



Image source: Government of Georgia/FB

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Georgian Nurse Collapses within 30 Minutes of Receiving an AstraZeneca Jab

BY TEAM GT

On Thursday afternoon, a nurse in Akhaltsikhe was vaccinated against COVID-19, with the AstraZeneca vaccine. The 27-year-old woman had previously had annual vaccinations against the flu and had never reported any allergic reactions. Immediately after the AstraZeneca vaccination was received, she gave a live interview to a TV channel, calling on other medical staff to get vaccinated.

"Unfortunately, she developed a reaction within 30 minutes," Director of the National Center for Disease Control and Public Health, Amiran Gamkrelidze, said. "We don't yet know if it was an allergic reaction or some other type of reaction. Preliminary conversations with doctors lead us to think it was likely an anaphylactic reaction."

Gamkrelidze explained that the nurse's condition worsened quickly, and it was necessary to put her on artificial respiration.

Continued on page 3



Image source: japantimes.co.jp

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As of 15-Mar-2021

STOCKS				BONDS			
	Price	w/w	m/m		Price	w/w	m/m
Bank of Georgia (BGEO LN)	GBP 11.18	+5.3%	-2.6%	GEOROG 04/21	100.14 (YTM 5.34%)	+0.1%	-0.5%
Georgia Capital (CGEO LN)	GBP 5.49	+10.2%	+4.4%	GEORG 04/21	100.44 (YTM 0.49%)	+0.1%	-0.3%
TBC Bank Group (TBCG LN)	GBP 11.14	-2.1%	-11.2%	GRAIL 07/22	106.54 (YTM 2.66%)	-0.1%	-0.6%
				GEBGG 07/23	106.03 (YTM 3.32%)	+0.2%	+0.2%

COMMODITIES				CURRENCIES			
	Price	w/w	m/m		Price	w/w	m/m
Crude Oil, Brent (US\$/bbl)	68.88	+0.9%	+8.8%	GEL / USD	3.3190	+0.1%	+0.8%
Gold Spot (US\$/OZ)	1 731.67	+2.9%	-4.8%	GEL / EUR	3.9596	+0.8%	-0.8%
				GEL / GBP	4.6127	+0.6%	-0.8%
				GEL / CHF	3.5775	+0.9%	-3.3%

INDICES			
	Price	w/w	m/m
FTSE 100	6 749.70	+0.5%	-0.1%
FTSE 250	21 522.35	+2.5%	+0.5%
DAX	14 461.42	+0.6%	+2.5%
DOW JONES	32 953.46	+3.6%	+4.8%
NASDAQ	13 459.71	+6.7%	-4.5%
MSCI EM EE	174.76	+6.5%	+2.0%
MSCI EM	1 340.25	+2.5%	-6.8%
SP 500	3 968.94	+3.9%	+0.9%
MSCI FM	2 489.36	+0.3%	-3.5%
GT Index (GEL)	1 582.68	-	-
GT Index (USD)	1 208.13	-	-

Georgia Visits Brussels: Political Parties Must Find Common Ground, EU & NATO Officials Say

BY ANA DUMBADZE

The Georgia-EU strategic partnership, progress toward European integration, the situation in the occupied territories, and the ongoing political process were the key issues discussed during Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili's two-day visit to Brussels this week.

The Georgian delegation, led by the Prime Minister, left for Brussels on March 15. It included Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Foreign Affairs David Zalkaliani, Minister of Economy and Sustainable Development Natia Turnava and Minister of Justice Gocha Lortkipanidze.

High-level meetings were held within the framework of the visit, at the European Commission, the European Council, the European Parliament, and NATO.

Garibashvili once again met with the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, and thanked him for the mediation.

"Charles Michel's position is that in the shortest possible time, we will be able to find common ground and compromise," Garibashvili said afterwards.

On March 16, the Georgian PM met with the Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Belgium, Alexander De Croo. They talked about the successful cooperation between the two countries.

The same day, another high-level meeting took place with European Commissioner for Neighborhood and Enlargement Olivér Várhelyi. The face-to-face meeting at the European Commission emphasized the importance of deeper economic and sectoral integration into the EU. The Georgian Government has an ambitious plan to apply for full EU membership in 2024, the Prime Minister noted, and political and economic reforms to that end continue.

The parties discussed challenges and difficulties brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. The PM underlined the EU's invaluable support in the fight against the social and economic consequences



of the pandemic. The importance of vaccination was singled out, as was the need to ensure equal access to the vaccine for all countries.

Following his meeting with Várhelyi, Garibashvili held a meeting with EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell.

All key directions of the bilateral agenda were discussed, while challenges in Georgia's occupied territories and the arrests and illegal detention of Georgian citizens were singled out in particular.

The European Union and Georgia held the 6th meeting of the Association Council on March 16. The Association Council took note of the 2021 Association Implementation Report on Georgia and assessed the state of EU-Georgia relations since the last such meeting in March 2019.

The Association Council welcomed Georgia's progress on its European path, including in the challenging COVID-19 context.

It noted that the elections of 31 October and 21 November 2020 were competitive and that, overall, fundamental freedoms were respected, but that it strongly regretted the deepening political polarization in Georgia. They called for a swift resolution to the ongoing political situation, for all parties to step up efforts to work together and to maintain open dialogue, including with civil society.

After the meeting of the Association Council, Garibashvili made the following statement at the briefing, responding to one of the main demands of the opposition regarding holding snap elections: "It is not my prerogative to decide when the elec-

tions will take place. All international organizations, all international observers recognized that the elections were competitive, fair and free. The next parliamentary elections will be held in 2024."

He also answered questions regarding the political prisoners: "Being a politician does not make anyone immune to prison. If anyone has committed a crime, he should be punished. Therefore, it is not up to me to decide when or how someone will be released from court."

On March 17, Garibashvili met with the Head of the South Caucasus Delegation of the European Parliament, Marina Kaljurand, to discuss the geopolitical situation in the region and the security challenges in the occupied territories.

"Marina Kaljurand especially noted the successful results of the Georgia-EU Association Council meeting and reaffirmed strong support for Georgia's European integration," he said.

The PM also had a meeting with the President of the European Parliament, David Sassoli, during which the sides discussed the current political processes in Georgia. The Prime Minister once again thanked the EU for its efforts to manage and de-escalate the ongoing processes in the country in a constructive manner. It was underlined that the final report of the OSCE/ODIHR EOM assessed the parliamentary elections in Georgia as competitive and stated that, in general, fundamental freedoms were protected.

On March 17, the Head of the Government of Georgia was also hosted by the Secretary General of the Alliance Jens Stoltenberg at the NATO Headquarters.

The meeting emphasized the successful cooperation between NATO and Georgia and the refreshed Substantial Package designed to assist Georgia in cementing its resilience, and to offer new opportunities for cooperation with the Alliance.

PM Garibashvili thanked Jens Stoltenberg for supporting Georgia's integration into NATO and

for the 2020 Report dedicating an individual chapter to cooperation with Georgia, emphasizing that the Alliance continues to support Georgia's integration into NATO in line with the decision of the 2008 NATO Summit in Bucharest.

The parties also discussed the importance of Black Sea security and Georgia's role in this direction, with special emphasis being placed on the region's new geopolitical landscape and Russian threats as a major challenge for Euro-Atlantic security. The parties spoke about security challenges in Georgia's occupied territories, and Stoltenberg reaffirmed strong support for Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty.

"NATO membership is a top priority of Georgia's foreign and security policy, and it is so important that it is reflected in our Constitution," Garibashvili highlighted afterwards.

Stoltenberg later spoke about the concerns within the Alliance regarding the recent political events in Georgia, including the detention of the chair of the "National Movement" Nika Melia. He emphasized that the Alliance is based on the rule of law and democratic values, and as such, they call on Georgian politicians to find a way out of this difficult situation in order to be able to continue reforms to deepen European integration.

Stoltenberg added that NATO supports the mediation efforts of the European Union. He called on Garibashvili to work with the opposition to find a common solution to the crisis.

Another important meeting, this one between the PM and Chair of the European Parliament Foreign Affairs Committee, David McAllister, saw the two discussing the country's ongoing political processes and the EU's mediation, with special emphasis on the need to achieve a compromise and channel the process into Parliament.

At the end of his official visit to Brussels, the PM noted that all friends and partners of Georgia agree and recommend that the political parties must find common ground.

"I met with MEPs, held very productive meetings with our friends, those taking a keen interest in Georgia's better tomorrow. Everyone's shared, consolidated recommendation is that political parties must find common ground, and we must all continue a political life together in Georgia's Parliament. Everyone agrees to this position, and no-one has voiced a different position. I had productive talks with Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee David McAllister and other friends of our country who have an earnest interest in the future of our country," Garibashvili concluded.



Cour
Pénale
Internationale

International
Criminal
Court

The Trust Fund for Victims (TFV) at the International Criminal Court (ICC)

Trust Fund for Victims at the Int'l Criminal Court Approves Victim Assistance Program in Georgia.

The Trust Fund for Victims (TFV) at the International Criminal Court (ICC) has approved a

Victim Assistance program in Georgia. TFV will soon issue a solicitation for the provision of the assistance program to conduct psychological rehabilitation, physical rehabilitation, and material support for the victims of the armed conflict of 2008, the August War, in Georgia, through TFV funding.

Within this context, the ICC/TFV has announced a call on Expressions of Interest (EOI) from qualified and interested organizations. Through this announcement, TFV calls on competent and qualified organizations to express their interest.

The assistance services requested, modalities, and the minimum qualification criteria are outlined here: <https://www.icc-cpi.int/get-involved/Pages/expressions-of-interest.aspx>

Reference Number 128881

And here: <https://www.ungm.org/Public/Notice/121344>

Interested organizations should submit their Expression of Interest, as well as all required documents, by e-mail, to Tender.7@icc-cpi.int, by **29th March, 2021**.

Coronavirus Update: Georgia Launches Vaccination Process with AstraZeneca

BY ANA DUMBADZE

Compared to the previous week, the number of newly detected cases of the coronavirus in Georgia has slightly increased. Georgia recorded 369 coronavirus cases, 378 recoveries, and 9 deaths on Thursday, the official figures show.

23,747 tests were conducted in the 24 hours Wednesday-Thursday throughout the country, including 13,503 rapid tests and 10,244 PCRs.

The testing revealed that Georgian capital Tbilisi recorded the highest number of 190 Covid-19 cases, followed by the Imereti region with 67 cases and the Shida Kartli region with 26 cases.

Georgia's total case tally has reached 276,436, among them 269,384 people recovered and 3674 died.

Presently, there are 3378 active cases of infection in the country, and the daily test-positivity rate stands at 1.55%, while it was 1.53% in the past 14 days.

ASTRAZENECA VACCINATION KICKS OFF

On March 15, the vaccination process with the AstraZeneca vaccine against coronavirus was launched in the country, with a focus on the country's doctors.

Paata Imnadze, Deputy Head of the National Center for Disease Control, was the first in Georgia to be vaccinated against coronavirus. He was vaccinated live with the AstraZeneca vaccine. Afterwards, Imnadze said he felt very well.

"Today is an important day in our country, the beginning of the end of the epidemic. The vaccine is the only way for the country to return to a normal life," he said.

Doctors of the Tbilisi Infectious Diseases Hospital, Marina Ezugbaia and Marina Endzeladze,



also followed his example, as did President Zurbishvili, noting that they haven't felt any side effects of the vaccine and urging others to get vaccinated.

MORE RESTRICTIONS EASED THIS WEEK

Based on the decision of the Coordinating Council, another phase of easing the restrictions imposed due to the pandemic was launched on March 15.

In accordance to the phased recovery plan, the following economic and social activities have been allowed:

- Gyms can reopen;
- The teaching process was restored in the auditoriums of higher and vocational schools;
- The functioning of school extracurricular activities were restored;
- Rehearsals and training were resumed by theaters, sports clubs, professional ensembles;
- Live music will be allowed in restaurants.
- Cinemas and children's entertainment centers will reopen from April 1.
- By the decision of the Coordinating Council, the curfew from 9 PM to 5 AM is to remain in force. The government officials explain that curfew is "one of the best ways to reduce public mobility."

