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Employee Satisfaction & Company Performance – Veon Georgia's Experience in an Interview with the Company CEO

A recent LinkedIn post by Veon Georgia is a visible example of how intertwined employee happiness and increased profitability are. We asked Andrzej Malinowski how correlated the two are, and how long Veon has been observing the trend.

"We have been tracking the engagement of our team for quite a long time now, and added the enablement index to the indicators a bit later," he tells us. "The two are equally important for creating an employee-centric working environment, which in turn facilitates business growth. Engagement in simple terms answers the questions "do you want to work in this particular company?" and "do you want to put extra effort in for the good of the organization?" Enablement is more about "can do." It shows how our teammates view the utilization of their knowledge, skills and abilities, and if the organizational environment supports them in getting their work done in the best possible manner. We have always regarded those two components as the key success factors for our business. Recent results showed the trend we were aiming to achieve.



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Prepared for Georgia Today Business by GALT & TAGGART

As of 15-Feb-2021

MARKETS	Price	w/w	m/m	Price	w/w	m/m
STOCKS				BONDS		
Bank of Georgia (BGEO LN)	GBP 11.48	-1.5%	-4.0%	GEOROG 04/21	100.66 (YTM 3.23%)	+0.3%
Georgia Capital (CGEO LN)	GBP 5.26	-2.8%	-3.3%	GEORG 04/21	100.69 (YTM 2.26%)	-0.2%
TBC Bank Group (TBCG LN)	GBP 12.54	-1.9%	-4.1%	GRAIL 07/22	107.15 (YTM 2.52%)	-0.0%
				GEBGG 07/23	105.79 (YTM 3.51%)	-0.1%
COMMODITIES				CURRENCIES		
Crude Oil, Brent (US\$/bbl)	63.30	+4.5%	+14.9%	GEL / USD	3.2915	-0.8%
Gold Spot (US\$/OZ)	1 818.86	-0.7%	-0.5%	GEL / EUR	3.9919	-0.2%
				GEL / GBP	4.5746	+0.4%
				GEL / CHF	3.6990	+0.2%
INDICES				GEL / RUB	0.0449	+0.4%
FTSE 100	6 756.11	+3.6%	+0.2%	GEL / TRY	0.4726	+0.7%
FTSE 250	21 418.90	+2.6%	+3.9%	GEL / AZN	1.9362	-0.8%
DAX	14 109.48	+0.4%	+2.3%	GEL / AMD	0.0063	-1.6%
DOW JONES	31 458.40	+0.2%	+2.1%	GEL / UAH	0.1185	-1.3%
NASDAQ	14 095.47	+0.8%	+8.4%	EUR / USD	0.8245	-0.6%
MSCI EM	1 437.72	+2.7%	+5.9%	GBP / USD	0.7192	-2.2%
SP 500	3 934.83	+0.5%	+4.4%	CHF / USD	0.8903	-1.0%
MSCI FM	2 580.85	+0.3%	-2.0%	RUB / USD	73.3385	-1.3%
GT Index (GEL)	1 582.68	-	-	TRY / USD	6.9642	-1.5%
GT Index (USD)	1 208.13	-	-	AZN / USD	1.6988	+0.0%

Coronavirus Update: Case Numbers Falling, Businesses Urge Gov't to Re-Open Faster



BY ANA DUMBADZE

As of Thursday, the test-positivity rate had reached 2.12%, having been 2.7% over the past two weeks.

On February 17, ten business associations released an open letter addressed to the Government of Georgia, specifying the extremely serious problems the economy is facing during the pandemic, demanding the gradual lifting of restrictions and offering help in the mass vaccination process.

To assist the government in devising the best strategy for reopening, the signatories of the letter introduced a 7-point plan:

- The nationwide curfew to start at 23:00 instead of 21:00.
- Businesses to be allowed to work on weekdays (according to strict guidelines).
- To develop specific anti-crisis packages for different sectors of the economy.
- Restaurants and food facilities to be allowed to operate in closed spaces too (according to strict guidelines).
- Ski resorts to reopen on February 22.
- The Business Ombudsman of Georgia to be elected and appointed through direct consultations with the business sector.
- Business associations express readiness to be involved in the vaccination process and offer both business contacts and financial resources.

The letter is signed by: The Georgia Restaurant Association, Gastronomic Association Of Georgia, Georgian Retailers Association, Georgian Distributors Business Association, Taxpayers Union of Georgia, Georgia Association of Manufacturers, Georgian Shopping Centers Association, Georgian Transport and Roads Association, Mountain Resorts Business Association and Georgian Hotels Federation.

Regarding the government's decision on lifting more restrictions in the coming days, the authorities say they are taking a "break" in terms of easing regulations until March to monitor the epidemiological situation during the two weeks ahead, and only afterwards they will make new decisions.

The epidemiological situation in Georgia continues to be stable, and during the week, the daily numbers of new infection cases have been decreasing, along with the death toll.

On Monday, February 15, based on the government's decision, additional coronavirus-related regulations were lifted in the country, allowing schoolchildren to resume the educational process in classrooms countrywide, and restaurants and food facilities to serve customers in outdoor dining areas. Despite this gradual lifting of restrictions, no particular increase in new coronavirus cases has yet been reported.

Georgia reported 165 coronavirus cases, 639 recoveries, and 11 deaths on Monday, with 9197 tests performed; on Tuesday, 740 coronavirus cases, 496 recoveries, and 14 deaths with 20,549 tests conducted; on Wednesday, 486 coronavirus cases, 499 recoveries, and 13 deaths, with 19,192 tests performed; and on Thursday, 365 coronavirus cases, 539 recoveries, and 9 deaths with 17,188 tests conducted.

As of Thursday, Georgia's total case tally since February 2020 stands at 267,313 cases, among them 260,266 recoveries and 3399 deaths.

The capital Tbilisi still remains the hotspot in terms of the infection spread, with up to 200-300 new cases detected daily on average.

ECHR Calls On Russia to Free Alexei Navalny Immediately

BY ANA DUMBADZE



ECHR Calls On Russia to Free Alexei Navalny Immediately

Russian opposition figure Alexei Navalny should be released from jail immediately because of the risk to his life, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) has ruled.

Russia says it will ignore the ruling, which it calls 'a blatant and gross interference' in its affairs.

Navalny was detained on his return to Russia last month following treatment for a nerve agent poisoning in Siberia. He was then given a jail term.

In a ruling published on Wednesday, the Strasbourg-based court granted Navalny a temporary release from jail because it said the government "could not provide sufficient safeguards for his life and health".

Russia has said it will ignore the ruling despite a requirement to comply as a member of the Council of Europe, calling the court's decision "a blatant and gross interference in the judicial affairs of a sovereign state".

"Mr. Navalny's current application before the Court was lodged on 20 January 2021 under Article 34 of the European Convention on Human Rights. On the same date, the applicant made a request to the Court under Rule 39 of the Rules of Court related to his detention, asking for his release.

"On 21 January 2021, the Court decided to suspend the examination of the Rule 39 request until receipt of the following information from the Russian Government:

1. In view of the arguable allegation of a near-lethal attack on the applicant in August 2020 with the use of a chemical nerve agent, and the fact that the perpetrators had not been established by the Russian authorities, did the risk to the applicant's life persist?

2. If so, what measures were being taken by the Russian authorities to safeguard his life and well-being, in particular, while in custody?

3. Furthermore, were the conditions of detention and the treatment of the applicant subject to regular independent monitoring in line with European standards?

"On 26 January 2021, the Government replied to the above questions, stating that the applicant was being held in a properly guarded facility and that his cell was under video surveillance. They described the material conditions in the cell and stated that the applicant had access to electronic communications via the prison system. He was allowed to make phone calls and had been visited by his lawyers and members of the public monitoring commission on several occasions.

"On 3 February 2021, the applicant submitted his comments to the Government's reply. He contested that the arrangements listed by the Government could not provide sufficient safeguards for his life and health.

"On 16 February 2021, the Court decided to indicate to the Government of Russia, under Rule 39 of the Rules of Court, to release the applicant. This measure shall apply with immediate effect. The Court had regard to the nature and extent of risk to the applicant's life, demonstrated prima facie for the purposes of applying the interim measure, and seen in the light of the overall circumstances of the applicant's current detention. This measure has been granted without prejudice to the Court's decision on the merits of the present case and the competence of the Committee of Ministers," the Court stated.

Parliament Sets Up Temporary Election Inquiry Commission



BY ANA DUMBADZE

Parliament decided by a majority vote to set up a temporary commission of inquiry into the October 31, 2020 parliamentary elections.

The relevant resolution, prepared by the Georgian Dream faction, was adopted by 78 votes. The new Commission of Inquiry was set up for a period of three months.

Within three days of adopting the resolution, the Committee on Procedural Issues and Rules of Parliament will determine the number of members and the proportional representation quotas, and submit them to the Bureau for approval. Representation of the opposition in the new commission should not be less than half of the total number of members.

Mamuka Mdinardze, Chairman of the Georgian Dream faction, noted at the plenary session today that the number and composition of the commis-

sion will depend on the opposition members of parliament. He added that no consultations have been held on this topic yet.

