



FOCUS ON RUSSIA'S FUTURE

Latvian President Rinkevics on Ukraine and the West's potential role in fostering a more democratic future for Russia

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Latvian President Edgars Rinkevics. Source: RFE/RL

EU Demands Independent Investigation into Navalny's Death

BY TEAM GT

The European Union summoned Russia's representative to the EU, Kirill Loginov, and called for an independent international investigation into the death of opposition leader Alexei Navalny, the EU's diplomatic service said on Tuesday.

Michael Siebert, a senior official in the European External Action Service, also urged Russia to release Navalny's body to his family without further delay.

"At the meeting with Russia's representative, the EU side conveyed the EU's outrage over the death of the Russian opposition politician Alexei Navalny, for which the ultimate responsibility lies with President Putin and the Russian authorities," it said.

Siebert "called upon Russia to allow an independent and transparent international investigation into the circumstances" of Navalny's death, it added.

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Alexei Navalny. Source: REUTERS/Shamil Zhumatov/File Photo

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| BONDS | | Price | w/w | m/m | COMMODITIES | | Price | w/w | m/m |
|---------------------------|--------------------|--------|--------|-----|-----------------------------|----------|-------|-------|-----|
| GRAIL 07/28 | 91.47 (YTM 6.29%) | +0.1% | -0.4% | | Crude Oil, Brent (US\$/bbl) | 83.03 | +1.8% | +5.7% | |
| SILNET 01/27 | 100.58 (YTM 8.14%) | +0.1% | +0.3% | | Gold Spot (US\$/OZ) | 2,025.99 | +1.7% | -0.2% | |
| TBC 06/24 | 99.66 (YTM 6.75%) | +0.1% | +0.2% | | | | | | |
| STOCKS | | Price | w/w | m/m | CURRENCIES | | Price | w/w | m/m |
| Bank of Georgia (BGE LN) | GBP 43.85 | +13.3% | +16.2% | | GEL / USD | 2.6478 | +0.1% | -0.3% | |
| Georgia Capital (CGEO LN) | GBP 11.98 | +6.8% | +12.2% | | GEL / EUR | 2.8647 | +0.9% | -1.0% | |
| TBC Bank Group (TBCG LN) | GBP 28.80 | +1.6% | -2.7% | | GEL / GBP | 3.3476 | +0.6% | -0.7% | |
| | | | | | GEL / CHF | 3.0068 | +0.6% | -0.6% | |
| | | | | | GEL / RUB | 0.0287 | -0.7% | -5.0% | |
| | | | | | GEL / TRY | 0.0852 | -0.8% | -3.1% | |
| | | | | | GEL / AZN | 1.5585 | +0.1% | -0.3% | |
| | | | | | GEL / AMD | 0.0066 | -0.0% | -0.0% | |
| | | | | | GEL / UAH | 0.0687 | -1.2% | -2.6% | |
| | | | | | EUR / USD | 0.9243 | -0.8% | +0.7% | |
| | | | | | GBP / USD | 0.7913 | -0.6% | +0.5% | |
| | | | | | CHF / USD | 0.8796 | -0.7% | +1.3% | |
| | | | | | RUB / USD | 92.3663 | +0.9% | +5.0% | |
| | | | | | TRY / USD | 31.0080 | +0.8% | +2.7% | |
| | | | | | AZN / USD | 1.6995 | - | -0.0% | |
| | | | | | AMD / USD | 403.4000 | +0.1% | -0.3% | |

Georgia at the Munich Security Conference 2024

BY TEAM GT

The Georgian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ilya Darchiashvili, met with the Vice-Chairman and CEO of the Munich Security Conference, Benedikt Franke this week.

The meeting is said to have highlighted the successful and longstanding cooperation between the Munich Conference and the Georgian government, and focused on future collaboration.

"Minister Darchiashvili emphasized the importance of presenting Georgia properly within the Munich Conference, an effective international forum addressing global political challenges.

"The conversation also touched on the 2024 report of the conference [see below], with the Georgian side noting that the report relies on information from politically motivated individuals," the Georgian Foreign Ministry stated.

Darchiashvili highlighted the country's focus on European integration during his discussions at the Munich Security Conference, and mentioned working with partners so as to secure strong support for Georgia's European integration.

"We are actively engaging with our partners to ensure that Georgia has robust support. A notable discussion took place with the recently appointed Minister of



President Zurabishvili at the Munich Security Conference. Source: FB

Foreign Affairs of France, who pledged support for our country," Darchiashvili noted. "We are continuing these discussions with our German partners, emphasizing the importance of consistent backing from influential European Union members such as France and Germany.

"Additionally, we have had interesting meetings with the US delegation, acknowledging the United States as our main strategic partner.

"Our participation in the Munich Conference has yielded positive outcomes, mobilizing our friends and partners around critical issues that are of utmost priority for Georgia. These issues remain our number one, primary focus," he said. The Vice-Chairman of the Munich

Conference expressed interest in further cooperation with the Georgian government, including the planning of joint events to help strengthen the positive image of Georgia.

2024 MUNICH SECURITY REPORT CALLS TO EXTEND SECURITY GUARANTEES TO COUNTRIES ON ACCESSION PATH

Within the 2024 edition of the Munich Security Report, titled "Lose-Lose?", Bidzina Ivanishvili, described as "the pro-Russian oligarch and founder of Georgia's governing party," is identified as being responsible for Georgia's recent democratic backsliding and movement

away from the European Union, "against the wishes of the majority of the Georgian public."

Apart from the role of Ivanishvili, the report also highlights Russia's tactic of using threats of "fueling separatism in Abkhazia and South Ossetia [occupied Tskhinvali region] to sow instability." The report reads that "Russia may have failed to draw Georgia, Moldova, and the Western Balkans into its camp, but it still seeks to spoil their westward integration."

According to the report, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the cooperative era of European security has ended, and countries stuck in the grey zone between the Russian and Western camps find themselves in a precarious situation, forced to choose sides. It notes that Georgia, Moldova, and the Western Balkans are feeling "the precariousness of being in between the camps."

The report states that it is in the hands of the EU and NATO to "shrink the grey zone" by actively supporting countries on their paths toward membership while also setting more ambitious milestones along the way.

It calls on the EU to concretize the notion of staged accession and reward reform progress with gradual access to its institutions and policies. This should include, according to the report, "regular invitations of candidate countries as guests to European Council and Council

meetings." Moreover, "NATO Allies should, where necessary, extend bilateral security guarantees in the interim phase until accession," the report states.

PRESIDENT ZURABISHVILI: FOR US, THE ENLARGEMENT OF THE EUROPEAN UNION IS AN EXISTENTIAL ISSUE

"Enlargement of the European Union is an existential issue for us," Georgia's President Salome Zurbashvili said this week, while speaking at a panel held within the Munich International Conference, A Deeper, Wider and More Capable European Union. "It is not a question of procedure, or a matter of approval or disapproval. There is no choice. Enlargement is also an existential issue for the European Union.

"If we look at the global picture, we will see that Russia not only invaded Ukraine, threatens our countries with cyberattacks and hybrid war, but also wants to enter a satellite war, which will threaten the communication and logistics of our countries. We have to do more internally, and I'm talking about Georgia, to accelerate reforms. But nothing will change the fact that we all together have no alternative but to stand together, to be united, to be more democratic, and to confront together the alliance of autocracy that nurtures terrorism, cyberattacks - all threats that come from one direction," Zurbashvili concluded.

In Memory of Maro Makashvili (August 25, 1901 to February 19, 1921)



BY RYAN SHERMAN

On the night of February 11, 1921, the Red Army forces overwhelmed Georgian military outposts on the border and began their march toward the capital. This attack was in direct violation of the Treaty of Moscow, signed May 7, 1920, a peace agreement recognizing Georgia's independence and establishing a basis for cooperation and peaceful coexistence.

Maro Makashvili was among the invasion's first casualties. An idealistic and freedom-loving teenager, her diaries capture the hope and excitement that flooded Tbilisi during their few years of independence. On its pages, we meet a young girl coming of age in an independent Georgia, seeing friends, reflecting on literature, on feminism, and spying on the poet Paolo Iashvili with fascination. She scribbles down her thoughts on the social upheaval all around her and condemns the Russian aggression that was soon to take her life.

