution.

INBOUND TOURISM AS CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

What distinguishes our work is a deep understanding that tourism is not just an economic activity—it is cultural diplomacy in motion. Every guest who visits Georgia returns home with a new understanding of our values, history, and people. By curating authentic, respectful experiences, we turn tourists into storytellers, clients into ambassadors.

A prime example of this was our 2017 hosting of the former Prime Minister of Jordan and his family. Their genuine admiration for Georgia's cleanliness, hospitality, and serenity affirmed what I already knew: inbound tourism is one of the most effective soft power tools available to any nation.

SUSTAINABILITY AND COMMUNITY IMPACT AT THE CORE

As the tourism sector grows, so does our responsibility. Our model goes beyond logistics—we work with local artisans, eco-lodges, family-owned restaurants, and regional guides to ensure that tourism benefits every level of society. In rural areas like Svaneti and Racha, we have created bespoke packages that emphasize heritage preservation, local

storytelling, and environmentally conscious travel.

We also educate travelers on responsible tourism, emphasizing minimal impact and maximum respect. From introducing reusable welcome kits to promoting off-season travel, we are actively shaping tourism behavior in a way that protects Georgia's natural and cultural resources.

AWARD-WINNING LEADERSHIP ON THE GLOBAL STAGE

My contributions to inbound tourism have been internationally recognized. In recent years, I have received several global honors, including:

- Best Inbound Tour Operator 2023 – Golden Tree Awards, Dubai
- Award for Excellence in Service 2024 – Travel and Hospitality Awards, London
- Global Recognition Award for Leadership 2024 – Dubai
- Leader of the Year 2023 – Swiss Rating Association & National Business Rating, Georgia
- Tailor-made company of the year in Georgia 2025 – Travel and Hospitality Awards, London

CHAMPIONING FEMALE ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

As a female entrepreneur in a traditionally male-dominated industry, I've made it a personal mission to uplift other women in tourism. My co-authored academic research on female entrepreneurship and marriage explores how women balance business leadership with societal expectations—highlighting the challenges and triumphs we face.

Furthermore, I frequently speak at

international tourism forums and serve as a mentor to young professionals entering the field. Thought leadership is not just about sharing knowledge—it's about paving the way for future generations.

THE ROAD AHEAD: DIGITIZATION, PERSONALIZATION, AND SMART TOURISM

Looking forward, the future of inbound tourism lies at the intersection of technology, personalization, and sustainability. At Guide of Georgia, we are investing in CRM systems, AI-assisted itinerary planning, and advanced customer profiling to create hyper-personalized travel experiences.

We also plan to launch a digital storytelling platform that allows travelers to document and share their Georgian journeys in real time—amplifying word-of-mouth marketing and user-generated content.

With our proven model, growing global network, and unwavering commitment to quality, I believe Georgia can become the most visited country in the Caucasus within the next decade. And I am committed to helping make that vision a reality.

Inbound tourism is more than my profession—it's my platform for impact. I've witnessed firsthand how well-designed travel experiences can elevate perceptions, build bridges, and transform communities. As Georgia moves forward, I remain dedicated to leading with vision, integrity, and innovation.

We are not just welcoming tourists. We are welcoming the world—and showing them who we are.

Lokross: Redefining Urban Living with Comfort, Character, and Community



Co-owner George Makasarashvili

BY MARIAM RAZMADZE

In an increasingly fast-paced construction landscape, one Georgian development company is choosing a different direction—one that respects heritage and, of course, remains committed to quality. Founded in Kutaisi, Lokross is not just building apartments; it is creating a shared community that honors the past while being grounded in the present.

Started as a shared idea among a small group of individuals, Lokross was created to give new life to Kutaisi while respecting the city's unique cultural and architectural identity. "We wanted to create spaces that reflect the spirit of

the city and its people, while contributing meaningfully to its development," say Guram Shalamberidze and Giorgi Makasarashvili, the founders of the company.

Lokross's philosophy rests on three pillars: thoughtful location, honest construction, and comfort. These values are clear in its current residential projects, Inside Bukhaidze in Tbilisi and Ortachalis Turfa, each catered to the needs of modern residents while taking local context into account.

LOCATION AS A FOUNDATION

For Lokross, every project starts with choosing the right location. "We prioritize ecologically clean, safe, and well-connected areas that offer both tranquility and convenience," the company

explains. The idea is simple but meaningful: where you live should improve your life, not complicate it.

For instance, Inside Bukhaidze is located in a dynamic urban area surrounded by schools, kindergartens, public services, sports facilities like the Olympic pool and football fields, and retail centers such as Carrefour. The project aims to locate everyday essentials within walking distance, lifting the burden of city life.

