



## FOCUS

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# Corona Updates: Global Cases Up, Georgia Loosens More Restrictions

BY TEAM GT

For the first time in seven weeks, the global cases of COVID-19 rose again last week, the World Health Organization said during a briefing on Monday. "If countries rely solely on vaccines, they are making a mistake. Basic public health measures remain the foundation of the response," WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said.

The organization says that Ghana and the Ivory Coast were the first countries to start vaccinating people with doses provided by COVAX, the platform supplying poor and middle-income countries with vaccines.

Tedros criticized wealthy countries for hoarding the vaccine doses, as it puts the poor in "an unequal position in a common global fight against the COVID-19."

Georgia expects its own vaccination process to begin in March.



Continued on page 2 Image source: AP

Prepared for Georgia Today Business by GALT & TAGGART CREATING OPPORTUNITIES

As of 22-Feb-2021

Markets				BONDS					
STOCKS	Price	w/w	m/m	Price	w/w	m/m			
Bank of Georgia (BGEO LN)	GBP 10.76	-6.3%	-9.4%	GEORG 04/21	100.36 (YTM 4.55%)	-0.3%	-0.2%		
Georgia Capital (CGEO LN)	GBP 5.15	-2.1%	-1.9%	GEORG 04/21	100.63 (YTM 2.11%)	-0.1%	-0.5%		
TBC Bank Group (TBCG LN)	GBP 11.14	-11.2%	-10.9%	GRAIL 07/22	107.13 (YTM 2.47%)	-0.0%	+0.6%		
				GEBGG 07/23	106.41 (YTM 3.23%)	+0.6%	+0.8%		
COMMODITIES				CURRENCIES					
Price	w/w	m/m	Price	w/w	m/m	Price	w/w	m/m	
Crude Oil, Brent (US\$/bbl)	65.24	+3.1%	+17.7%	GEL / USD	3.3079	+0.5%	+0.3%		
Gold Spot (US\$/OZ)	1 809.67	-0.5%	-2.5%	GEL / EUR	4.0213	+0.7%	+0.1%		
				GEL / GBP	4.6511	+1.7%	+3.0%		
				GEL / CHF	3.6925	-0.2%	-1.0%		
FTSE 100	6 612.24	-2.1%	-1.2%	GEL / RUB	0.0445	-0.9%	+1.6%		
FTSE 250	20 981.09	-2.0%	+1.9%	GEL / TRY	0.4712	-0.3%	+5.9%		
DAX	13 950.04	-2.1%	+0.5%	GEL / AZN	1.9458	+0.5%	+0.2%		
DOW JONES	31 521.69	+0.2%	+1.7%	GEL / AMD	0.0063	-	-1.6%		
NASDAQ	13 533.05	-0.0%	-0.1%	GEL / UAH	0.1186	+0.1%	+1.2%		
MSCI EM EE	166.12	-3.0%	+1.1%	EUR / USD	0.8225	-0.2%	+0.1%		
MSCI EM	1 397.67	-2.8%	+0.3%	GBP / USD	0.7110	-1.1%	-2.7%		
SP 500	3 876.50	-2.5%	+0.9%	CHF / USD	0.8961	+0.7%	+1.2%		
MSCI FM	2 560.71	-0.8%	-1.0%	RUB / USD	74.3075	+1.3%	-1.3%		
GT Index (GEL)	1 582.68	-	-	TRY / USD	7.0189	+0.8%	-5.4%		
GT Index (USD)	1 208.13	-	-	AZN / USD	1.6988	-	-0.2%		

# On Charles Michel's Visit



Recent meeting between Gov't and opposition, initiated by Charles Michel

BY TEAM GT

The European Council President, Charles Michel, this week paid a two-day working visit to Georgia. He met with Georgian President Salome Zurbashvili, Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili and representatives of the opposition parties to discuss the current situation in the country, the coronavirus vaccine, and the political tension created against the background of the recent arrest of UNM Chairman Nika Melia.

"We had a very important dialogue. The main message is the following: to protect the interests of the Georgian people," Michel summarized on the second day of his visit, following a meeting between ruling party members and opposition representatives.

"There are many difficult and complex challenges in this country: economic development, the social situation, COVID-19, security, stability; these are very important challenges that must be overcome. That is why this political crisis must be resolved urgently, and today I'm proud that important and good steps have been taken in the right direction. This does not mean that everything is resolved, but when I asked all the participants [of the meeting] if they were ready for dialogue to find a solution together, their answer was 'yes.' This is a good step, an important step, and we will continue to support all positive efforts," Michel said.

"The call, recommendation and advice

of the President of the European Council was that we should all find a common language as soon as possible, including the opposition and the government," said Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili.

"We agreed that this dialogue will continue. I will consult with the political council of the Georgian Dream and we will take further steps. I hope the opposition will continue to work in such a constructive mode," the PM added.

Many representatives of the opposition also positively assessed their meeting with the government officials, and said that the negotiations had reached a fundamentally new level.

Mamuka Khazaradze, one of the leaders of the 'Lelo for Georgia' party, told journalists that, "Naturally, no agreement could be reached on all these issues today. The main thing is that the process has started and this process is accompanied by specific deadlines," he said.

"If the Georgian Dream has the illusion that Mr. Michel will leave and will no longer be interested in what is happening in our country, they are wrong," said Salome Samadashvili, a leader of the United National Movement party. "The promise we received today is that the EU will be extremely active in overcoming the current crisis and will use all possible means to apply pressure, including on the government.

"Our partners are well aware that it is impossible to simultaneously arrest political leaders and talk about dialogue," she noted.

Opposition representatives noted that further negotiations with the government will only be possible if the political persecution in the country stops, and

UNM Chairman Nika Melia and opposition leader Giorgi Rurua are released from custody.

They also said they are willing to increase the EU's role in their dialogue with the ruling Georgian Dream party.

On Monday, Charles Michel was taken to the village of Khurvaleti, bordering the occupation line with the Tskhinvali region. Having been briefed on the situation on the ground, he emphasized that the European Union is committed to Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

"It is very important for me to see the situation on the ground with my own eyes. That is why I am here. The EU is committed to Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity. It is also very impor-

tant for the EUMM. We know that the situation is complex and difficult for the local people. I would like to tell them: you are not alone. The EU is committed to peace, stability and security," he said.

He noted the importance of strengthening ties between Georgia and Europe. "It is very important for us to strengthen the ties between Georgia and Europe. At the same time, it is important to implement the reforms that are needed not for Europe, but for the people of Georgia: the rule of law, the fight against corruption. It is also important to develop ambitious economic programs. COVID-19 is a big challenge in Georgia, Europe, and all over the world. We will work to be able to develop a recovery strategy that is important to the people," he said.

Following a meeting with President of Georgia Salome Zurbashvili, Michel spoke of the COVID-19 vaccine.

"I hope the vaccine will be distributed in Georgia soon. We will do our best, of course, together with the World Health Organization, to ensure that Georgia has access to vaccine doses," he said.

As a parting message, Michel wrote on his Facebook page: "My visit to Georgia was eye opening, to say the least. The Administrative Boundary Line in South Ossetia was proof that the EU's presence is sometimes more than necessary: it is a lifeline of hope in a region that needs some. Barbed wire fences divide families, prevent children from going to school. This is unacceptable.

"I can firmly reaffirm the EU's support to the territorial integrity of Georgia.

"The political crisis and polarization in the country is of the deepest concern to the EU and to me personally. Nevertheless, I sensed today in all political actors the willingness to discuss, to move



"We had a very important dialogue. This is a good step, an important step, and we will continue to support all positive efforts."  
- Charles Michel

forward, to break the deadlock. After meeting all parties, I convened a meeting that led to a spontaneous and open debate, with everyone sitting at the same table. The EU's priority has always been the protection of the interests of the Georgian citizens, and we know the work that remains to be done. Tonight I am proud because a good step, an important step in the right direction has been taken.

"I decided to hold the EU-Georgia Association Council in Brussels in mid-March. It will be a rendez-vous in order to observe what progress has been made on the different difficult topics.

"Thank you Georgia for the warmest welcome!"



Image source: 1TV

## Economy Minister: WizzAir to Resume Flights from Kutaisi at the End of March

BY ANA DUMBADZE

Hungarian low-cost airline WizzAir will resume flights from Kutaisi Airport at the end of March. Based on the information available at the moment, the airline will operate 45 flights a week to 20 destinations, Minister of Economy and Sustainable Development, Natia Turnava, said.

She noted that about 70 passenger flights a week will be operated by different airlines during March, while, considering the applications received today, 200 flights will be performed each week during the summer.

flights per week, Fly Dubai with four flights per week, Air Arabia with two flights per week, and low-cost Buta Airways will be added mid-March, a Baku-Tbilisi-Baku flight three times a week. Air Astana and Fly Aristan will also start flights. As a result of the lifting of flight restrictions, some airlines have increased the frequency of flights, such as Turkish Airlines, which operated flights three times a week and currently operates two flights a day. Pegasus operated flights only twice a week. Qatar Airways also switched to flights four times a week.

"WizzAir will resume flights from Kutaisi International Airport from the end of March, and, based on the information available at the moment, will operate flights to 20 destinations, 45 flights per week. From the end of March, the new airline 'WizzAir Abu Dhabi' will start operating on the Georgian air market and will operate flights to Abu Dhabi - Kutaisi - Abu Dhabi twice a week," the Minister stated.

## Corona Updates: Global Cases Up, Georgia Loosens More Restrictions

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Deputy Health Minister Tamar Gabunia said that communication and negotiations with COVAX are ongoing and she hopes that by the end of March, the country will receive the vaccine.