Chairman of the Georgian Parliament, Archil Talakvadze, called on the opposition parties to get involved in the 2020 parliamentary elections Commission on Inquiry.

"Let's together check the election-related questions and complaints filed by the opposition," Talakvadze stated on Wednesday, adding that "International observers have already concluded that the elections were competitive and, overall, fundamental freedoms were respected."

For the record, 51 out of 60 opposition MPs filed applications demanding the termination of their parliamentary mandates, demanding the termination of their mandates obtained as a result of the October 31 parliamentary elections, as they believe the results were rigged by the incumbent government. However, none of the members of the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party voted for termination of their mandates. As such, the boycotting opposition formally remains in Parliament.

Cour
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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 **1st March, 2021**.

Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia Resigns, Former PM Garibashvili Nominated to Take Over

BY ANA DUMBADZE

Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia announced Thursday morning his intention to resign. He explained that he considers it unjust to arrest UNM Chairman Nika Melia in conditions when there is a danger of political escalation, and had chosen to resign because he could not reach an agreement with his team.

“Unfortunately, I could not reach a



I want to believe that this step will help reduce polarization in the political sphere, because I am convinced that polarization and confrontation between us is the biggest risk for the future of our country. - PM Giorgi Gakharia

joint opinion with my team on this issue, so I decided to resign. I want to believe that this step will help reduce polarization in the political sphere, because I am convinced that polarization and confrontation between us is the biggest risk for the future of our country,” he said.

On Wednesday night, Tbilisi City Court satisfied a motion of the Prosecutor’s Office and ruled to use the pre-trial detention measure against Nika Melia.

“We remain hopeful that we will sit down at the negotiating table with the representatives of this regime and discuss the issue of holding new elections,” Melia said at a briefing at the party office following Gakharia’s resignation.

The UNM Chairman said he believes only early elections will bring the country out of the crisis. Melia thanked his supporters and said that the main thing for the opposition has always been, is, and will be, the rule of law and the principle of fair elections.

“Mr. Gakharia has enough political and human sins in connection with June 20 [2019], and he will never wash away this stain. The fact that Mr. Gakharia resigned today and practically admitted that bloodshed and violence were planned on the free will of free people, and that he did not do so, is appreciated. But that does not help the case. Rapid action will. We, the main opposition movement, demand an urgent meeting with the representatives of the regime, with the participation of our partner ambassadors, on the only issue: new elections,” Melia said.

When PM Giorgi Gakharia announced his resignation, in response, the MIA temporarily postponed Melia’s detention.

“Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia decided to resign,” Chairman of the ruling Georgian Dream party, Irakli Kobakhidze said. “It is unfortunate that he made such a decision. He had a different



position on the court decision against Nikanor Melia from other members of the team. However, unfortunately, we could not hear any arguments that would strengthen his position.”

“With the resignation of the Prime Minister, the Minister of Internal Affairs made a completely logical decision to

temporarily postpone the arrest of Nikanor Melia,” Kobakhidze added. “We call on Nikanor Melia to obey the law. Otherwise, the government will apply law enforcement and make the arrest,” he finished. Keep updated on georgiatoday.ge for the latest political news.

On Thursday afternoon, the Political

Council met and unanimously nominated former PM, former Minister of Defense and current Minister of Internal Affairs, Irakli Garibashvili, as a candidate for Prime Minister.

“The new composition of the government will be approved as soon as possible by law,” Kobakhidze said.

Court Rules Pre-trial Detention for UNM Chairman Melia, PM Resigns amid Fears of Political Unrest

BY ANA DUMBADZE

Tbilisi City Court on Wednesday satisfied a motion of the Prosecutor’s Office and ruled to use the pre-trial detention measure against Nika Melia, Chairman of the opposition United National Movement party.

“The bail, as a measure of restraint, should be replaced by a more severe measure of restraint - detention. Defendant Nikanor Melia should start counting the period of detention from the moment of actual detention,” Judge Nino Chakhnashvili said when announcing the verdict.

With this decision, Chakhnashvili fully satisfied the motion of the General Prosecutor’s Office of Georgia.

The trial of Nika Melia lasted six hours on Wednesday, as the court discussed the revision of the measure of restraint against him. The accused himself was not present at the trial, as a form of protest and distrust toward the court.

The Prosecutor’s Office applied to Tbilisi City Court with a motion to change the measure of restraint after the parliamentary majority supported the investigative agency’s motion to detain the opposition leader, with 88 votes in favor and two against.

Melia is to be arrested for refusing to pay the 40,000 GEL bail set last year. He was charged with incitement of violence during the June protests back in 2019, and was released on bail in November.

He should have paid the bail by December 24, 2020, but did not.

“Do not make me come to Parliament, Aleko. I will take you out of there with my own hands!” Melia responded this week to MP Aleko Elisashvili’s offer to transfer his salary to him so he can pay his bail. Melia said he does not need anyone to pay the bail, and that whoever paid the bail in his place would be “an agent of the SUS [State Security Service] and a supporter of Gavrilov.”

On an earlier court decision, Nika Melia also had to wear a monitoring bracelet, which he removed publicly during the street protests. With reference to this

move, on 3 November 2020, the Prosecutor’s Office applied to Tbilisi City Court, requesting an aggravation to the already existing injunction on Melia.

“Melia demonstratively took off the electronic monitoring device while making a public statement at the opposition rally protesting the Central Election Commission’s announcement of the preliminary voting results for the parliamentary elections. This deliberate act was a clear violation of the injunction imposed on him, and creates legal grounds for immediate prosecution,” the investigative agency said at the time.

On Wednesday evening, the US Embassy

to Georgia issued a statement calling for calm: “We call on the authorities and the opposition to exercise maximum restraint in the wake of tonight’s ruling. Violence serves no-one except those who want to undermine Georgia’s stability. This must be resolved peacefully.”

In response to his disagreeing with his team’s opinion regarding the Melia case, Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia on Thursday morning announced his resignation.

“Unfortunately, I could not reach a joint opinion with my team on this issue, so I decided to resign. I want to believe that this step will help reduce polarization



The bail, as a measure of restraint, should be replaced by detention. - Judge Nino Chakhnashvili

in the political sphere, because I am convinced that polarization and confrontation between us is the biggest risk for the future of our country,” he said.

In response to the PM’s resignation, the MIA temporarily postponed the planned detention of Melia.

“With the resignation of the Prime Minister, the Minister of Internal Affairs made a completely logical decision to temporarily postpone the arrest of Nikanor Melia,” said Chairman of the Georgian Dream party, Irakli Kobakhidze.

He added that “A country where law enforcement is not ensured, cannot establish itself as a state,” and warned Melia to obey the law, “Otherwise, the government will apply law enforcement and make the arrest.”



Foreign Policy during the Biden Presidency: Probabilities & Realistic Expectations. Part 2

ANALYSIS BY VICTOR KIPANI,
CHAIRMAN, GEOCASE

Among its many benefits to decision making, representative democracy in the United States is distinguished by a certain degree of “democratic coquettishness”. Despite the wide constitutional mandate that the President enjoys in matters of foreign policy (mostly through executive orders and executive privileges), he shares the stage with the Senate, whose support is a necessary political and legal requirement when carrying out certain basic functions. Given the Democrats’ insignificant advantage in both houses (when this article was published), Biden’s freedom of action would therefore be quite limited.

This circumstance underlines the particular importance of using every available opportunity, way and format to intensify contacts with American lawmakers. Lobbyists acting on behalf of Georgia’s interests as well as other similar actors are sufficiently aware of this, but it is vital that this knowledge be transformed into practical, tangible actions that will achieve real results—particularly as current challenges and development prospects deny our country the luxury to waste precious resources on pursuing current trends.

AND “IDEOLOGY” ONCE AGAIN

America’s foreign policy course has always been characterized by its association with euphonious ideals, which from the Second World War onwards have included and still include supporting democracy and human rights around the world. Alongside other aspects, this represented America’s “soft power”, but this has not always been wielded successfully and in its execution has not always been associated with “softness”. In any case, it is a fact that the efforts of the American government and society rest upon the pursuit of democratic principles at home and their establishment abroad. One result of these efforts (and of overall Western political support) is our present enjoyment of a resurrected Georgian statehood.

But every great story has its own “but”, and in this case the latter is most visible at the Obama-Trump-Biden presidential crossroads and is much more relevant. In short, this “but” requires an alignment between America’s overall foreign policy principles—greater involvement in global processes—with the urgency of the current need to pay more attention to the acute economic and social challenges that American society is facing. This “but” logically implies the establishment of a new and economically self-sufficient formation capable of dealing with this contemporary crisis. Alongside many other aspects, this “but” is also linked to the possible “reformatting” of US foreign policy that we will discuss in greater detail below.

NOVELTIES THEY HAVE PROMISED US—AND US

According to several comments made by members of Biden’s circle of advisors, over the following four years the main accent of U.S. foreign policy will be placed upon the country’s “middle class”. This statement is noteworthy for several reasons that we will briefly try to explain below.