In Ortachala, the design and materials pay tribute to Old Tbilisi's charm. The use of traditional Georgian brick, terraced architecture, and river views creates a connection to the city's historic character while still delivering modern standards of energy efficiency and ventilation. "This isn't decorative nostalgia; it's functional design rooted in place," the founders say.

TRUE QUALITY

In a crowded market where 'premium quality' is often reduced to a marketing tactic, Lokross is bringing substance back to the term. "Premium doesn't mean just using expensive materials. It means every aspect of the work, from materials to craftsmanship, is handled with expertise and care," the team states.

That's why Lokross collaborates with Floors, a trusted construction company with years of proven experience. Each phase of development undergoes thorough review, from material origin and durability to energy performance and safety. "Our construction process is guided by real professionals—people who know how to deliver long-lasting results," they add.

COMFORT BEYOND THE APARTMENT WALLS

Lokross designs its buildings with full lives in mind. Their developments offer not just housing, but carefully chosen



Co-owner Guram Shalamberidze

amenities, such as modern elevators, secure underground parking, and natural ventilation, that support residents' well-being. "We're partnering with local businesses to provide in-building services like gyms, wellness zones, cafes, and common spaces that enhance everyday life," the founders state.

ADAPTABILITY

What makes Lokross different is its flexible, people-oriented approach. "We always try to meet buyers halfway," the

company notes, emphasizing adaptability. A summer promotion will offer discounted prices and customized purchase terms on in-demand apartments, making quality living more accessible.

Lokross is focused on sustainable growth and innovation. "We aim to bring global standards to Georgia while staying rooted in our communities," the team adds. With a long-term vision and commitment to development, Lokross is building more than homes—it is shaping an urban future.

“Know Your Rights – Stay Protected!” Food Safety Campaign Engages Thousands across Georgia

BY TEAM GT

In seven regions of Georgia, a dynamic information campaign has brought food safety and consumer rights to the forefront of public attention. As part of the ENPARD IV program, the initiative is aligned with European Union efforts to contribute to food safety reforms in the country.

The project, titled “Regions and People for Food Safety”, was implemented by Caritas Czech Republic on behalf of the Czech Development Agency (CzDA). The campaign reached over 2,200 school-children in 35 schools, aiming to equip young people, teachers, and civil society with the tools and knowledge to make informed choices, advocate for food safety in their communities and understand the principles and regulations in place to protect the consumers.

STRENGTHENING LOCAL CAPACITY AND ENGAGING SCHOOLS THROUGH EDUCATION AND INNOVATION

A critical component of the project involved capacity-building for regional civil society organisations and school teachers. With this in mind, at the end of 2024, a series of specialised training sessions were held, covering food safety communication systems, consumer protection legislation, advocacy techniques, and EU standards. Trainers also provided insights into current trends and challenges in food safety across the European Union.

In addition to technical knowledge, participants received guidance in project management and proposal writing, enhancing their ability to implement

local campaigns independently. Experts from the Czech Consumer Organisation and SAFE Food Advocacy Europe contributed to the sessions, bringing a valuable European perspective.

The project strongly emphasised school children engagement. Experts developed educational materials tailored for students in grades 7 through 12, accompanied by a set of interactive board games designed to make complex topics such as food safety and consumer rights more accessible for non-formal education in schools.

Workshops were organised in selected schools, encouraging students to think critically about the safety and quality of the food they consume. These sessions aimed to instill a sense of responsibility and awareness in the younger generation, encouraging them to become advocates for safer, healthier choices within their families and communities.

For Luka Mghebrishvili, a youth activist from the Mtskheta-Mtianeti region, who represents the Anti-violence Network of Mtskheta-Mtianeti and participated in the project, the campaign brought personal experiences into sharper focus. Luka recalled first becoming aware of the importance of food safety after a friend was hospitalised from drinking contaminated water:

“One of my friends got sick from drinking water, and I was shocked — I didn’t know people could be poisoned by water. At the time, I was involved in a youth centre based in our school, and that experience sparked my interest in food safety issues. Initially, students didn’t seem very engaged, but I later discovered organisations that were seriously working on food safety. That inspired me to get involved and do my part in raising awareness on food safety.”

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT AND WIDER IMPACT

The campaign’s strength lay in its collaborative approach. Six civil society organisations from various regions played a central role in organising both online and onsite events, while trained school teachers led activities for school children. The project participants engaged the public in meaningful discussions about food safety and consumer rights.