"We expect the delivery of the first doses of AstraZeneca to arrive by the end of March and then continue. COVAX explicitly indicates that AstraZeneca will arrive in the country sooner than Pfizer. The date of introduction of Pfizer will be specified after we work on the terms they proposed. We expect vaccination to start in March," Gabunia said.

Tengiz Tsertsvadze, Director General of Infectious Diseases, AIDS and Clinical Immunology Research Center, this week also discussed the upcoming plans regarding the vaccination process in Georgia.

"As far as I know, negotiations are successfully underway with Novavax, and an agreement has been reached for the supply of one million doses," Tengiz Tsertsvadze, Director General of Infectious Diseases, AIDS and Clinical Immunology Research Center, told Rustavi2.

He added: "It's 25% [of what we need], and it's not a bad thing that about 700,000 people will be vaccinated in the autumn and winter, and there will be a lot of negotiations before the end of the year."

According to CNBC, Novavax expects FDA clearance for the Covid vaccine as early as May.

### THE RESTRICTIONS

Hotels at ski resorts opened on February 25, and from Monday March 8, the rope-ways will also open, in full compliance with epidemiological standards and regulations.

The same day, we can also look forward to the restaurants opening indoor service, and shopping malls and fairs resuming full seven-days-a-week operation. All will have to follow the established recommendations and standards, which will be strictly controlled by the relevant agencies.

Still to look forward to are gyms resuming operation from March 15, along with theaters and sports clubs. Professional ensembles will be able to resume rehearsals from March 15, and fully resume activities (theatrical performances, sports competitions in the presence of specta-

tors) from April 1.

The restriction on movement from 9 PM to 5 AM remains in force.

### THE LATEST STATS

Georgia reported 133 coronavirus cases, 276 recoveries, and 12 deaths Wednesday-Thursday, the official figures show.

10,678 tests were performed in 24 hours, including 5456 antigen tests and 5222 PCR tests.

Testing revealed that out of 133 new cases of infection detected in the country, 78 cases were detected in Tbilisi, Adjara 3, Imereti 20, Kvemo Kartli 1, Shida Kartli 8, Guria 3, Samegrelo - Zemo Svaneti 14, Kakheti 2, Mtskheta-Mtianeti 1, Samtskhe-Javakheti 1, Racha-Lechkhumi and Kvemo Svaneti 2.

The daily test-positivity rate stands at 1.25%, while it was 1.65% over the past 14 days.

The total number of confirmed cases since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in the country has reached 271,872, of which 266,081 people recovered and 3553 have died.

Currently, there are 2238 active cases of infection in the country.

# International Women's Day, 8 March 2021

OP-ED BY DANIELLE MEUWLY,  
REGIONAL DIRECTOR OF  
COOPERATION, EMBASSY  
OF SWITZERLAND

**T**his year, we will be marking International Women's Day with the bitter realization that the gains achieved over the last decades in our efforts towards gender equality and women's empowerment remain fragile. The pandemic has exacerbated the unequal division of unpaid domestic and care work between women and men. It has shown how vulnerable and insecure women's employment is, and how perilous the situation of victims of domestic violence can get as lockdown measures were implemented. While the fragility is not only COVID related, the pandemic has poignantly highlighted the significance of women's contributions to society in so many areas: as healthcare workers, care-givers, or community organizers to name just a few. They have clearly demonstrated, once again if it was needed, their potential for leadership.

It is therefore important for all of us to embrace the global priority theme articulated by UN Women for the 2021 International Women's Day: the increased participation of women in leadership positions, with a view to achieve an equal future in a COVID-19 world. The theme is aligned with the 65th session of the Commission on the Status of Women and with the flagship Generation Equality campaign, to which many states worldwide have already adhered. The

Swiss Cooperation stands in solidarity with civil society organizations, women's rights activists, the government, the UN, and other development partners in our shared aspiration of achieving gender equality as we mark this International Women's Day and remember the battles we won, as well as those still ahead of us.

Efforts are being made to achieve SDG 5, which are at the core of Switzerland's cooperation program in Georgia. For over a decade, we have been supporting women's economic empowerment through value-chain development projects in the agriculture sector ("Alliance Caucasus Program"). We helped women producers of meat and dairy products, wool, and honey to improve the quality and quantity of their goods and access to the markets; this has created more than GEL50 million in additional income since 2017.

Efforts are being made, but there is still some way to go, in particular to raise awareness. For example, women's participation is ensured by the Decentralization Strategy, and a number of guidelines for conducting community meetings for the development of municipal planning documents. Women have the full right to participate in this process, but they often still do not know about it, or still doubt that their participation can make a difference. Together with our implementing partner, Mercy Corps, we supported the opening of Women's Rooms in many partner municipalities, with municipal buildings offering a resource space and access to public services to women. The first three rooms were opened in Kvemo Kartli in 2012. There are now about thirty in various



regions of Georgia. National guidelines are ready. Once approved, they will ensure consistency among these Women's Rooms as well as the quality of the services offered.

The Swiss Cooperation also takes particular pride in the Gender Pay Gap Analysis for Georgia, undertaken by us with Austria as a co-funder, within the UN Women-implemented project on "Women's Economic Empowerment in the South Caucasus." The findings have provided solid data and convinced the Government of Georgia to start advocating for an end to gender-based discrimination in the labor market. The principle of equal pay for equal work has been adopted through the amend-

ments of the Labor Code in 2020, and Georgia has expressed its interest in joining the Equal Pay International Coalition (EPIC) in 2020. These are welcome developments. Yet, the monthly Gender Pay Gap at 35.7% in 2019 has only marginally declined in Georgia since 2013 when it stood at 36.5%. Obviously, more should be done to reach the goal of equal pay, notably by ensuring that national legislation expressly commits to the principle of equal pay for men and women for work of equal value, and that procedures for joining EPIC are finalized. Surely, this agenda would benefit from the commitment to EPIC by important actors, such as Georgia's Trade Union Con-

federation, the Employers' Association, representatives of the private sector, civil society and academia. To succeed, all forces are needed.

This International Women's Day can only be a symbol, and we need symbols. Gender equality will only be achieved if all make an effort, every day, to implement it. There are many opportunities to do so. For example, this year 'Ring the Bell for Gender Equality,' will take place - virtually - on 11 March. It will be hosted by the Georgian Stock Exchange in cooperation with our partners IFC and UN Women as a call to the private sector to take concrete actions to advance women's empowerment and gender equality. Please take part.

## EMC: Namakhvani HPP Will Not Contribute to Georgia's Energy Security

BY ANA GIORGADZE

**T**he Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center (EMC) critically assessed the Namakhvani HPP agreement, which was made public on February 7 by the Group of Investigative Journalists "ifact.ge."

"It is clear that the project will not only not contribute to the energy security of the country, as indicated by the government, but that the agreement provides for heavy and indefinite fiscal burdens for the state budget," EMC reports.

The statement is as follows:

"The agreement also shows a number of guarantees and conditions of support given to the company by the state, which made it possible to circumvent the strict requirements of the legislation and start the construction process by obtaining basic permits.

"The analysis of the agreement shows that the company is actually using Georgia's natural resources free of charge and does not undertake to sell energy on the domestic market, which invalidates the country's energy security or even economic benefits.

"The list of possible circumstances in which the company seeks compensation from the state is indefinitely extensive and puts the country in an unequal position due to the fact that it seeks to reinsure risks beyond the control of the state with budgetary funds. Under the agreement, all possible business risks are insured in the state budget in favor of the company."



Image source: publika.ge

This Sunday's rally in Kutaisi marked the 126th day of a protest against the construction of the Namakhvani hydropower project. Thousands gathered in Kutaisi's central square calling on the government to review their permission to construct the hydropower plant in northwest Georgia.

The cascade project is to be built in the Tskaltubo and Tsageri municipalities north of Kutaisi, by a Turkish construction firm, Enka Renewables. Despite the strong local resistance, round-the-clock tents and activist groups' intense involvement, the construction work is already underway and the territory is being controlled by police forces.

The criticism around the ongoing project is actively supported by green activist groups, non-governmental organizations and researchers who suggest that the project will affect the environmental and social setting in the region, and the consequences can be dangerous for the whole valley, putting Kutaisi, one of the largest cities in Georgia, at high risk.

One of the organizers of the rally, Varlam Goletiani, during his speech said that if Enka Renewable does not stop the construction works on the HPP immediately and leave the River Rioni Valley within two weeks, protesters will picket Kutaisi. "Guardians of Rioni Valley" gave the government until March

14 to review their decisions regarding Namakhvani HPP, marking the date for another massive rally.

"In response to the population's concerns over the Namakhvani HPP, there are certain questions being raised, and every question must be answered adequately, reasonably, and professionally," Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili stated at Thursday's Cabinet meeting.

The PM then instructed the Ministers of Economy and Environmental Protection and Agriculture to engage the population in direct contact and participate in relevant parliamentary committee hearings.

"I believe it necessary for the ministers themselves to answer the population's questions, which is why I ask Ms. Natia Turnava and Mr. Levan Davitashvili to engage in direct communication with the population on the ground tomorrow; speak to them in person, answer the subject of their concerns. I also ask our ministers to take part in relevant parliamentary committee hearings. Importantly, said hearings must engage stakeholders in this issue, and all questions must be answered," Garibashvili said.

The PM noted that Georgia's energy independence is one of the key priorities to be upheld by the country.