Carefree entries are punctuated by energetic interpretations of the historical events she witnessed firsthand. One section, entitled "Free Women in a Free Georgia," discusses the ideals of equality for Georgian women. Another chapter describes her admiration for a father

who cooked at home and helped with housework. She reads and studies diligently, while dreaming about traveling and studying in Europe.

Her father, Konstantine Makashvili, was a teacher, a poet, and active member in the famous Society for the Spreading of Literacy Among Georgians—a charitable organization that played a critical role in countering Russification by promoting Georgian-language education. During the Democratic Republic of Georgia, Konstantine was also a member of the Constitutional Commission which drafted the country's first constitution.

Many of the friends and relatives appearing in her diaries were later killed by the Soviets, while others fled for their lives. This cleansing was a necessary precursor for the project of Soviet social engineering which aimed to create an indoctrinated Georgian society in service to the fickle visions of the Communist party in Moscow.

On February 17, 1921, as the Bolshevik forces approached Tbilisi. Maro joined the war effort as a Sister of Mercy Red Cross volunteer. Her brother enlisted in the defense forces as a soldier. She was killed by mortar shrapnel on February 19 on the front line at Kojori, near Tbilisi.

On February 23, 1921, she was buried alongside fallen soldiers in the yard of the Saint Alexander Nevsky Military Cathedral of Tiflis.

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Ukraine Latest: Civilians Flee as Russians Advance near Captured Avdiivka

COMPILED BY ANA DUMBADZE

Ukrainians have started to flee towns near the captured city of Avdiivka as Moscow's troops advance across the front line.

President Vladimir Putin said on Tuesday that Russian troops would push further into Ukraine to build on their success on the battlefield after the fall of the town of Avdiivka, where he said Ukrainian troops had been forced to flee in chaos.

"Avdiivka is an absolute success, I congratulate you. It needs to be built on," Putin told Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu in the Kremlin.

The town, which once had a population of 32,000, fell to Russia on Saturday, a capture that is Russia's biggest battlefield triumph since its forces seized Bakhmut in May 2023.

EU TARGETS NEARLY 200 ENTITIES WITH RUSSIAN SANCTIONS

The European Union this week approved a 13th package of sanctions against Russia, in what has been hailed as "one of the broadest" measures to date.

The fresh wave of sanctions targets nearly 200 entities and individuals accused of helping Moscow procure weapons or of involvement in kidnapping Ukrainian children.

The Belgian presidency said on X, "EU Ambassadors just agreed in principle on a 13th package of sanctions in the framework of Russia's aggression against Ukraine."

The new package will see 193 entities and individuals added to the list of those banned from travelling to the EU or doing business there, but no fresh measures against specific economic sectors, EU diplomatic sources said.

POLISH FARMER FLIES PRO-PUTIN BANNER DURING GRAIN PROTESTS

Poland has threatened additional restrictions on Ukrainian food products as farmers displayed a pro-Putin banner.

Poland's government has ramped up pressure on Ukraine as its farmers continue their blockade of the border in protest against the EU agricultural policy which permits cheap grain imports from Ukraine.

Polish farmers have used their tractors to block border crossings with Ukraine to protest against the grain shipments, which they say threaten their livelihoods, with one tractor flying a Soviet flag and bearing a poster that read: "Putin - sort out Ukraine, Brussels, and our government".

"Either they want to reach an agreement with us, or we will have to introduce further restrictions on the import of Ukrainian goods," Michal Kolodziejczak, the Polish Agriculture Minister, said.

Volodymyr Zelensky has called for emergency talks with the Polish president and prime minister as well as the European Union to resolve the situation.

RUSSIA 'INCREASES GROUND ATTACKS AROUND ROBOTYNE'

It is "highly likely" Russia has increased its ground attacks in and around southern Ukraine, the Ministry of Defense reported this week.

This is one of several points on the front line where Russia has intensified attacks within the last week in an attempt to "stretch Ukrainian forces", it added.

The Robotyne axis in southern Ukraine was re-captured by Ukraine during its counteroffensive in summer 2023 and has remained on the front line ever since.

During the Ukrainian offensive, the Russian army and air force operating in the area sustained heavy casualties, but the ebb in tempo since - combined with a recruitment drive - have "likely enabled" Russian forces to reconstitute, the MoD said.

THREE KILLED IN RUSSIAN STRIKES

Three people died and 22 others were injured in Russian strikes over 24 hours on Wednesday.

The Russian attacks targeted nine regions of Ukraine in total, with casualties reported in Dnipro, Donetsk, Kherson, Kharkiv, and Sumy.

A strike on Kramatorsk injured at least seven people, with one buried under the rubble according to local military officials. One person was killed in the village of Kostiantynivka in Donetsk and two more were injured, the regional governor said.

Oleh Syniehubov, governor of the Kharkiv region, said a Russian drone strike on a civilian vehicle in Kupiansk killed two passengers and injured a third.

Elsewhere, three people were injured in strikes on the Nikopol district in Dnipro which also damaged power lines and a gas pipeline.

Vadim Filashkin, governor of Donetsk Oblast, said on Facebook that Russian troops launched 19 strikes against multiple settlements in total, destroying and damaging around 15 houses, 19 apartment buildings and two industrial buildings.

BIDEN TO ANNOUNCE 'MAJOR PACKAGE' OF RUSSIAN SANCTIONS

Washington has confirmed it will unveil a "major sanctions package" against Russia at the end of this week to hold Moscow "accountable" for the death of Alexei Navalny.

A state department spokesperson said: "As the White House announced this morning at President Biden's direction, we will be announcing a major sanctions package on Friday to hold Russia accountable for Navalny's death in prison."

President Biden said there is "no doubt" the death of the Russian opposition leader in an arctic penal colony last week was a "consequence of something that Putin and his thugs did".

EU Demands Independent Investigation into Navalny's Death

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The Kremlin has denied involvement in Navalny's death and says Western allegations that Putin was responsible are unacceptable. Russia's Investigative Committee says it has launched a procedural investigation into the death, and the Kremlin has said it does not bow to EU demands.

NAVALNY'S BODY HAS YET TO BE RELEASED

Navalny, 47, fell unconscious and died suddenly on February 16 after a walk at the penal colony above the Arctic Circle, where he was serving a three-decade sentence, the Russian prison service announced.

The mother of Alexei Navalny called on President Putin to release his body in a video filmed outside the colony where he died. She said she had been trying to see him for five days but didn't even know where he was.

"I'm asking you, Vladimir Putin - it all depends on you alone. Let me see my son. I demand that Alexei's body be released immediately so I can give him a decent burial."

The family have been told his body will not be released for two weeks. His mother was informed it is being held for "chemical analysis," a representative for Navalny said, though there has been no confirmation of the whereabouts of the body from Russian authorities, and efforts to locate it have been repeatedly shut down.

Yulia Navalnaya has alleged her husband's body is being kept until traces of poisoning by the nerve agent Novichok



Alexei Navalny after the attempted poisoning in 2020, with his wife and children. Source: Alexei Navalny Instagram Account/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

have disappeared. Navalny survived an assassination attempt using the poison in 2020.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov called the accusations "unfounded and vulgar", but added that since Ms Navalnaya was widowed just days ago, he "wouldn't comment further."

Navalny's mother filed a lawsuit at a court in the Arctic city of Salekhard contesting officials' refusal to release her son's body, Russia's state news agency Tass reported.

On Monday, the Kremlin said an investigation into Navalny's death was ongoing and that there were "no results" as yet.

ARRESTED NAVALNY MOURNERS 'FORCED TO REPORT TO MILITARY' ON RELEASE

Russian men arrested for paying tribute to Alexei Navalny have been forced to report to the military, according to a report.

On their release from Moskovsky 95, a detention center, the men arrested in St Petersburg were ordered to sign summonses to the city's military recruiting office, RUSNews reported.

One of the men told an independent local news outlet that prison officers threatened to break his fingers if he did not sign the document.

At least 400 people have been detained across Russia since Navalny's death was announced on Friday, according to the human rights group OVD-Info. Among them was a priest, Father Grigory Mikhnov-Vaitenko, who had been scheduled to hold a memorial service for Navalny in St. Petersburg, the New York Times reported. It is the most significant spate of arrests since protests against a general mobilization for the war in Ukraine in September 2022.