According to Ekaterine Meskhrikadze, Country Director of Caritas Czech Republic, the response from the community was overwhelmingly positive:

“Despite working within a tight time-frame, the results exceeded our expectations. More than two thousand students, along with teachers, food business operators, and the general public, became key communicators of food safety within their local circles”.

Mr. Denis Reiss, Programme Officer for Sustainable Food Systems at the EU Delegation, stated:

“Georgian consumers continue to face a range of risks, many of which are being progressively reduced through the alignment of national regulations with EU standards and awareness campaigns. These EU standards, based on scientific evidence, prohibit the use of certain harmful substances and unsustainable methods, and not only protect the consumers but expand market access for Georgian local food products.”

As part of the awareness drive, the project promoted the National Food Agency’s hotline – 1501, encouraging citizens to report issues related to food labelling and safety standards. In parallel, a study conducted within the project gathered insights into how effectively the hotline facilitates public reporting of food safety violations.



FOOD SAFETY IS EVERYONE’S RIGHT – AND RESPONSIBILITY

Georgia officially records around 40,000 cases of foodborne illness each year, though the actual number is likely much higher. While a single case may seem minor, prolonged exposure to unsafe food, especially chemical contaminants, can lead to serious long-term health problems.

Food safety reforms in Georgia gained momentum after a 2009 EU mission and became a key part of the EU-Georgia Association Agreement. Since then, Georgia has committed to gradually aligning its food safety laws with EU standards by 2028. To date, 134 of the required 200 legal acts have been approximated.

This progress has been made possible thanks to strong EU support, both at the systemic level and through direct assis-

tance to farmers, businesses, and civil society. The support to the development of the National Food Agency, improved infrastructure, and professional training all reflect this collaboration.

The “Regions and People for Food Safety” campaign, part of the EU- and Sweden-funded ENPARD IV project, co-funded and implemented by CzDA and the FAO, is a key example of how public awareness and youth engagement are helping build a safer, more transparent food system in Georgia.

Call the National Food Agency hotline at 1501, if you suspect a food safety violation.

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From Hay Clippings to Sheep Manure: How SABUKO's Grassland Restoration Project Is Helping Protect Georgia's Biodiversity

BY EREKLE POLADISHVILI

We, Georgians, do love talking about how unique our nature is and how much we admire it, but when it comes to protecting it, helping it to overcome the inevitable, destructive effects of global warming, and goodness knows how many other kinds of threats, who is it that truly puts all the effort into saving it, into saving what we love? Well, the Society for Nature Conservation, SABUKO, is one that comes to mind. It's been over a decade since the team of well-educated, well-experienced experts started their mission of protecting and conserving Georgia's biodiversity. Out of the projects they've worked on throughout these years, restoring degraded grasslands is what I'm going to tell you about this time. As a GT journalist, I was invited to the amazing Kakheti region and its Chachuna Managed Reserve to observe and write about a project that aims to tackle the widespread issue of grassland degradation.

Our journey begins in Dedoplistskaro municipality, where Giorgi Chikorashvili, SABUKO's Natural Resources Program Manager, accompanied by biologist Gio Khubashvili, visits his parents' house to load the pickup truck with hay clippings his father has stored to protect them from moisture and mold. These hay clippings, which will play a crucial role in the experiment, are made up of grass mowed from around the project area. The reason behind it is simple: SABUKO's goal is to check if restoring severely degraded grasslands in Chachuna is possible, and for that purpose, no grass other than from that area can better help them conduct the experiment. After they finish loading the truck with hay clippings, David Chikorashvili secures them in the bed of the pickup with a strong rope, because a difficult road lies ahead, and we can't afford to lose any of it.

The road from Dedoplistskaro to Chachuna Managed Reserve is a long one. Within the over three-hour journey, you experience stunning natural landscapes while constantly being reminded of the risks that come with taking this route. Through sun or fog, on paved roads or muddy trails, across sweeping fields and beneath towering cliffs – indeed, the path we traveled was nothing short of remarkable. And the hay clippings that Giorgi's father had secured in the truck survived it all. That man truly knows his job.

We reached the Chachuna Managed Reserve and one of the two test plots that



SABUKO has there. In addition to the Chachuna Managed Reserve, the Society for Nature Conservation also maintains experimental plots in the Samukhi Valley and the Vashlovani Protected Area. A few days before our arrival, the SABUKO experts released sheep into the surrounding area so they could graze the grass and prepare the site for the experiment. This enclosed area, which does not exceed 1 hectare, is protected by an electric fence. SABUKO is one of the rare organizations in Georgia that uses such a protection system. The electric fence, powered by solar, has a dual purpose: on one hand, it protects the enclosed area and the animals within it, and on the other, it prevents the animals inside from leaving the area. Most importantly, a few wooden posts, driven into the ground, with the finest electrical cables attached to them, ensure that there is no physical barrier between the enclosed area and the surrounding environment.