"The volume of imported power is growing by the year. Energy projections show that at least 100 MW HPPs must be built every year, something missing at this point. But we, of course, must find the golden mean, and to that end it is vital to maintain direct communication with the public so that all questions our society may have are answered," he said.

**//**  
"It is clear that the project will not only not contribute to the energy security of the country, as indicated by the government, but that the agreement provides for heavy and indefinite fiscal burdens for the state budget." — EMC.



Construction of Namakhvani HPP. Source: lpress.ge

# The Israeli Ambassador on Palestine, Anti-Semitism & the Georgian Political Crisis

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW BY  
KATIE RUTH DAVIES

Israel has been much in the news of late- from a controversial ICC decision, to a revolutionary new COVID vaccine and accusations of anti-Semitism in Georgia. We sat down with Ambassador of Israel to Georgia, Ran Gidor, to get his take on things.

**AT THE BEGINNING OF FEBRUARY, ISRAEL REJECTED THE DECISION OF THE INTERNATIONAL CRIMINAL COURT ON JURISDICTION IN THE PALESTINIAN CASE. PLEASE TELL US MORE ABOUT THAT DECISION, AND ISRAEL'S REACTION.**

The ICC Pre-Trial Chamber's decision that the Prosecutor has jurisdiction in the Palestinian case is deeply flawed, and confirms Israel's long-standing concerns that the Court may be susceptible to politicization. The ICC was established following the horrors of the Holocaust, to deal with the worst cases of mass atrocities that shock the conscience of humanity, and with cases that could not be addressed within any other framework. It only has authority over cases where States choose to delegate their own criminal jurisdiction to the Court.

The Court wholly lacks jurisdiction over the so-called "situation in Palestine". The Rome Statute clearly stipulates that the Court only has jurisdiction in cases brought before it by sovereign states; a sovereign Palestinian State does not exist, and never has. Despite these facts, the ICC's Pre-Trial Chamber ruled that The Hague has the jurisdiction to investigate Israel.

One can only imagine how Georgian public opinion would react if the so called "governments" of Abkhazia and South Ossetia were to be recognized as sovereign states by the ICC and, indeed, launched a criminal investigation against Georgia itself.

Unfortunately, two judges came to this decision on the basis of political considerations rather than judicial ones. In fact, it was for these very reasons that the Presiding Judge himself, Judge Péter Kovács, opposed the majority opinion



of the Pre-Trial Chamber. In his highly critical dissenting opinion, he stated that the majority's approach has "no legal basis in the Rome Statute, and even less so in international law", and that "acrobatics with provisions of the Statute cannot mask legal reality".

It is worth noting that the dissenting opinion reflects the official positions of seven leading states' parties of the Court, such as Germany, Austria, Australia, Brazil, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Uganda, as well as world renowned international law experts, which were submitted to the Court in the framework of these proceedings.

The ICC's latest decision has turned the Court into a political tool, diverted it from its original mandate and undermined the values for which it was established. It is still not too late to shift course to the right path however, and the responsibility for doing so rests on the shoulders of the Prosecutor, who enjoys full discretion on this matter.

**ISRAEL, AS A COUNTRY TRADITIONALLY WELL-KNOWN FOR ITS GREAT ACHIEVEMENTS IN THE MEDICAL FIELD, RECENTLY ANNOUNCED THE CREATION OF AN INNOVATIVE DRUG AGAINST CORONAVIRUS, EXO-CD24, SHOWING 96% EFFICACY IN EARLY TRIALS. WHAT IS THE LATEST ON THAT?**

Israeli scientists have so far achieved dramatic results in the clinical trials of two potential anti-COVID-19 drugs: EXO-CD24 and Allocetra.

EXO-CD24, developed at Tel Aviv Sourasky Medical Center, and administered by inhalation, cured all 30 moderate-to-severe cases in a Phase I clinical trial. The drug is designed to tackle the so-called "cytokine storm," where the immune system goes out of control and starts attacking healthy cells, that occurs in the lungs of 5-7% of Covid-19 patients. The drug is based on exosomes [vesicles] that are released from the cell membrane

and used for intercellular communication. It is enriched the exosomes with 24CD protein. This protein is expressed on the surface of the cell and has a known and important role in regulating the immune system.

Concurrently, Enlivex Therapeutics also reported positive results from a multi-center Phase II clinical trial of its experimental COVID-19 immunotherapy drug Allocetra in severe and critical COVID-19 patients. Nine severe and seven critical COVID-19 patients were treated with Allocetra in the Phase II clinical trial. Fourteen of them recovered and were discharged from the hospital after an average of 5.3 days. The Phase II trial originally was expected to enroll 24 patients but was "completed early in support of anticipated accelerated regulatory filings of the trial's positive safety and efficacy data," Enlivex reported. Altogether, 19 out of 21 Phase II and Phase Ib Allocetra trial patients recovered and were

discharged from the hospital after an average of 5.6 days. Most of the patients in both studies had pre-existing risk factors such as male gender, obesity and hypertension.

**EARLY JANUARY, YOU SPOKE ABOUT ANTI-SEMITISM IN GEORGIA, A COUNTRY THAT IS REGULARLY MARKETED FOR ITS TOLERANCE AND HOSPITALITY. TELL US WHAT PROMPTED YOU TO MAKE THAT STATEMENT AND HOW YOU THINK WE CAN/SHOULD CHANGE.**

One would not like to exaggerate the current scale of this objectionable and tragic phenomenon, as Georgia has always had less anti-Semitism than almost any other country in the world. Jews have existed in Georgia for over two millennia, and are still welcomed here as guests and neighbors. However, by the same token, it is important not to pretend that the issue doesn't exist at all, otherwise, it might get out of hand in the future.

Unfortunately, xenophobia, racism, anti-Semitism and homophobia are on the rise in many countries around the world, and in recent years we have witnessed some violent attacks on Jews even in the US, UK, France and Germany.

It is therefore essential to address the problem and nip it in the bud. In order to be able to do that, first we need to acknowledge that it exists. Then we need an inter-disciplinary, cross-departmental approach that would involve education, outreach campaigns, inter-faith dialogue and, when needed, law enforcement.

**TELL US YOUR VIEWS ON THE CURRENT POLITICAL CRISIS IN GEORGIA. WHAT ARE YOUR CONCERNS AND HOPES MOVING FORWARD?**

Israel joins the rest of the international community in hoping that Georgia will emerge out of its current political impasse in the near future. We support the process of peaceful dialogue between the relevant sides, and trust that Georgia will soon re-embark on the road to prosperity. Israel has always been a close ally of Georgia, and will continue to support it in agricultural development, high-tech and entrepreneurship, investment and commerce, and public health.

## Law Makes Life Easier

OP-ED BY NUGZAR B. RUHADZE

On one of my numerous bookshelves, I have a 1971 edition by the Reader's Digest titled 'You and the Law'. Guess what it says in the introduction: 'Law is the set of rules that we have established to make it easier for us to live'. Commonly, law and the law enforcement ways and means are changed to serve time's demands and exigencies. What remains unchanged is only us, the people. We have always had a nasty proclivity to flout the law; hating it and defying it if we are given a chance.

The belief is that Georgia and its culture, as well as the human behavioral model here, is mostly pro-western: we are attached to the western lifestyle, and our hopes for a better life are connected with what we call "the family of western nations," rich and happy and stable. This is why we are so enthusiastically imbibing those values, including the celebrated rule of law, the central truth-seeking idea of the western political culture.

It is not very easy for a former author-

itarian socialist nation to become an adherent of the rule of law overnight, but we have been trying as hard as possible over the last 30 years. But what is 'rule of law'? Here goes its encyclopedic definition, based on and closely related to constitutionalism: "The rule of law is the authority and influence of law in society, especially when viewed as a constraint on individual and institutional behavior, hence the principle whereby all members of a society are considered equally subject to publicly disclosed legal codes and processes." All members of a society! This should include the government officials, political figures, military personnel, law enforcement bodies and of course all of us rank-and-file - the subjects of government. If this definition is true, then there can be no exemptions from the law unless the person accused of a breach of law happens to be mentally incapacitated.

The hot talk about the recent arrest of the leader of the largest oppositional party in Georgia totally and absolutely contradicts the extant definition of the rule of law. If this particular detention case is in unison with the rule of law, then every single word, pronounced to declare this legal action unlawful, is

wrong and meant to destroy the entire system of government of this country.

The precedent of exclusion might have been so contagious that the enforcement of law could have been rendered absolutely impossible in the future. Thus, on the scale of social and political fairness, there have been put two burning issues: the rule of law as such, and the detention of a political leader. The preponderance was fixated on the side of the rule of law, instigating an avalanche of denouncing commentary both internally and internationally.

If we give up on the rule of law, we might jeopardize the constitutionality

of our existence within the boundaries of this country; if we imprison a leader of the political opposition, we are putting at risk the measure of our freedom and democracy, so fiercely fought for after having defied the Russian dominance of our nation and the acceptance of western system of values. So what to do?

What we might need very badly is to eat the cake and still have it. Most of the evaluators of the current situation would consider this naïve formula next to impossible to use, but I would not be that pessimistic. At this very moment, on a practicable level, when the oil is

already in the fire, I would let it go smoothly and gradually, clinging to this brilliant idea of the rule of law, trying to find the ensuing compromises. But in the long run, I would make use of the idea of "governmentality." Here is one more borrowed definition: "It is an approach to the study of power that emphasizes the governing of people's conduct through positive means rather than the sovereign power to formulate the law. In contrast to a disciplinary form of power, governmentality is generally associated with the willing participation of the governed." Wow! Shall we go for it? I mean, in the future?