NAVALNY'S WIFE SAYS SHE WILL CONTINUE HIS WORK

In a show of determination, Navalnaya

told media she would continue her husband's work.

"Three days ago, Vladimir Putin killed my husband, Alexei Navalny. He died in a prison colony after three years of torment and torture," she said. "The most important thing we can do for Alexei and for ourselves is to keep fighting, more desperately and more fiercely than before. We need to seize every opportunity to fight against war, against corruption, against injustice, to fight for fair elections and the freedom of speech, to fight to take back our country."


"I want to live in a free Russia, I want to build a free Russia. I will continue the work of Alexei Navalny. By killing Alexei, Putin killed half of me — half of my heart and half of my soul. But I still have the other half, and it tells me that I have no right to give up."


MORE SANCTIONS TO BE APPLIED IN RESPONSE TO NAVALNY'S DEATH

The EU moved closer on Monday to imposing new sanctions against Moscow over its war on Ukraine, while the US is set to announce sanctions against Russia on Friday over Navalny's death.

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak told the House of Commons that Navalny "died for a cause to which he dedicated his whole life, freedom. Together with our allies, we are considering all options to hold Russia and Putin to account."

"I strongly believe that the best way to honor the memory of Alexei Navalny is to ensure that President Putin doesn't win on the battlefield, but that Ukraine prevails," Jens Stoltenberg, Secretary General of NATO, said Wednesday.





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Latvian President Rinkevics: "Ukraine is fighting not only for us, but instead of us"

INTERVIEW BY VAZHA
TAVBERIDZE AT THE MUNICH
SECURITY CONFERENCE

In July 2023, Edgars Rinkevics assumed the presidency of Latvia, concluding an 11-year tenure as the longest-serving foreign minister in the history of his Baltic nation.

Since 2014, Rinkevics has been an outspoken critic of Russia's aggressive actions towards neighboring Ukraine. He drew parallels between the annexation of Crimea and the Soviet occupation of the Baltic states in 1940, famously stating, "History repeats itself, first as tragedy, second as farce."

During the recent Munich Security Conference, RFE/RL's Georgian Service caught up with Rinkevics to discuss the potential role of Ukraine in fostering a more democratic future for Russia, and the role Europe plays in working toward that goal. We started our interview, however, with the event that overshadowed pretty much everything at the conference - Alexei Navalny's death.

HOW BIG A BLOW IS NAVALNY'S DEATH FOR THE HOPES OF HAVING A BETTER RUSSIA? A RUSSIA THAT WANTS TO TRY ITS HAND AT DEMOCRACY AGAIN?

The very fact that all the opponents of Mr. Putin are either in jail, or are somewhere in exile, and that Mr. Navalny was not the first opponent to die, actually testify to that. At this point, it is very difficult to imagine any kind of opposing force that could make difference in Russia, though it may happen sometime in the future. Things are not frozen in time. They are not constant. They keep moving. But I think this has been a very symbolic end of an era.

We remember how Navalny turned, fought corruption, exposed officials. You could agree or disagree with him as a politician, but, technically, he was a very viable alternative to the current regime. And that's why he was imprisoned and died.

I also believe that we must understand that our condemnation of his death, the Western world saying how bad it is, means nothing to the Kremlin at this point. Mr. Putin has his own goals. He wants, first of all, to eliminate any dissent back home. And, of course, he wants to advance his foreign policy, and achieve his imperialistic goals.

WHAT DO YOU EXPECT THE WESTERN REACTION TO NAVALNY'S DEATH TO BE, BEYOND THE USUAL CONDEMNATION AND CONDEMNATION?

The only viable way to respond to this tragic news is to provide more assistance, more weapons, to Ukraine. To some extent, the possibility of a better Russia,



To some extent, the possibility of a better Russia, a more democratic Russia, currently lies not in Russia itself, but in Ukraine



More defense spending, the establishment of conscription or building the Baltic defense line, we have plenty of work to do

a more democratic Russia, currently lies not in Russia itself, but in Ukraine - on Ukraine being able to defeat this regime, to emerge victorious.

I do believe that we still have this very wrong narrative that we are going to support Ukraine "as long as it takes" - we should change it to "we are going to support Ukraine until their victory," even with all the issues that we now face: funding, a bit of fatigue. It's a major, important message that leaders of the free world should send, that "we will support your claim until your victory."

And I would say the victory of Ukraine means also some possible changes in Russia, not necessarily positive ones [for Russia], but at least there is a chance for change.

I would say that the only viable way to react is not to impose sanctions on that or the other judge, prosecutor, or the warden of the prison where Mr. Navalny died, but to actually double down on support to Ukraine.

We have talking a bit about the lesson learned from 2008, from Russia's aggression against Georgia. Now, everyone is saying that if we had been smart enough then, the war in Europe would never have kicked off. But this is no longer the case. I think that now, and I repeat this whenever I meet the press or colleagues if they don't realize, not providing enough help to Ukraine will mean a kind of cease-fire or the end of hostilities probably only for the time being. Russia has shown that over the last 16+ years, it's been on a war footing, and it will continue to be so. So from that point of view, I would say Mr. Navalny's death has reinforced the message that we have to continue fighting Russia any way we can. And we know that Ukraine is fighting not only for us, but, to some extent, fighting instead of us.

WHEN YOU VISITED KYIV, YOU PLEDGED TO PRESIDENT ZELENSKY THAT LATVIA WOULD STAND WITH UKRAINE UNTIL ITS VICTORY. WHAT DOES THIS VICTORY LOOK LIKE FOR UKRAINE AND, IN A BROADER SENSE, THE WEST?

I think this is a question that is very easily answerable, but is not so easily deliverable. The Ukrainian president has presented his peace formula, and what this peace formula says is that Ukraine must regain control of its own internationally recognized borders, but this is something that will be very difficult to deliver. And yes, this year is going to be difficult, difficult in that we are not delivering enough. We are ramping up the defense industry, we are going to see to it that Ukraine receives more sophisticated weapons, but I think that the only way Russia can start to talk about the end of hostilities and agreeing to the peace formula is if they understand that they can't advance anymore, that they are losing ground, and that their own internal stability, their regime, is threat-



Rinkevics inspects the Latvia-Russia border near Lidumnieki in August. Source: Reuters

ened. And that is where if I am asked the timeline, I wouldn't be able to give it and a lot depends on the Ukrainians.

IS THERE WILLINGNESS IN THE WEST TO DO WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE?

All my colleagues with whom I was speaking understand that, at this point, this is a very complex issue. There is the example of 2008 in Georgia, there is the example of 2014 in Crimea and Donbas. And there is the example of subversive actions when it comes to the Latvian election process back in 2016, 2017. We also see attempts to intimidate in countries like Moldova. But there is this difficulty that we, as leaders, are trying to find the right way to talk with our public. Why? Because there is a bit of fatigue. If they switch on the TV, or look at news sites, and see the Ukraine war, some people continue watching, some simply move on to something else. And we have this very complex situation in the Middle East, which has also taken a toll on the global community.

And then, of course, you understand that if there is a stalemate, then Russia can regroup. And then you have to honestly tell your public that you have to be prepared for all kinds of scenarios. I'm not saying that we should approach the current situation with a sense of gloom and doom, but we have to be prepared for all kinds of scenarios, back home as well. It requires some effort to mobilize the civil protection system; it has to be reconfigured according to the experience of Ukraine: More defense spending, the establishment of conscription, or building the Baltic defense line. We have plenty of work to do.

SOME SCANDINAVIAN COUNTRIES HAVE TOLD THEIR PEOPLE IT'S NOT AN UNREALISTIC POSSIBILITY THAT RUSSIA WILL LAUNCH AN ATTACK AGAINST THEM IN THREE TO FIVE YEARS. WHAT WOULD THE REACTION BE TO THAT IDEA IN LATVIA?

For us, those "realizations" we hear from other capitals in the West are nothing new. We knew that Russia was getting more and more belligerent; we saw what was happening in Georgia, in Ukraine; we saw what was happening in our neighboring Belarus in 2021. With the assistance of President Putin, Mr. Lukashenko suppressed unrest. This is not anything that I would say is new. But having said that, I see a need to somehow tell the public that, first of all, we need to spend

more on security, including both defense and internal security. We have to work with our allies.