Mayor Kaladze: I'm Not Leaving Politics

BY ANA DUMBADZE

I want to say with full responsibility that the rumors on my resignation are being purposefully spread. First, I could not understand why I had to go to Milan, I came from Milan and returned to the country in 2012. I have finished my career in sports, and today I am in politics, Tbilisi Mayor Kakha Kaladze said on Imedi TV's 'Capital' program.

"I think that my country needs the work I am doing more, and I say with full responsibility that, together with my teammates, we are working 24/7 to solve all the problems that concern Tbilisi and the people living in Tbilisi," Kaladze noted.

"The rumors are incorrect: I'm not going anywhere, I'm going to stay in politics for a long time, as long as I have the support of society, the support of the population. I never run from the middle of a job; I always like to finish what I start.

"One of the components of my success formula is that when you achieve some success, by no means should you be sat-



Source: TV Imedi

isfied with it: you should always look for more. The same applies to my city, Tbilisi. I have done many good things here, many good projects, but it is certainly not enough. No matter how well we did it, there are more problems in the capital that need to be solved, and I will do

my best with my teammates to make tomorrow's Tbilisi better.

"Regarding the mayoral elections and my participation, it is too early to talk about it. There are seven months to go before the elections, everything has its time and place," he said.

Head of NCDC Asks for Church Support for Vaccination Process, Church Refuses



BY TEAM GT

Georgian immunologist and the Head of the National Center for Disease Control and Public Health, Amiran Gamkrelidze, addressed the members of the Synod via a video on Formula on March 16, asking for their support during the vaccination process and reminding them of the significance of their position and their influence on members of society.

"The Georgian Church is an organization with one of the highest authorities in the country. We all believe in our Church, and I want to give thanks for the

position the Church, especially His Holiness and Beatitude, took, and the help they provided us with last year when the pandemic had just begun," Gamkrelidze said. "Because of this, we survived with minimal loss. You all know how challenging the pre-Easter, Easter, and post-Easter periods were when the state of emergency was declared in the country, and the way the Church called upon people played a huge role in their compliance.

"I want to take advantage of the occasion and ask the Holy Synod and each high priest to remember their special role in this situation. During the last 200 years, vaccines and vaccinations have saved millions of lives. Vaccination is a scientifically proven method. The Church and science have always had a very syn-

ergic relationship. The Church always leans on scientifically proven facts, and the positive side of vaccinations has been scientifically proven and experienced by humankind.

"Please stand by us, the doctors, during these hard times, because people's faith in you is very strong, oftentimes stronger than in doctors. We ask for special collaboration during the vaccination process. We are prepared for any meetings as always, and it is always an honor for us to work with the Church and be with you. I am sure we will achieve the desired outcome together," said Gamkrelidze.

The head of the public relations department of the Patriarchate, Archpriest Andria Jagmaidze, responded indirectly to the appeal on March 17, saying the Church cannot take responsibility for the promotion of the newly launched vaccination in Georgia, and that it is the responsibility of the health workers.

"With regard to vaccination, any person is free in his/her choice. The Church cannot take responsibility for the promotion of vaccination, as the above is the competence and responsibility of health workers," he stated.

"The Church is currently guided by the February 11 decision of the Synod, which states that any person, regardless of his or her social status, public or private activities, should not be subjected to harassment, insult, or persecution in case of vaccination or non-vaccination," he added.

Georgian Nurse Collapses within 30 Minutes of Receiving an AstraZeneca Jab

Continued from page 1

Paramedics then transported the patient to Tbilisi. "We will not be able to talk about cause-and-effect until an investigation has been conducted," Gamkrelidze said.

An emergency joint session of the Immunization Scientific Committee and the National Committee of Immunization Safety Experts was held at the Ministry of Health on Thursday evening to discuss the Akhaltsikhe case.

Several European countries have this week suspended their AstraZeneca vaccination programs due to reports of blood clots forming in patients who had been vaccinated with the British-Swed-

ish jab. Among those countries are Germany, France, Italy, Ireland, Denmark, Norway, Spain, the Netherlands, and Bulgaria.

In Germany, out of one million six hundred vaccinated with AstraZeneca, seven people were diagnosed with thromboembolism, which, according to the Health Minister, is a very low rate; however, for safety reasons, he still supported the temporary suspension of AstraZeneca.

Austria, despite the above, decided to continue its vaccination program with AstraZeneca. The country's health minister said on March 16 that Austria was waiting for the opinion of the European

Medicines Agency, and only then will it decide whether or not to suspend the vaccination process. The EMA's final approval on AstraZeneca came on Thursday evening with a report that AstraZeneca is both safe and effective.

The World Health Organization has called on states to continue using the AstraZeneca vaccine. WHO's Chief Researcher Sumaya Suaminata says that no link has been made between the complications and the vaccine.

After consultation, the Georgian experts on Thursday decided not to suspend the AstraZeneca countrywide vaccination program, based on the EMA's report on the vaccine's safety.

POLITICS



Image source: ImediNews.ge

The EU & US' Ongoing Intervention in Georgia's Political Crisis

BY TEAM GT

The President of Georgia Salome Zurbishvili on March 12 met with Christian Danielsson, Personal Representative of the President of the European Council, Charles Michel.

Danielsson had arrived in Georgia that morning to engage in a renewed political dialogue initiated by President Michel on March 1 with the leaders of all parties involved in the current political conflict.

"My mission is to help these political parties, to enable them to start a dialogue, and to make progress," Danielsson said, noting that what is happening in Georgia is very concerning to the European Union.

"We believe that now is the time for the political parties, for the interested parties, to make every effort to find a way out of the current impasse, in the form of a compromise. I would like to emphasize that my role, as well as that of ambassadors Hartzell and Degnan, is to support this process. It is the job of the parties and their representatives to find a solution for themselves, with our help, and to get out of this situation, and, especially in the face of important issues like the pandemic and the economic consequences, to find a solution. This is a vision of moving towards unity," Danielsson said.

During their Friday meeting, President Zurbishvili pointed out that the process in negotiations between the parties is moving in the right direction, although there are "attempts to bring tension."

"Rhetoric needs to be eased and the process shifted to the negotiating table to find a solution," she said.

Danielsson in reply noted that Georgia has always been an example of democracy and stability in the region, and this situation should not change that, as it is "in the national interests of the country."

The meeting with the President was attended by the EU Ambassador to Georgia Carl Hartzell and the Adviser to the President of the European Council, Magdalena Grono.

Christian Danielsson then began his work with the representatives of the opposition, resulting on the first day in a four-hour meeting with the United National Movement (UNM), European Georgia, Lelo for Georgia, Strategy Builder, as well as Girchi, and Girchi - More Freedom.

Salome Samadashvili, a member of the UNM, spoke to press before the meeting, stating that the fate of the talks "depends on the position of Georgian Dream today."

Several leaders of the opposition parties held a short briefing for journalists afterwards, saying the meeting had been "intense and difficult." They refrained from sharing further details while the sessions of the negotiation process are ongoing.

The opposition leaders emphasized that all the topics initiated before, especially the early elections and issue of political prisoners, were priorities in the discussion. Zurab Japaridze, the leader

of Girchi - More Freedom, also mentioned that during these discussions, the tone of the ruling party, especially of Irakli Kobakhidze, was very different from their usual rhetoric.

Yet leader of the Labor Party, Shalva Natelashvili, left the March 17 meeting early.

On his way out, Natelashvili told journalists that the reason for his protest was the different perspectives on the meeting agenda and prioritization of the issues to be discussed.

"The Labor Party is leaving the negotiation process, in which setting the date for early elections, the issue of political prisoners, and the absence of the illegally detained Nika Melia, are not being discussed as priorities," Natelashvili said.

He added that his party would join the sessions again only if the issues above have a clear resolution.

"I have said many times that building a house starts from the foundation and not from the roof. When we start discussing electoral, judicial reforms, other problems, or initially request the opposition MPs to enter Parliament, it means that the process is falling apart and that the Russian oligarch remains the master of the country and, therefore, it means that the opposition has failed to fulfill its mission for the Georgian people, for the present and future of the country," Natelashvili said.

The same day, Georgian Dream MP Sozar Subari said that the opposition leaders were "much more constructive than before," and that Georgian Dream is doing everything possible to maintain the strength of the state, and the fact that the party did not terminate the opposition mandates was also an example of the constructiveness of the leading party, with which behavior "they gave an opportunity for dialogue and negotiation."

Danielsson extended his stay since no agreement between the government and the opposition has been reached in the ongoing EU-mediated negotiations.

"We will continue to work to go even further. All parties were very involved in the process. It depends on them to reach an agreement," Danielsson reiterated.



Everyone's shared recommendation is that the Georgian political parties must find common ground, and work together in Parliament. – PM Irakli Garibashvili

On Specific Issues – So Simple, Yet So Complex. Part 1

ANALYSIS BY VICTOR KIPIANI,
CHAIRMAN, GEOCASE

Today's system of interstate relations, namely the aspiration of a state to influence and spread its interests over others, has been based on an elemental "instinct" for several centuries now. Judging by the reality in the world today, this cause of global order (or disorder) is not anticipated to be removed of its priority status, revision, or reassessment in the near future. It is an inexorable constant that the imminent attitude of unceasing competition (which Thomas Hobbes distinguished among the people and explained in his teaching) remains the main determinant among subjects of international relations between states.

THE SPATIAL FACTOR

The endless processes of geopolitical reorganization over the centuries, the desire of some countries to "invade" and establish "living spaces" in the spheres of influence of others, have revived the teachings of geography and turned them into practical tools for developing and pursuing specific interests. Leaving aside the vast scientific entrails, geopolitics has come to observe specific forms and mechanisms of interaction of national interests; it is focused on conclusions, recommendations, and predictions, how specific forces will be deployed in a global or regional context, and how they will be further rearranged under the influence of external and internal factors.

This is an event of great and profound significance, the practical effect of which our country can neither bypass now nor in the future. This is not surprising, since we are accustomed to the fact that Georgia's location, its presence at the crossroads of strong, large-scale, and conflicting geopolitical interests, has been and remains what equally brings both unique opportunities and fateful challenges. Moreover, for the Georgian state, this historically consistent dilemma will forever remain, as due to the collapse of Communism, Fukuyama's announcement about the "end of history" finally passed, and the realization of all other similar geopolitical predictions was postponed to an uncertain future. As a result, as Immanuel Kant said, the struggle for "eternal peace" has "failed", and the renewed confrontation over spheres of influence is taking on an updated theoretical-practical format of great geopol-

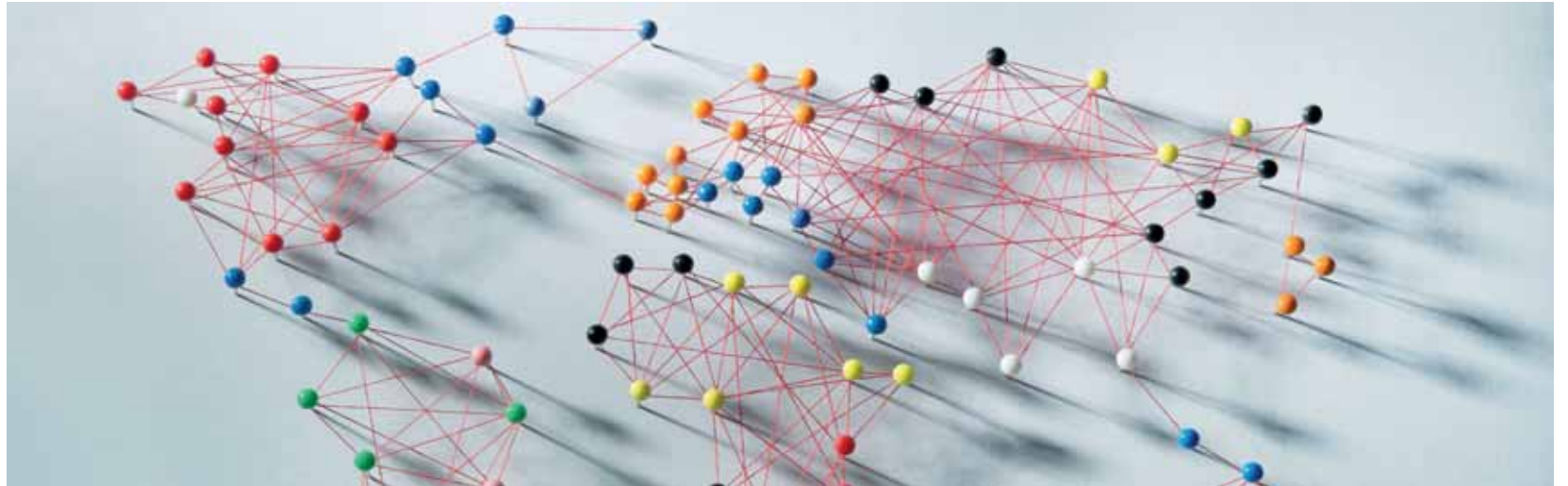


Image source: universidadeuropea.com

itical competition.