# Why Did We React So Poorly to COVID-19?



Image source: Shutterstock/Vladimir Ermolin

OP-ED BY MICHAEL GODWIN

For many of us, the year 2020 is broadly marked as a year spent at home with a mask, and sadly for some, death. Some lost family members, some lost businesses and investments, and some lost connections with friends, but almost everyone lost their normal livelihoods. General anger and discontentment is certainly understandable. However, despite the initial reaction to point the proverbial finger at the virus itself, the responsible party for a large portion of the fallout lies in the governmental response.

In fairness, any new virus is going to be problematic for authorities. Preparedness, response, containment, and testing are all predicated on not only the virus itself, but also the public view of the virus. As it is in military planning that the enemy always gets a vote, so it is when countering the effects of a pandemic. However, the enemy in this statement is not just the virus. China has an indisputable role in the inception of this crisis.

To understand much of the response, a closer look at the initial phases must be examined.

China is notoriously void of freedom and truth. Their control of people and ideas is unrivaled in the modern world, and in virtually all of history. Their state security elements are masters of their craft, and their foreign operations detachments have the ability to influence other nations and corporate entities like a conductor to a symphony. In a theoretical vacuum, it could be quite admirable. The Uyghurs would surely not agree.

These tactics were used to masterful effect in the outbreak of the virus in the now notorious city of Wuhan. According to most sources at the time, it's most likely

that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) authorities surmised that the virus was of little effect and the death rate was low enough to not warrant further action. Because of this, they resorted to their tried and true method; suppression of information and letting the clock run out in an effort to get people to forget all about it.

However, what they didn't count on was the social media dissemination of this information, and this put the CCP on the defensive. They have to look like the "good guy" in this at all costs. The CCP went into full Hollywood mode, putting on staged displays of special disinfection teams clearing public buildings, police vehicles with water cannons (usually reserved for the people) were outfitted to shoot disinfectant through the streets. Altogether, these were complemented with images of a heavy police and military presence. Their mission was aggressive lockdown enforcement, amplified by now-famous imagery of apartment entrance doors being welded shut.

All of this, including further imagery from places such as Italy, prompted so much of the world to mirror the lockdown and masking initiatives. Since China had first begun to report its death numbers, they had dropped precipitously. The CCP released COVID-19 case numbers at 6,900 per day mid-February, to only 15 a day just over a month later, and total deaths at only about 5,000. In a nation of more than 1 billion people, this is highly dubious. Despite the obvious use of their well-oiled propaganda machine, so much of the world believed its sophistry.

The seeds had been sown for the spread of a fictitious "killer virus," and the story was being pushed by conventional press as well as social media. According to these outlets, the reaction and data from China affirmed the drastic measures being taken by more democratic and Western governments. Those in these countries saw the measures as reinforcement

of their fears, initially created by the first wave of CCP propaganda. The two factors became a vicious cycle; the government acting for fear of underperforming and losing popular support, and the people having their fears confirmed by more lockdowns and restrictions.

"The Chinese leadership reacted very consistently to the Covid-19 epidemic. Apparently it was less about the threat of a virus than about the chance to consolidate the neo-Confucian state model. A strong, external enemy was defined (and exaggerated). And at the same time suppressed other factors that favored respiratory infections and were partly responsible for the outbreak (including the air quality in Wuhan)," said Dr. Helmut Jäger, M.D.

Like many governments, Georgia has followed the reactions of other "leaders" of truth; the US, UK, and much of Western Europe. Repeated lockdowns, mask mandates, and closure of businesses and

facilities have racked the country. Despite the lack of quality research and evidence showing the effectiveness of masks and lockdowns, authorities have played the emotional strings of the people to encourage compliance. Statements such as "save others, stay home" and other absurd attempts at soft tyranny are all too easily convincing with the stain of Chinese propaganda on the table.

With all of these measures, they have backed themselves into a dark corner. As mounting studies and evidence becomes available, the government is coming to a terrifying reality. Silently, in the high offices after all the staffers have left, the leadership is realizing that so much was overstated and how they were woefully wrong with their overreacting. However, to admit this would be political suicide and destroy an already precariously held reputation.

Altogether, this would come at a time when popular support for the govern-

ment isn't at particularly high levels anyway, and many political opponents are hunting for reasons to have them ousted. Their only hope is a miracle, their saving grace. Anything to rescue them from fault, wrongdoing, and even prosecution and incarceration. Specifically, something to distract the attention of the masses; something like a vaccine.

With the help of a vaccine, Parliament, the Ministry of Health, and other national authorities can claim a victory and be given their medals, as well their absolution from any guilt. All of their overblown and destructive rhetoric from the recent past swept away only to be replaced with laurels and praise. One year ago, the slogans were "wash your hands", and "don't touch your face." Now they have become, "wear this mask everywhere, at all times, or else" and "if you don't let us inject this in you, you can't travel." This is the pacification of the people by the State, and it's not ok.

It is the duty of organizations and human rights groups to investigate this, and not just on the global scale to hold the CCP accountable. The Georgian government and authorities need to be held responsible. Hundreds of thousands of people forced out of work, thousands of businesses closed, and a shrinking national economy with monumental economic, socio-cultural, and national security concerns on the horizon.

The Georgian people are resilient, and left to their own devices will unquestionably rebuild their world. However, with such poor performance from certain offices upon high, it's imperative that those responsible be held accountable and resumption of what can only be described as "normality" be enacted at the earliest possible opportunity. The people demand it, research supports it, and the nation's vitality requires it.



Image source: Reuters / Aly Song



Image source: Vano Shlamov/AFP via Getty Images

OP-ED BY SOLOMON ALVARES

Georgia has been facing internal political disturbances following the arrest of the leader of Georgia's major opposition party, United National Movement (UNM). Narratively, as well as purely propaganda-wise, the opposition managed to gain

the upper hand as the scenes of the party HQ being stormed damaged the ruling party, Georgian Dream's, international standing. However, it remains to be seen whether this crisis could reinvigorate support for the party among other population groups than just the hardcore opposition supporters. From a longer term perspective, it could be argued that the opposition managed again to put itself once again into the political spotlight, specifically in the light of UNM's

## In Georgia, It is More than just Political Infighting

declining political ratings over past years.

Georgia is in the midst of this democracy-building crisis precisely because of the post-2020 parliamentary elections, where the opposition refused to acknowledge the results. But the roots of the internal troubles could be more far reaching. Ultimately, it could be about how disconnected the political elites of Georgia have become with the demands of the ordinary people. This happens from time to time in a state. Results could be ugly, but the ability to see this general disenchantment could heal the troubles.

The political class is polarized, and what is more important, both sides of the aisle are seeing decline in trust from the general public. Take the opposition, which faces antipathy from wider sections of the public: decades pass, but the rhetoric remains the same. A gradually decreasing number of supporters is also being seen for the governing party, as long-term economic problems are exacerbated by the pandemic, constituting a major challenge. Overall though, little has been offered over the past years from either side, and, for many, the current crisis is more about a GD-UNM struggle than a fight for democracy and economic

development.

This explains the large abstention rate of voters during the past several elections in Georgia. Large sections of the population do not see a preferred party with a fitting program amidst the growingly polarized political climate, which delays the prospects for a more balanced foreign policy and internal economic development. The latter is exactly what is needed. What Georgia has lacked throughout its post-Soviet independence period is a long-term policy plan to re-boot its fragile economy, heritage of the troubled 1990s. More attention from inter-party politics towards the needs of the economically poor population is much needed.

Democracy is struggling, and it is not only about whether the arrest of the opposition leader was a lawful act or even an urgently necessary move in these circumstances. We are dealing here with what the Georgian public has been accustomed to since regaining independence: the belief that a ruling party always stands above the law.

But the crisis has a wider dimension. The South Caucasus is home to two small and fragile democracies, Armenia and Georgia, the former having taken a major

hit last year when its dependence on Moscow grew exponentially following Yerevan's defeat in the Second Karabakh War. Now, Russia is even more capable of backtracking the reformist agenda of the Armenian leadership, as protests are being staged against the ruling party. While internally the ruling PM is increasingly challenged, Russia is playing the long game by navigating and slowly killing the last vestiges of Armenia's independent foreign policy, and increasing Yerevan's dependence on Moscow.

Georgia too is being hit. Internal challenges have been troubling the ruling party for more than a year now. And this is what constitutes Russia's power: the inability of political classes in both Georgia and Armenia to find unified long-term visions for their respective states. These divisions diminish Tbilisi and Yerevan's pursuit of geopolitical standing.

And it also not about Georgia. Eventually, the political infighting could be a boon even to some in the West who have always been skeptical about Tbilisi's EU/NATO ambitions. With prolonged internal problems inside further delaying the closer integration of Georgia into the Western institutions.

# Havlicek: Never Before in EU-Russia Relations Has the Kremlin Expressed such Disdain & Disinterest in Meaningful Dialogue

INTERVIEW BY VAZHA TAVBERIDZE

The EU and Kremlin relations are at perhaps a historically low point, something neither side even bothers to hide anymore, especially after EU High Representative Josep Borrell's disastrous visit to Moscow and the resulting political circus masterfully staged by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and his entourage. Alexey Navalny remains jailed, although the EU did roll out additional sanctions. It remains to be seen how long it will take until either side decides to give ground. What to expect from this new phase of escalated tensions between Brussels and Moscow, and what impact all of this might have on the Eastern Partnership trio of Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine were among the many questions the Georgian Institute for Security Policy put to Pavel Havlicek, an Eastern European political expert and analyst at the Association for International Affairs, Prague.