For the Latvians, then, the narrative would be a bit different than for those countries that even a couple of years ago said it's unimaginable. Now, everything is possible. And we should understand that when we are past this phase, once we have acknowledged the problem, then we need address it, find a solution, and the solution is more defense industry, more defense spending.

ARE RUSSIA'S KNOWN TACTICS OF PASSPORTIZATION AND USING RUSSIAN SPEAKING RESIDENTS IN OTHER COUNTRIES FOR AGGRESSION SOMETHING YOU FEAR MIGHT HAPPEN IN LATVIA, WITH ITS RATHER SIZEABLE RUSSIAN-SPEAKING MINORITY?

We do take the internal security challenges seriously, and that's why legislation has been passed to this effect and there is now a more rigorous vetting process. And at the same time, I would say that we were aware of some of those tactics long in advance. We saw heavy attempts to issue Russian passports 10 years ago, when we were introducing our social security system reform, raising the pension age, when all of a sudden those people who had taken Russian passports instead of Latvian understood that, actually, life is not as nice as it seems.

We have been talking with those who live in Latvia and don't speak Latin as a native language. If you look at the opinion polls, they present a very interesting picture: About a quarter of those non-Latvian speaking citizens support Ukraine, a quarter support Mr. Putin, and the rest either refuse to give an exact answer or say they are "confused." It would be very wise to try to understand how confused they are, and why they are not answering the question.

HOW DO YOU SEE COEXISTENCE WITH RUSSIA IN GENERAL, IN THE FUTURE? DO YOU EVER SEE YOURSELF VISITING RUSSIA?

It's impossible to imagine that during my mandate, I will go to Russia or receive any Russian official. I don't think it's going to happen. And I don't believe that, even in the best possible scenario, we are going to see Russia changing in a radical way for democracy, human rights and rule of law.

The whole history of Russia shows that there are waves where they turn to the

West, want to be like the West, but they never quite get there. Now we are in the wave where Russia is completely turning away from being a part of Western civilization, but that wave is also going to pass. My concern at this point would be that if Russia feels that it has won, it will try its luck. And if Russia feels that it has lost, but the current regime continues in power, then there will be a kind of humiliation and they will probably attempt to somehow correct the mistake. So like it or not, we will have to face, for the next few years, I don't know, maybe decades, living next to a very unpredictable, dangerous country, maybe a time that resembles a little bit those years of the Cold War.

I WANT TO ASK ABOUT THE ENDURING RELUCTANCE OF THE OLD WEST TO SEE RUSSIA AS THE BALTIC COUNTRIES, OR MORE BROADLY, EASTERN EUROPE, SEE IT. ALL DESPITE HISTORY PROVING YOU RIGHT ON A CONTINUOUS BASIS.

To some extent, I think that last two years have shown that we are getting closer, but we have not met each other yet. I think we are getting closer because there is an understanding that in the 21st century, Russia can use very brutal means to launch a war; Russia can kill innocent civilians.

But there are two elements that I try to understand when I'm talking with my Western counterparts: First is that we have a bit of a different history, one that saw most of Western Europe freeing itself of Nazi occupation, or getting liberated from Germany, which had become one of the leading global anti-European powers, but which saw us getting another 50 years of Soviet occupation that ended relatively recently, only 33 years ago. And that's why we have those kinds of memories.

Second, I think that everyone was so excited that the Cold War was over, there was this very wishful thinking that is very difficult to get rid of it.

And let's not forget that there are many other pressing issues for many of the bigger and smaller European countries. Russia, as part of the UN Security Council, has global reach. And to some extent, there is this feeling that if you properly addressed them, you could probably get some kind of deal. I don't believe that: I see that deals are honored by Russia only if they believe they serve Russia's interests. As soon as this stops, they break them. Be it Ukraine, be it Georgia, be it any other international treaty they have signed in the last 30 years.



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Carlson – An Example to Follow?



The Tucker Carlson interview with Putin. Source: The Australian

OP-ED BY NUGZAR B. RUHADZE

Putin is a bad guy – this is the current standard view, held up and repeated by half the world. And while the other half will not readily admit that the guy is good, nor will they insist

that he is bad. Only history will make a fair and due judgement upon this mind-boggling issue of our time. Take Napoleon: Historically, he is also somewhere between good and bad; Hitler is overwhelmingly thought of in negative terms and colors, although there are people who vehemently defend his good and strong points and repudiate his tragically obnoxious shortcomings; while Stalin's

ruthless dictatorial image, mixed with the suppositions of his conceivable geniality, is still the subject of worldwide controversy.

If Putin's image and deeds are asking for questions to be answered, then, those questions have to be specifically posed in the first place.

That's exactly why the world-renowned American man of letters and sounds,

Tucker Carlson, embarked on his controversial journalistic stint in Russia, having persistently and determinedly sought for an encounter with the well-known Kremlin resident of consequence. For better or worse, Carlson did his job, having managed to break through the strong and morose walls of the former communist citadel, which, via certain vicissitudes of life, a couple of decades ago turned into something less scary for the rest of the world, but exactly two years back from now, forfeited its newly acquired benign image, having sent the message to the world that nothing has changed and nobody has gone through any transfiguration.

Carlson was so curious to see the Russian leader with his own eyes, and to listen to the famous pariah with his own ears, that nothing could have held him back from risking the venture. Undoubtedly, it was not easy, but it did happen, and with outstanding success. Curiosity didn't kill Carlson, and he was brought him back from the pinnacle of glory with satisfaction, though with a certain number of pitfalls and drawbacks on the way.

The interview itself was OK, not more than that, though it exceeded global expectation. Although he earned every available epithet in spoken English, both agreeable and nasty, Carlson literally turned billions of heads towards Russia and its mysterious boss, in consternation and with a huge question mark as to whether Putin is what the world thought he was, or something else. Indeed, the journalist has definitely helped the Rus-

sian leader to make the world think of him in slightly different terms, but of course without an iota of anticipation of altering the dynamics of the extant geopolitical process.

Did Carlson do a good job? Technically, yes, because the deed appeared for all intents and purposes like freedom of speech and democracy in action. Everybody should be listened to, be they liberal or conservative, gay or straight, democrat or autocrat, bully or defender! This is what freedom of speech is all about, and the right of judgement should belong to all society! We are all wise and weathered enough to make our own conclusions and live with it!

Now that time has elapsed since the interview of the century took place, and the feeling of sensation is fading away, the commentary is getting easier to make. Those who wanted to inveigh against Carlson have let off steam, and the journalistic life of the world is back in its normal routine; those who wanted to give him kudos for the high jump are also in their old rut. To tell the truth, many of us envy his amazing 'fifteen minutes', but the main question is if we should follow in his venturesome steps. Why not? Courage, skills and smarts, along with knowledge of the ropes, is a huge stock in trade for any journalist. What newscaster would say no to glory and celebrity? Tucker Carlson has no power to change the world, but he can at least make the world think in a little differently. If this is true, then we can all be winners.

President to Veto Amendments to Electoral Code



The Georgian President, Salome Zurbishvili, has announced her intention to veto the recently adopted amendments to the Election Code by the Georgian Parliament. "The majority adopted changes to the election code, which are in contradiction with the 9 recommendations of the Venice Commission and the European Union. With the adopted changes, the CEC staffing process became completely fictitious, adjusted only to the political interest of the ruling party," – reads the statement issued by the presidential administration.

As stated, the President of Georgia will veto the amendments to the Electoral Code, as well as any law that is not in line with the country's European path. "Today, when the new Prime Minister is in Brussels on his first international visit and when there is an international observation mission in the country, the Parliament of Georgia, the ruling majority, adopted changes in the election code, which contradict both the Venice Commission and the 9 recommendations of the European Union.

"Instead of the head and members of the election commission to be selected and elected by broad consensus, with the adopted changes, the process of staffing the CEC has become completely fictitious, which is only adjusted to the political interest of the ruling party.

"There was a risk that the elections would be conducted by a one-party, biased election administration that is controlled by the ruling party, which would lead to mistrust of the process, both among the public and international community.

"As she has said many times, the President of Georgia will veto the amendments to the Election Code, as well as any law that is not in line with the country's European path!", reads the statement.