The theory that foreign policy is the continuation of domestic policy was formulated long ago, but the complex and conflicting processes that America is currently witnessing give this theory greater meaning and depth. First of all, one must consider the degree of economic inequality that exists between Americans and the social imbalance and dangerous political confrontations to which it gives rise. We have previously spoken about the essence of these events,



Image by Chip Somodevilla / Getty Images

and will now therefore only repeat that, instead of the “constructive disruption” that development requires, the current and ongoing “destructive disruption” threatens the foundations of civil stability—barely a step away from the disruption of the very foundations of the state.

The response to these quite dangerous processes is the “Building Back Better” program that Biden presented during the pre-election period, the essence of which is regular care for American families (as opposed to only during crises). This principle of American society that is linked to turning foreign policy into future achievable and tangible results is also a continuation of this same electoral line.

Two main aspects of this policy are of particular interest to us. The first of these is the U.S. administration’s views on reforming the State Department and its current tasks—a circumstance that we could link to an indirect reminder of the need for a healthy evaluation of the possibilities of Georgia’s foreign and diplomatic agencies, of their modernization needs and their alignment with contemporary requirements. It is vital that Georgia maintain these agencies not as a mere attribute of her sovereignty and tribute to her statehood, but instead as an orderly, effective and efficient organization with clear benefits. We mentioned recently that the need to rearrange Georgia’s state institutions and bureaucratic system in general is growing more pressing, and we will add that a competitive and accountable Georgia needs properly functioning public institutions since it is these that create and maintain the country’s image, and these that can be a source of pride when facing our current world and the challenges of its transformation.

The second, and very important, aspect linked to the domestic focus of the Biden administration’s foreign policy is defined by a very complex equation: to what extent will concentrating on internal problems affect the quality of the United States’ initiatives and the resources available in order for the country to have a real impact on ongoing processes far from its borders? This question becomes even more relevant if we look at it from the point of view of our national and regional agenda and consider the need for the undivided attention and support of our strategic ally.

It is obviously impossible to associate the new foreign policy of the current U.S. administration with the course of Trump’s “America First” approach. Such

a comparison (for the time being, in any case) would be quite groundless and not serious, yet certain tendencies (including legitimate ones!) do exist and could be discerned in the overall picture, which is not only linked to American society but to others as well. In a few words, these tendencies are more egocentrism in international relations and an excessive desire to subjugate “social goods” to your “own benefits”. This is of course nothing new in the global system, but it has gained prominence against the background of recent developments, and quite a few countries have elevated this approach practically to the level of state policy.

All this is noteworthy for Georgia, as our levels of domestic and foreign vulnerability do not permit us the luxury of remaining calm at this stage or indeed in the foreseeable future, particularly considering the new world order towards which we are all rushing. This fact requires us to maintain a constant vigilance and readiness for renewal, for rapid alignment with modern requirements, and for the systematic and practical development and modernization of our national and state “identity”—which makes us wonder what Georgia’s self-sufficient statehood should look like and how it could benefit the region—but this is naturally another conversation.

HIGHLY PROBABLE POSITIVES

Of course, first of all these positive aspects will imply more systematic and solidary US foreign policy processes and greater responsibility when studying, preparing and making decisions. Its accompanying and characteristic “procedural” components would most likely be increased consultations, summaries and exchanges of opinion—both with relevant actors within the United States as well as with the country’s allies and partners abroad.

Along with other benefits, this approach would serve as a precondition for improved and more competent management, whose measure would be an essential factor for evaluating the American political process itself as well as for analyzing and underlining its achievements and failings. But equally essential is that, by doing so, Biden’s administration would be taking an important step towards restoring trust among the country’s partners and strengthening the United States’ deserved reputation and renown among the international community. High levels of trust and reputation are not only necessary for the United States, but equally so for placing ongoing

global processes into predictable and relatively manageable frameworks. International order and stability are also linked to these factors, whose restoration requires more concrete and practical aid.

We will add here (recognizing that many will find this assumption quite disputable) that, besides many problems, Trump’s presidency also left some positive things behind for Biden. This can be seen in the revision of many global problems (and in the growing need for such revision, e.g. the clumsiness of international organizations) as well as in a few “hushed-up” themes that were given names (e.g. renewing the Western security system by increasing the shared responsibility of every member state). Trump’s presidency also applied new methods to international politics which, in the right hands and if maintained in proper working condition, could achieve desirable results (e.g. ongoing developments between Israel and several Middle Eastern countries).

IN SHORT...

Many things undoubtedly depend on this administration, both from the domestic American point of view as well as from international perspectives. We have already mentioned that expectations for a “revolutionized” American foreign policy are exaggerated, but the fact remains that, over the next four years and in terms of a newly formed global order, we will witness many novelties. That said, we should of course not expect a “New World” to be firmly established during this period, as this is a much lengthier process which will depend on many factors. What can safely be said, however, is that several load-bearing walls of this new world will be built during Biden’s presidency.

In conclusion, we will limit ourselves to a few main assumptions:

Ideology: The era of global ideological lines (and therefore of “Grand Strategies”) is long gone. But for lovers of strategy, we would add that the word “strategy” will of course not disappear from the political vocabulary: “Grand Strategy” will be replaced by “Emergent Strategy”, which allows for greater mobility, flexibility, alignment and improvisation. With this radical transformation, we are entering a world in which positioning oneself without hiding one’s own interests will be acceptable etiquette. This makes Georgia’s efforts to maximize our self-sufficiency as quickly as possible even more relevant. In turn, this

can only be done by maximizing the realization of our national potential and of the resources our partners have allocated us.

The United States and the rest of the world: The time has come for the United States on the world stage when our strategic partner will less often have to define its approach to ongoing events solely based upon its own vision, and will instead increasingly have to consider the approaches of others towards such issues. In short, a new phase of geopolitical and geo-economic competitiveness is only now gathering strength. Under these conditions, the words and real actions of any partner country, regardless of its size and power, become important for the United States. This is especially true of those countries or regions in which the geopolitical conditions for Georgian-Western interests have significantly worsened, and is in direct correlation with our current sustainability when we consider political, economic and security issues.

Georgia and the United States: We have mentioned Georgian diplomacy above in relation to the country’s statehood and overall institutional structure. But let us for a moment forget about novel structures of international relations and the legal entities they encompass. It is vital to shift our country’s management style to a more corporate one, as this would improve decision-making processes, encourage greater rationalism in their execution, and increase our perception of domestic and foreign challenges. We have often said that this also requires us to properly define our state’s functional benefits through the prism of our regional and strategic partnership. We have many achievement and success on this road which also enables us to build something new on it. With the same point of view, even the US-Georgia Charter on Strategic Partnership creates a long-term perspective. But one thing remains: this perspective requires opportunities to be seized in a full and timely manner. As for what our tasks must be, these must be bold (and “achievable”) initiatives coming from Tbilisi, instead of merely waiting for someone to remember us and enquire. The inertia of our post-independence period has gone on for too long and must be overcome.

In this extremely difficult process, we wish our ally and ourselves every success. The existing challenges are as great and as complex as our special co-operation and strategic partnership are necessary and promising.

The Dangers of Appeasement Tactics with Tskhinvali & the Kremlin

OP-ED BY MICHAEL GODWIN

On July 11, 2020, Zaza Gakhladze left his home in the small village of Kvemo Chala in the morning to gather mushrooms. His search led him into the nearby hills where they grew in abundance. Somewhere near the ruins of the 14th century castle 'Skhvilos,' once a proud home to the powerful Georgian Amilakhvari family, he was taken. While the specific details of the abduction are uncertain, one thing is clear: Zaza was taken against his will, illegally and with extreme force.

At some point in the fray, Zaza suffered a gunshot wound to one of his legs. While not fatal, it was most certainly unwarranted, as the man faced several heavily armed and equipped Russian military personnel. The Russian puppet-government in Tskhinvali claimed their border units were fired upon several times with a hunting rifle and responded with a wounding shot. Despite the absurdity of Russian occupation forces exercising this type of restraint, witnesses, including his family that saw him leave, stated he had no rifle; no weapon at all, in fact. 11 months later, on February 5, 2021, a so-called "court" sentenced him to 12 years and 6 months' imprisonment, his



AP Photo

crimes being listed as illegally crossing a border, and attempted murder of a military service-member.

Clearly, there are obvious legal issues in the case; that of there not being any actual border to cross, and "attempted murder" against an illegally invading army - generally not something you prosecute. However, this isn't the first time Russian puppets have played these games in their self-declared micro-kingdoms. A multitude of locals in the region have fallen prey to these thugs in the mountains, and Tbilisi has been tame in its response.

While the Georgian government has raised the issues with the European Union, the United States, the United Kingdom, as well as the Russian Federation themselves, little has come but repeated cries for his release, something the Kremlin and Tskhinvali are both unlikely to heed. The only solutions these hybrid political-criminal organizations will respond to is economic and social warfare.

Sadly, for years, the people of South Ossetia and Abkhazia have suffered under the boot of Russian-backed oppression. Inadequate utility services, poor eco-

nomics and social development, and unserved infrastructure, have brought the two to their knees. Now with COVID-19 running rampant with no support from their so-called "protectors", the Russian Federation, if not in the socio-political interest of the Georgian government, something must at least be done for the humanitarian interests of the people living in these stricken provinces.