Clearly, like so many other events that relate to the once-existing and now-forgotten, the factor of geographical location and space is not new either, and it is linked to several, already relatively old theoretical roots. Among them, the doctrine of Halford Mackinder is one of the basics in political geography, which speaks of the role of Eurasia as the "heartland" of world domination, which is very relevant for Georgia.

When talking about the Eurasian space, we must mention the school of thought of Nicholas Spykman, which, in terms of fighting for influence, highlights the importance of coastline and countries along the Eurasian "heartland". When discussing sea basins (Black Sea or other) as political-geographical spaces, Spykman's doctrine has now been modernized, having once been less "relevant" than Mackinder's. And finally: Talking about the teachings of geopolitical space would be incomplete if we do not recall here Alfred Mahan's theory of the control of naval arteries for the purpose of general space control. This is just a short note to illustrate that geography and location have always had, and will continue to have, a characteristic purpose in terms of both geopolitical analysis and practical policy. That is why, when discussing the Georgian foreign and domestic vectors, along with other external and internal aspects, we must "magnify" the geopolitical and spatial factor of our country and make a more complex and substantive observation. This is necessary to draw the right conclusions.

THE NEAR ABROAD INFLUENCES

The results from the neighborhood are unfortunately well known to us. Even without quoting examples from distant

history, the most recent experience offers extensive enough, although for the most part negative for Georgia, material from which to draw conclusions.

In general, the practice of a large state marking its own "vital interests" in a direct environment has existed for a long time. Once again, we are not going to call for eclectic historical parallels and will name the Monroe Doctrine as the first, relatively orderly theoretical-practical attempt. Its main point was related to the declaration of several basic principles of US foreign policy in the first half of the 19th century. In particular, through the systematic separation of the old (European) and the new (American) worlds, the United States declared its non-interference in European affairs, but at the same time, in its anti-colonial context, considered it inadmissible for European countries to participate in processes in the Western Hemisphere. In practice, the Monroe Doctrine was unsuccessful, but it was certainly the first systematic attempt to separate global spheres of influence, which, along with non-interference in internal affairs, was intended to avoid military conflicts between states.

In our time, this doctrine, has in fact been repeated several times in various forms. Today, it is relatively clearly expressed by China in regards to the South China Sea and the East China Sea. This is the geography where, with the revived Monroe Doctrine has been adapted to the Beijing template. It is an attempt to establish the surrounding area as a zone of Chinese influence. To date, such attempt is largely economic in nature and serves to restrict free shipping. However, in the wake of the declining interests of the US and its regional partners, it is expected that events will develop not only in the scenario of eco-

nomics pressure. This is only a theoretical probability at the moment and its implementation in practice is possible only in the case of a few fateful factors.

We believe that the way the world is developing will make the "Monroe Syndrome" more frequent in international relations. Moreover, in the conditions of egocentric tendencies and countries with nationalist, regional leaders, the practice of spreading influence in the immediate neighborhood becomes the "norm".

Naturally, such practice will never gain legal support, but the created conjuncture will give it the effect of the force of a legal-like counter-realism. This becomes a formidable equation in international politics, especially in regions with geopolitical and mutually exclusive interests. One such region, unfortunately, is the South Caucasus, where, to "break" the existing configuration of our allies, the actions of the West and Tbilisi require a qualitatively new stage.

We consider the formation of new, multilateral or bilateral military-political alliances on the regional mark (Black Sea) as one of the legally and morally proven forms for such a "crossing". In the conditions of "scattering" the global map, the most effective and flexible cooperation of the chosen partners in the West and its distant or not far geographies acquires the contours of micro-alliances (a so-called small NATO). Considering the given global and regional context, in the case of the Black Sea and Georgia, this approach may also work. We have discussed this in previous publications. By the way, using alliances to expand one's own interests in terms of geography – and consequently, to limit undesirable counter-interests – is used by many revisionist countries in inter-

national systems. Probably the most prominent among them is in regards to the Russian experience. When discussing this particular topic, we obviously do not consider further distorting the practice of increasing influence – when it transcends written and unwritten norms and takes the form of open military aggression, occupation, and annexation. Such a gross violation of international law has manifested itself in the attitude of the Russian Federation towards its neighbors. This turned not only the regional order upside down, but also set a dangerous precedent for the sustainability of global relations in general – a system that, even without Russian intervention (since the end of the Cold War), has struggled to find the optimal balance. In Moscow's spatial policy, the once Soviet sphere has been replaced by the vague connotation of the "Near Abroad". And its theoretical substantiation with the formulation of Primakov's doctrine, has meant nothing more than declaring the Russian neighborhood a "privileged sphere of influence" and gaining recognition as such by the West. The so-called "ethnic" – in reality, geopolitical conflicts (including in Georgia) – and then military aggression and occupation (in the case of Crimea, annexation) has become a tool to incarnate this doctrine. In the military sense, the Anti Access/Area Denial method has become a spatial method in terms of geographical expansion. It should also be noted that in recent years (especially after the annexation of Crimea) the Russian methodology has been relatively refined, which is more often manifested in the impact of soft power on the countries of the region.

Continued in next week's GT, and online at georgiatoday.ge



OP-ED BY NUGZAR B. RUHADZE

The story of Georgia is like a bestselling thriller intrigue, keeping the pot boiling from cover to cover: as one protest ends in the street, be ready for another the next afternoon; when one celebrity is taken into custody, behold, there goes another one to the reformatory; as soon as one scandal of a personal nature explodes on our ever-shimmering television screens, there starts brewing another,

Recognizing the Working Women beyond Politics

even a more rousing one. This and other samples of our societal ups and downs fill our informational space on an everyday basis, so much so that the overall impression, formulated from what we read, hear and see via the media, is that the country has stopped moving, all is hopelessly bad, and the nation is on the verge of a catastrophe, expected to crash on our poor heads in any possible twinkle of an eye. The news pieces of the nation's social, business, cultural, economic and industrial character have become sporadic in the realm of mass communication.

Meanwhile, believe it or not, the country is working, people tend to be creative, and the youth is trying to live up to contemporary demands and expectations. Only we, the regular folks, know nothing about it! One of the clearest examples of the nation's movement forward with promising research potential and a considerable scientific bottom-line is the fact that the Georgian Academy of Natural Sciences (GANS), headed by its

president, Professor Paata Kervalishvili, in collaboration with the Georgian Young Scientists' Association (GYSA), has formed a group to support women in research and science, which is led by young bio-medical geneticist Anna Kekelidze. The support group for female scientists includes the women who work in various fields of science, and are experts in research and technology, social science or legal matters. The team is focused on developing socially beneficial strategies, and improving the research skills of women, which has been recognized as one of the strongest national priorities.

Women in Georgia remain a minority in science and technology. The number of Georgian women in research and development is far behind the EU and US, where women make up 33% of researchers in this field. Incidentally, in the former Soviet bloc countries, about 40% of researchers were women. This was a legacy of the consistent investment in education by the socialist governments

that was in place until the early 1990s. Georgia's current growth strategy is to enhance the socio-economic role of women. Consequently, the selection criteria for research grants, universities and other donors should take into consideration the proportion of women among teaching researchers.

Georgia is certainly taking a number of affordable measures to integrate young female scientists into its research and innovation strategy. However, the continued lack of representation of women at the top level of entrepreneurship and faculties, management and science decision-making indicates that we still have to go another mile. For instance, less than 10% of female membership in GANS might serve as a vivid corroboration of this appreciable piece of advice, but it is also true that Paata Kervalishvili and Anna Kekelidze have created a wonderful paradigm of generational cooperation in matters scientific and technological, benefitting the national progress. By the way, the democratic development which

has become a household word in our freedom-of-speech-hungry Georgia, is something wonderful, but it is not everything. Scientific development might be even more important for the nation's future. In a word, we need qualified labor more than politics of any degree and qualification.

In Georgia, if we hear a female voice on the radio, or see a female face on the television, they inevitably belong to either a politician or a journalist. We barely even know of the women in this country who are outstanding researchers, technologists, doctors, teachers, authors, translators, engineers, inventors or entrepreneurs. Meanwhile, these people are doing a great job, each of them in their own place, but media has little idea of their life and value, as if this nation has nothing else to do except politics. Well, be it as it is, but it is time to give preference to what matters more and deserves higher recognition. Laughing this off might turn this nation into a subject of cruel mockery someday.

The Sit Down: A Discussion with The State Security Service on the Borderization



Image source: interpressnews

INTERVIEW BY MICHAEL GODWIN

The State Security Service of Georgia is largely thought of as comparable with such storied organizations as the United States' Central Intelligence Agency, the CIA, and the United Kingdom's Secret Intelligence Service, or MI6. While this may be accurate in some respects, the SSSG has a very unique mission with regards to the disputed regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Operating in a deeply complex environment, and with an occupation force that operates illegally, Irakli Antadze, Deputy Director of the Information Analytical Department at the SSSG, has quite the workload. In this edition of *The Sit Down*, GEORGIA TODAY speaks with him on the mission at these so-called borders, and the growing complications of making safe a frozen conflict zone.

Irakli Antadze, as well as being a deputy director, is also the leading participant in the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM), which is a tool of the Geneva International Discussions (GID), and also represents the State Security Service in those Geneva International Discussions.

HOW DO YOU AND YOUR DEPARTMENT OPERATE WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE SECURITY SITUATION AT THE ADMINISTRATIVE BOUNDARY LINE (ABL)?

The State Security Service of Georgia is the leading agency in security related issues along the ABL, which actually is an occupation line. First and foremost, let me highlight that an occupation line or ABL is merely a notion. It's not a state border. It marks the territory that is under control of the central government of Georgia, and territories which are temporarily out of the order of the central government. So, we're the leading agency and I'm the leading participant in the IPRM, a tool of the GID, one of the most important tools when we discuss the security related issues and ongoing incidents like borderization, illegal detentions, which are unfortunately quite frequent across the occupation lines, and also the humanitarian related issues are also subjected to the IPRM format.

Formally, it is absolutely apoliticized. Its main goal is to solve security related issues and humanitarian issues in order to make the lives of the population along this occupation line easier. As to our presence along the ABL, we are represented by our police forces, meaning our units of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, but we are the leading agency and we are coordinating in response to all security related issues along the occupation line, all related subjects such as regulations, negotiations,

and also the hotline holders operating with the EUMM. It's a daily based practice if an incident takes place or for humanitarian issues requiring a response, such as a Medical Evacuation or something like this.

We're also activating the hotline with the hotline holders of the de-facto representatives in Tskhinvali and their representatives of the Russian occupation forces. Actually, the Russian hotline holder representative is the FSB border guard representative across the occupation line. It's a daily practice, especially when we have cases of illegal detentions of Georgian citizens, which is quite frequent, and in cases of so-called borderization. This is another inhuman act led and facilitated by Russian occupation forces. It's a matter of disturbance of the peaceful population residing on both sides of the line.

WITHIN THAT TOTAL MISSION, WHAT WOULD YOU SAY ARE YOUR SHORT-TERM AND LONG-TERM GOALS?