The Parliament, without considering the recommendations of the Venice Commission, adopted changes in the Election Code. Voting in the Parliament was held on February 20.

The changes envisage the abolition of the position of the deputy chairman of the CEC elected by the opposition quota.



Association Council: EU Recognized that Georgia Implemented Significant Reforms in a Number of Areas

BY TEAM GT

The European Union recognized that Georgia has carried out important reforms in a number of areas and has successfully brought its legislation closer to the EU standards in many sectors, – this was stated in the joint document published after the 8th session of the Association Council.

The document mentions that the Association Council has positively assessed Georgia's active civil society and emphasized the importance of inclusive, meaningful and systematic engagement with civil society in policy-making processes.

"The EU has recognized that Georgia has implemented significant reforms in a number of areas and has successfully

brought its legislation closer to EU standards in many sectors, as noted in the European Commission's November 8, 2023 report on Georgia." It was noted that the key factor in this regard was the goal of joining the European Union, which is supported by the population of Georgia, the government and a wide political spectrum.

"The European Union called on all political entities in Georgia to demonstrate constructive multi-party cooperation and dialogue, to overcome polarization and to refrain from actions that will further deepen political tension and hinder the implementation of the country's reform agenda. The Association Council positively assessed Georgia's active civil society and emphasized the importance of inclusive, meaningful and systematic engagement with civil society in policy-making processes.

"Emphasizing the importance of combating disinformation, anti-European rhetoric and information manipulation and interference by external forces, the EU called on Georgia to take substantial steps in this direction and at the same time took into account the efforts already made by the government.

"The Association Council emphasized that full independence, accountability and impartiality of all state institutions, especially all courts, prosecutor's offices, anti-corruption and monetary institutions, should be ensured, in accordance with European standards and recommendations of the Venice Commission. The European Union emphasized the need to further improve the implementation of parliamentary supervision, especially on the security services," the document released by the Georgian government administration states.

Zero Strays Georgia: Adopting and Sterilizing Animals around the Country



Founder of Zero Strays Georgia, Mariam Shekiladze

BY SHELBI R. ANKIEWICZ

Georgia currently has an estimated half a million stray (or street) dogs. One organization fighting this alarming trend is Zero Strays Georgia, which works to sterilize and take stray animals off the streets and find them homes. The organization has seen some positive progress since its inception, with slowly changing mentalities and new legislation for the protection of street animals finally drafted on February 14 this year by Parliament.

Founder of Zero Strays Georgia, Mariam Shekiladze, started helping stray animals in 2015 when she adopted her first dog with epilepsy. It was then that she really saw Georgia's ongoing issue of dog overpopulation, and the one dog she saved quickly grew into a project that saved more and more. In the past nine years, Zero Strays alone has sterilized more than 1000 dogs and cats (both strays and pets), found homes abroad for more than 150 former strays, and is currently supporting eight families who are fostering strays looking for adoption. With the right legislation, though, their efforts will see even better results.

"If we have proper working legislation and good enforcement, if the government works hard on raising awareness to promote adoption, and they control all breeders through licensing, etc., there

are many details, but if everything is done in combination, then it will be possible to not have any stray dogs at all within five years," Shekiladze tells GEORGIA TODAY.

At the parliamentary briefing on February 14 where the draft law on stray animals was discussed, chair of the Environmental Protection and Natural Resources Committee, Maia Bitadze, said the draft law will, among other things, raise awareness about sterilization and harmful practices that allow strays to reproduce. She said current pet owners will have to begin registering their pets, and registration will have to be provided if the pet is taken into any agencies. Bitadze said this is to prevent the abandonment of animals on the streets.

Shekiladze told us that Zero Strays will be involved in all decisions being made by Parliament until the law is passed and put into place. She says both her organization and Animal Project, another group, are actively pursuing this legislation, and will be at the following seven sessions regarding it to discuss what and how things should be changed to ensure healthy animal and human welfare.

Zero Strays also operates in the rural areas of Georgia, where animal abandonment and low sterilization rates are high. Shekiladze explains that animal related organizations and government agencies exist, but they are all based in Tbilisi, so people living in the regions are struggling with their little to no resources. Every time she goes to her village near Zugdidi, she says, there are always new dogs struggling to survive, many of them living

near terribly dangerous roads. She said she has often found animals that are sick, which have been hit by cars, or are suffering from disabilities. To prevent more animals from being born, or put into conditions like this, Zero Strays helps families sterilize their pets and stray dogs, while informing people why it's important.

While the organization's focus is to sterilize and neuter animals, they also put a big emphasis on adopting and fostering. Unlike traditional outlets, Zero Strays doesn't give their strays to shelters after they've been helped; rather, they foster their animals until they find their forever homes. Shekiladze said they give an animal and a stipend to low-income families to take care of the animal until they can find someone to adopt them. This creates a win-win situation, as the family is receiving money while doing a good deed for the organization.

"Georgia is like a big shelter that's overcrowded, and no-one wants dogs and cats," Shekiladze says. "Animal lovers here already tend to have three, four, five animals, and they can't take any more."

Up until recently, Zero Strays has been paid out of pocket by Shekiladze and others volunteering with the organization. She said everything was fine until there were so many animals that they could no longer do it on their own, and that's when the organization launched an official website and social media channels with a donation option, so the public with like-minded interests knows who they are and what they can do to help.

Since Georgian households are overpopulated with animals, and so many end up being homeless, Zero Strays also sends animals abroad, in particular to Europe. A volunteer who is flying somewhere agrees to take an animal with them, and Zero Strays arranges a meeting at the destination airport with another volunteer living there. This helps get the dogs to better homes, and allows the organization to partner with groups and individuals who live abroad to find veterinarians for rescues from Georgia.

Shekiladze says people's mindsets have been changing toward strays particularly within the past three years. Five years ago, she found it difficult to feed strays or help them because the locals would laugh at the situation. However, now people are realizing the problem at hand and becoming more involved in trying to find a solution, she notes.

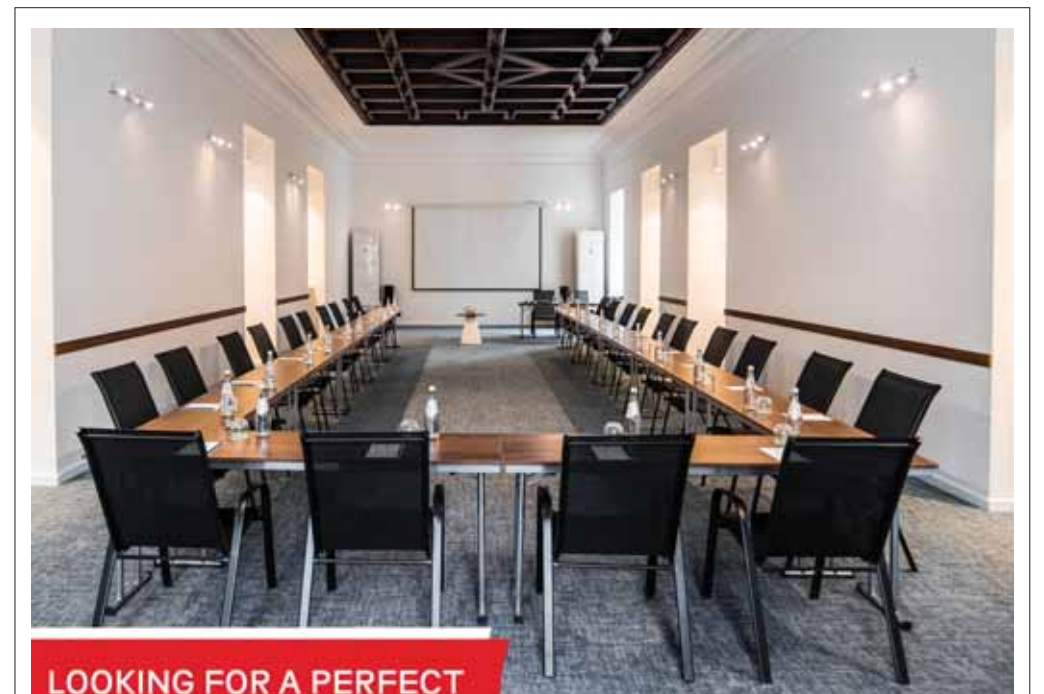
As to what people can do on an everyday basis to help, Shekiladze encourages us to feed strays around our workplaces and houses, because she says that when strays are fed, they are less aggressive. She also emphasizes the need to ensure dogs are neutered, sterilized, and vaccinated. By being neutered, the aggressiveness also decreases, so people will be more likely to adopt and welcome these animals. A good way of determining if a dog needs help is whether it has an ear tag - if a dog has one, it means they've had their shots.