Giorgi and Gio unload the material from the truck and spread it over two-fourths of the area, distributing the hay evenly across the designated zone. We'll get back to the role this material plays in the study, but first, the two must return to the truck and head to the nearest farm to collect another essential component – sheep manure. By conducting this experiment, SABUKO's top priority is to help local shepherds by restoring degraded grasslands, which, if successful, will provide them with more grazing area for their livestock. By collecting sheep manure from the locals, they not only involve them in the study, but also test whether they can rely solely on their livestock and the manure they produce – a strategy that would significantly reduce their expenses.

After loading the truck with sheep manure, Giorgi and Gio drive back to the experimental plot and begin spreading. How does the experiment work?



The one-hectare plot of land is divided into four equal sections. Each section has a specific role in the study. On one-fourth of the area, only sheep manure will be spread. On another, only hay clippings (grass) will be applied. A third section will receive a mix of both sheep manure and hay clippings. The final quarter will be left completely untouched, serving as a control to help assess how much impact the different treatments have.

As for why they chose these two materials, let's break it down. As I mentioned earlier, the hay clippings that the two brought to the experimental zone consist of grass mowed from the surrounding area. Their purpose is to serve as ground cover in this region, where droughts have been lasting longer in recent years. The rainwater that does fall tends to evaporate quickly due to the lack of vegetation, without having time to soak into the soil. The hay spread over the designated zone

will act as a protective layer, helping rainwater penetrate the ground. Hay often contains residual plant seeds, which, over time, will make their way into the soil and support the growth of new grass in the area. The sheep manure is a natural fertilizer, is both important for improving soil quality and readily available to local shepherds. The SABUKO team wants to make the process of restoring degraded grasslands as cost-efficient for locals as possible.

With both the hay clippings and sheep manure now spread over the designated area, we prepare to head back to Dedoplistskaro, leaving nature to play its part. The SABUKO team will visit once a month to check on the experimental area and the electric fence. The sun and wind, rain and mist will help both sheep manure and the hay merge with the soil. Next year, SABUKO experts, accompanied by Ilia State University students, will visit to monitor the progress. They will evaluate the soil-adjusted vegetation index (SAVI) using high-resolution images from a professional drone, and later share the results not only with the wider scientific community but with practitioners and land users for communication purposes. The same process will continue for the next few years and will end in 2027.

In a world where environmental challenges are growing more urgent by the day, it is non-governmental organizations like SABUKO that quietly but powerfully lead the charge. Their work goes far beyond experiments and data collection – it is about long-term commitment, community involvement, and finding real solutions for real problems. What SABUKO is doing in Chachuna, and in other regions across Georgia, is not just about saving grasslands; it's about building a future where people and nature can thrive together. Their team of passionate experts, driven by science and grounded in local knowledge, reminds us that meaningful change comes only with dedication, consistency, and care.





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Stories That Shape Us: Media, Memory, and Georgian Identity with Oliko Babluani

BY TEAM GT

Oliko Babluani is the creator of widely viewed cognitive media projects such as *Goodbye to the Weapon* and *No Time to Sleep*—programs that have captivated large audiences for many years. For her, creative media is a space of pleasure, knowledge, and culture. She also established a visually and intellectually engaging TV design studio, adorned with books and photographs by Natela Grigalashvili, to reflect this philosophy.

EDUCATIONAL PROJECTS

In addition to her media work, Babluani has developed educational initiatives aimed at popularizing vocational education. These include events at the Writers' House, three short educational films, and the Art and Education Forum held at the Batumi National Gallery. In partnership with the International Organization for Migration, Oliko has also led projects on visa liberalization and migration, simplifying complex topics for broad and diverse audiences.

CINEMA AND CULTURAL HERITAGE

Coming from a family deeply rooted in Georgian cinema, being related to the famed Georgian film director, script writer, and actor, Temur Babluani, Oliko views this legacy as a vital part of Georgia's cultural heritage. She has played character roles in several internationally acclaimed films.

When asked about her connection to cinema, she often notes that while she has portrayed characters in award-winning films, her desire to act has faded



Oliko Babluani. Source: FB

over time. The decline in film production—driven by economic, political, and social challenges—has been disheartening.

"Female roles in particular remain underrepresented, despite the efforts of many talented young directors I respect

deeply," she says.