But what measures should be taken is the most complicated issue at hand not just for these regions, but the Black Sea commandship and Europe as a whole. Games of appeasement have been the go-to stratagem in the frozen conflict with the Kremlin. It's beyond time that the EU, NATO, and most importantly the Georgian government began to squeeze the vice on Russian interests in the region.

Subversion through social media and electronic methods have proven their effectiveness. These methods should be aimed to mobilize the people in these oppressed regions against their captors. The Russians are masters of misinformation, and the creators of the original "fake news." As a result, the only recourse is countering with unabridged truth. Fos-

tering an informed people and culture of civil disobedience within these areas is imperative. There is little Russians detest more than those who wrong-think.

To affirm this and provide a bastion of support, the Georgian government should (and should have done so a long time ago) establish strong military positions along the Russian-erected fence line. The Georgian government's rationale of "instigation" be damned: The best way to make a sneaky and conniving enemy back down is by countering with visible defensive brawn. Regular infantry and rapid response units should be visibly on patrol, armored vehicles and all. A message of "incursions will be met with force" should be promulgated to the furthest extent. Not dissimilar to the missions carried out in Kosovo, EU and NATO units should not only be encouraged, but required to participate in assignments. Just like the US military currently on rotation in the country, NATO partner forces should hold to their word of standing by Georgia's territorial sovereignty by placing bilateral combat-ready units alongside Georgian peace-keeping units on patrol.

Appeasement is not a fruitful strategy,

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As the ancient Kartli would ride with lance and sword in hand, this modern threat must be met with cyberwarfare and counter-information tactics

and this tactic only feeds Russia's false ego as a mighty nation in control of Eastern Europe and Central Asia. This is a mask they wear over their crippling infrastructure, the inability to control their own internal dissidents, and inadequate, undertrained, afraid, and untested military. The time has long since come for Brussels, Washington D.C., London, and most importantly Tbilisi, to deny the paper bear. Like the 14th century castle 'Skhvilos' still watching over the mountain passes, build a bastion of hope and freedom against Russian oppression that lasts for centuries. Avenge Zaza, and the four other Georgians still held illegally by the criminal bandit-government: Lasha Hetereli, Ramaz Begeluri, Irakli Bebuia, and Gennady Bestaev.

It's imperative for not only the rule of just law and human rights, but for the pursuit of the God-given freedom of Man that this oppression be banished. The Russian threat has stood at the door for too long, and feeding it just enough to stay in its den is not enough. It must be vanquished, but in the modern sense. As the ancient Kartli would ride with lance and sword in hand, this modern threat must be met with cyberwarfare and counter-information tactics. The general on the field has been replaced with the decisions of parliament. Tbilisi will need to muster their digital forces to do what is right.

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If we do not talk about the arrests of Georgian citizens in Sukhumi and Tskhinvali, these people will be forgotten. - Elene Khoshtaria

Reflections on Georgia's NATO Aspirations & the US Position in the Region

ANALYSIS BY EMIL AVDALIANI

The territorial problems Georgia has due to the Russian military presence in the Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions (also known as South Ossetia) are undoubtedly a major obstacle for the country's NATO membership prospects. To avoid this problem, various models for alliance membership are being proposed, among them the non-inclusion of Georgia's troubled territories under NATO defense obligations, thereby extending the collective defense article solely over those territories under Tbilisi's control.

But there seems to be a lack of willingness to pursue this line. The West has its own problems to solve, including frictions in transatlantic ties, the fallout from the pandemic, and strained relations with the rising China. Perhaps no less important is the thinking in the West on how Georgia's NATO membership could further complicate relations with Russia. EU-Russia relations are at their lowest (as Joseph Borrell's visit to Moscow showed), but major European states are still unwilling to further complicate ties with Moscow, especially as the

Kremlin signaled it would not withhold from severing contacts with Europe altogether.

Furthermore, although US President Joe Biden is more straightforward in his vision of future bilateral ties with Russia, and his administration will certainly be more principled towards Moscow, it is also clear that Biden is unlikely to seek further complications with Russia. The latter's military presence in Georgia's Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions will often be invoked and criticized by the US official, but it remains to be seen how far Washington is able to go regarding Georgia's NATO membership prospects.

In Georgia, the US has an important partner in the region. This is not only explained by the pro-Western nature of our country, but also by the fact that the location of Georgia is such that it allows the United States to influence the corridor leading to the Caspian Sea. In other words, Washington understands that without Georgia, America will practically lose its penetration in the middle of Eurasia.

For a variety of reasons, Georgia's role in US foreign policy has not yet been singled out as a top priority. We still have a lot of work to do to achieve this goal, to which must be added significant changes in the region. It seems that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has shown

that the collective West needs to be more active in dealing with Georgia. It should be noted, however, that the consequences of this conflict coincided with the period of the US presidential election and subsequent change of administration, which led to political steps made towards the South Caucasus.

The political signals coming from Washington at the moment are different from what Georgia witnessed during the Trump presidency: in the coming years, Georgia can expect to be mentioned more often in the political game between Russia and the United States. Further, Biden's government will be much more principled towards Russia. This will be expressed primarily by raising the issue of the liberation of the occupied territories of Georgia. Attempts to establish closer military and economic contacts may also be seen.

For the moment, Russian military moves in the region, particularly following the Second Karabakh War, serve as a major disincentive for the US and NATO overall to make a major step in the region. Perhaps what could happen is the introduction of an enhanced NATO-Georgia partnership involving more regular military training, transfer of military technologies, etc.

Russian military moves in Abkhazia



Image by David Urbani / TASS

and Tskhinvali represent a direct military threat to Tbilisi. However, with NATO membership, Georgia is seeking a safer geopolitical situation along its borders. This does not mean that after receiving NATO membership, problems along the contact line in the two regions will not be seen, but, overall, the NATO alliance for the moment is the only option for Georgia to balance the negative effects it experiences because of the loss of direct political control over Abkhazia and Tskhinvali.

Another interesting development is the Georgian army's attempts to improve its military capabilities. Harmonization with NATO standards through military trainings with the western partners, and other methods such as sharing of mili-

tary experience, are ongoing: new military technologies are being bought and major efforts are being put into improving the country's air-defense system. This has been the weakest point in Georgia's military in general. The Second Karabakh War and the effective use of drones underlined the need for the improvement of the air-defense system. To offset the deficiencies in the air-defense sector, partnerships with France and Israel were made.

Georgia is in a geopolitically fluid region. It needs to adjust to swiftly changing circumstances on the ground. Policies of adjustment involve the evolution of military doctrine, increase in military budget, and work towards furthering of ties with the US and EU.

Employee Satisfaction & Company Performance – Veon Georgia's Experience in an Interview with the Company CEO

Continued from page 1

Data presented on the graph dates back to 2017 and covers the subsequent years, so there is strong evidence to believe it is not a coincidence of any kind.

"Building an employee-centric culture is one piece of the puzzle; another, equally important, one is to be clear about the purpose. Like every other commercial organization, we are responsible for increasing shareholder value and growth of the business; we all manage, to play our respective roles. In other words, our long lasting focus on a work environment based on respect, integrity, open communication, support and care is the foundation for growth, measured by financial indicators.

"The correlation is visible even at first glance: our teammates don't just appreciate being part of a culture that puts them at the very center of the business, but also have absolute clarity about company objectives, and so deliver a top-notch performance."

WHY DID THE NEGATIVES OF 2020 NOT AFFECT THE RESULTS?

It's not entirely true. Our country and its economy have suffered due to COVID-19. Our company is part of Georgia's economy and, obviously, we faced unprecedented challenges last year. I am completely sure we did everything in our power to face and overcome the challenges, but our ambitions were bigger, and some of our plans had to be deprioritized.

That said, connectivity as an industry didn't suffer as much as other industries crucial to our country's economy. During difficult times, people need to stay connected, and the technology they use for that purpose is in a way secondary. I'm glad we have managed to provide our customers good quality service during the tough times. I also very much hope the Georgian economy will recover fast and we will be able to achieve our ambitions.

Speaking of corporate culture and the limited negative impact of COVID on



our performance, I have to underline an important correlation between the two. Our key priority from early 2020 was to ensure our team is safe, no matter the location, no matter the role. With this done, we shifted to full scale work from home, then switched to work from anywhere – which we intend to continue going forward. We took care of our people from day one, taking this worry off their backs, so they could focus on fulfilling their respective jobs. We offered our colleagues working in the retail network, when shops closed, access to an online learning platform to make good

use of their time so they could gain new skills. The true "frontline heroes," our colleagues from the network development and maintenance teams, could not work from home because of the nature of their job. But we managed to provide them with all necessary protective measures and resources, so they were safe while working. My great thanks goes to each one of our engineers for their tireless work, despite all the limitations and challenges. All our objectives in that area were successfully completed.

I'm proud of our team on a job well done. This is how we have managed to

not only survive 2020, but also complete a vast majority of our tasks.

THE DATA CERTAINLY SHOWS SUCCESS. WHAT DO YOU THINK WAS THE MAIN CONTRIBUTOR TO GROWING BOTH DIMENSIONS?