## HOW WOULD YOU ASSESS JOSEP BORRELL'S MOSCOW TRIP, CONSIDERING YOU WROTE AT LENGTH WHAT HE WAS SUPPOSED TO DO IN MOSCOW?

The message wasn't as clear as it could be, but at the same time the conditions were so bad, there was only so much he could do. When he decided to go there, it meant Russians got to command the terms, and obviously they did everything they could to make it suit their plans. They wanted to humiliate him, to play and toy with him, and Foreign Minister Lavrov has all the honed skills of Old School Soviet diplomacy that Borrell, to put it mildly, simply couldn't measure up to.



Russia was and remains the ultimate challenge for having a strong and credible EU foreign policy

**UNSUCCESSFUL DIPLOMATIC PILGRIMAGES WOULDN'T BE A FIRST FOR AN EU DIPLOMAT, BUT IT WAS HIS AWKWARD-SEEMING SILENCE DURING THE PRESS CONFERENCE AS LAVROV LAUNCHED A BARRAGE OF CRITICISM AT THE EU THAT BEWILDERED PEOPLE. WHY NOT SPEAK UP WHEN LAVROV DECLARED THAT "THE EU SHOULD NOT INTERFERE IN WESTERN BALKANS AND POST SOVIET COUNTRIES?" NEEDLESS TO SAY, IT DID NOTHING TO REASSURE OTHERS OF GEORGIA'S PRO-WESTERN SOCIETY.**

This was indeed seen as a PR fiasco, not only by our Eastern European partners and the Western Balkans, but also by many EU countries as well. There were other similarly alarming moments as well, most vividly, Lavrov calling the EU "an unreliable partner," and Borrell not commenting on it. Borrell himself, being grilled at the European Parliament upon his return, justified it by saying that he wasn't there to offend anybody, and chose to be diplomatic instead of assertive.

## LAVROV WAS, THOUGH, AND THE 'STAIRCASE SPIRIT' IS PROBABLY NOT THE PRINCIPLE EU DIPLOMACY SHOULD WORK ACCORDING TO.

I absolutely agree. There were moments that gave the impression that Mr. Borrell was completely unprepared and off-script. In the following days, Mr. Borrell said that he argued very staunchly over many important points, including Ukraine and other neighborhood issues, behind closed doors, and he didn't want to bring them up again during the presser. That was his line of thinking. Then the Russian side reacted and said that this was not the case. However, there is one important point to consider: This Russian short term "diplomatic" victory, the humiliation of Mr. Borrell and the EU as a whole, might have helped to create a momentum for the EU to realize that things are not as they should be. The crowning statement of FM Lavrov, days later, when he announced that Russia is prepared to cut ties with the EU altogether if the latter decides to double down on sanctions, gives the EU a unique opportunity to unify around the Russia issue and stand up to the Kremlin politics of aggression and bullying.

## WOULD THIS MOMENTUM INTRODUCE SOME RED LINES FOR RUSSIA THAT HAVE BEEN MISSING FROM



Macron will have to make a choice: does he want to leave the legacy of the man that stood up for a united Europe, or the guy that fruitlessly pushed for dialogue with the Kremlin?

## THE EU APPROACH FOR SOME TIME NOW?

Indeed, there were no red lines articulated in Moscow during Borrell's visit. And I would say that if there were any, they have long since been crossed. The Navalny poisoning and then imprisoning him on the basis of a case that the European Court of Human Rights explicitly considered unlawful, the repression against the protesters: the scale of it all is unprecedented even for Russia. It might be the right moment to create a new consensus on the EU's foreign policy towards Russia. This has been one of the EU's biggest challenges since the united European foreign policy began to take shape. Russia was and remains the ultimate challenge for having a strong and credible EU foreign policy. The fact that on February 21, the EU agreed to impose a set of new, Navalny case-related further sanctions, is a correct step in this direction. Borrell's visit was the tipping point that might have convinced the skeptics to change their position towards Russia.

## THOSE SKEPTICS MIGHT SAY THAT ALL THIS IS TEMPORARY, THAT ALLILLS WILL BE FORGOTTEN NEXT WEEK AND YET ANOTHER RESET WILL BE ON THE BOOKS.

First, never before in the history of EU and Russia relations has Russia expressed such an ultimate disgust, disdain and disinterest in having any sort of meaningful dialogue with the EU. This is the first time. Second, Russia seems to have passed all limits of insolence already:



## FOR THE COUNTRIES OF THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP?

the list of undesirable organizations from the EU and the West in general has never been this long. They have antagonized Germany: during the above-discussed presser, Lavrov called Germany out on several issues. This wasn't merely humiliating Borrell, it was a humiliation of Germany itself. So even the "doves", the camp that was constantly arguing for having some kind of relations with Russia, even they are despondent and frustrated. It might come to pass that even the Nord Stream 2 will be put into question, especially if the Greens end up successful in the upcoming German elections. Even Macron will have to make a choice: does he want to leave the legacy of the man that stood for a united Europe, or the guy that fruitlessly pushed for dialogue with the Kremlin? He has already lost credit in Eastern Europe, and if you are competing for votes with Marine Le Pen, you don't want your legacy to be a bilateral dialogue with Russia at the cost of a humiliated Europe.

## WHAT DOES THIS POLITICAL CLIMATE CHANGE MEAN

My vision for the Eastern Partnership in the long-term would be that the policy and the region itself will be elevated above Russia. Instead of pursuing a relationship with Moscow that evidently leads nowhere, this might be the big moment for the Eastern Partnership project to come back to the EU table. Unfortunately, up to this point, the Eastern Partnership was nowhere to be seen on EU's day to day agenda. Even the Summit has been postponed again. Moldova: not much luck with obtaining the vaccine, Ukraine: scrambling as hard as it can to acquire some; the same for Georgia. They are alone. This is a huge challenge and the EU should be much more instrumental in assisting the Eastern Partnership trio, at least with vaccinations. If the EU is good at one thing, that's solving such matters, and this is a perfect opportunity to strengthen EU enlargement in the region. If these countries are our associated members, then it stands to reason that we should not abandon them in such a dire situation.

# FM: Turkey Supports Georgia in Deepening Relations with Euro-Atlantic Structures

BY ANA DUMBADZE

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu said his country supports the deepening of Georgia's relations with Euro-Atlantic structures.

He noted at a joint briefing held after the meeting with his Georgian counterpart Davit Zalkaliani that Turkey determined its firm position about Georgia



openly on all international platforms. "We support Georgia in deepening relations with the Euro-Atlantic structures. We openly reiterate our stance regarding Georgia's integration into NATO," Çavuşoğlu said.

Zalkaliani expressed his gratitude for Turkey's unwavering stance on Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity and its strong support for Georgia's integration into the Euro-Atlantic structures.

On March 3, Vice Prime Minister of Georgia, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Davit Zalkaliani paid an official visit to

the Republic of Turkey. As part of the working visit, he met with Turkish officials in Ankara.

The meeting with Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu focused on current issues on the bilateral agenda and the challenges, threats and prospects facing the region.

The strategic partnership between the two countries was emphasized, focusing on the existing economic projects, which ensure the sustainable development of the region and make it strategically important.



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# THE ISET ECONOMIST

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The ISET Policy Institute (ISET-PI, www.iset-pi.ge) is an independent think-tank associated with the International School of Economics at TSU (ISET). Our blog carries economic analysis of current events and policies in Georgia and the South Caucasus region ranging from agriculture, to economic growth, energy, labor markets and the nexus of economics, culture and religion. Thought-provoking and fun to read, our blog posts are written by international faculty teaching at ISET and recent graduates representing the new generation of Georgian, Azerbaijani and Armenian economists.

## Prevent, Repair, or Start Over: Should Georgia Put 'Maintenance' Ahead of 'Investment' in Its Development Dictionary?



Image source: eu4georgia.ge

BY YASYA BABYCH & LUC LERUTH

In a recent blog post, we raised several issues related to public infrastructure management in the city of Tbilisi. They observed that the consequences of poor past management practices were highly visible. But some of these consequences are also less visible or less immediate. Take schooling, for example. If the authorities fail to plan for the expected increase in the city's population over the next few years and neglect to build an adequate number of kindergartens/pre-schools, the results will be overcrowded, fast decaying pre-schools and eventually poor educational outcomes. Similarly, as the number of cars keeps growing, the authorities must plan new roads and enhance their maintenance<sup>1</sup>. Overall, the issue is one of striking the right balance between new investments, and the rehabilitation and maintenance of existing ones. In view of the importance of these infrastructure costs in the budget, and the linkages that exist between them over the lifetime of infrastructure, it should be done within a medium-term economic framework<sup>2</sup>.

Yet, on paper, Georgia has invested more in infrastructure than, for example, Estonia. Obviously, infrastructure investment (building new infrastructure) is a critical factor of development. As argued in Ari, et al. (2020) and many others, it can have important multiplier effects and, in the case of Georgia, is a key factor in speeding up convergence with Europe. Strictly from that point of view, Georgia has fared well. Public investment grew sharply from 3% to 8% of GDP between 2003 and 2007, and was then kept at that level until about 2012. It then declined a bit but rose back to a respectable 6% after 2017 (see PIMA GEO). A comparison with Estonia seems to confirm this good impression. Public investment in Estonia went below 4% in 2004 and peaked at 6% in 2012, before falling back to 4% around 2015, and this

is still high compared to a group of advanced economies, Nordic economies, or even the EU average (see PIMA EST, p. 14). Unsurprisingly, the public investment effort in Georgia has translated into higher public capital stock. In Estonia, it rose from around 47 to 57% of GDP between 2004 and 2015, successfully catching up with comparator countries (EU, advanced economies, Nordic countries) whereas, in Georgia, after a decline from 130% that started in 2000, it has stabilized at about 90% of GDP since 2007 (PIMA GEO, p.13).