Still, she believes Georgian cinema remains a unique and powerful cultural phenomenon.

Media projects, tied closely to her work with cameras and screens, have been central to her personal and professional

development. These projects became a way to process and share knowledge, reaching far beyond conventional television content and drawing millions of views on social media. Oliko was solely responsible for creating this creative environment—an experience she describes as both demanding and liberating. She credits her loyal viewers, participants, and partners for their support and understanding of her vision.

"I'm grateful to my loyal viewers, participants, and partners who supported these efforts and appreciated what I was trying to achieve," she notes.

A FAREWELL TO ARMS

Television, she reflects, is a massive commercial machine that spans the entire country. To succeed, one must maintain peak physical and intellectual condition and manage a team so that every part of the production runs smoothly. Over time, the demands became exhausting.

When the program finally came to an end, only a few people were still "riding motorcycles" around the city—a metaphor for how much the media landscape had changed. Today, scooters dominate the youth scene.

CURRENT PROJECT

Oliko's latest project is currently in development. It explores cultural identity through the lens of art, focusing on a unique cultural phenomenon in the Caucasus Mountains.

In the geopolitically complex region of the South Caucasus, identity remains a critical issue. As writer Grigol Robakidze once said:

"The history of Georgia has always been governed by the pathos of chivalry. Chivalry is a defining trait of our national character. We worship life. For Georgians, life is a Promethean passion—a danger,

not merely a condition."

She believes that every nation possesses its own distinct character, and in Georgia, that character is a powerful spiritual force shaping cultural identity and artistic expression.

"Georgian art evokes, with universal clarity, a profound sense of originality and human essence," she argues.

Though often conquered, Georgia has never been culturally hybridized. Eastern and Western influences are evident in its artistic output, but it is the fusion of bold creative spirit and magnetic individuality that gives Georgian art its distinct power. After the Russian Empire's conquest, even the cinematic language had to be reinvented to communicate unspoken truths.

"I love Georgian art's poetic style—slightly fantastical, yet deeply realistic. Georgian art is not about theoretical objectives; it transcends epochs," she says.

NASTASIA – MODELING & FASHION

Oliko's eldest daughter, Nastasia, has made a name for herself in the fashion world. She has graced the cover of Harper's, worked with major brands, walked in Fashion Week, and was named "New French Top Model of the Year." She is represented by Women Management in Paris and Milan. Oliko describes Nastasia as hardworking and grounded, while her second daughter, Liana, is "a very strong specialist in strategic communication."

Babluani expresses immense pride in her daughters' achievements. She believes in raising children who understand right from wrong, who strive for freedom within themselves, and who live simply—with dignity and purpose: "Never complain, never explain."

'This Shirt Was Your Youth': How a Humble White Shirt Becomes a Canvas of Collective Memory

BY IVAN NECHAEV

Every May in Georgia, the streets swell with teenagers in white button-downs streaked with neon scribbles, illustrated declarations of love, pop culture references, spiritual totems, and absurdist graffiti. It looks chaotic. It is joyful. But beneath the color, there's a deeper story to be told—about ritual, identity, and post-Soviet reinvention. What began in the 1990s as a grassroots tradition among Tbilisi school-leavers has evolved into a meaningful cultural phenomenon, one that merges personal expression with collective memory and local mythology with global fashion currents.

FROM UNIFORM TO UNIQUENESS: THE AESTHETIC POLITICS OF THE GRADUATION SHIRT

At its heart, the painted graduation shirt, worn on the day of the *bolo zari* ("last bell")—is a rite of passage. The white shirt, once a symbol of uniformity and discipline, becomes a medium of self-expression. Each graduate either decorates their own shirt in advance or invites friends, classmates, and teachers to leave inscriptions, signatures, and drawings directly on their back.

The tradition, according to oral histories, emerged organically in Tbilisi sometime in the mid-1990s—a period marked by the collapse of Soviet structures and a sudden need for new rituals to replace the discarded ones. Just as many post-Soviet cultures saw a reinvention of weddings, funerals, and memorials, Georgian youth sought out new forms to mark the psychological crossing into adulthood. The defaced shirt, filled with coded messages, inside jokes, and stylized illustrations, became that threshold.

Cultural anthropologist Victor Turner describes rites of passage as containing three phases: separation, liminality, and incorporation. The graduation shirt ritual fits perfectly within this framework. First, students dress identically in white—a nod to their shared status. Then they allow that blank slate to be deconstructed through drawing and writing—a liminal act of symbolic transformation. Finally, the shirt becomes a personal artifact: preserved, folded away, remembered.