I will start with the long-term goals. Our long-term goal is to achieve our final goal: the full scale resolution and removal of all artificial barriers and hindrances along the occupation line, of course the removal of all occupation forces, and, finally, reconciliation between two artificially divided communities who, through the ages, have links between relatives. There are a lot of mixed families. All those problems are artificial, and started not just in the early 1990s but in the 1920s when Georgia was occupied by Soviet Russia.

As to the short-term goals, it's our daily working routine to release our illegally detained citizens. We have illegally detained citizens in both Tskhinvali and in occupied Abkhazia. I have some figures here on the illegal detentions. For instance, in 2020, in occupied Abkhazia, they detained 13 Georgia citizens, and in occupied Tskhinvali they detained 64. Those figures are fluctuating. For example, in 2015, there were 336 illegal detentions in Abkhazia and 163 in Tskhinvali, and even more going back to 2013.

This is the main issue of our concern, because it doesn't matter the number of illegal detainees, even if we have one illegal detainee, it's a big problem. Of course, part of our daily routine is also reacting to illegal borderization cases and the hotline mechanism that we activate immediately when an incident becomes known. Then we inform the co-chairs of the GID, both directly and through our partner agencies, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. We then try to deal with these grave incidents through the strong support of our international partners.

YOU MENTIONED, ESPECIALLY IN THE SHORT-TERM, THE SMALLER TASKS THAT BUILD TO ACHIEVE LARGER GOALS. WHAT ARE SOME OF THESE SMALLER

DAILY AND WEEKLY TASKS?

It depends. For instance, the achievement of our biggest goal lies in some dimension with the GID, because we have the six-point agreement and the main part of this agreement is the removal of occupation forces to previous positions and launching international security mechanisms. While Russian occupation forces are still present in both occupied territories, any engagement of international security arrangements will not be effective. So first and foremost, subject to the final goal, it is to remove the Russian occupation forces. It's a political issue and this is why we are discussing this issue in Geneva because the GID is a political format and we have strong support from the US delegation, who are permanently represented at this forum.

IN LIGHT OF SOME OF THE MORE RECENT ACTIONS TAKEN BY THE OCCUPATION FORCES, WHAT ARE THE PROACTIVE MEASURES BEING TAKEN BY THE SSSG AND PARTNER AGENCIES?

We have a constructive approach. We always refrain from any use of force or anything like that, because we deem it necessary. We have existing mechanisms to diffuse any incidents or divergence. For example, when we are dealing with illegal detainees, we use the hotline and meetings in the IPRM format, as well as the GID. We believe it to be the only way to solve all existing divergences; the use of force and actions like this are not the proper method. We try to persuade them, but in vain. The position of the central government has never been a cause for allegations that we used force or violated any rights. Yes, we have police forces represented along the occupation line, but their goal and task is to promote a secure environment. Any armed encounter is not in our plans.

WHAT WOULD YOU CONSIDER TO BE THE GREATEST THREATS AND OBSTACLES TO THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THOSE MEASURES, BUT ALSO TO THE SAFETY AND LIVELIHOOD OF THE POPULATION AND THE OFFICIALS PRESENT THERE?

The main obstacle is the presence of occupation forces on the ground. I can definitely say that the people living there have nothing to hide, as they have known each other since childhood; they are relatives. If one day comes, and I hope this comes soon, that the occupation forces leave the area, everything will be ok, because the locals will have nothing keeping them apart.

These two artificially divided communities are very traditional, and these traditions are represented throughout the age groups. So the main hindrance and obstacle is the presence of these Russian

occupying forces. I can give you an example in the illegal detentions and the rising number of groundless allegations. Those practices are carried out by Russian occupation forces. If a local from Tskhinvali tries to cross the occupation line and the Russian patrol catches him, they put him in jail. Yet, we do not prohibit the movement of people across the occupation line, and it is our strong position to promote this freedom as a human right. So, what I'm trying to say is that not only Georgians are victims of this practice being carried out by Russians, but also Tskhinvali residents.

IT'S CLEAR THAT THE FORCES ON THE OCCUPATION LINE ARE NOT TRADITIONAL BORDER SECURITY FORCES, AND ACT IN A FAR MORE MILITARISTIC MANNER. IS THERE A PLAN OR STRUCTURED RESPONSE SHOULD HOSTILITIES RESUME?

We're doing our best to avoid any outbreak of hostilities, because it would be detrimental not only for Georgians but also for the Ossetians who are living on the other side of the occupation line as a peaceful population. Our adherence to the principals of a full scale peaceful resolution and the position of the central government at the highest level is peace. All our activity is directed towards this direction. Our firm stance is to not only avoid but also prevent any possible outbreak of hostilities.

WITH THE CONFLICT CAME THE INFUX OF INTERNALLY DISPLACED PEOPLES (IDPS). WHAT IS THE PLAN TO ASSIST THESE PEOPLE, AND WILL THEY PEOPLE EVER BE ABLE TO GO HOME?

So, when we are speaking about IDPs, it should be divided. The first wave of IDPs was in the early 1990s after the wars in the former Abkhazia and South Ossetia Oblasts, and the second wave was received after the Russian-Georgia war in 2008. I would like to underscore one important issue, that every single person from these groups is to return to their homes in both Abkhazia and in the Tskhinvali region. The children are growing up with this hope.

As to our participation in this process, we have confidence in our existing activities within the current IPRM formats. Of course, it's the aim of the occupation forces to establish a sense of nihilism on both sets of residents along the ABL, and also the IDPs. But these people continue to live despite the risk to themselves along this line. Many times, when I meet with people who were displaced by the Russian-Georgian war, I hear that their dream is to go back to their homes, which were in fact destroyed by the Russians. Several villages that were destroyed in Tsartseni are now used as a firing range by the occupation forces.

AS A GENERAL RULE, CONTESTED BORDERS GO ONE OF TWO WAYS: EITHER TOTAL RESOLUTION, LIKE



Image source: EUMM

IRELAND WITH THE GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT, OR TOTAL MILITARIZATION, AS IN THE CASE OF THE NORTH/SOUTH KOREAN DMZ. WHAT IS THE PERCEIVED OUTCOME WITH THE ABL HERE IN GEORGIA?

From my perspective and experience, I would not draw parallels between those two cases, because every single conflict is unique. It's determined by various factors, such as culture. If we take, for instance, Abkhazia: we have common blood; more than two thirds have Georgian surnames. So, what is the core of those two wars? The core is purely artificial. The Russians have poisoned them, even as Abkhaz people are studying their language, they speak Russian. The only way to rescue them in the long-term perspective is to have them live with us, because nobody here is going to do anything terrible to them. We see them as our brothers. It's the same for Ossetians.

The only final outcome should be the removal of occupation and a full scale resolution. Believe me, it's possible if we eliminate or at least minimize the negative influence of the Russian presence. They are operating, for example on social media, with Cold War wording. They are living in the past, in the USSR. The more progressive youth, who are more or less well educated, want to see more. For example, Abkhazia has one of the most beautiful coastlines, but the infrastructure remains destroyed, the result of living with Russia.

THE RECENT MOVE NEAR KHURVALETI SHOWS THE BRUSH NATURE OF THE RUSSIAN FSB, GRU, AND OTHER FORCES DEPLOYED AGAINST YOUR TEAMS AT THE ABL. DO YOU FEEL THAT THIS IS A SIGN OF THINGS TO COME, OR ONLY A ONE-OFF OPERATION INTO GEORGIA?

It's just another visible example as to how Russian occupation forces are operating. We have many incidents. For instance, last year, they captured Zaza Gakheladze and wounded him. They shot him in the leg and illegally deprived him of his liberty. It's one more example of the ugly face of occupation. A majority of the illegal detentions take place on Tbilisi-administered territory. For example, the man who was chased by Russians was cultivating his land. It's often very difficult to distinguish whether you are on Tbilisi-administered territory, or out of it. As I mentioned before, the ABL is merely a notion. Those farmers don't have GPS navigation, so that's why we always stress out meetings in both formats the need to apply a humanitarian approach. When you are tending to cattle or foraging in the forest, how, without GPS, are you able to identify your location? The Russians are trying to do this to establish that nihilism, and also to push their politically motivated goals. But it won't work, because those people living there are aware and they love their homes and they will never abandon them.

Occupation of Crimea, 7 Years On – What Have We Learned?

OP-ED BY DAVID BRAGVADZE,
GEORGIAN INSTITUTE
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Seven years have passed since the illegal occupation of Crimea by the Russian Federation.

At the end of 2013, the Ukrainian capital was engulfed by mass protests. The reason was the refusal of the then President of the country, Viktor Yanukovich, to sign the Association Agreement with the European Union and, to aggravate things further, his attempt to get closer to the Eurasian Union instead. Yanukovich, now mostly remembered for his gold-adorned villa and toilet seat, fled to Russia on February 21, 2014, as a result of the protests that went down in history as the “Euro-maidan.”

The protests of the Ukrainian people against the pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian authorities were met with pain in Moscow, which in response began the occupation of the Crimean peninsula (including the city and port of Sevastopol). The formal excuse was the need to protect the “Russian-speaking population” and the “referendum” held under the auspices of the “Green People”, which resulted in the Crimean population “voting” to join the Russian Federation. Practical reasons had nobody second-guessing.

The Crimean “referendum” was held in gross violation of international law, and was immediately declared illegal by a Ukrainian court. It is today still considered illegal by the international community.

The occupation of Crimea was another manifestation of the Kremlin’s revisionist policies after the 2008 Russia-Georgia War, aimed at maintaining / expanding spheres of influence in the spirit of the Cold War and violating the principles established in international politics after World War II.

The occupation of Crimea, which was supported by a part of the Russian-



Image source: Jane Sweeney/Getty

speaking population of the peninsula, had dire consequences for the same population. The economic situation of the inhabitants of the peninsula has not even marginally improved over the last seven years, with water supply and other household issues remaining an unresolved problem to this day. Further, Russian passports issued in Crimea are not recognized by the vast majority of countries in the world, which restricts its residents from free movement.

Similarly, the situation is dire in terms of the legal status of the Ukrainian population remaining in Crimea and the Crimean Tatars. Those who remained

on the peninsula after the occupation could not enjoy basic human rights and freedoms.

Due to the occupation of Crimea, the Russian Federation was imposed economic sanctions by the European Union, the United States and other countries, which further weakened the already struggling Russian economy. At the same time, the peninsula itself has become an additional burden on the Russian budget, another subsidiary region has been added to Moscow, all this having a serious impact on the economic situation of the population of the Russian Federation.

In addition to the occupation of the Crimean peninsula, the Russian Federation unleashed war in the Lugansk and Donetsk regions on April 6, 2014. The Donbas War claimed the lives of 4,500 Ukrainian soldiers and 5,670 separatists, including 500 members of the armed forces of the Russian Federation. According to various sources, up to 3,500 civilians were killed and 1,500,000 Ukrainians became refugees. The Kremlin has not yet claimed any responsibility for the events in Donbas.

As a result of the occupation of the Crimean peninsula (including the city and port of Sevastopol) and the outbreak

of the Donbas War, Russia has lost its influence and leverage over Ukraine’s domestic politics, as a significant part of the Russian-speaking population no longer participates in Ukrainian politics.

Today, as EU leaders appear in disagreement as to whether the EU’s Russia policy should be centered around Ukraine, reminding the whole world of the story of the Crimea annexation is as important as ever. This difficult lesson in history clearly shows that Russia is not ready for civilized relations with neighboring countries (or with the rest of the world), and is trying to achieve its strategic goals using long-forgotten methods.

Changing Connectivity Patterns in the South Caucasus

ANALYSIS BY EMIL AVDALIANI

Connectivity patterns in the South Caucasus are changing. What used to be a relatively landlocked region, despite its access to the Black Sea, is now opening up, with Turkey and Iran likely to have new railway connections to Russia.