I would like to emphasize very strongly that there is only one contributor to our success, and it is the team of more than 350 talented, skillful, dedicated and hard-working people I have a great privilege to lead. I know it might sound cliché, but it is the only honest response I can think of. Ever since I joined Veon Georgia in April 2017, I have been amazed at the outstanding performance of the team, with everyone's internal drive to perform better and to utilize all growth opportunities. It is quite probably the very definition of happiness for any leader. It definitely makes me very happy.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF A LEADER IN CREATING EMPLOYEE SATISFACTION, AND WHAT ARE SOME OF THE METHODS TO KNOW REGARDING EMPLOYEE SATISFACTION IN PARTICULAR?

Personally, I don't see a distinction between interacting with any other person and interacting with a teammate. Leading is not about the leader; leading is all about those whom you lead. If your leadership includes respect, integrity, treating the team with understanding, it is set for a success. Creating employee satisfaction is not a task on your daily "to do list"; it doesn't work that way. Let me give you an example: I have a tradition of congratulating our female teammates on their birthdays by visiting our stores and offices in Tbilisi with a bouquet of flowers and best wishes. I have been doing this for two years now, and I don't do it to improve employee engagement index by X points; I do it because I know how hard they work and how important it is for all of them to hear personally from me, especially when it coincides with birthday wishes. My colleagues in the regions do the same on

my behalf, as for obvious reasons I cannot make it out to all our locations countrywide. The key thing for me is to make sure all the Veon Georgia team members know the company cares for and appreciates them. If you want to call it our secret ingredient (well not so secret anymore), it works for me, though I wouldn't call it a "method". It is way of thinking, a way of interacting with people in general.

WHAT IS THE MOST RELIABLE WAY TO MEASURE EMPLOYEE SATISFACTION AND HAPPINESS, IN YOUR PRACTICE?

I don't know if it qualifies as a method, but for me there is no better way than just talking to people you work with. Ivory Tower management is a key to failure, and I want to believe it is part of the past; at least it has never been my way of working. There is a saying I really like: "be the leader you would want to have." I have the privilege to work with leaders who care about my view, who always make time to talk to me. I can hardly imagine any other way of effective interaction with people, whether it is about the business or some other matter.

In a more systematic manner, we run surveys measuring key aspects of our work-related behavior. As I have already mentioned, we ask our teammates about their engagement and enablement. The results of those surveys, conducted by a third party, are compared to market averages in our industry. We at Veon Georgia score higher than the industry benchmark in all aspects. It is worth underlining that that industry benchmark includes the same indicators measured in the same manner across best performing companies globally.

Given that the surveys have been conducted for a couple of years now, we can track the dynamics, not just high-level ones, but more importantly deep in respective areas, like management team integrity and individual career goals achievement. We are proud to see progress in many areas, and clear messages showing us where we have to try harder.

Digital Literacy Centers Bringing Modernity to the Georgian Regions with the Support of the German Development Cooperation

BY NINI DAKHUNDARIDZE

Civil engagement is a must for a democracy. In countries like Georgia, where older generations are more often than not still far from technology-friendly, especially in the regions, institutes' growing dependency on digitalism poses a big problem, since these people cannot participate in the nation's civil life as much as they would like to. In light of the global pandemic, and with many jobs switching to remote working, this issue has become more evident than ever.

With the above in mind, through its program 'Good Governance for Local Development South Caucasus' (GGLD), GIZ (The Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit) is supporting its partner municipalities to establish digital literacy and citizen engagement centers, aiming to make "the wonders of technology" accessible to all.

"The idea is that we want citizens in the regions to possess adequate digital literacy and knowledge in order to be able to communicate digitally with both local and central government," says GIZ representative Tornike Darjanja.

He adds that the idea came about because, as the pandemic started and the municipalities actually moved to remote work, it led to a certain "paralysis."

"Let us suppose there is an active citizen who has to travel 15 kilometers from their village to the municipal administration just so they can submit a request to repair the local road, and now, due to the pandemic restrictions on social gatherings and in-house working, they are unable to do so," Tornike explains. Only this hypothetical person is not hypothetical: there are numerous citizens who have faced this problem.

So, the question for partner municipalities was why don't we use digital capabilities? The answer came that we cannot use them as people are simply not ready to digitally interact with local government and central government, because they do not have the necessary skills to do so.

From there, the idea arose to support the partner municipalities in building a digital literacy center, and three of them are already ready to open in Telavi, Rustavi, and Keda.

"These are the spaces that the municipalities have allocated, and we have supported their renovation and equipping with the necessary technology, like computers and computer desks, making a place where it is possible for a citizen to come and get different types of information through digital literacy training."

In addition, various digital courses will be offered remotely. People in their own regions will be able to take courses remotely, and will no longer need to go to Tbilisi. These centers will also be used for employees of the municipality to gain knowledge and training. So, the centers



will become advantageous for both civilians and civil servants, to train and retrain their digital skills, gradually making the communication between the government and the people easier, while bringing more technological modernity to Georgians in the regions, which in the end promotes more participation in local decision-making processes.

The Digital Literacy Centers are now complete, and municipalities plan to open their doors from March 1 and start various trainings.

"Another advantage is that this space

is equipped in such a way that the training can be held from Tbilisi. Conventionally, 10 people will sit in a training room in Keda, 10-10 people in Rustavi and Telavi, and we can get involved from Tbilisi and conduct a training for people in three regions simultaneously, remotely," Tornike tells us, visibly excited about this opportunity. "These people will be able to fully prepare for local economic and social life. We all agree that the 21st century is difficult to live in without digital skills, while local governments are being reformed to move to a form of

electronic government."

Since 1992, with the funding of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), GIZ has been actively supporting Georgia in the areas of good governance and democracy, sustainable economic development as well as environment and climate change, among other areas. On April 1, 2020, the new regional technical assistance program 'Good Governance for Local Development South Caucasus' (GGLD) implemented by GIZ was launched. Being a strategic partner to the Ministry of Regional Development and Infrastructure (MRDI) and the Ministry of Finance of Georgia, GIZ continues its assistance to foster citizen-oriented local self-governance and regional development reforms in Georgia.

In the future, if similar initiatives appear in other municipalities, GIZ says it would support the creation of digital literacy centers in other Georgian regions. The priority is set for the future choice of regions. "I think we should support setting up similar centers in regions that will be motivated, and where they have the most difficulty in this regard," says Tornike.

Local governments hope that this will be a platform that will do good for the civilian life of municipalities, and their inhabitants.

The Digital Literacy Centers are supported by GIZ, and commissioned by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Development and Cooperation (BMZ).



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ISET GDP Forecast | National, Global Vaccination Efforts, Resumption of Travel & Trade are Key to Georgia's Economic Recovery in 2021

BY DAVIT KESHELAVA &
YASYA BABYCH

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

HIGHLIGHTS

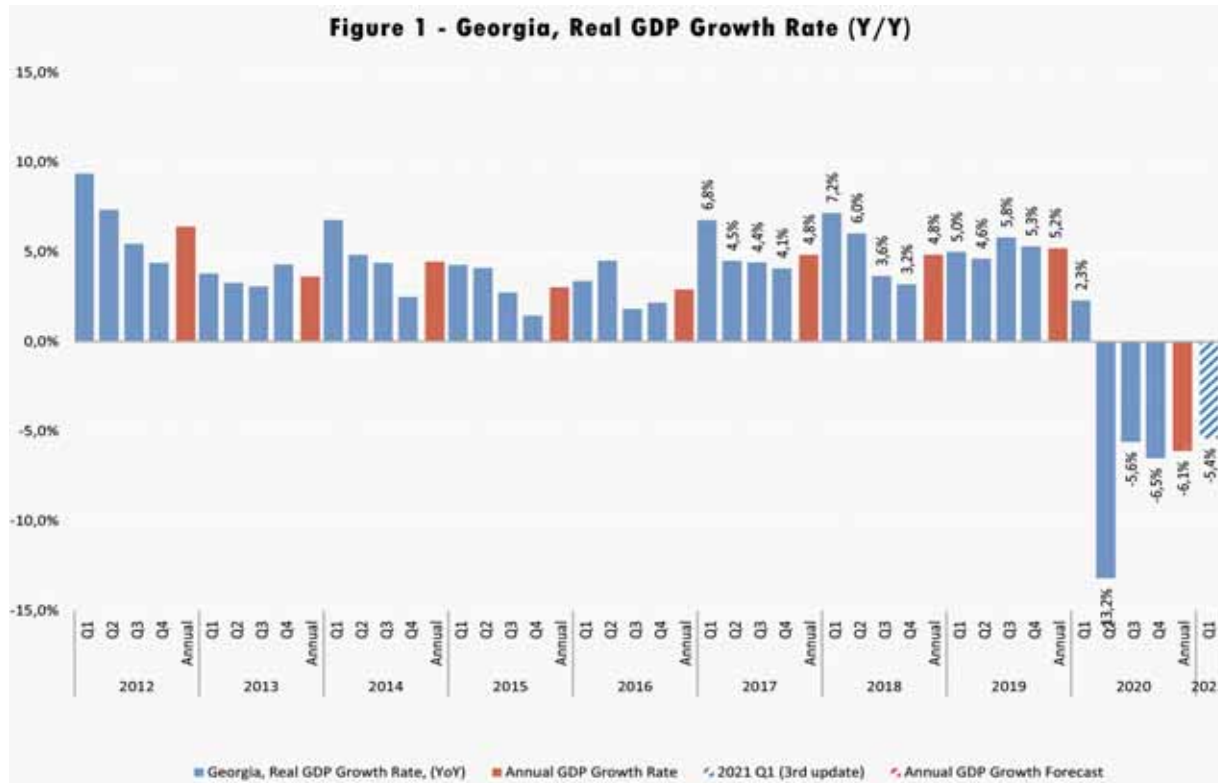
- Geostat has published its rapid estimate of real GDP growth for the fourth quarter of 2020, and their estimated growth stands at -6.5%, which is 1.3 percentage points below the ISET-PI's most recent forecast.
- The annual real GDP growth in 2020 amounted to -6.1%, which is 0.6 percentage points lower than our recent prediction. Economic activity fell sharply due to the global pandemic, although the decline was mitigated by the relatively strong fiscal stimulus and lending.
- Thus, the growth forecast for Q1 of 2021 was revised downward to -5.4% from -3.5% in January.