INK, MEMORY, AND PERFORMANCE: THE SHIRT AS A SOCIAL OBJECT

These shirts are not just souvenirs. They are mnemonic objects—vessels of memory, charged with emotion and collective significance. As scholars like Pierre Nora have argued, modern societies increasingly invest memory into objects and places once traditional oral or ritual structures fade. In a country where Soviet-era commemorative rituals were often rigid and top-down, this spontaneous youth-created tradition offers an alternative memory-keeping practice.

Crucially, the inscriptions on the shirts are often ephemeral, humorous, flirtatious, sometimes even transgressive. Messages like "First time I've seen you all year" or "To my invisible crush" play with social conventions, teasing out hidden dynamics within the classroom. Others are sincere: dedications from teachers, confessions of love, or simply dates and names. These shirts become a wearable archive of social relationships.

In recent years, an informal micro-industry has grown around the tradition. Young artists, many of them former graduates themselves, offer to create custom illustrations on commission. These are not mass-produced items, but handcrafted works, echoing the rise of



Balenciaga shirt. Source: on.ge

DIY and personalized culture in Georgia's youth scene. Even when digital print-on-demand services began to offer "pre-made" graduation shirt designs, many students rejected them in favor of one-of-a-kind, hand-painted pieces. The tradition remains, at its core, about intimacy.

HIGH FASHION AND STREET SENTIMENTALITY: FROM SCHOOLYARD TO RUNWAY

In 2018, the painted graduation shirt entered the global fashion circuit. Georgian designer Demna Gvasalia, creative director of Balenciaga and founder of Vetements, released a shirt in the Spring/Summer 2019 collection directly referencing this Georgian ritual. The garment—a crisp white button-up with scribbled drawings and personal messages screen-printed on it—was sold for over \$1000. The messages read like notes from classmates: "Congrats, my boy," "In case you forget me," "I was here."

Critics in the West viewed it as another example of Gvasalia's post-ironic streetwear, part of a broader tendency in contemporary fashion to blur the lines

between authenticity and simulation. But for those familiar with Georgian cultural codes, it was a loaded gesture. Gvasalia wasn't merely appropriating a subcultural aesthetic—he was exporting an emotional artifact from his own coming-of-age experience in the post-Soviet periphery. The runway, in this case, became a space of diasporic nostalgia.

This gesture also re-inscribed the shirt-signing tradition into a broader conversation about global youth culture and commodification. Can something as intimate as a farewell shirt be turned into a luxury item? What happens when a local memory ritual becomes a fashion trend?

RITUALS OF SELFHOOD IN TRANSITIONAL SOCIETIES

Anthropologist Alexei Yurchak, in "Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More," describes the strange temporality of late Soviet and post-Soviet youth, caught between the collapse of one ideological system and the emergence of another. The graduation shirt ritual belongs to this in-between space. It does not inherit from the Soviet ceremonial mold, nor does it mimic Western graduation culture with caps and gowns. Instead, it grows sideways: an improvised hybrid of performance, friendship, and rebellion.

Unlike the rigid ceremony of most Western high school graduations—where students wear identical robes, march in formation, and receive diplomas from behind podiums—the Georgian version is more carnivalesque. Friends chase each other with markers. Shirts are painted with dragons, hearts, sports logos, and sacred mountains. Some students add quotes from Nika Turbina, Freddie Mercury, or Guram Dochanashvili. Others draw icons of Tbilisi's neighborhoods, graffiti tags, or symbols of protest. It's a youth ritual that makes

space for both the deeply personal and the socially resonant.

In a society still negotiating its relationship with post-Soviet identity, national heritage, and global modernity, the act of painting your own clothes becomes an act of authorship—a small but defiant way of saying, this is who I was when I left childhood behind.

THE SHIRT THAT CARRIES A LIFE

In the years after graduation, these shirts are rarely worn again. But they are kept. Folded in wardrobes. Packed in storage. Hung like relics. They function like keepsake boxes or time capsules. In some families, a graduation shirt might be brought out years later at a wedding or during a move. It is, in many ways, a secular amulet, infused with emotion, names, jokes, and smells of that last school summer.

In the 2020s, amid rising digitization and surveillance, such analog rituals carry a renewed power. The hand-painted shirt resists the algorithm. It cannot be copied, reposted, or deleted. It is non-transferable. It remembers not as a database, but as a garment worn close to the skin.

A SHIRT FOR A NATION IN TRANSITION

The Georgian graduation shirt ritual is deceptively simple—a marker, a white blouse, a gathering of friends. But in its folds lie the textures of a society in flux: post-Soviet improvisation, youthful authorship, community aesthetics, and intimate resistance to commodified memory.