A cornerstone of this change is the November 2020 tripartite agreement between Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia that ended the Second Karabakh War. Among the provisions, Turkey is set to gain a land corridor from Azerbaijan’s

exclave of Nakhchivan to the rest of Azerbaijan via Armenia. The stipulation in the document reads: “Armenia guarantees the security of transport links ... [for] unimpeded movement of citizens, vehicles, and cargo in both directions”. Moreover, “Transport control is exercised by the Border Service of the Federal Security Service of Russia. By agreement of the parties, the construction of new transport communications connecting the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic and Azerbaijan’s western regions will be provided.”

This represents a major breakthrough for Ankara, as it would allow the country to anchor its influence on the Caspian Sea and perhaps, in the longer term, look

even further towards its Central Asia kinsmen. Ankara has had this vision since the establishment of the Turkish Republic following World War I, when measures were taken to obtain a direct land corridor to Nakhchivan.

The push for Turkey’s corridor to Azerbaijan paves the way for a Turkish military presence on Azerbaijani soil. The Turkish parliament voted to allow Ankara to send troops to Azerbaijan. Indeed, Ankara has long been working on using the Nakhchivan corridor for geopolitical purposes. Recently, the Turkish government announced plans to build a railway to Nakhchivan, following the earlier announcement of a gas pipeline construction to the exclave. This creates a

major dilemma for Iran and Russia, who both historically viewed the Caspian Sea as a condominium between themselves. They also aspired to project their influence over Azerbaijan, which is set to serve as a transit country for the North-South transport corridor, stretching from the Persian Gulf to the Baltics.

A Turkish presence in Azerbaijan disrupts the Russo-Iranian vision. But beyond the military issues, Iran is worried that the new corridor may stoke pan-Turkic sentiments, as a large ethnic group of Azerbaijanis live in the north of the country. Additionally, for Iran, the nascent Nakhchivan corridor could disrupt some of the routes which have been in use since the end of the first Karabakh War in 1994. For instance, where Azerbaijan has been dependent on Iran for transiting energy and other supplies to Nakhchivan, now Armenia will guarantee the opening up of a corridor through its territory to allow Azerbaijan to transport goods directly to the Nakhchivan exclave.

In normal circumstances, a higher level of connectivity is a boon for countries. But in the South Caucasus, it could also be a cause of economic isolation and even isolation or projection of external geopolitical power. Take Armenia, cut off for decades from regional pipelines, roads and a major railway connecting the Caspian and Black seas, and Turkey.

When the new Karabakh agreement was announced, many in Tbilisi began to wonder whether Georgia’s transit

capabilities might be challenged. In the short and medium term, no reshuffling in the region’s connectivity patterns is likely to take place. After all, Baku and Ankara already have well-functioning railway and pipeline infrastructure running through Georgia, and Georgia has been officially engaged in the trilateral partnership with Turkey and Azerbaijan for nearly a decade: the endurance of the format has been proven by changes of governments and region-wide geopolitical transformations over that decade. Turkey wants a more stable Georgia, with deeper economic and energy relations, while Azerbaijan needs Turkey’s backing. Georgia, under pressure from Russia and, given that it is located between its two fellow members of cooperation dependent on transit, in turn needs both Turkey and Azerbaijan.

The collective West has a strategic interest in strengthening connectivity to the Caspian region, which would enable more strategic and commercial access to Central Asia while balancing Russian and other powers’ influence. However, following the war in Karabakh, Russian troops are now present in all three South Caucasus states, which can allow it to exercise control over the East-West rail-road and pipeline infrastructure on relatively short notice.

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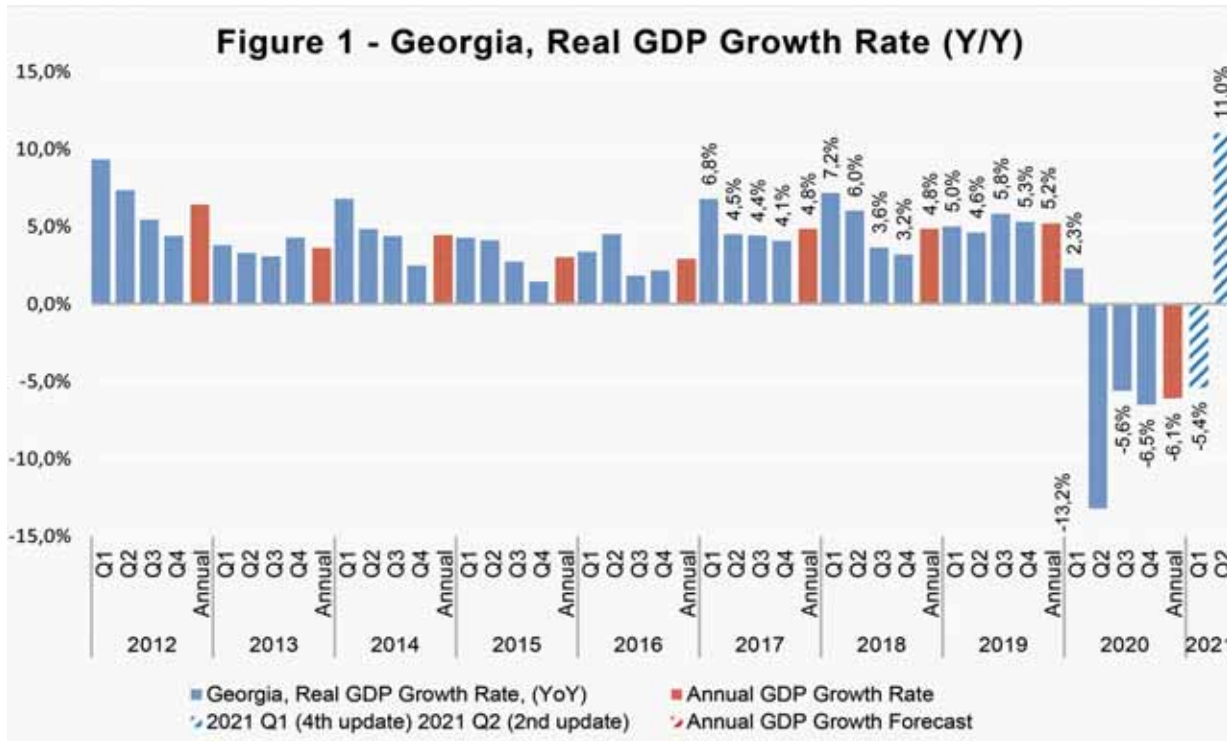
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ISET GDP Forecast | Growth Ups & Downs Projected in Qs 1 and 2 Point to an Uncertain Recovery in 2021



BY DAVIT KESHELAVA & YASYA BABYCH

ISET-PI has updated its real GDP growth forecast for the first and second quarters of 2021. Here are the highlights of this month's release:

HIGHLIGHTS

- The real GDP growth rate amounted to -11.5% year-on-year for January 2021.
- As a result of the update, the growth forecast for Q1 of 2021 remained unchanged, at -5.4%. ISET-PI's second forecast for Q2 of 2021 puts GDP growth at positive 11%.
- Since Q2 2021, the growth rate is relative to the same quarter of the previous year, the unusually high 11% growth rate is in part due to the pandemic-driven collapse of GDP observed in Q2 2020 (negative 13.2%). Thus, our forecast model "expects" the bounce back recovery of real GDP relative to last year.
- The negative 5.4% growth projected in Q1 2020 is possibly too "optimistic", as most of the lockdown measures were extended until mid-March.
- Based on January data, the annual growth in 2021, is expected to be 2.5% in the worst-case scenario, and 3.6% in the best-case or an average long-term growth scenario. Our middle-of-the-road scenario (based on the average growth in the last four quarters) predicts a 2.9% increase in real GDP.
- Overall, the projected growth numbers for Q1 and Q2 2021 should be interpreted with caution, as our model does not take into account the current and potential future public health measures to contain the pandemic, significant uncertainties associated with the pace of vaccination and the economic rebound after the lockdown.

Forecasts of the real GDP growth. ISET-PI's forecast is a little bit more pessimistic than the forecast of the National Bank of Georgia (NBG) and International Organizations (ADB, IMF, and World Bank). According to the recent Monetary Policy Report of NBG (February 2021), real GDP will increase by around 4% in 2021. This forecast assumes

that with an improving epidemiological situation, the tourism sector will gradually begin to recover in the second half of the year. According to the Asian Development Bank's (ADB) recent Economic Outlook (September 2020), Georgia's economy is expected to expand by 4.5% this year. Similarly, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (January 2021) predicts a 4.3% growth rate. The World Bank (WB) (January 2021) has one of the most conservative predictions among international (and even national) organizations. According to the WB, the economy is projected to increase by 4% in 2021.

GDP growth by Categories of Use. Geostat has released information about the decomposition of economic growth by categories of use for the first three quarters of 2020. Increase in consumption expenditure (both public and private) was the main positive contributor to real GDP in the first and third quarters of 2020. One may note that overall, GDP growth was -5.6% in Q3, but the collapse would have been more dramatic without the increase in consumption expenditure. The boost to overall consumption starting from Q3 2020 could be explained by the fiscal stimulus measures mitigating the effects of the pandemic, as well as favorable growth of credit and lending in the economy. Investment had a small positive contribution to growth in the first quarter of 2020, and a small negative contribution of 3.3% and 2.1% in the second and third quarters of 2020 respectively. Net export was the main contributor of the economic slowdown in all three quarters of 2020, and the drop was mainly driven by the disruption in tourism revenues. The second quarter of 2020 saw a decline in all three categories of expenditure, negatively contributing to GDP growth. (see figure above).

National and Foreign Currency Deposits. The first set of variables with a moderate effect on our forecast relates to national and foreign currency deposits in commercial banks. All categories of national currency deposits experienced growth in annual terms, while some of them decline on a month-to-month basis in January. In particular, national currency demand deposits saw an annual

increase of 9.9%, while time deposits increased by 86.8% annually. Consequently, national currency total deposits increased by 37.3% yearly. In the same period, time deposits increased by 7.1% in monthly terms, while demand deposits and currency in circulation decreased by 7.3% and 5.2% respectively, compared to the previous month.

In contrast to domestic currency deposits, foreign currency total deposits increased relatively moderately, by 27%, compared to the same month of the previous year. In the same period, nearly all categories of foreign currency deposits increased by more than 10% annually. The annual growth of foreign currency deposits is partially driven by the depreciation of the national currency. Nevertheless, growth rates are still pronounced even after excluding the exchange rate effect. As a result, deposit dollarization increased by 1 percentage points monthly and decreased by 2.1 percentage points yearly. Despite the positive annual trends, deposit-related variables still had a slight negative contribution to real GDP growth based on our model.

VAT Turnover. As far as other variables of interest go, VAT turnover in January decreased by 13.7% yearly and 17.6% monthly. Consequently, this variable had a negative contribution to real GDP growth.

External Merchandise Trade. In January, Georgia's exports saw a 16.2% annual decline. This drop was driven by a reduction in the re-export of motor cars from Azerbaijan; alongside the export of ferroalloys and natural grape wines to Russia; re-export of motor cars to Armenia; re-export/export of motor cars, chemical and natural fertilizers to Ukraine; and export of raw gold to Switzerland. In contrast, Georgian export of ferroalloys to the USA; copper ores and concentrates to Bulgaria; and hazelnuts and walnuts to Germany registered an annual increase.

During this period, the import of goods decreased by 16.6%, driven by a reduction in petroleum and fuel product imports from Russia and Azerbaijan (mostly due to a significant annual reduction of crude oil prices on the international market in annual terms). Among other negatively affected imports were:

precious metals, copper ores and concentrates from Armenia; carbon steel rods from Ukraine; motor cars and Portland cement from Turkey; motor cars from USA, Germany and Japan; and paving tiles from Iran. In contrast, Georgian imports of drilling machines and ready-made garments from China; and trucks and metalworking machines from Italy experienced yearly growth. Consequently, the trade deficit shrank dramatically by 16.8% yearly, and amounted to 313.6 million USD. Overall, trade related variables had a positive contribution to the GDP growth forecast.