According to the recent Monetary Policy Report of the National Bank of Georgia (NBG), real economic growth forecast for 2021 revised downward from 5% to 4%. This growth prediction is based on assumptions that epidemiological situation will improve, the tourism sector will gradually begin to recover in the second half of the year, and, overall, the Georgian economy will manage to recover partially from the pandemic-related economic losses (baseline scenario). While in the pessimistic scenario, with more prolonged and severe economic crisis, which might be a result of a slow vaccination process (compared to the national plan of vaccination) and/or restraint of international travel due to the fear of virus, the real GDP growth forecast downgrades to 1%.

ISET-PI's forecast for real GDP growth for the first quarter of 2021 was downwardly revised by 1.9 percentage points. This change is resultant on two factors: firstly, Geostat's newly released growth figures for the fourth quarter of 2020 was 1.3 percentage points lower than ISET-PI's most recent forecast. Secondly, looking at the economic landscape from the standpoint of the December data, several variables changed significantly and affected growth predictions in different ways.

EXTERNAL MERCHANDISE TRADE.

In December, Georgia's exports experienced a 17.7% annual decline. This drop was driven by a reduction in the re-export of motor cars and trucks from Armenia, alongside the declining re-export of motor cars from Azerbaijan; export/re-export of motor cars and trucks, electrical transformers, and natural grape wines to Kyrgyz Republic; and export of copper ores and concentrates to United States. There was, however, a slight increase in the export of natural grape wines, alcoholic beverages and chemical fertilizers to Ukraine; and export of raw gold to Switzerland. Overall, re-export of vehicles other than railway or tram rolling-stock has the highest negative contribution to



the export decline (-16.4 ppts), and export of iron and steel was the second largest category in this regard (-6.4 ppts). While beverages, spirits and vinegar (1.9 ppts); edible fruit and nuts, peel of melons or citrus (1.9 ppts); and pearls, precious or semi-precious stones (1.7 ppts) had the highest positive contribution.

During this period, the import of goods decreased by 17.9%, 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). Among other negatively affected imports were: carbon steel rods and frozen meat of cattle from Ukraine; motor cars and wires from Turkey; motor cars from USA and Japan; copper ores and concentrates from Peru and Australia. In contrast, Georgian imports of copper ores and concentrates from Chile; and imports of medicines and medical equipment from Netherlands experienced yearly growth. Consequently, the trade deficit shrank dramatically by 17.7% yearly, and amounted to 473.3 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 year, remittances were on the path of recovery. In December, remittances increased by 15.9% yearly (high growth rate was maintained in January 2021 - 19.2% yearly). The main contributors to this increase (in December) were Italy (by 33.4% YoY, contribution 4.6 ppts), the USA (by 35.1% YoY, 3.4 ppts), Ukraine (by 95.2% YoY, 2.7 ppts), Azerbaijan (by 160.1% YoY, 2.1 ppts), Germany (by 60.9% YoY, 1.8 ppts), and Greece (by 14.4% YoY, 1.6 ppts). Whereas money inflows decreased from the Kyrgyz Republic (by 70% YoY, -2 ppts), and Russia (by 7.1% YoY, -1.8 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, as well as precautionary behaviors on the part of potential tourists. In December, the number of international visitors decreased by 90.8% yearly (driven by Russia [-11.4 ppts], Azerbaijan [-22.2 ppts], Armenia [-23.4 ppts], Turkey [-11.4 ppts] and EU [-3.1 ppts]), while the decline in tourist numbers (visitors who spent 24 hours or more in Georgia) amounted to 85.8%. 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.

REAL EFFECTIVE EXCHANGE RATE.

In November, the Georgian Lari real exchange rate sharply depreciated in monthly terms against all main trading currencies. The Real Effective Exchange Rate (REER) depreciated by 2.9% relative to the previous months, and also by 7.4%, relative to the same month of the previous year. Notably, the Lari real exchange rate depreciated with respect to the euro and the US Dollar by 3.3% and 0.4% respectively in monthly and by 17.1% and 10.7% respectively in yearly terms. REER also depreciated with respect to the two major trading partners - Turkey and Russia by 4.6% and 4.9% respectively in monthly terms and appreciated by 4.4% and 1.7% in yearly terms.

It is also notable that the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) of the National Bank of Georgia (NBG) met on December 9, 2020 and February 2, 2021, and decided to keep its Policy Rate unchanged at 8%. The committee has taken into consideration a significant increase in prices in international commodity markets, persistent upward pressure on inflation due to rising production costs stemming from prolongation of pandemic-related restrictions and depreciated exchange rate,

uncertainty related to the recovery of global economic activity. In addition, the downward impact of weak aggregate demand on forecasted inflation is weakened by the depreciation of the nominal effective exchange rate, while the high dollarization of the economy fortifies the transmission of exchange rate fluctuations to inflation. 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 December, the annual inflation of consumer prices amounted to 2.4%, which is only slightly lower than the targeted 3%. However, 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 1.9 ppts). Approximately 1.9 percentage points of CPI inflation were related to higher food prices, which increased 6.7% annually (of which 0.8 ppts are related to cheese and oil prices), while tobacco prices contributed 0.4 percentage points. However, decreased oil prices made a notable negative contribution (0.6 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 25.7% yearly). Meanwhile, the measure of core inflation amounted to 4.9%. Overall, CPI related variables had a slight positive contribution to the GDP forecast.

WORLD PRICES.

The other variables to have a negative contribution on the growth figure are the Metals Price Index (PMETA), and the Agricultural Raw Materials Index (PRAWM). In December, metal prices, in annual terms, increased by 28.6%, while

the price of agricultural raw material prices increased by 6.4% in annual terms. Adding the PMETA and PRAWM indicators to the model decreases the growth forecast for the first quarter of 2021.

CONSUMER CREDIT.

In December 2020, the total volume of commercial banks' consumer credit increased by only 2.2% monthly and 15.2% yearly. However, the credit volume of commercial banks' short-term consumer credits reduced by 0.5% and 71% in monthly and yearly terms, respectively (the main driver behind this negative trend being short-term consumer loans in the national currency, which reduced by 21.8% monthly and 47.8% annually). Whereas, the credit volume of commercial banks' long-term consumer credits increased by 2.3% monthly and 16.4% yearly. Overall, the variables related to consumer credit have had a negative impact on the growth forecast.

BUSINESS AND CONSUMER CONFIDENCE.

In the first quarter of 2021, ISET-PI's Business Confidence Index (BCI) increased by 32.1 index points reaching to 3.4 points after a significant deterioration in the previous quarter. Business confidence improved across all sectors, except retail trade, with the largest increase observed in the construction sector. The positive change in BCI, for Q1 2021, is driven by optimistic future expectations and improved past performance. The Past Performance Index, which considers the business sector's assessment of their own economic performance in the previous quarter, increased by 12.4 points compared to Q4 2020, and reached -29.2 for Q1 2021. The construction sector has the greatest improvement in past performance.

The Consumer Confidence Index (CCI) has declined slightly after a recovery that lasted about 6 months. In December, the index dropped by 5.5 index points and the pattern is similar for both sub-indices: Present Situation Index went down by 5.4 and Expectations Index by 5.6. Increased daily cases of the COVID-19 led us to maintain the same level of restrictions (public transport did not resume working, shopping malls were closed, etc.) that had significant social costs for the Georgian population, has disrupted New Year celebrations in Georgia and has soured consumers' moods.

Our forecasting model is based on the Leading Economic Indicator (LEI) methodology developed by the New Economic School, Moscow, Russia. We have constructed a dynamic model of the Georgian economy, which assumes that all economic variables, including GDP itself, are driven by a small number of factors that can be extracted from the data well before the GDP growth estimates are published. For each quarter, ISET-PI produces five consecutive monthly forecasts (or "vintages"), which increase in precision as time passes. Our first forecast (the 1st vintage) is available around five months before the end of the quarter in question. The last forecast (the 5th vintage) is published in the first month of the next quarter.