It is a tradition made from laughter and loss, from kitsch and meaning, from ink and cotton. And in a world that increasingly tells young people they are replaceable, forgettable, and always online, it offers something quietly radical: the right to be remembered—personally, imperfectly, and in your own handwriting.

Mountains, Compared

BLOG BY TONY HANMER

The Rocky Mountains run down the whole length of North America, practically joining up with the Andes in South America. They have long been a source of delight for me, growing up camping in and through them from ages 14-22 and, in 1989, mountain biking with a friend from Jasper to Banff and then west all the way to the Pacific. Unforgettable.

Family and I recently spent our traditional first camp of the year at Snaring River campground, near Jasper. This was the May long weekend, including Victoria Day. Several people went out a couple of days early to reserve spots (which, there, can't be booked except in person), and the rest of us followed on Friday, leaving Monday.

The road itself is a big difference. In the Rockies, you're mostly driving on the flat, with mountains all around you. In Georgia you seem always to be steeply ascending or descending, among the mountains in a much more intimate way, though the roads range from equally as good as Canadian ones to "rated among worst in world," as those in Tusheti (I've

survived that gorgeous place three times now, but always with the same experienced professional driver, because my wife won't have it any other way).

Camping in North America is a fine art, with many designated locations outside or inside provincial and national parks. The pastime ranges from hiking with all your gear on your back, through driving or biking with a tent or hammock, to SUV-top tents to camper vans to truck-mounted campers or pulled tent trailers, and motor homes many meters long. There is a whole industry built around camping, supplying all sorts of equipment for it to suit any budget.

Georgia has hardly any formally designated campgrounds... although this means hugely more freedom for enthusiasts simply to arrive and set up, asking permission and/or paying a small fee if required. In Canada, there are strict rules about number of vehicles and tents in a formal site, fire location (ONLY in the designated fire area), and even picking up of any loose wood to burn (DON'T! Use only the provided split wood, nothing else!). This is a change from the years when we would pull up to our location and my little sister and I, aged 8-16, would be sent off to gather all the available fallen dry wood to burn. No more of that now. This strictness is both to allow

wildlife to benefit from nature, and to limit forest fires, which only last year ravaged Jasper town itself and its surroundings, to the shock of the world.

Canadian campsite prices are much higher too, of course, because you're paying to support careful infrastructure for millions of campers per year and the parks themselves. Look at \$30/day or more. You may or may not have an on-site water and electricity source and sewage outlet for your camper too. Failing these, there will be outhouse toilets, bear-proof thick steel garbage dumpsters, a common water source, and the requirement to pump out your camper's sewage off-site somewhere. So, varying degrees of comfort and support.

We usually went in tents, with two canoes as well, and a whole minutely detailed paper checklist of what to take for every camp. Nothing left out, from matches to gauze dining tent against the prevalent mosquitoes (which are virtually nonexistent in Georgia's mountains).

Wildlife is completely protected, with harsh penalties for harming or killing it. Here, you may see bears (others of my family did on this trip, but I didn't), beavers (seen by no one save a flash of a head examining me before it dove into the water, but evident by their huge log lodges), Canada Geese, loons, raptors,



Bighorn sheep in Canada. Photo by the author

various ducks, songbirds, woodpeckers... and bighorn sheep, which we saw in abundance right at the roadside. You are strongly warned not to approach or feed any wildlife, both for its own sake and yours. But a new word has been coined to describe those who break these rules, and usually end up injured or dead at the horns or claws of bison or bear: tour (or tourist) morons. Apt. YouTube is full of their idiotic exploits, and they seemingly never will learn. I'm sure my Georgian friends are envious at the sight of the four well-decorated old bighorn rams I saw together... but they're not to be shot! Just admired. Or it's off to prison for you.

As I mentioned in last week's article comparing Georgian and Canadian wetlands, garbage in mountains and campsites is a huge difference. Almost none in Canada; far too much in Georgia. We need to work on this, and I think we are.

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

CULTURE

A Scenographer of Lost Empires: Alexander Shervashidze's Grand Return to Tbilisi

BY IVAN NECHAEV

When the Dimitri Shervashidze National Gallery unveiled its newest major exhibition, a 270-piece retrospective dedicated to the Georgian-Abkhazian prince and scenographer Alexander Shervashidze, it did more than fill a room with history: it resurrected a myth, a chapter of Georgia's artistic diaspora, long silenced by wars, exiles, and political forgetfulness.