"Even when Georgia has the right legislation, it will be very important to have public support," Shekiladze tells us. "Many people are needed to solve this together, because the government alone can't do everything."

Shekiladze says she realizes it's going to be hard for people to work toward this change, but after a few years, and a lot of dedicated work, the country's stray animal problem could be resolved.



Zero Strays Georgia has found homes abroad for more than 150 former strays



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Shangri La Batumi: Celebrating Culinary Excellence

At Shangri La, excellence is not just a goal—it's a commitment woven into every aspect of our services. From the thrilling excitement of our entertainment complex to the refined elegance of our dining experience, we spare no effort in delivering the finest to our guests.

Under the expert guidance of Chef Anatoly Anisim, our restaurant embodies the pursuit of culinary excellence. With over 15 years of experience and a passion for innovation, Chef Anatoly crafts dishes that tantalize the senses and elevate the dining experience to new heights. During his professional career, he has studied cuisines from around the world, having worked in both small restaurants and 5-star hotel establishments. Anatoly pays particular attention to technology and understands the chemistry and processes involved in food preparation.

"I believe the most important aspect of this profession is to never stop learning. Culinary arts should keep pace with the times while respecting their roots.



Only by treating each ingredient with love and respect can we achieve excellent results. Cooking is not just about preparing food; it's about creating a frame of mind for our guests," he says.

Indulge in refined dining amidst opulent surroundings, where a fusion of Continental and Asian flavors awaits your palate. As we approach the Chinese New Year, Chef Anatoly has crafted a special Chinese menu, adding traditional and innovative dishes to our diverse offerings.

At our restaurant, we take pride in honoring the nuances of Oriental cuisine, ensuring every dish is meticulously prepared to the highest standards of quality. Guests from diverse backgrounds will find their national dishes featured on our menu, a testament to our commitment to culinary diversity.

Join us at Shangri La Casino Batumi, open 24/7, and indulge in a culinary journey like no other. From the opulent surroundings to the impeccable service, every moment is designed to delight and exceed expectations. Experience the pinnacle of culinary excellence with us.



UNDP and Sweden Empowering Women in Georgian Politics

Ahead of the parliamentary elections in Georgia, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and Sweden are supporting political parties to empower women politicians and explore effective strategies for attracting, engaging, and promoting women candidates.

These targeted efforts envision consultations and training on introducing internal gender policies, while also fostering professional development opportunities for party members.

Additionally, UNDP and Sweden assist in strengthening women's wings within political parties and support the establishment of these entities where they are lacking. As of 2023, parties such as "For Georgia", "Georgian Dream", "Lelo", and the "United National Movement", have initiated the integration of Women's Political Organizations into their structures, with more planning to follow suit in 2024.

According to H.E. Anna Lyberg, Ambassador of Sweden to Georgia, women play a critical role in political representation, constituting half of the population in a country. In Georgia, women are significantly underrepresented in parliament, holding only one-fifth of the seats. "Political parties can change that by implementing robust internal gender policies to ensure meaningful equality for women politicians."

Douglas Webb, UNDP Resident Representative a.i. in Georgia, noted that "Electoral gender quotas play a vital role in enhancing women's political participation in Georgia, garnering support from citizens and political parties alike. However, for this mechanism to truly empower women in politics, political parties must actively seek improved methods for attracting, engaging, and promoting women candidates."

Research conducted in 2022 by Sweden, the United Kingdom, UNDP, and the National Democratic Institute examined the impact of electoral gender quotas on Georgia's political landscape. Despite broad support for gender quotas among political parties, the research highlights the need for stronger internal democratic mechanisms to advance gender equality and women's participation effectively. It offers a comprehensive set of recommendations for political parties to identify and support active and talented women candidates, bridging the gap from party roles to political positions.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

The Sweden-funded UN Joint Programme for Gender Equality is a flagship initiative assisting Georgia in achieving meaningful gender equality in social, economic, and policy realms. The programme is jointly implemented by three UN agencies - UNDP, UNFPA, and UN Women.



UNDP/Leli Blagonravova

Celebrating Inclusivity: Shangri La Hosts Snow Wheelchair Championship



vors. This championship, now in its third consecutive year, has garnered widespread acclaim for its inclusive spirit and ability to inspire both participants and spectators alike.

One standout contender was Shorena Kavelidze, a wheelchair user from Marneuli municipality, who demonstrated remarkable skill to secure the third run-

ner-up position. Stella Andriuk from Tbilisi put up a fierce competition, ultimately claiming the second-place spot. However, it was Lela Zhorzhikashvili, also from Tbilisi, who emerged victorious, seizing the coveted first place and earning the prestigious transitional cup for a year. Notably, all three competitors made their debut in the snowmobile ski-



In a heartwarming display of inclusivity and empowerment, the entertainment complex Shangri La Tbilisi recently played host to the Snow Wheelchair Championship for women with disabilities in Bakuriani township. From January 27th to 29th, 2024, this remarkable event welcomed 17 participants from diverse backgrounds, each showcasing remarkable skill and determination despite facing significant challenges.

Among the participants were women overcoming various obstacles, including spinal cord injuries, visual impairments, amputations, and breast cancer survi-



ing championship, showcasing their exceptional talent and determination.

Beyond the championship itself, Shangri La Tbilisi remains committed to fostering the integration of disabled individuals and war veterans into society through financial support and advocacy. Helen Keane, General Manager of Shangri La Tbilisi, emphasized the importance of social initiatives, stating, "In the Shangri La network, we see it very important for every business to support civil activities and inclusivity in particular as an act of promoting and establishing equal rights in the society of disabled people."

She also expressed her happiness at seeing the winners' smiles as they received a special money prize from Shangri La, along with a box of sweets, wine, and tea.

The Snow Wheelchair Championship in Bakuriani stands as a testament to the power of inclusivity and the remarkable achievements of individuals overcoming challenges. Through events like these, organizations like the Shangri La Tbilisi entertainment complex are not only celebrating diversity but also paving the way for a more inclusive and empowering society.

ADB, Credo Sign Deal to Promote Food Security and Women-Owned Agriculture MSMEs in Georgia

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) and Credo Bank have signed a loan of 65 million lari (equivalent to around \$25 million). The loan will support onlending activities to micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs), with a specific focus on targeting women borrowers in agricultural production, processing, and trade.

"Women account for over a third of the country's agricultural employment and agricultural holdings ownership, but remain underserved in terms of accessing financial assistance. Credo is uniquely focused on closing this financing gap," said ADB Director General for Private Sector Operations Suzanne Gaboury. "Additionally, this project will promote domestic food production and import substitution to enhance the food security of Georgia."

An accompanying technical assistance grant of up to \$700,000 will also be provided to facilitate Credo's rural outreach by expanding its digital infrastructure and promoting climate-resilient farming practices to its borrowers. The grant will support initiatives to improve women's financial access and literacy in remote villages and improve rural women's competencies in financial and digital literacy.

ADB's financing will provide long-term local currency funding to support Credo, which will help avoid foreign currency exposure and risks. To support the local capital market, ADB will issue local currency bonds to fund the loan.

"We deeply appreciate the long-term strategic partnership with the Asian Development Bank. Over the years, their unwavering support through over 185 million lari of total investments has been instrumental in our bank's growth and development. This particular transaction is a significant milestone, as it will empower agriculture businesses, with a



specific focus on women entrepreneurs," said Credo Bank Chief Executive Officer Zaza Pirtskhelava. "The sizeable technical assistance will further enhance the bank's digitization efforts as well as promote climate-resilient farming."

Credo is the fifth largest commercial

bank in Georgia and has a robust rural presence with 87 branches and digital infrastructure serving 360,000 borrowers, of which more than half are women. It is owned by international social impact and development finance institutions such as Access Microfinance Holding

AG based in Germany, responsAbility Investment Management AG in Switzerland, Triodos Investment Management BV in the Netherlands, and Proparco based in France. Since 2015, ADB has worked with Credo on projects covering MSME financing, affordable housing

finance, and COVID-19 response.