Carrefour Launches 3rd Store in Samegrelo to Offer Customers More Value, Quality & Choice



Carrefour, owned and operated by Majid Al Futtaim in Georgia, has launched a new store in Poti, port city of Georgia. Opening its doors to customers on Wednesday 17 February, this store is the third Carrefour to open in the Samegrelo region of western Georgia.

Located at Poti mall, Mshvidoba Street 2, the new supermarket offers a convenient shopping experience seven days a week and access to a wide variety of high-quality food products and household goods. These include health foods, baby care, hygiene and personal care items, as well as exclusive Carrefour private label products.

The store opening reinforces Carrefour's position as a trusted partner of communities throughout Georgia, and represents the continuation of its active physical expansion across the country. In doing so, the brand introduces its elevated shopping experience to residents of different regions of the country, allowing them to enjoy accessibility to the highest quality products and affordable prices.

Christophe Orcet, Country Manager of Carrefour Georgia at Majid Al Futtaim

Retail noted: I am delighted that Carrefour is already in Poti. In addition to creating unique shopping experiences for our customers, we are especially pleased to be uplifting local manufacturers and suppliers through our success. With such an active physical and digital expansion, we wish to be as close as possible to our customers, to satisfy their needs, offer unbeatable value, and continue to create great moments for everyone, every day.

The new Poti store follows the opening of Carrefour branches in Zugdidi. This growth has helped to boost the local economy and create more employment opportunities for people across the region. In spite of the COVID-19 pandemic, Carrefour opened 20 new stores countrywide in 2020, creating jobs for more than 2,000 people.

Additionally, the Carrefour marked the beginning of 2021 with the opening of a new branch in Telavi: its first store in the Kakheti region of eastern Georgia; its 40th store in the country. The scope and size of Carrefour's vast network, and considerable presence across a number of markets, sets it apart as a large-scale job creator and one of the biggest contributors in the local market, supporting

the Georgian economy as a whole.

Recently, Carrefour enhanced its online capabilities and expanded its delivery service by partnering with non-food delivery app Vendoo, as well as food-delivery apps Glovo and Wolt. These partnerships have allowed customers to prioritise their health and wellbeing by affording them the convenience of shopping from the safety and comfort of their own homes during the pandemic.



SOCIETY

Chef Enzo Neri on Reducing Food Waste

INTERVIEW BY KATIE RUTH DAVIES

One-third of food produced each year is lost or wasted. Food waste is caused, among other things, by overproduction, spoilage, and overbuying, and is said to be one of the biggest contributors to climate change, accounting for 8% of the greenhouse gas emissions. Further, people are less likely to buy and consume fruits and vegetables due to their aesthetic or physical irregularities. As such, one third of the fruits and vegetables globally do not make it to our grocery store shelves because they are rejected to avoid complaints of bad quality by the consumers. Added to this the fact that, as a result of the pandemic, poverty levels are expected to rise to up to 125 million, and 2020 marks the most severe increase in global food insecurity, impacting vulnerable households in almost every country. And yet we continue to waste a third of perfectly edible food.

GEORGIA TODAY, in partnership with CENN, is running a joint awareness-raising campaign to try and turn things around with Georgia's food waste issue. As part of the campaign, we are talking to those in the know – chefs – to find out their views on the food waste problem, what they are doing to combat it, and what they suggest could be done in future. Our first interviewee is Georgia-based Italian Chef Enzo.

Chef Enzo says he discovered cooking quite late. He was already thirty, and while "others had been working in the kitchen for 15 years by that age," he immediately recognized it as the path he needed to be on in life. For the next 20 years, he dedicated himself to the culinary industry, holding a range of senior positions within the field, from Head Chef to consultancy design and management of new dining experiences for private clients, around the world, from Italy to Georgia through London, Dubai and New York.

"I'm passionate about food," he says. "Cooking, eating, sharing, experimenting and developing it. It's what drives me to be the best chef and leader I can be. My motto goes: Cooking has never

been my ambition, it's just the way I express myself. I get inspiration from various sources - culture, music, history, arts, everyday life and the people themselves. Preparing a dish is like creating a sculpture or a drawing, you play with colors, shapes and at the same time add flavors.

WHAT GOT YOU TO WHERE YOU ARE TODAY?

Passion, a high sense of duty, self-development, curiosity, dedication and hard work.

WHAT ARE YOU WORKING ON NOW (AND WHERE)?

I'm working for Maqro Group, branding Dinehall Restaurant & Cafe on Rustaveli Avenue in Tbilisi. I'm currently the brand Chef of DineHall for Maqro Group, and the Brand Chef of the Mercure Hotel Old Town and Ibis Styles branding, and within the next two months, I will open a new rooftop restaurant Tiki Lounge on the roof of the Ibis.

IN YOUR WORK AS A CHEF, PAST AND PRESENT, HOW DID/DO YOU HANDLE POTENTIAL FOOD WASTE?

I always worked for private companies and corporates, so believe me, they are very attentive when it comes to wastage of goods, because it would directly affect the food costs. But if you take into consideration day-to-day operation, I ensure that we only purchase the ingredients that our business will use. It can be tempting to buy in bulk if your supplier has a good deal on, but doing so can leave you with more food than you need, which will go to waste. I make sure I correctly store my food, checking that fridges and freezers are working properly, checking the temperatures and keeping tidy and cleaning all the storage spaces, which involves accurate stock rotation. We also label every single product, and we keep a stock inventory on a monthly basis. We also train employees how to reduce waste, using preparation leftovers for staff food, and we give our customers the opportunity to take their leftovers home.

FROM YOUR TIME WORKING AS A CHEF IN GEORGIA,



WHAT HAS BEEN YOUR EXPERIENCE WITH REGARDS TO FOOD WASTE?

I'll be honest with you. I was working a year and half within a company which was actually part of an international chain, and I was shocked how much food was wasted from the banqueting events. Personally, as I said above, I'm very attentive and sensitive to this matter. Back in NYC for example, for Christmas, we used all the leftovers and the complimentary food gifted by suppliers to prepare over 150 kg of meals to be delivered to the Bowery Mission in East Village. I've done that kind of charity a few times in the past.

WHERE DO YOU BUY THE INGREDIENTS YOU USE IN YOUR KITCHEN? DO YOU CHOOSE AESTHETICALLY

PLEASING FRUIT & VEG, OR ARE YOU HAPPY TO BUY "UGLY"? SAME QUESTION FOR YOUR RESTAURANT AND IN YOUR PERSONAL LIFE.

I buy my ingredients from suppliers who deliver directly to our premises. Funny though, the ugly ones are more related to the organic products, because it means they have grown naturally. For me, the quality and the state of the products are important, because I have to ensure I can make a product which is suitable for the customers to consume. But also, the good quality and state of a product is important to ensure a better shelf life, because as we said above, it reduces the possibility of wastage.

40% OF WASTE IN GEORGIA IS ORGANIC WASTE, A LARGE PORTION OF WHICH IS FOOD.

HOW DO YOU SUGGEST WE REDUCE THIS PERCENTAGE?

With all the careful steps I mentioned above. Also, we should use food waste to make other resources, like converting it into gas and creating a source of renewable energy. We could use ugly fruits and vegetables, regardless of the size and shape, for products as such as jams, chutneys, snacks, and so on.

WHAT WORK HAVE YOU DONE IN THE PAST/WILL YOU DO IN FUTURE TO HELP THE VULNERABLE, USING YOUR SKILLS AS A CHEF?

In the past, I did those charity events back in NYC, and also in London. In 2019, I cooked for 80 people, including 20 kids, in Dzegvi shelter with the collaboration of American Friends of Georgia and Nino Gagua. In the future, I will keep implementing what I have been doing, trying to prepare a new generation of chefs that are sensitive to wastage; empowering everyone who deals with restaurants and food production. I am always open to new initiatives in that sense, although I have found it pretty difficult finding support.

ANY FURTHER COMMENTS ON FIGHTING FOOD WASTE IN GEORGIA?

It would be nice to give life to a non-profit organization that can collect food waste and transform it into meals to be dispatched to families who need help.



British Embassy
Tbilisi



Marketplace & Education

OP-ED BY NUGZAR B. RUHADZE

Living in a digital epoch is both difficult and easy: difficult because one needs to use a lot of smarts and common sense to survive, and easy because it is full of readily exploitable opportunities. In a nutshell, we can survive only if we are capable of handling the numeric age. So welcome to it, especially the younger generation, no longer associating age with wisdom, experience with success, and wellbeing with formal education.

In the era of numbers, kids often make more money than their parents. On the other hand, the self same children are in constant need of picking the minds of those grownups who have achieved success not only via their education but their sense of orientation in the cruel world of pragmatism and competition.

Diplomas no longer matter as much as they did before. The skills acquired at universities are not very compatible with the market place. Where, in the recent past, the knowledge of Microsoft Word was just about enough to find a job, today it sounds no more impressive than "being literate." This is why programming is turning into the most usable skill for a young person, so it probably should be made one of the core subjects at high schools and colleges.

The thing is that literacy is no longer associated with the ability to read and write. Literacy nowadays means having strong computer and programming skills. And the earlier a kid learns, so much the better for all of us. People have to become specialists at an early age: this is one of the most salient characteristic features of our time.