Born in 1867 in Feodosia, on the Crimean coast, Alexander Shervashidze (also known as Alexandre Chérovachidze) embodied the ruptures and splendors of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Descended from the princely house of Abkhazia — a family lineage as enmeshed with Byzantium as with the Russian Empire — his was a fate marked by flight. After the Bolshevik Revolution, Shervashidze emigrated to France, joining the tide of stateless Russian and Caucasian intellectuals who would reshape European art from its fringes.

The exhibition, initiated by the Ministry of Education and Culture of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia, and curated by Dr. Nana Shervashidze (a descendant and a specialist in émigré Georgian art), does not just honor a forgotten son; it reconfigures his place in both Georgian and European art histories. The nearly 270 exhibits, pulled from the formidable holdings of the Shalva Amiranashvili Museum of Art, trace a career that unfolded across Russian



Photo from Facebook page by Georgian National Museum

imperial salons, Parisian theaters, and the ateliers of the Ballets Russes.

THEATER AS ICONOGRAPHY

What makes Shervashidze's legacy so magnetic — and so ripe for rediscovery — is his synthesis of Georgian medieval visual culture, Orthodox iconographic form, and cutting-edge theatrical design. His collaborations with legendary directors and impresarios, including Sergei Diaghilev, placed him at the avant-garde of stagecraft. Yet, even amid futurist ballet and Wagnerian opera, his visual language retained a distinct aesthetic mysticism: elongated silhouettes, golden

Byzantine light, labyrinthine architectural motifs — elements that spoke of a lost Orthodox Orient hovering behind modernity's rush.

In this retrospective, these motifs are palpable: sketches for set designs, costume illustrations, and scenographic models shimmer with a metaphysical elegance. Shervashidze was never merely a decorator; he was a philosopher of atmosphere, transforming theater into a ritual space. In his 1912 designs for The Legend of Saint Elizabeth at the Mariinsky Theatre, sacred architecture unfolds like a dream cathedral; his 1920s Paris work, in contrast, channels Art Deco and

Symbolist abstraction into the shimmering language of exile.

A GEORGIAN DIAGHILEV?

It's tempting to call him a Georgian Diaghilev — an exile who translated national identity into cosmopolitan innovation — but Shervashidze was less an impresario than a solitary visionary. The tragedy, of course, is that much of his work vanished with time. Ephemeral by nature, set designs and costumes rarely outlive the performance. This makes the archival labor behind this exhibition all the more monumental. Dr. Nana Shervashidze's curation reconstructs a life through fragments — watercolors, faded pencil sketches, photographs of vanished productions — each acting as a cipher for the grandeur once materialized on stage.

POLITICS OF ABSENCE AND RETURN

The opening ceremony reflected the exhibition's symbolic and political charge. Levan Mgaloblishvili, Jemal Gamakharia, and Beka Ghvichiani — political leaders from the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia government — addressed the audience with a message that transcended mere art history. In honoring Shervashidze, they were also invoking a vision of Abkhazia not defined by conflict or occupation, but by intellectual brilliance and cultural contribution.

It is no accident that the exhibition arrives now. As Georgia continues to navigate the memory wars of its post-Soviet condition — between nostalgia, trauma, and contested geographies — figures like Shervashidze become vessels

for soft power, cultural diplomacy, and identity reconstruction. His art, forged between St. Petersburg, Paris, and Tbilisi, becomes a space of encounter — between empires, aesthetics, and histories.

For Georgian audiences, especially the younger generation, this exhibition is a lesson in the paradoxes of nationhood and exile. It challenges the borders of what Georgian culture is presumed to be. Shervashidze never lived in independent Georgia, never painted its mountains or folktales in the manner of Lado Gudiashvili or Elene Akhvediani. Yet his work, suffused with Orthodox ritualism and historical longing, belongs fully to the Georgian imagination — just one displaced across continents and decades.

Moreover, this retrospective reaffirms the Georgian National Museum's growing ambition to recontextualize its holdings not as provincial but as integral to broader European and Eurasian modernism. This is not merely heritage management; it is a reassertion of cultural agency.

The exhibition runs until June 16 — an ephemeral span that mirrors the transient nature of theater itself. Yet what it offers is enduring: a glimpse into a world where art crossed borders more freely than its creators could, where aristocrats turned refugees re-enchanted Europe's stages with the ghosts of their lost homelands.

Standing before Shervashidze's drawings — delicate yet tectonic, mournful yet luminous — one feels not only the presence of a great scenographer, but the haunting echo of an entire civilization in exile, now briefly, triumphantly, restored.



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