Is Estonia a good point of comparison for Georgia? Yes! They share several features, including a common social and economic Soviet legacy. Both countries have a small population. Estonia numbers just 1.3 million people, of which 46% reside in the capital city of Tallinn. The population is larger in Georgia, at 3.72 million, but a high share (one third) also resides in its capital, Tbilisi<sup>3</sup>. The capital cities in both countries generate more than half of their countries' GDP. Importantly, Georgia has regarded Estonia as a sort of role model for reform. For example, in 2017, Georgia followed a unique Estonian model to abolish tax on non-distributed corporate profits. Georgia is also a priority country for Estonia's bilateral aid. There are major differences, though. Estonia's GDP per capita stands at \$23,787, way above Georgia's \$4,765 (2019). Estonia is a member of the EU and NATO, while Georgia aspires to membership in both clubs. And, as we just discussed, capital investment in Estonia is substantially lower than in Georgia.

How good is the infrastructure in Estonia, then? Put plainly, and in spite of the good numbers for capital investment in Georgia, it is better than in Georgia. That is another empirically obvious difference with Estonia.

Why is it better? The answer is simple: its management, especially maintenance! Both countries recently went through a Public Investment Management Assessment (PIMA), a comprehensive framework developed by the IMF to assess

infrastructure governance, including key institutions, public investment practices, IT system, legal framework, and staff capacity. It is apparent that the Georgian system's relative weaknesses lie in the areas of planning, budgeting and maintenance. In particular, the quality of national and sectoral infrastructure plans in Georgia receive low scores on both institutional design and effectiveness from PIMA, primarily because Georgia's sectoral strategies tend to cover only new initiatives, and public investment objectives are "not consistent with effective investment." In addition, project selection, appraisal and implementation are all areas where reform priority is high.

Poor public infrastructure management has high costs. A recent book by G. Schwartz, et al. (2020) shows that countries waste about 1/3 (and some even more) of their infrastructure spending due to inefficiencies. With poor management, the major budgetary efforts made to invest in infrastructure are wasted (see also Allen, et al., 2020).

In Georgia, donor involvement in an infrastructure project tends to raise the quality of its management, which is good news. Projects that are not funded by donors (60% of the projects) tend not to follow the standard appraisal procedures, which means that one cannot be certain that a planned investment project is indeed necessary, cost effective or that it will be efficiently implemented. To complete the picture, ex-post audits are irregular (the PIMA reveals that no individual project audits were completed by SAO during 2015-2017). Maintenance funding is another area where differences are apparent. In Estonia, maintenance funding is "costed, planned, monitored and reported." In Georgia, according to PIMA, there is "no standard methodology for maintenance requirements, or to track maintenance funding."

Yet, maintenance, rehabilitation and new investments are intrinsically linked. Figure 1 below (from Thi Hoai Le, et al., 2019) shows how too much or too little of planned infrastructure maintenance could result in wasteful spending. When planned maintenance activities (such as planned repair, upkeep, etc.) are insufficient, then the infrastructure will start deteriorating quickly, and the unplanned maintenance costs (e.g. costs resulting from fixing or replacing failed components) will be high. This, in turn, results in high total cost of maintenance (the area the left of the blue line, close to the y-axis on Figure 1). If the amount of planned maintenance activities is excessive, then the unplanned costs may be low, but the total cost is higher than

optimal. In order to strike the optimal balance, there needs to be just enough planned maintenance activities to ensure that the service life of infrastructure is extended and total maintenance cost is kept to a minimum. Clearly, Georgia, where maintenance funding is not planned in a standardized way, would be in the left-most area of the graph, the "insufficient planned maintenance" zone, whereas Estonia would be in the middle, "optimal maintenance zone."

Unfortunately, the bias against spending on maintenance extends to public accounting rules. As we mentioned at the beginning of this blog, capital investment looks good on paper. Rehabilitation is also reported as an investment item. Maintenance, on the other hand, appears as a current expenditure item in the commonly agreed budget presentation (GFS, 2013). Spending more on maintenance will therefore not look good in the first instance because more maintenance spending will reduce government savings.

What should be done? Fortunately, there are some answers:

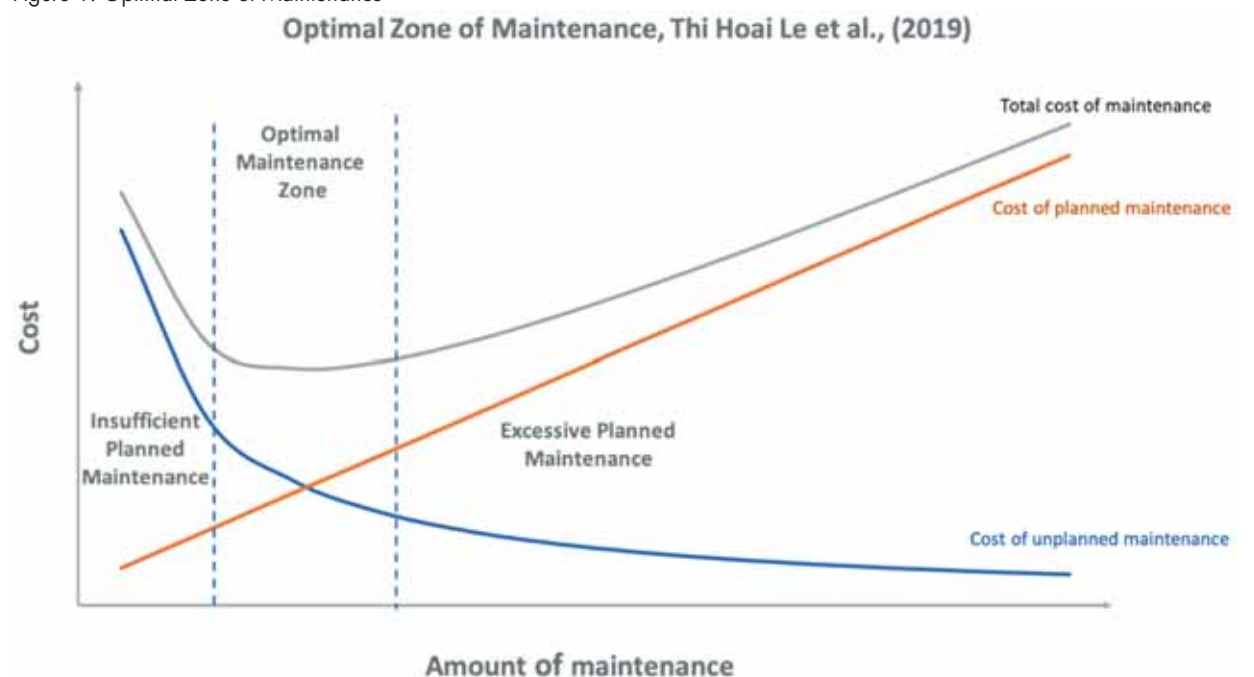
- All investments should be assessed in terms of their medium-term costs and these costs must constitute one of the corner stones of budget preparation within a medium-term economic framework;

- The donor community eager to help Georgia (and other countries) should carefully look at the necessity to build new infrastructure and perform regular assessments of the management of existing projects (PIMA); and

- The authorities in Georgia should pay more attention to infrastructure management issues and perhaps start giving the word 'maintenance' a priority over 'investment' in the country's development dictionary.

In short, maintain so as to prevent first; rehabilitate when needed; and only start over when necessary. This should lead to better and cheaper investments.

Figure 1. Optimal Zone of Maintenance



<sup>1</sup> Of course, they should also consider incentives to promote the use of alternative ways of commuting and of working remotely, but that is not the topic of this blog.

<sup>2</sup> We leave aside issues such as historical preservation, the quality of urban and public spaces, or car parking availability that belong to the field of urban planning. We also leave out of our analysis the risks associated with a laissez-faire approach to housing construction, even though the implications may be dramatic (J. Salukvadze, O. Golubchikov, 2015), with a majority of the population would no longer be able to afford the housing being built using public support.

<sup>3</sup> Data for both countries from 2019.



# 109 Beneficiaries of SOS Children's Village Awarded within Carrefour & Mastercard Social Campaign



ing them to get an education, develop their abilities and fully integrate into society.

This month, the project came to a successful conclusion. Mastercard and Carrefour purchased tablets for 109 SOS Children's Village beneficiaries. The ceremony of handing over the equipment and various gifts was held at the SOS Children's Village Georgia office.

"This campaign was especially important during the COVID-19 pandemic because the students found themselves in a really difficult and stressful situation, which we all managed to overcome together. From now on, 109 more children in Georgia will have the opportunity to be fully involved in the educational process and receive a quality education," notes Igor Stepanov, General Manager of Mastercard in Georgia and Armenia.

"Mastercard and Carrefour have a long and demonstrable record of contributing to important local and communal causes. I'm delighted that as a result of this particular campaign we have contributed to support educational development of younger generation. Such a collaboration is a good example of what an important role a business can play in helping the population," says Christophe Orcet, Country Manager of Carrefour Georgia at Majid Al Futtaim Retail.