ADB is committed to achieving a prosperous, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable Asia and the Pacific, while sustaining its efforts to eradicate extreme poverty. Established in 1966, it is owned by 68 members—49 from the region.



Back to Armenia, 1

BLOG BY TONY HANMER

As I wrote last week, it was time for a return to Georgia's southern neighbor after a 23-year absence. This time with my wife, who had not been there for about 16 years.

I tried to book the train tickets online, but gave up when some part of the multi-part page glitched and I could go no further. Much simpler, in the end, to go to the main Tbilisi railway station and do it in person. For this, photos of our passport pages on my phone were sufficient. I decided to splurge a bit and bought first class tickets there, two beds to a cabin.

The train was nice and new, impressing us both with its cleanliness and upgraded equipment. The conductress, though, could not seem to manage a single word of Russian with correct grammar. Oh well, second language for us all, we understood each other. Sheets were included in the price, as well as snacks and water, and the heating was nicely warm.

I had expected from all past experience that all passport and customs business would be handled on board. Half right, this time... Leaving the Georgian side, we did have to exit the train (at least without any luggage) and get our passports stamped at a window. No big deal, though. The rest of the thing, on the Armenian side, was all done inside the train, and we continued.

I always like getting this part of the train trip done at the beginning, which is the case when going to both Armenia and Azerbaijan. Then you have the rest of the night to sleep and arrive the next morning.

We taxi'd to our friend's house near Yerevan Zoo, and he met us on the street and took us home, where we did get a bit more sleep before deciding to see some of the capital.

Yerevan, in the ongoing Armenian-Georgian battle for "first or oldest", does beat Tbilisi by over 1000 years, having been founded as Erebuni by King Argishti I of Uartu in 782 BC. It is also the 14th capital city of the country, and has been the capital only since 1918. It is characterized, as is much of the country, by its many red to dark gray buildings of the local tuff stone. Being that stone fills the country, one might as well build with it. Pity the farmers, though, as we saw field after field, plain after plain, filled with rocks, and lined with removed ones too.

Our great friend and host took us by bus to the city center, where we walked around exploring, including Republic Square and the great Cascade sculpture garden. This is filled with amazing sculptures by famous artists from all over the world, and leads to a huge multi-level staircase, inside which are more wonderful sculptures. You can either walk or take a series of escalators in both directions.

Lali and I both found ourselves comparing things in this country to things in Georgia, as well as finding many things which are unique. For instance,

there IS a monumental statue of Mother Armenia at the top of this stairway, and she DOES have a sword. Here, though, there is no bowl of wine or anything for the guest, just the weapon. She is surrounded by military hardware, and in front of her is an eternal flame to the Unknown Soldier. Armenia and Georgia have both had their share of tragedy, rises and falls in fortune, but it seems that the former's national identity is more mired up in its struggles with its neighbors, especially Turkey and Azerbaijan. The former committed more than one Armenian genocide in the Ottoman Empire times, and the latter took back Artsakh (Karabakh) last year. It is also, as we heard while in Yerevan, suggesting that this city too really belongs to Azerbaijan. So, plenty of ongoing mourning and trauma. I can only try to make sense of all the histories I read, depending on who wrote them.

Near the Mother there is also... a giant ferris wheel. And a huge television tower. See what I mean about comparisons? We decided not to take this too far, though, and simply to enjoy the experience. More next week, as we venture further afield.

Tony Hanmer has lived in Georgia since 1999, in Svaneti since 2007, and been a weekly writer and photographer for GT since early 2011. He runs the "Svaneti Renaissance" Facebook group, now with over 2000 members, at www.facebook.com/groups/SvanetiRenaissance/. He and his wife also run their own guest house in Etseri: www.facebook.com/hanmer.house.svaneti

In Memory of Maro Makashvili (August 25, 1901 to February 19, 1921)

Continued from page 2 Tbilisi cried as one for her loss."

The final insult to her memory would come in 1930, when the cathedral and its cemetery were demolished by the Soviet government and the graves lost. The new Government House of the Georgian SSR was built on top of the ruins. This is where the Georgian Parliament now stands on Rustaveli Avenue in downtown Tbilisi.

The passages below are excerpts from her diary dated February 23, 1919. The previous day, Maro and her classmates had hosted their final evening ball, akin to a high school senior graduation ceremony. The passage is notable not only for capturing the celebratory spirit of the Democratic Republic of Georgia, but also for the flamboyant appearance of a young Paolo Iashvili. Paolo was a prominent figure in the Order of the Blue Horns, a coterie of post-symbolist poets, known for their life affirming verses and later banned by the Soviet authorities. During the 1937-38 purges, Paolo tragically took his own life with a hunting rifle on the 2nd floor of the Writers' Palace in Tbilisi while a denunciation meeting was unfolding in the rooms below.

In an obituary for Maro, a fellow Blue Horn poet Titsian Tabidze (executed December 16, 1937), wrote:

"For many years, people will call to mind the memory of the deceased, and much will be written about how she was taken from us—but for their friend, who fell for the greatest honor of Georgia, they will not be able to find words of mourning so powerful as when all of

MARO'S DIARY EXCERPTS:

"February 23 (continued 24). 1919.

"Yesterday we had our big evening ball at school. What a state we were in beforehand. We were afraid it would be a disaster, but there was no need to worry. At 7 o'clock people started arriving. Before the concert started, some outsiders were there, students and little kids. That was annoying. Tamara Ilinishna put Keto, Vava, and me in the tea room. The buffet was excellent. We tried so many tasty things. At 9 o'clock the artists arrived: Vano Sarajishvili, Inashvili, Spitko."

...

"There were many people, and a fight almost broke out between some soldiers who were there, but they put a stop to it in time. At 1 o'clock, Paolo showed up. We greeted him and gave him flowers. Then Kopali came and all the good people stayed for the dinner. At one o'clock or half past, they sat down at the table. Paolo was tamada. At the auction, he got two thousand for the bottle of champagne. He shouted a lot but never grew tired. He called Keto and me to join him on the stage, and we held the bottle. Others collected money."

...

"We started dancing. There was music and the piano was playing. We had an even better time here. It was my first time at such a party, and I have never had such a good time. They made me dance the Chechnuri. Paolo and Kopali never left my side. They were laughing, and I was happy to see that everyone I invited was

having a wonderful time. At 5 o'clock, they laid out the food on an enormous table. At 4 o'clock Keto left. She was telling me to come too, but my friends wouldn't let me. Our German teacher got quite drunk and was complimenting everyone. He was quite funny, drinking and dancing. Mr. Lelo also came all the way from Zugdidi for our evening. We were very happy to see him, and the feeling was mutual. After he had had a few drinks, he wouldn't leave us alone and joked and teased us.

"During the dinner, the director congratulated us and wished us happiness. He said: 'I want each of you to find your own opinions and live by your own ideas. Never do simply what others are doing—nothing is more dreadful.'" Paolo and Kopali drank to that. Then alavardi was with me. They played Chechnuri, and I knew they would want me to dance. I escaped and hid in another room. Everyone chased after me, "Princess! Princess! There's no point in resisting! We won't stop until you agree!" What could I do? So I agreed. By this point, Taso and Rtskhiladze were quite drunk. Taso could barely sit. Sometimes she would put her head on my shoulder, sometimes on Elo's. I also kept giving her drinks. Rtskhiladze was almost dead. He was completely gone and muttering something. Oh, we were laughing so much!

"We decided to go home at 8 o'clock. They tried to stop us, but we left anyway, first the 6th class, and then the rest. The boys, Sunana, Media and I came out together. This was when the real fun began. All the way home I didn't shut my mouth. We were laughing like crazy.

"When we left the school, Paolo broke

a big branch from a tree and stood in the middle of the street, shouting, "Wake up, Minister Evgeni Gegechkori!" That is where Gegechkori is stationed. We went on, and whenever we came across someone in the street, he would shake their hand, tip his hat, even give them a kiss. Then he spotted a wheelbarrow, got inside and started shouting "I'm going to Mtskheta!" Patriarch Leonid was being crowned that day. He was soon escorted out of the wheelbarrow.