Money Inflow. After a significant slowdown in money inflows at the beginning of the previous year, remittances were on the path of recovery. In January, remittances increased by 19.2% yearly. The main contributors to this increase were Italy (by 29.7% YoY, contribution 5 ppts), USA (by 33.2% YoY, 3.6 ppts), Greece (by 25.2% YoY, 3 ppts), Azerbaijan (by 213.1% YoY, 2.9 ppts), Ukraine (by 80.6% YoY, 2.3 ppts), and Germany (by 57.2% YoY, 1.8 ppts). Whereas money inflows from Russia declined (by 11.4% YoY, -2.4 ppts). The recovery of remittances flows made a positive contribution to the growth forecast.

International Visits and Tourism. Tourism arrivals and receipts declined sharply as a result of numerous travel bans and precautionary behavior on the part of potential tourists. In January, the number of international visitors decreased by 93.6% yearly (driven by Azerbaijan [-23.2 ppts], Armenia [-16.7 ppts], Russia [-16.2 ppts], Turkey [-11.6 ppts] and EU [-4.1 ppts]), while the decline in tourist numbers (visitors who spent 24 hours or more in Georgia) amounted to 91.9%. Overall, dramatically declining numbers of visitors and tourists, along with a sharp decrease in touristic spending, has made a significant negative contribution to the growth forecast.

Foreign Direct Investment. Foreign direct investment (FDI) in Georgia amounted to only \$616.9 million in 2020, which is 52.9% lower than in 2019. According to Geostat, the main reasons for decreasing FDI included transfer of ownership from non-resident to the resident units in several companies, which reduced the value of FDI by \$340.5 million. In addition, FDI experienced notable reductions in hotels and restaurants (284.3% yearly, contributing 26.1 ppts, mostly due to change of ownership), energy (97.8% yearly, -19.5 ppts contribution), transport (77.1% yearly, -3.2 ppts), manufacturing (41% yearly, -3.6 ppts), communication (33.4% yearly, -1.8 ppts) and health and social work (24.6% yearly, -0.3 ppts) sectors, while FDI increased in real estate, renting and business activities (729% yearly, 4.8 ppts), mining (93.8% yearly, 3.7 ppts), construction (76.3% yearly, 2.1 ppts), agriculture (56.2% yearly, contributing only 0.2 ppts to FDI growth, as agriculture still remains a very small part of the overall foreign investment) and financial (47.1% yearly, 9.8 ppts) sectors. The recent trends in FDI are not taken into consideration in our model yet.

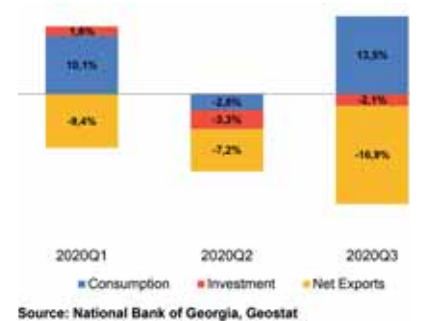
Real Effective Exchange Rate. In January, the Georgian lari real exchange rate depreciated sharply both in monthly and yearly terms against all main trading currencies. The Real Effective Exchange Rate (REER) depreciated by 0.9% relative to the previous months,

and by 9.1%, relative to the same month of the previous year. Notably, the lari real exchange rate depreciated with respect to the euro, the US dollar and Turkish lira by 18.8%, 11.3% and 2.3% respectively in yearly terms, but appreciated with respect to the euro and dollar both by 0.4%. REER appreciated with respect to the Russian ruble by 0.6% and 2.9% respectively in monthly and annual terms. Depreciation of the REER is typically associated with domestic export goods gaining competitiveness on the foreign markets, but it also translates into increased prices on imported goods. Overall, REER-related variables had a small negative contribution to the real GDP growth projections.

Inflation. In January, the annual inflation of consumer prices amounted to 2.8%, which is only slightly lower than the targeted 3%. However, the relatively low level of inflation over the last two months is related to the government subsidy of utility fees (which reduced annual inflation rate by 1.6 ppts). Approximately 1.8 percentage points of CPI inflation was due to higher food prices (increased 6.3% annually), while tobacco prices contributed 0.3 percentage points to CPI. However, decreased oil prices made a notable negative contribution (0.7 ppts) to the annual inflation measure. The latter trend is mostly a reflection of significantly weakened oil prices on the global market (Euro Brent Spot Price (COP) decreased by 14.2% yearly). Meanwhile, the measure of core inflation amounted to 5.7%. Overall, CPI related variables had a slight negative contribution to the GDP forecast.

World prices. The other variables to have a negative contribution to growth forecast are the Metals Price Index (PMETA), and the Agricultural Raw Materials Index (PRAWM). In January, metal prices, in annual terms, increased by 32.4%, while the price of agricultural raw material prices increased by 8.6% in annual terms. Adding the PMETA and PRAWM indicators to the model decreases the growth forecast for the first and second quarters of 2021.

Consumer Credit. In January 2021, the total volume of commercial banks' consumer credit increased by a mere 0.1% monthly and by 14.7% yearly. However, the credit volume of commercial banks' short-term consumer credits declined by 2.7% and 7.5% in monthly and yearly terms, respectively (the main driver behind this negative trend being short-term consumer loans in foreign currency, which increased by 4.1% monthly, but went down by 43.4% annually), whereas the credit volume of commercial banks' long-term consumer credits increased by 0.2% monthly and 15.8% yearly. Overall, the variables related to consumer credit have had a negative impact on the growth forecast.



Chances to Save with Exclusive Deals and Offers During Carrefour Brand Days



Carrefour, owned and operated by Majid Al Futtaim in Georgia, has launched Carrefour Brand Days — a period of great promotions and offers on a range of food and non-food items from 10 - 23 March, across all Carrefour Georgia stores.

The above promotions period represents yet another opportunity for customers to enjoy Carrefour's convenient and safe unrivalled shopping experience.

Moreover, during the Carrefour Brand Days, customers will be able to earn and accumulate points using MyCLUB — the brand's special loyalty programme — when purchasing Carrefour products. Customers will be able to double their points throughout the period when buying coffee, ready breakfast, marshmallows, washing liquid, kitchen towel and toilet tissue. Additionally, the full range of Carrefour drinks will be on offer for the whole month: 1 GEL = 1 point; get 1 point for 1 GEL.

Within the Brand Days campaign, Carrefour investing in the development of its own branded products, in response to customers' growing demand for high quality products at affordable prices. Carrefour is constantly expanding its range of Carrefour private label products

that are comparable in quality with leading brands in the market, available at competitive prices.

CARREFOUR'S PRIVATE LABEL

Carrefour Georgia prides itself on offering its communities a vast assortment of up to 40,000 items across its stores. Providing the highest quality products at unbeatable value, Carrefour's private label products are noteworthy due to their exclusivity and distinctive characteristics.

The Carrefour private label products are represented by three pillars: the traceability and quality of their key ingredients; the quality of the product itself, be it the taste, the production, absence of artificial additives and GMOs, and the careful consideration of nutritional value; as well as the safety of the product — all products under Carrefour's private label followed recommended safety guidelines and are tested to ensure they meet stringent standards.

Notably, the ingredients for the brand's products come from all around the world, mainly from Europe, under strict guidelines of sourcing and quality.

One of the ranges under the private label banner is Carrefour Bio. Launched under the general Carrefour private label

in 1997, Carrefour Bio offers organic products that adhere to strict rules of biological production, without the use of additional harmful chemicals. These products are designed to fulfill customers' demand of having healthy balanced and desirable diet at reasonable prices.

For those who are health focused or on restricted diets, such as people with diabetes, Carrefour also offers products without or containing reduced amounts of sugar, products without gluten, and healthy substitutes for people with a lactose intolerance.

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Another collection under Carrefour's private label is the brand's EcoPlanet range. As part of the Majid Al Futtaim ecosystem, Carrefour sets the standard for being a sustainable, responsible, self-sufficient business. As part of its eco-conscious strategy, Carrefour offers its EcoPlanet range whose products are made from 100 per cent recycled paper.

MORE ON MYCLUB

MyCLUB was launched in Georgia a year ago, on Carrefour's seventh anniversary. Carrefour decided to reward its loyal customers by offering them the opportunity to earn points and redeem them



through discounts and a unique loyalty program.

To become a member, customers can

download the Carrefour Georgia app on the Google Play Store or Apple's App Store and register.

Online Course on Sexual & Reproductive Health & Rights of Women with Psychosocial Needs

An online training course on the sexual and reproductive health and rights of women with psychosocial needs has been developed in cooperation with the Public Defender of Georgia, Tbilisi State Medical University and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Georgia Country Office.

The online training course is available on the website of Tbilisi State Medical University (<http://sms.tsmu.edu/cme>), and its target group is certified obstetrician-gynecologists and psychiatrists. The course has been accredited by the Professional Development Council under the Ministry of Internally Displaced

Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labor, Health and Social Affairs of Georgia, and has been awarded 6 credit points. The course consists of three modules and respective multiple choice tests.

This novelty will help participating certified obstetrician-gynecologists and psychiatrists to deepen their knowledge in the health management of women with psycho-social needs, as well as their rights and the commitments undertaken by the state.

The program is based on the needs identified as a result of a 2019 study "Situation of Women's Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in Psychiatric and Public Care Institutions" carried out

by the Public Defender, with UNFPA support. The program was developed under two UN joint programs: for Gender Equality, implemented with the financial support of the Swedish Government, and Transforming Social Protection for Persons with Disabilities in Georgia, implemented with the support of the SDG Fund.

For more information, please contact: Office of the Public Defender via e-mail: info@ombudsman.ge
Institute of Postgraduate Medical Education and Continuous Professional Development of the Tbilisi State Medical University via e-mail: postgraduate@tsmu.edu



ფსიქოსოციალური საჭიროების მქონე ქალებზე
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მშობიარობის შემდეგ

Sheraton Tbilisi GM, Iva Trifonov: You Don't Have to be Crazy to Work for Us, but it Helps

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW BY
ANA GIORGADZE

Iva Trifonov, General Manager at the Sheraton Grand Metechi Palace Tbilisi, was very excited about coming to Georgia, she tells GEORGIA TODAY in an exclusive interview.

Her previous assignment was in Amman, Jordan, also as a GM. She is originally Bulgarian, born and raised in Sofia, and joined the hospitality sector by chance. In fact, she wanted to become a pilot like her brother, but they wouldn't take women on at the time, so she joined the airline as an air hostess instead.

"I thought, I can't fly the plane, but at least I'll fly on it," she tells us. "And then there was an unfortunate air crash in Bulgaria, after which they said family members couldn't work together or fly on the same plane. So, obviously, my brother stayed and I had to leave."

Trifonov found out the first Sheraton behind the "iron curtain" was looking for English speakers. Having attended an English school and studied English philology, she decided to give it a try. She was impressed by Sheraton from first sight.

"It was a spectacular building in the city, built in Communist times, right after the second world war, and reflected all that Soviet glamor," she says. "Inside, it was absolutely fantastic: high ceilings, chandeliers and golden glitter."

Half an hour after arriving, and despite having no experience in the sector, she had a job, first in housekeeping and then slowly moving up the ranks. That was 37 years ago.

"I got to learn a lot more about the industry. I realized with my humanitarian education, it still needed to be upgraded, so I did economics and then I went to Cornell for a while in the States and little by little I built up my career, I knew I had to go abroad to really make a difference, because if you're 'home-grown,' it's like you're still secondary. And if you go to a foreign world, you go not only to operate, but to train and develop local talent. I think that's the key of the game, and whoever operated here [at Sheraton] in Georgia obviously did a good job. For our hotel in particular, I'm sure there's lots of potential."

From housekeeping to front office and then reservations, Trifonov then took on a new skill set when the company created a job needing knowledge of statistics and analytics to improve the business.

"I did that for almost three years. It



You don't have to be crazy to work for us, but it helps, because who in their right mind would join an industry that works when everybody else is having fun?



was the first time I realized how difficult it is to manage people or to make people do the things you want them to do without being their boss, which obviously requires certain skills that you acquire, if you are as goal-driven and ambitious as I am."

She tells us she sees the hospitality sector as "fascinating."

"It's an industry that allows for the fastest track up the hierarchy if you work hard, if you have the right attitude. All that it requires is that you really live with it, that you are passionate about it, and that you're a people's person. And yes, you have to be smart, too. We have an enormous amount of opportunity, and because we are hungry for talent and are expanding so dramatically, there are always more positions and places for people to work."