In addition to actively supporting socially vulnerable youth and elderly, particularly in these difficult times, Carrefour's recent collaborations and partnerships with the companies such as MasterCard, Vendoo, Glovo and Wolt, in order to maximally enhance its online capabilities, further highlights its commitment to the safety, health and well-being of its customers.

These collaborations are a translation of Carrefour's position as a trusted local partner creating value for the local industry and economy. All the above activities, over the years, have conditioned the Brand's high reputation among customers, and its image of having particularly high social responsibility, dedicated to create great moments for everyone, everyday.



**C**arrefour, owned and operated by Majid Al Futtaim in Georgia, apart from providing the communities it serves with an unrivaled shopping experience and a wide variety of the highest quality products, has many times proven its commitment to improving living conditions in society and helping those in need, especially during the global pandemic, which significantly complicated the lives of many.

Last month, the brand has joined forces with a multinational financial services corporation Mastercard to reward customers and empower young Georgians with the launch of a new campaign aimed at tackling another challenge of COVID-19, online learning, while, on the other hand, promoting contactless payment, which reduces the risk of spreading the virus.

Since March last year, schools and universities were using the online teaching

method. The situation changed this semester, with school pupils being allowed back to the classrooms. However, university life still goes on online, and, sadly, in Georgia, not all students had the opportunity to receive any education remotely due to a lack of the necessary equipment.

The social campaign implemented through the joint efforts of Carrefour and MasterCard saw 1% of all Mastercard transactions completed in a Carrefour Georgia stores donated to the SOS Children's Village beneficiaries. These donations were used to purchase tablets for 109 children, ensuring they are able to further their education and realize their potential.

SOS Children's Village Georgia has served to provide urgent assistance to young people across the country for over 30 years, since the 1990s, raising children in a family-friendly environment, help-

# State Department: Drug-Related Crimes in Georgia Down 32% in 2020

BY ANA DUMBADZE

**D**rug-related crimes in Georgia decreased by approximately 32% in 2020 compared to 2019, the US Department of State said in the Drug and Chemical Control report on Wednesday.

"The Georgian government closed Georgia's borders (except to cargo) in March 2020 to stem the spread of COVID-19. Based on the Ministry of Internal Affairs reporting, this action was the probable cause of a 66% decrease in drug smuggling from January to August of 2020 compared to the same period in 2019," the report reads.

The US Department of State noted that "potentially due to the COVID-19 crisis, domestic drug use has increased in Georgia, particularly narcotics purchased via crypto-currency on the Dark Web."



Getty Images

"Sales of cannabis products comprise an estimated 56% of these transactions, while synthetic drugs and psychotropic substances comprise the remainder. These transactions largely occur via dead-drops around the country, using communication via VoIP applications such as Telegram.

"The Central Criminal Police Department (CCPD) introduced a Dark Web Drug Unit in January 2019 in response to several overdose deaths. The unit saw enormous success in 2020, seizing 70 kg of liquid alpha-PVP in November and 20 kg of alpha-PVP in December 2020, 4,380 MDMA pills in July 2020, and 964 Subutex pills in August 2020. As a result of these and other drug seizures, CCPD seized almost 50 assets (vehicles, real estate, and cash) with a value of over \$850,000.

"Following the 2018 abolishment of administrative punishment for the personal use of marijuana, marijuana trafficking increased. Between July 2019 and

January 2020, five significant marijuana loads, totaling over 80 kg of marijuana, were seized via commercial flights from South Africa," the report said.

The US Department of State noted that Georgia is located on a major drug trafficking route along which opium, heroin, and precursor chemicals are transported. Heroin and opium originating from Afghanistan are transported through Iran into Armenia, then transit Georgia for shipment to Western Europe via the Black Sea.

"In April 2020, the Ministry of Internal Affairs Drug Transit Unit within the Central Criminal Police Department (CCPD) worked jointly with the United States to seize 40 kilograms (kg) of heroin in Batumi (following a related seizure of 72 kg in Bulgaria via the Black Sea from Georgia). The United States supported a one-week training course on Emerging Trends in Synthetic Drugs in Tbilisi in November 2019," the report pointed out.

# Young Georgian-American Installs Solar Water Heater at Kakheti Elderly Home



**L**evani Vancko has a Georgian mother and American father. He is 15 years old and has two brothers, Giorgi (16) and Temuri (14). He was born in Singapore and lived in Chicago (USA) and Switzerland before moving to The Netherlands, where he and his family have been living since 2013. He attends the Amsterdam International Community School and his main hobbies are football, cycling, cooking, guitar and piano. Throughout his travels and living abroad, Georgia is on his mind. He has a strong connection with Georgia from his mother's side. Next to regular visits to Georgia each year since he was very young, his mother always spoke Georgian to the boys and they attend both the Georgian church and Georgian school every month in The Netherlands. His summers and autumns are spent in Kakheti and he enjoys the fresh fruit, wonderful polyphony, and the festive harvest. During all his visits, Levani has had the opportunity to experience and appreciate many different and interesting regions and legends about Georgia. But as much as he loves spending time in Georgia, he came to realize that Georgia faces some

challenges as it continues to progress and develop further. He decided he wanted to help. We asked him to tell us his story.

"In 2017 during one of our summer holidays in Georgia, Giorgi, Temuri, and I all visited Satnoebi's Sakhli, a home for people with physical and mental disabilities in Kakheti," Levani says. "My older brother Giorgi started several projects to support them, and I wanted to do something to help people in need as well. We discovered another home close by called Beteli (Tsnori) that caters to elderly people without relatives or others to take care of them. We spoke to the manager of the home, Ilia Demet-rashvili, who explained that they needed several items: wheelchairs, some warm blankets, and an oversize washing machine. I promised to help them.

"When we got back to The Netherlands, my brother Giorgi officially registered a charity for his projects, called Help the Republic of Georgia," he tells us. "This official status made it easier to organize fundraising activities and also for me to access the companies that might be able to help with the wheelchairs. I raised money by collecting donations from family, friends, classmates, and the com-

munity. Within a few months, I'd connected with a large company that supplies wheelchairs and other medical devices to all the hospitals in The Netherlands. They only keep each piece of equipment or device a few years, so I was able to purchase some wheelchairs that were in good condition for a reasonable price. With the rest of the money I raised, I bought warm blankets and that oversize washing machine. During my next visit to Georgia, I was able to deliver the wheelchairs, blankets and washing machine to the home. Although it was a relatively small effort on my part, I was struck by how humble and appreciative the home was for my help. That feeling inspired me to start thinking about another project.

"After visiting and talking with the manager, I knew that the home had a limited budget and a relatively high gas bill to heat the home and the water. The fact that they requested blankets gave me the impression that the heating might not be optimal. With so many fond memories of Georgia, with blue cloudless skies and beautiful sunrises and sunsets, I wondered if it might be possible to solve this problem by harnessing Georgia's sunshine. The idea of a solar water heater for my next project was born, and I started looking into it in more detail.

"A solar water heater uses the free energy of the sun to heat a fluid, which in turn heats water that circulates through the house, both for heating as well as for bathing," he says. "This dramatically reduces the gas bill, especially in the winter. This kind of project is perfect for Georgia, which has plenty of sunshine, cool winters, and expensive natural gas. A further benefit of a solar heater is the positive impact on the environment and climate of replacing burning of fossil fuels with sustainable solar energy.

This not only reduces the amount of CO2 released into the atmosphere but also contributes to less particulate pollution in the air, since less gas is burned.

"I studied the project in more detail, checking the gas bills of the home to make sure the investment would make sense. Another round of fundraising was required and this was quite challenging during the COVID-19 pandemic. Even in a relatively wealthy country like The Netherlands, COVID-19 has created uncertainties, and many people have problems of their own. It was difficult to raise the required funds, but after a lot of perseverance and the generosity of many people, I raised enough for the project. Next, I consulted with a few contractors who offered systems and technical support to install and setup the solar water heater and connecting it to the existing gas heating system. I'm really pleased that the solar heater is installed and working properly. I know this will allow the home to save money

on their gas bill so they can spend their limited budget on more essential goods that will directly benefit the residents.

"Installing the solar water heater is the last of the items that were needed at this home. I can already see that they are able to manage much better with the small help I was able to offer them. I'm part Georgian and love Georgia, so although I don't have a specific next project at this moment, I will definitely continue with activities to help the Georgian people and contribute to further positive developments in the country. I see that the modest projects I completed had a positive impact on the people and are truly appreciated," Levani says with a smile.

Website: [www.helptherepublicofgeorgia.org/](http://www.helptherepublicofgeorgia.org/)  
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## Letter from Svaneti No. 387 (Approximately)

BLOG BY TONY HANMER

**H**erewith, I celebrate 10 years of writing weekly articles for Georgia Today, mostly from Svaneti, where I live. The first few articles were indeed simply titled Letter from Svaneti No. 1, etc., until Editorial asked me for more interesting titles. Never missing a week, of some 520 articles I've written, about 1387 have been about Svaneti itself. The rest have hailed from other places in Georgia I visited, or further afield: Canada, the UK, Zimbabwe, Mexico.

It began simply with an email to GT offering my services. At the time, my wife and I were living and teaching English in Mestia, which was being renovated at a furious pace under President Saakashvili's energetic campaign to drag his country out of the depths to which it had fallen post-USSR. A few days later came a positive reply, with guidelines for word count, photos and dates, plus a small salary. Having received no answers from similar queries to other English-language newspapers in Georgia, I had finally got in with the best of them.