"Everyone came to the windows in their nightgowns to see what all the noise was about, but then would pull back in embarrassment when Paolo and Kopali tipped their hats and sent kisses. We came across a cart full of beets. Paolo gave the man 5 rubles and took four large beets, throwing one to us. He took one into a teahouse and asked them to make him some beet soup for dinner. He pushed one into a worker's mouth. Two donkeys came by, and he sat on one and trotted around. When a tram would pass near us, they both bowed their heads and shouted "Здравствуй душечка! Оля, Маруся, Таня!.." Kopali and Tsitsishvili, the aviator, joined him. We approached the Treasury Theater and heard music. Then we saw the Georgian army with the Georgian flag on their way to Mtskheta. Kopali and Paolo bought two enormous bunches of violets, the biggest ones they had, to give to me and Sunana.

"We stood in the middle of the street, and as the army approached we started handing small bouquets to everyone, who then cried vasha! and threw them over their heads. The army stopped and sang a Georgian song in chorus. Paolo spoke

in impromptu verse. Then we marched behind the army. People stared at us and others were peering at us from their windows. It was 9 o'clock. There were so many people. We caught up with the rest of our friends and went together. We laughed like crazy. We were standing in front of a shop when Paolo, Tsitsishvili, and Kopali saw a cook in a window with iron bars. They started teasing him as one would tease a beast, pointing fingers and grimacing. The cook lost his patience and splashed them with water. At a Tatar shop, Paolo went in and took a big apple, then shouted for the whole street to hear, "Maro, Makashvili's girl, apple, apple, catch the apple!" I barely caught it. Then he grabbed something and said to me "Here, look what I have for you!" I went over, and he put an onion in my hand.

"They insisted we go to Mtskheta, Sunana and I, by automobile, almost forcing us in, but we escaped. Our journey from the institute had taken two hours. We said goodbye. Kopali and Paolo kissed my hand with great ceremony, and I was home by 10. My mother was quite worried. She thought I must have stayed the night because of the rain, but then one thought after another would pop into her head. I was suddenly very tired. I had some tea and slept until dinner. Some guests came in the evening, but I was so slow. I was in a daze. They were laughing at me. They would ask me one thing, and I would answer another."

Extracts translated by Ryan Sherman and Maia Tserediani from *May These Ashes Be Light: Georgian Literature from the Soviet Shadow*.

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Berlinale 74, Tops and Flops

REVIEW BY LILY FÜRSTENOW-KHOSITASHVILI

The Berlinale 74 opening was accompanied this year by protests. The widespread backlash forced the festival organizers to withdraw at the last minute their opening ceremony invitations to the members of Germany's far-right political AfD party. Elsewhere on the Potsdamer Platz, a group of film industry workers teamed up demanding better pay and working conditions. The crisis that Berlinale finds itself in at the moment is, however, most evident in the questionable quality of the films presented at the festival's numerous sections, most of which are overtly political, referring to burning societal, economic or military challenges of today, yet lacking in visual style, compelling storytelling, aesthetic appeal and authenticity, and thus missing out on emotional impact.

Luckily for our readers, there were a few exceptions and we still managed to pick out a handful of films to review. In his poetic film *Hors du Temps* (Outside of Time), Olivier Assayas tells the story of a filmmaker, the main narrator, who is both protagonist and contemplative guide through the unfolding narrative of his childhood home in the picturesque French countryside. As he grapples with the uncertainties of the future of film, his introspective musings are interwoven with masterfully incorporated Zoom sessions, seamlessly blending screen-in-screen techniques to reflect the digital interconnectedness of the pandemic era.

Amidst the backdrop of lockdown, the protagonist's reliance on online shopping and virtual therapy sessions with



Lana Gogoberidze's documentary, co-directed by her daughter Salomé Alexi, is a moving personal story that features a unique family clan of female filmmakers. Source: cineuropa

his psychologist via Zoom serve as poignant reflections of contemporary life. Yet, it is the sanctuary of his childhood home, steeped in the rich art history library left by his father, that offers solace and inspiration during turbulent Corona times.

As the pandemic draws the protagonist closer to his new partner and brother, each member of the household finds comfort in their own pursuits. While the protagonist delves into the depths of cinematic introspection and housekeeping, his brother immerses himself in the sensory delights of cooking and music. Together, they navigate the complexities

of lockdown life, bound by the enduring ties of family and the shared memories of their beloved home.

Amidst the backdrop of quarrels and tensions, the film weaves a tender tapestry of resilience, revealing the enduring power of love and familial bonds in the face of adversity. True values like love and care for each other stand the test of time. What are pandemic hardships in the face of timelessness? References to Pierre Abelard and his beloved Eloise, a rare example of love and fidelity from the French Middle Ages, and the love letters that they wrote each other, give the whole story a touch of that timelessness. Assayas offers among other things in his film a touch of subtle critique of contemporary society standing on the verge of pandemic madness. Assayas is a French director, screenwriter and long-time editor for *Cahiers du Cinéma* Film magazine. His latest film is consequently in the best traditions of French cinematography.

Another cinematic highlight that attracted our attention at this year's Berlinale is undoubtedly Hong Sang-soo's *A Traveller's Needs*, with Isabelle Huppert starring in the main role. In this captivating film, the main protagonist, an ageing woman, finding herself in a foreign land embracing her role as a wandering teacher of French with unorthodox methods. Set against mesmer-

izing natural backdrops and stylishly arranged interiors, the filmmaker invites us to join the journey.

The French lady, who never taught languages before and makes no secret about it with her potential students, eschews textbooks, instead challenging them with uncomfortable questions that peel away layers of superficiality; inviting them to confront their true selves and deepest emotions. As she weaves poetry mixed with curiosity and a touch of irony into her teachings, the protagonist guides her students on a transformative yet emotionally disconcerting journey of self-discovery, leaving an indelible mark on their lives amidst the breathtaking beauty of their surroundings. This evocative film, embracing life as an experience of wandering in a foreign land, embodies the universal sense of being a stranger, seeking a home.

Isabelle Huppert embodies an enigmatic yet candid woman who defies easy categorization, portraying a character that is both mysterious and disarmingly forthright. With a fearless demeanor, she challenges those around her with unconventional questions, peeling back layers of pretense to scrutinize her counterparts' innermost thoughts and motivations. Through her compelling portrayal, she navigates the complexities of human nature.

La Cocina (Kitchen) by Alonso Ruiz-

palacios is a poignant portrayal of life behind the glitz and glamor of New York's Times Square. The film delves into the hidden world of illegal immigrants toiling away in an expensive restaurant. Forced to cook all day without respite, they endure what one might call modern slavery, their lives devoid of privacy or recognition. Yet, amidst the relentless struggle, they cling to their dignity and humanity, finding comfort in the bonds of camaraderie and the strength of the human spirit. Through their shared experiences, the film exposes the harsh realities of immigrant life in the heart of the city that never sleeps, offering a sobering reflection on the price of survival in the pursuit of the American dream.

Georgian film was presented at this year's Berlinale by two conflicting sides: The Georgian National Film Center and the Georgian Film Institute (the latter claiming that Georgian National Film Center is excessively corrupt and supports only films that are in line with the current governmental political programs and agendas). The newly founded Georgian Film Institute is headed by outstanding female film director Salomé Alexi, winner of numerous international film awards and the daughter of the iconic Lana Gogoberidze, whose new film, documentary *Mother and Daughter*, or the *Night Is Never Complete* was screened at the Berlinale 74 Forum. In this gripping documentary, the tough journey of her mother, Nutsa Gogoberidze, a woman filmmaker, pioneer of Georgian film, ruthlessly persecuted by the Stalinist regime, unfolds with haunting clarity. Through a cinematographic narrative woven from old footage in both color and black-and-white, viewers are transported through the tumultuous chapters of her life: from her courageous defiance of oppression to the harrowing years spent in the Gulag, and the stifling silence that followed, where she was barred from practicing her craft. Despite the regime's attempts to erase her from history, her enduring spirit and her films serve as a testament to her unwavering dedication to art and truth.

Three generations of women filmmakers, from mother to daughter and grand-daughter, all three represented at the current Berlinale - rarely can any other country claim such a profound cinematographic contribution to the festival's program.

The Georgian Film Institute is also set to present the Berlinale audience with Levan Akin's new work *Crossing*.



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