YOU HAVE EXPERIENCE WORKING IN DIFFERENT COUNTRIES. HOW FAMILIAR WERE YOU WITH GEORGIA BEFORE YOUR VISIT? HAS IT MET YOUR EXPECTATIONS?

If you choose to go to a country, you need to look for the best in it. I worked in a number of countries and with various foreigners, and one thing I hate is complaining about the country you are in. If you don't like it, pack and go. Nobody forced me to come, it was my decision.

Maybe because my past 5 years were in the Middle East, what I find very refreshing here, first of all, is that there are a lot more women working in the industry, lots of female Georgian GMs, and even inside our hotel we have 60% female employees.

The other thing that I've found is that people I have met so far are very intelligent and highly educated. Most of our staff speak three languages - Georgian, English and Russian, which are very different from each other. Georgians are also very curious about other people, in a nice way. Because of being in the countries where I was never asked where I came from, I find this curiosity here nice.

The hotel itself is also a blessing; it

was recently renovated, has an enormous reputation, it's been here for 30 years, and I think it has changed probably 6 or 7 general managers over these years. I knew some of them, some of us actually worked together. One Bulgarian GM that worked about 10 years in Tbilisi had the best ever results, according to our annual surveys, and I asked him how he made 99% of his people happy, and he told me: it's very simple, Georgians are very friendly, they need understanding and attention, so I just talk to all of them.

I came in November, but from what I see and what I've heard, I think there are quite a lot of similarities between Bulgarians and Georgians in terms of how we perceive the world and in humor; we are on the other side of the same sea, we both have mountains and we knew how the life we had was once worth nothing or very little.

Back during Soviet times, Georgian culture was strongly promoted, so we Bulgarians were introduced to Georgian movies, music, dances. As soon as I have a chance, I plan to go and visit all the museums and theaters and appreciate Georgian art as much as possible.

THE PANDEMIC HIT THE HOTEL BUSINESS HARD, AS IT DID THE SERVICE SECTOR IN GENERAL. HOW DID SHERATON OVERCOME THESE CHALLENGES AND WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN DONE DIFFERENTLY?

This hotel in a way was both lucky and unlucky. It re-opened in 2019, and it was just gaining momentum after its four-year closure, and then Covid-19 struck. I think they were closed for a month and then became a quarantine hotel which was hard for our young employees so used to serving guests. But the hotel still organized concerts and events to entertain people staying here.

A lot of the employees were on temporary contracts, so my predecessor had to let them go, because we couldn't possibly sustain that, financially. But it was a very wise decision not to close com-

pletely, because if you let them all go, how can you bring them back?

Some people agreed to continue on a reduced salary, and those who earned more got bigger cuts and those who earned less got lower cuts.

In my previous hotel, we did it slightly differently, but we had a very strong owner's spot, so I can't really judge whether anything could have been done differently. All I can say is, I was spared this very difficult task to say goodbye to people.

HOW HAVE YOU KEPT YOUR STAFF MOTIVATED AND YOUR GUESTS CONFIDENT IN THEIR SAFETY?

One thing this crisis taught everyone, especially in our business, is that you can't be only a waitress; you need to help maybe front office or assist security, too. And once this starts happening, people see the other side of the job, and bond more. That's the kind of atmosphere I'm trying to nurture here.

We often have to go to our guests, explain what works, what doesn't, apologize, make their stay as comfortable as possible, because regulations impose certain things; with a curfew people can't go out, and, honestly, we all find it very difficult. We have to lock guests in at 9 o'clock. It's outrageous: the restaurant's closed, only room service, guests eating alone. It really goes against my nature as a hotelier to impose such measures, and we try to explain it's not us, it's the regulations. Some people are more understanding than others.

THE PANDEMIC IS NOT OVER YET. WHAT ARE YOUR FUTURE PLANS AS THE NEW GM, AND WHAT ARE YOUR EXPECTATIONS FOR THE UPCOMING YEAR IN SHERATON, AND IN THE GEORGIAN TOURISM SECTOR AS A WHOLE?

Georgia's doing extremely well at the moment in terms of the number of infections. The question is, what will happen

once you start open the doors? It's hard to predict, and there's still a long way to go. Based on the trends around the world, we'll not recover by the end of this year. So we need to be braced for yet another year of strong restrictions and limitations within the hotel.

If business isn't good, you can't invest elsewhere; you can't run trainings, you can't entertain, do team-building activities, or raise salaries, and I think everybody understands that. What I hear from my staff is that those who have managed to retain their jobs are appreciative of the fact. It's enough to look out the window and see people sitting without a job for quite some time yet having families to feed and obligations to meet.

WHAT ABOUT YOUR FAMILY?

They say behind every successful man there is a strong woman, I'd say behind every successful woman there is a strong man, and that is the case in my family. I have one daughter. She lives in Bulgaria. My husband was very kind, and chose to sacrifice his own career to move with me. If not for his help and understanding, I wouldn't have managed it. I'm not saying this is a recipe for success, but it really takes two to tango, otherwise it won't happen.

IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE YOU WOULD LIKE TO SHARE WITH OUR READERS?

I have my favorite quote for you, which I do it at every orientation with new staff: you don't have to be crazy to work for us, but it helps, and that's because, who in their right mind would join an industry that works when everybody else is having fun? Because we do Christmas, and New Year and Sundays, and everybody wants to have time off. These days, the world goes "9 to 5", and we go 24/7, and that is sometimes difficult, especially when you have a family, and if you are a woman in particular, because you are expected to cook dinner or serve the mother-in-law, and you're not there. We are busy when everybody else is not.

What Shall I Spend a Fortune on Today?

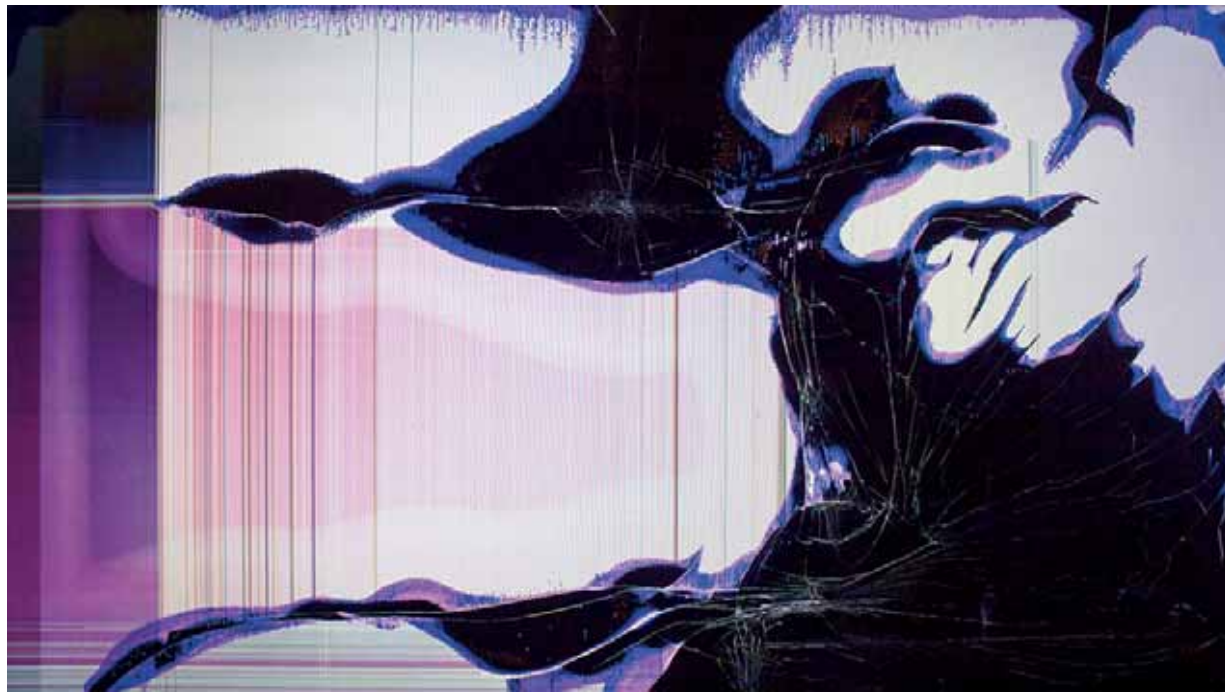
BLOG BY TONY HANMER

Oh, the dilemma (or trilemma, or even n-lemma, with as many horns to choose from as you want, if you prefer). SO rich, so bored! Having more money than I could ever possibly spend in my lifetime, what can I buy next?

Here's your answer: an NFT. That, to clarify, stands for non-fungible token. You are purchasing something digital, usually spending cryptocurrency to do so. It might be the first ever tweet on Twitter. Clips of NBA slam-dunk highlights. Digital art jpegs, whether photographic in origin or not. And so on. What you buy may well exist in countless (literally) copies which are all identical and available online for \$0.00. But only your copy is uniquely joined to the blockchain, and uniquely identified as such.

This is the Next Big Thing unfolding now. Christie's Auction House in the USA just sold an NFT 5000-image compiled jpeg for \$69 million. More: the artist, who goes by the name BEEPLE, gets 10% of every future resale of it, too. If you have something worth selling in this manner, you too can Get Rich Quick!

The catch? Is there one? Only if you have a conscience. You see, the entry of the thing you are spending your millions on into the blockchain will generate, as all such online transactions do, a ridicu-



lously large amount of waste heat. Cryptocurrency "mining" and the blockchain process are the worst things of all for the environment. The computers which perform their calculations are not your average desktop or laptop, no, not at all. The calculations are very time- and energy-consuming, and huge cooling efforts are necessary to keep the speeding computer banks from overheating.

I looked into this with simple curiosity

a couple of years ago just to see what kind of computing power is necessary to mine cryptocurrency. Multiple thousands of dollars required. This, I am told by numerous sources, is being done in Svaneti by millionaires (who have the money for start-up costs), using our free electricity, and paying their hosts to look the other way and get free home heating into the bargain! This is a story into which I cannot dig at this point, though

I hope someone not based here can.

There are efforts being made to make NFTs available in ways which use about 1% of the current typical blockchain process. This would thus render them not bothersome to the conscience of someone like me who might have something noteworthy to sell but cannot stand adding anything unnecessary to Global Warming only for, you know, money. For the moment, little is being said about

the irresponsible side of the standard processes, and a lot of wow is being pronounced about the bucks to be made.

I suppose we all dream of finding a piece of Great Art in the attic or behind the wallpaper; I know I do. I never even tried to let my father lend me the \$20,000 or \$50,000, whatever sum it was, to buy a mint-condition copy of Action Comics No. 1 as a 13-year-old. He'd only laugh me away. I would be doing the snickering now, however, as I carefully held my item which now, 41 years later, sells for upwards of \$2 million.

I've made a shortlist of works which I might consider to offer as NFT sales when doing so becomes reasonable, something I can live with. Until then, I shall continue to follow the story with interest, hoping things improve. It's a strange moment. The bubble which has blown up only in recent weeks might just as suddenly burst, leaving a lot of tears. Van Gogh had his 100-million-dollar sale (in Japan, decades after his death) but that market also was unstable. So you just can't tell.

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 nearly 2000 members, at www.facebook.com/groups/SvanetiRenaissance/. He and his wife also run their own guest house in Elseri:

www.facebook.com/hanmer.house.svaneti



Photo: bm.ge

EIB: Three Infrastructure Projects in Georgia among \$3.7bln COVID-19 Worldwide Support

BY ANA GIORGADZE

The European Investment Bank (EIB) will support three infrastructure projects, covering the construction of the Algeti-Sadakhlo road (approximately 30 km), which will connect a transit corridor of the E-60 Highway to the Armenian border; Rustavi Red Bridge, connecting Georgia to Azerbaijan, which is part of the E-60 highway and the extended Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) core network in Georgia, and a new fiberoptic network providing broadband internet access to more than 1,000 remote rural villages across the country.