Another question is how good or bad this might be for the children's fragile nervous system and their immature brains. The outdated patterns of relativity between jobs and qualifications have



Image source: blog.dafcode.pl

stopped working effectively. Therefore, the extant useless paradigms will have to be changed into more efficacious ones. For instance, the system of continuous education will work for real within the labor markets of literally every nation, including Georgia, based on which the labor force will be requalified, forgetting about undervalued diplomas and thinking only of matching personal skills and capabilities with current market demands. Numerous disciplines that are being taught in schools will probably drop out of curricula because of their obsolescence in the future. Modern youth can receive education, compatible with their

talent and competence, beyond the school walls.

Take Georgia, for instance, where the question pops up all the time as to whether the system prepares its kids for future life, guaranteeing their independent survival by turning them into real decision makers and problem solvers. Another problem in this country is choosing a profession. The most successful among the greatest achievers of our time are telling us that some professions fit better into the future than others, like work in artificial intelligence, programming machines to think like humans and mimic their actions, making our lives more

productive and creative. Another good choice is the sector of energy which might help improve the climate and handle poverty quicker. The third one is biological science, which gives us a chance to prolong human life and make it more qualitative.

And still, while considering professional opportunities, I would keep in mind four main preconditions: magnetism, reward, significance, and self-improvement. One of the most important issues to be considered in the academic endeavor is the readiness to master the way to learn, what to learn and why to learn, because employment mostly

depends on the quality of our earlier learning.

And speaking about employment as such, it is important for all of us, and not only for ensuring our physical survival, because an unemployed person has no way to feel happy. And to be employed, one needs to be compatible with the labor market, not simply educated. A hiring company needs a job done, not just an enlightened good guy. The attitude towards education cannot be healthier than this, and all these salubrious thoughts come from the greatest pragmatists of our time. We'd better believe them, and duly heed their thoughts!

Call a Spade a Spade: Etseri, Svaneti

BLOG BY TONY HANMER

Note: This article is actually more about shovels than spades. However, try and find a famous quote about a shovel? So, call a shovel a shovel. It's the flat-ended one, not the one with the pointed end.

Generally, here, one buys a shovel (OR a spade, hoe, rake, etc.) minus the handle. The assumption is that one will know which wood to use and how to make the handle oneself. When surrounded by forest as we are, and also surrounded by knowledgeable neighbors, the thing can be made and fixed in place without too much trouble. The handle must be hard, dense, able to take the strains put on it by your work. Not liable to rot. There are woods, and woods.

The implement is hugely important in a place like Upper Svaneti, where a long and snowy winter is a typical feature of the seasonal year. This year notwithstanding; although the snow is certainly making its entrance in grand style now, at long overdue last. You will have plenty of snow to remove from your steps, path, driveway and so on. If this is all, you are blessed not to have also to take it off your roof, generally a far larger surface than all the others together. But if you are supposed to shovel your roof, and don't, you can actually lose it from the accumulation of all that soft, fluffy weight! A cubic meter of fresh snow can weigh from 160 kg up, getting heavier as it is compacted over time by its own weight. More snow falls,

pressing that under it down, making it denser in the same volume.

Now, there are several major frustrations in shoveling snow, along with some joys. The former include when it is sticky enough not to go flying off when you swing! Then you must bang the shovel against a hard surface to dislodge the snow, and you've lost all the energy of the swing in useless effort.

If your shovel, on the other hand, wasn't fixed well enough, and eventually joins the snow in flying away, then you must re-fix it, better this time. Try using screws instead of mere nails! Also, it must be a tight fit, not a wobbly one.

Getting a damaged edge can really hurt the quality of your work. This might happen if you hit something unyieldingly hard, which warps the steel. Then you have to hammer it back into thin straightness. Your handle can break if you put too much force on it, and you have to replace it. I've only once had the steel shovel itself break, from attempting to move snow which was more ice. It didn't crack right across its width, though, just in the middle. So, for a while it will still be useable.

Gloves will help to prevent blisters on hands not used to this work. Very important!

If the snow is of the type which crumbles into powder when your shovel bites into it, you can lose much of the load which you expected to get. This is usually a factor of lower temperatures than the near-freezing ones which make the snow sticky. All you can do is accept this limitation, lower your expectations, and continue.



Wear too much clothing, and you'll sweat a lot with the work. Just enough, and you'll stay warm but not overheat. Sweating can lead to getting a chill when you cool down. Prolonged shoveling even in considerable cold can generate quite a lot of body heat.

What are the joys of shoveling, then? One is simply the absence of all the above problems, with nice neat blocks of snow

going where you send them. Another is the good physical workout you get, helping you stay fit. Heart, arms, chest, back, legs, hands and fingers. And there's the pleasure of a job well done, aesthetically and with the knowledge that you have performed something useful and necessary.

Keep the spade for digging into soil, in other seasons.

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 Etseri:

www.facebook.com/hanmer.house.svaneti

Top Coffee Spots in Tbilisi: Where to Drink the Best Coffee Post-Lockdown



BY ANA DUMBADZE
FOR WHERE.GE

For many of us, coffee is one of the most important elements and a precondition for a successful and energetic day. No doubt, starting a day with a strong and tasty cup of coffee can have a great influence on our mood and productivity, but making the right choice is important. Now, as outdoor eateries have been allowed to host guests since February 15, many of our favorite places throughout the city are well up and running, and are waiting to greet thirsty customers.

Here, we guide you through the top places in Tbilisi to grab the most delicious cup of coffee and enjoy a cozy and friendly environment and quality service at the same time.

GLORIA JEAN'S COFFEES

Gloria Jean's, an Australian coffee brand with 40 years' experience, is available in Tbilisi on Liberty (Freedom) Square. Original Blend Dark Roast is the signature taste of Gloria Jean's. However, coffee lovers can find a wide variety of special coffees suitable for any taste, from delicate and creamy Cappuccino to intense and aromatic Americano. And only original top quality beans roasted in Australia are used during the preparation process. Each cup of coffee at

'Gloria' is controlled by professionalism, with the condition of the beans to milk temperature carefully maintained. No burnt milk or dissatisfaction here!

The new branch at Liberty Square continues the tradition of the brand by sourcing quality coffee beans, and training the best baristas to serve up their unbeatable coffee with a smile.
1/3 Aleksandr Pushkin Street
Daily from 08:30 AM - 8 PM (except weekends)
(+995) 555 33 48 73

LE GATEAU



Le Gateau is a boulangerie offering a wide variety of premium French desserts, cakes and freshly made bread. Moreover, it is widely known among coffee lovers as one of the best facilities to enjoy the highest quality coffee in Tbilisi. When visiting the facility, one can enjoy the combination of its distinguished sweets and tasty coffee.

"The long-awaited day has come! Our cafes started hosting in the open air. Do

not spend the warm and sunny days of February at home, create your mood by visiting Le Gateau. Visit our cafes in the open air!" the brand addressed loyal customers this week.

42 Abashidze Street, Vake; 24 Al. Kazbegi Ave.; 25 Pekini Ave.; 1 T. Shevchenko Str.
Daily from 08:00 AM - 8 PM (except weekends)
(032) 247 15 15

PAUL GEORGIA



This French family bakery and patisserie, running internationally since 1889, easily won the hearts of Georgian coffee and sweets enthusiasts. PAUL Georgia is one of the most popular places to have a delicious, light lunch and quality coffee in Tbilisi.

"From now on, you can visit us and sit on our terrace (except weekends); the time to be together has come again!" the facility announced following the lifting of restrictions.

26 A. Abashidze Str.; 15 Al. Kazbegi Ave.
Daily from 09:00 AM - 8 PM (except weekends)
(+995) 558 37 59 58

LUCA POLARE



Apart from finest ice cream and sweets, Luca Polare offers coffees for all tastes. Moreover, they serve the most delicious hot chocolate!

LUCA's coffee is the highest quality Arabica, with beans picked in South America. Mocha, Latte, Cappuccino, Americano, or Espresso? The choice is up to you! Notably, LUCA's coffees can be enjoyed with vegan milk.

Branches:
Tbilisi: 11 Mosashvili Str.; 12 Eristavi Str.; (Round garden); 7 Sandro Euli Str.; 9 Kazbegi Ave.; 125 Agmashenebeli Ave.; 2 Kakabadze Str.; 7 Pekini Ave.; 3 Arakishvili (Vake); Eastpoint (2 Tvalchrelidze Str.); City mall Saburtalo (1 Kavtaradze Str.).

Batumi: 3 Irakli Abashidze Str.
Daily from 08:00 AM - 8 PM (except weekends)
(032) 238 08 02

DOLCI DI PARADISO



If you've been to Dolci di Paradiso once, you'll be sure to want to head there again and again. Here, you will find the highest quality, best service, and delicious ice cream, coffee and sweets.

The authentic Italian brand Kimbo coffee will fill you on your way to work in the morning with distinguished flavors. Dolce di Paradiso is a real Italian paradise where you can feel for yourself what heavenly sweets and coffee are like.

40 Chavchavadze Street, Vake
Daily from 10:00 AM - 8 PM (except weekends)
(+995) 577 25 22 00



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*Gloria
Jean's*



Coffee made especially for you

Liberty Square Pushkin st 1,3 T'bilisi