It would be quite a few months before I even met the GT staff, on my next visit to Tbilisi, and picked up accumulated pay. Since then, there have been a few personnel changes, most notably in Editor; Katie Davies is doing a wonderful job in a very challenging position, and we are good friends, too. George Sharashidze continues as Publisher, and has added other publications to his repertoire too, such as Focus Magazine, OK! and Where.

When Focus Café opened in Vake, I was quick to suggest the addition of exhibitions on its walls, and offered the inaugural one, tying together themes of food and Svaneti in my years of photos. The sale proceeds went to supporting three recently orphaned teenage children in Kakheti, and it was a great, generous success. Sadly, the Café is no more, but the experience was a good one and my last solo exhibition to date.



I have been given mostly free rein to write about what goes on around me, so, not serious news, more a blog. But culture, tourism, history, literature, the Svan language, art and crafts, cuisine, music, dance, travel, controversies, corruption, traditions, reli-

gions, recreational mathematics, chaos theory and more have all found their way onto my page. Each article accompanied by a photo of mine too, so that visual aspect has gone side by side with the words. There is never a week when I have to struggle to

find a subject. The deadline helps my somewhat undisciplined nature to concentrate, but there are always things going on, in our village or nearby. I am grateful indeed for the opportunity to have to write something each week. Stephen King wrote in 'On Writing' that there are only two things one needs to do to be a writer: read a lot, and write a lot. Done.

One story I have been asked to withhold for the time being is of my relationship to the Aprasidze family in Etseri. Its time will come eventually.

A book, focusing on Svaneti, gathering together all that material? It remains a dream, and now with a decade passed (along with 21 years living in Georgia itself), the hope is as strong as ever. These years have enabled me to see a lot of change in this superb, traumatized little country, to live through some amazing history, ups and downs.

I'm not going anywhere else, as far as I can tell, not permanently. My grave location (long may it wait) is already designated, here in my village, the name of which means "help" in Hebrew. My wife and I may retire elsewhere, most likely Tbilisi, when running our big guest house and shop get too much for us. But until then, there is time to continue and improve life here: hopefully not just for ourselves, but also for the village and region of Svaneti, to which I remain deeply committed as one of its champions. I have found home, after decades of wandering the earth, far away from my roots in the UK, Zimbabwe and Canada. I never could have imagined it would be here, in these high mountains. I wouldn't have it any other way.

Thank you, Georgia Today, for this decade together.

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/](https://www.facebook.com/groups/SvanetiRenaissance/). He and his wife also run their own guest house in Etseri: [www.facebook.com/hanmer.house.svaneti](https://www.facebook.com/hanmer.house.svaneti)

# Entrée's Co-Founder on Reducing the Food We Waste



EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW BY  
NINI DAKHUNDARIDZE

**C**ENN, with the support of the British Embassy, last month kicked off a new project 'Sustainable Food Systems for Climate Resilience,' which also launched the 'Say No to Food Waste' campaign.

It is hoped that the project will contribute to reduction of the country's GHG emissions by initiating dialogues between private and public sectors, and as a result advocating relevant policy changes at the governmental level. For this reason, CENN is putting together a Food Waste Working Group comprised of key actors in the food industry affected by this issue. The 'Say No to Food Waste' media

campaign has been running since February, with the aim of urging people to change their behavior and consume more responsibly to reduce food waste. The campaign strives to achieve an "awakened" culture, the members of which will act more responsibly in support of their own surroundings. GEORGIA TODAY, ever eager to support a good cause, is one of the CENN campaign's media partners.

In this interview with GEORGIA TODAY, co-founder of Entrée artisan bakery chain, Jean Michel Charles tells us how the restaurant views food waste management.

"I've been involved in the food sector since my childhood, as my father had several restaurants in France and I started as a dish-washer to earn some pocket money when I was 12 or 13," Charles tells us. "The restaurant was on the first floor

and we lived on the second, so you can imagine - I literally lived in a restaurant! "Later, I decided to study restaurants and hospitality and have several diplomas in this direction. The food industry is my passion and my life, I know no other."

**ONE-THIRD OF FOOD PRODUCED EACH YEAR IS LOST OR WASTED. FOOD WASTE IS CAUSED BY OVERPRODUCTION, SPOILAGE, OVERBUYING, AND A LOT MORE! IN YOUR RESTAURANT WORK, PAST AND PRESENT, HOW DID/DO YOU HANDLE POTENTIAL FOOD WASTE?**

From the very first day of Entrée opening, precisely from December 2, 2008, we have supported charity houses and orphanages every day. Products are col-

lected daily and delivered to the most vulnerable people. We are doing the same in Baku, Azerbaijan, where we have six Entrée cafes. This way we have minimal wastage and we keep those who are in need supported.

**FOOD WASTE IS SAID TO BE ONE OF THE BIGGEST CONTRIBUTORS TO CLIMATE CHANGE, ACCOUNTING FOR 8% OF THE GREENHOUSE GAS EMISSIONS. FROM YOUR TIME WORKING IN GEORGIA, WHAT HAS BEEN YOUR EXPERIENCE WITH REGARDS TO FOOD WASTE?**

I am not so much aware to give you a clear picture, but I hope the Georgian government has a very close eye on waste management.

**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 STORES. WHERE DO YOU BUY THE INGREDIENTS YOU USE IN YOUR KITCHEN? DO YOU CHOSE AESTHETICALLY PLEASING, OR ARE YOU HAPPY TO BUY "UGLY"?**

At Entrée, we are trying to work with small family producers, who very often are free of chemical support and try to grow plants in a natural way. Certainly, fruits and vegetables grown like this are less shiny and are very often not attractive at all, but Entrée is an ambassador of healthy lifestyle, that's why it is essential for us to be as organic as possible. I believe that companies like Entrée are the biggest supporters of small and medium size businesses in Georgia, and

provide inspiration too. We tell them, give me healthy products and I will guarantee that your goods will always find a place in our kitchen.

**40% OF WASTE IN GEORGIA IS ORGANIC WASTE, A LARGE PORTION OF WHICH IS FOOD. HOW DO YOU SUGGEST WE REDUCE THIS PERCENTAGE?**

People in Georgia must start to respect food: so many supras are made with too-full tables, and 40% of the food goes untouched. What are they doing after? Throwing it into the bin!

Even when a housewife is cooking at home, she is making food not precisely for the members but for some potential guests as well, even if nobody is expected to come. I know it is an iconic habit that Georgian people have called hospitality, and it is extremely charming, but it has a very bad side effect. France is different: people there cook for two if they are two, and will have empty plates by the end of the dinner. It is done unconsciously, but it works for the good cause, so we must start doing the same in Georgia. A solution like this will not come if each family does not change their behavior.



British Embassy  
Tbilisi



## CULTURE

# Georgian Traditional Handicraft Association Awards Best Example of Adaptation to the Crisis

BY NINI DAKHUNDARIDZE

**O**n February 26, the Georgian Traditional Handicraft Association organized an online award ceremony for 'Best Master of the Year 2020,' with 'Best Example of Adaptation to the Crisis' nominated for this year's competition.

The Georgian Traditional Handicraft Association, in cooperation with the Intangible Cultural Heritage Department of the National Agency for Cultural Heritage Preservation of Georgia, continues the competition 'Best Master of the Year,' which was founded in 2015. The aim of the competition is to introduce the masters of traditional handicrafts to the public and to show their merits.

In 2020, the global pandemic caused significant damage to almost all sectors. Recent studies have shown that traditional handicrafts were largely dependent on international tourism. Despite the current situation, some craftsmen and workshops were still able to find alternative ways to continue and develop their activities. Thus, the aim of this year's nomination was to identify the

best examples of crisis adaptation in the craft sector as a positive experience that will encourage similar approaches in the future.

The Association and the National Agency for the Protection of Cultural Heritage awarded the winners of the nomination with a cash prize. The first place was won by the studio 'Katamura,' which in 2020 most effectively managed to generate international sales and adapt to new principles. The second place in the nomination was shared by studio Atelier Saddam (Tbilisi) and felt master Naili Lazarashvili (Bolnisi).

"We decided to participate in the competition based on its content," Tatia Tvaladze from Katamura, told GEORGIA TODAY. "In light of the pandemic crisis, we tried to find an alternative way and continue to sell our work on the international online platform Etsy. Initially, at the request of the Georgian Handicrafts Association, we and other workshops were able to consult online with ETSY representatives on various technical nuances, which at the initial stage turned out to be very important and later simplified our work. Despite our being a small enterprise, online sales worldwide have been successful. Winning this competition a few days



ago gave us a great incentive. We are very happy that our daily work, and hard work at that, has been appreciated and we are going to continue our work with more determination. I hope it will be a positive example for other enterprises that want to develop in this regard."

"I've been associated with the Traditional Handicraft Association for years," says Meriko Dochviri from Atelier Sada. "I always try to be involved in their

events. The relationship with them is always positive. This is a team that does a lot, and does so with a lot of love.

"2020 was a difficult and challenging year. It was a year when we fought daily for survival. I think we withstood these tests, overcoming a lot of difficulties and becoming stronger for it.

Winning the competition is certainly a great incentive. What is important to me is that it was a competition of the traditional handicraft association, because



their opinion is very important to me," Dochviri tells us.

In the framework of the 2020 nomination, The USAID Economic Security program also awarded the five best selling craft makers of ETSY.COM, supporting them in further marketing and promotion of their Etsy stores.

The event was attended by members of the Georgian Traditional Handicraft Association, donors and members of the organization's board.



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The  
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