Business investment, renewable energy

and upgrading hospitals, schools, internet services and urban infrastructure will be accelerated by new financing totaling €3.7 billion, approved on 11 March by the EIB.

€2.4 billion will be allocated for business investment and ensuring economic resilience to COVID-19; €688 million to harness renewable energy across Europe; and €1.5 billion for new private sector financing COVID-19 crisis response under the Pan-European Guarantee Fund. €381 million will back transport, hospitals and schools, and sustainable urban investment across Europe and beyond.

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, the EIB has approved €40.3 billion for 251 projects to provide vaccines, improve public health, and strengthen economic resilience across Europe and around the world, the press release reads.

Georgia Explores New Opportunities to Enhance Finance Management for Biodiversity, Forestry & Agriculture



Twelve initiatives, covering energy efficiency, forestry, eco-tourism and sustainable agriculture, were presented at a fund-raising forum on 12 March for international and private-sector partners. The event was organized by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture (MEPA) as part of BIOFIN, a global initiative launched in response to the urgent need to channel more funding into biodiversity protection.

"Global disasters such as the pandemic and climate change are the results of human encroachment on nature," said UNDP Head Louisa Vinton. "The BIOFIN initiative helps countries find creative and practical solutions to try to reverse this destruction. The rich catalogue of projects prepared for Georgia will help protect the country's natural treasures and build a greener and more sustainable economy."

Georgia is among the first 30 countries

to launch a national BIOFIN process aimed at closing funding gaps in biodiversity conservation, mobilizing the resources needed to develop, implementing biodiversity policies, and carrying out practical steps in the energy, agriculture and other sectors.

In 2020, in partnership with MEPA's Biodiversity and Forestry Department, the National Forestry Agency and the Agency of Protected Areas, UNDP identified over 40 projects to address urgent biodiversity issues, including energy efficiency in the public sector, eco-tourism, forest management, certification for non-timber forest products, and the sustainable management of natural resources in protected areas. The top 10 priority initiatives were selected by MEPA in a consultative process, based on their compliance with national priorities, sustainability, environmental benefits, funding potential, and other criteria.

On March 12, a discussion was organized to present these initiatives to the Govern-

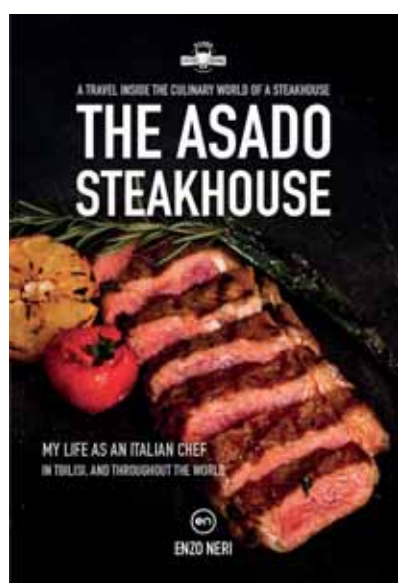
ment, civil society, environmental experts and potential donors, seeking resources needed for their implementation.

Additionally, the event summarized a five-year collaboration under the BIOFIN project, led by UNDP, in partnership with MEPA and other biodiversity actors in Georgia.

Since the launch of BIOFIN in 2016, Georgia's state funding allocated for biodiversity conservation has grown 24-fold, from GEL 30,000 to GEL 720,000. UNDP also helped to adopt the national biodiversity finance plan in 2019, develop an ecotourism development plan for the National Forest Agency, design a crowdfunding platform and a fundraising strategy for the Tbilisi Zoo to save endangered species and captive bear cubs, develop biodiversity-related guidelines for the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), and create a calculation methodology for non-timber forest products.

Based on these achievements, Georgia was recognized as a 2019 champion among BIOFIN countries.

Chef Enzo's New Asado Steakhouse Cookbook, Out Soon



INTERVIEW BY KATIE RUTH DAVIES

Anyone who knows Georgia-based Italian Chef Enzo Neri, the Brand Chef of DineHall for Maqro Group, and of the Mercure Hotel Old Town and Ibis Styles, knows he is never short of energy, motivation and new ideas. He has already done much in his time here in Georgia to develop culinary awareness and add his own touch of magic to numerous kitchens. Stuck inside, just like the rest of us these curfew evenings, he let no time go to waste, and tasked himself the challenge of creating a new steak-based cookbook.

With the book set for release at the end of March, GEORGIA TODAY asked him to tell us more.

HOW DID YOU END UP IN TBILISI?

Riccardo Massi, a good friend from my hometown, has been coming to Georgia repeatedly since his childhood. I remember 'Richi' talking a lot about this country, highlighting the unique cuisine and the extraordinary wine. He would also often talk at length about the popular orange or amber wine made in special

amphora called qvevri, and about his long-time Georgian friend, Gia Piradashvili, owner of Chateau Mere, a stone castle hotel located in the historical province of Kakheti. Richi tried to persuade me to visit Georgia millions of times, all to no avail. Then one day, Gia messaged me on Facebook and invited me to come to his Chateau Mere and teach a high-level cooking masterclass. So, in the summer of 2015, I flew from New York to Tbilisi, the capital city of Georgia.

WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO STAY?

The charm of the city captured me. I have been living for the last 20 years in big cities like London, New York and Dubai, and Tbilisi looked much more like a city on a human scale. I found the culture very interesting, especially the one related to food and wine. Also, I thought it was a new up-and-coming market, and with my international experience, I could help the hospitality business to grow. I have been doing consulting and building new concepts since 2017. In fact, Asado Steakhouse is the latest.

TELL US HOW ASADO STEAKHOUSE CAME ABOUT. WHY STEAK IN GEORGIA?

Since January 2020, I have been part of the Maqro Tourism project under the title of Brand Chef. When in June, Mr Erdogan Sahin, the GM of the hotel but also the person in charge of the hospitality sector of the Maqro company, asked me what I could do inside the hotel restaurant, I replied that I had an idea that might work. Having lived in Georgia for four years, thinking of Georgians as recognized as being great meat lovers, and having worked in cities like New York and London, I had the idea of creating a concept focused on meat. Also knowing that, in Georgian tradition, there was no custom of eating grilled steaks that were previously subjected to the dry aging procedure, I realized that my new concept would work.

The main restaurant of the hotel seemed little more than a breakfast space for hotel guests, but with a nice adjacent

patio, not so wide but all along the restaurant. With great surprise, almost by fate, I realized that there was a kitchen area used for grilling with the beauty of a Jospser Oven. My GM liked the idea, and so we started working on it. We had the kitchen, the Jospser, the lounge and the patio. A dry ager and heating lamps were needed on the Jospser's kitchen pass. I started developing the recipes, we did some research online, and we put together our synergies to get a new product on the market. I based the recipes not only on the idea of an Argentine steakhouse, but also on some dishes that were part of my culinary journey.

WHY THIS COOK BOOK AND WHY NOW?

The Asado Cookbook takes both its title and its form from the concept of the Asado Steakhouse restaurant, a concept I developed for the Mercure Hotel Tbilisi. This pandemic time restricted my lifestyle, and being a 'full of energy' person, I had to find something to work on. I also knew that I'd achieved a lot when it comes to restaurant and concept development, and I needed a new challenge.

The idea of writing a book had been with me for a while, but I didn't want to make a classic recipe book of Italian cuisine, which is now highly exploited in every sense; I wanted to do something that went a little out of the ordinary and had to do with what I was working on. One of those days of the pandemic, I was at home quite frustrated that I was unable to get out. The rules were clear, curfew after 9 in the evening until 5 in the morning. What to do? A film and a few pages of a book to read alternating the various messages that we dribbled between friends. Almost as a joke, I told Nick, with whom I was in virtual contact on a daily basis, my idea of writing a book. He didn't hesitate to encourage me, and at the beginning of January I began to write down some life stories, the description of Asado, and the recipes.

WHAT INTERNATIONAL AND LOCAL INFLUENCES CAN READERS EXPECT?



It is a recipe book, to be sure; but it also is about the past 20 years of my life, working in and around restaurants throughout the world. It is also a book steak, from the raw meat, to the tools used, to technical descriptions of some of the professional equipment needed for preparing it. Many of the recipes in this book are featured in our Asado Steakhouse menu. Asado's menu is quite simple. It does not pretend to teach anyone about cooking. It contains a series of dishes suited to a steakhouse, along with some personal culinary choices from places where I have worked around the world. It also contains a few dishes I would order, when I have the chance to sit on the other side of the kitchen.

WHO DO YOU EXPECT YOUR READERSHIP TO BE, AND WHERE CAN WE GRAB A COPY?

When I posted on social media that my first book was going to be published, I was surprised how many people around the world, from childhood friends and ex colleagues to regular customers in the various restaurants I have worked, asked me where to buy a copy.

Even a lot of people here in Georgia were texting me or adding a comment

under my post to find out the date of release and where to find it in the stores.

I guess the readership will be friends, customers, old and new, foodie people, the new generation of chefs, and people who are also curious about a chef's life.

Between my regular guests, I have made few friends and in particular an American couple from the American Embassy whom are going to be relocated soon. Cindy and Paul reserved three copies already. It is such a nice, rewarding feeling.

The Asado Steakhouse cookbook will be available at the beginning of April, first in the Asado Steakhouse itself, and soon on Amazon and in various bookstores. Follow Enzo Neri on social media to stay up-to-date.



Enzo Neri

Keeping Nature Safe in Georgia's Protected Areas

The national parks and other protected areas that cover more than 11% of Georgia's territory are tasked with safeguarding the country's unique natural treasures. This includes protecting endangered species like the bezoar goat from illegal hunting and Georgia's vast and diverse woodlands from illegal logging. Georgia's park rangers face the daunting and sometimes dangerous task of patrolling this vast terrain, but their work is now being made easier thanks to state-of-the-art biodiversity monitoring technology provided by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP).

First to be equipped was the sprawling Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park, which

covers more than 100,000 hectares of mountainous terrain, and like Georgia's other 92 protected areas is managed by the Agency for Protected Areas (APA) under the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture.

UNDP Head Louisa Vinton and APA Chairperson Valerian Mchedlidze on 11 March delivered equipment to the park that will enable its corps of 77 seasoned rangers to use smartphones and tablets to collect real-time information on poaching incidents, wildlife sightings and even signs of infestation by the bark beetle, a pest that plagues coniferous trees. Data collected during patrols will be processed in a unified database, with a software program then shaping the choice and frequency of ranger patrol routes.

"Nature brings tourists to Georgia and thus is key to any post-pandemic recovery," said Vinton. "This exciting new technology is a big step forward in ensuring that the country's rangers have the tools and skills they need to protect the flora and fauna that make Georgia such a unique place to visit."

The Spatial Monitoring and Reporting Tool (SMART) system, in high demand globally, is brand-new to Georgia.

"We are introducing a new system to collect biodiversity data and register violations in protected areas. Our rangers are now equipped with SMART devices where this application is integrated," said Mchedlidze. "The SMART monitoring and patrolling system will make ranger patrols more efficient and

effective, contributing to the effective management of protected areas."

The new technology provided by UNDP comes as part of a broader USD 1.8 million program aimed at improving the management of 12 major protected areas in Georgia. The program is funded by the Global Environmental Facility (GEF) and implemented in partnership with the APA and the Caucasus Nature Fund (CNF). UNDP is providing additional assistance, including developing new hiking trails and providing first aid training to rangers, through a Swedish-funded program for democratic reforms.

Protected areas are a national priority for Georgia. Since 1991, Georgia's protected areas have almost tripled in size, expanding to 11.4 percent of the country's

territory as of 2020 and encompassing more than 790,000 hectares of unique forests, landscapes, rivers and lakes. This has required modernizing the management of protected areas to safeguard biodiversity and integrate ecosystem services into the country's economic and social development, ensuring that local communities see nature protection as an economic opportunity rather than a threat to their livelihoods. The establishment of a professional ranger service and a modern system of biodiversity monitoring is key to these reforms.

Georgia adopted a ten-year biodiversity monitoring plan in 2020, committing to study and monitor rare and endangered species of animals, birds, fish and plants in all protected areas across the country.



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