



**FOCUS**  
ON THE  
QUARANTINE  
How long should we sacrifice the economy to save lives? PAGE 6-9

Image source: US Embassy Georgia

## Georgian Gov't, Patriarchate Agree Not to Close Churches on Easter Night

BY ANA DUMBADZE

**W**ith the joint decision of the Georgian government and the patriarchate, churches will not be closed on Easter night throughout the country.

Advisor to the Prime Minister Irakli Chikovani and the head of the press service of the Patriarchate, Archpriest Andria Jagmaidze made corresponding statements on Wednesday evening.

However, they emphasized that services will be conducted in accordance with the recommendations.

As the Prime Minister's spokesman said at a briefing at the government administration, only clergymen will be allowed inside small churches, while a 2-meter social distance will be maintained in large temples.

"All safety standards set by the Ministry of Health will be observed in the churches," Chikovani said.

"We have decided that the parishioners should come to the church before the start of the curfew



(9 PM) and leave the church at 6 AM in the morning after the Easter service," Archpriest Jagmaidze stated.

"This is a very favorable condition that allows the parishioners to fully participate in the Easter service," he added.

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As of 10-Apr-2020

STOCKS				BONDS				
Symbol	Price	w/w	m/m	Symbol	Price	w/w	m/m	
Bank of Georgia (BGEO LN)	9.93	+18.8%	-30.5%	GEORG04/21	96.09	(YTM 10.84%)	-0.4%	-7.5%
Georgia Capital (CGEO LN)	5.42	+30.8%	-12.6%	GEORG04/21	101.01	(YTM 5.81%)	-0.0%	-2.4%
GHG (GHG LN)	1.00	+23.1%	+2.6%	GRAIL07/22	100.09	(YTM 7.70%)	+0.0%	-8.5%
TBC Bank Group (TBCG LN)	8.09	+24.5%	-32.6%	GEBGG07/23	104.24	(YTM 4.59%)	+1.6%	-1.8%

COMMODITIES				CURRENCIES			
Symbol	Price	w/w	m/m	Symbol	Price	w/w	m/m
Crude Oil, Brent (US\$/bbl)	31.48	-2.7%	-15.4%	GEL / USD	3.1425	-2.0%	+10.3%
Gold Spot (US\$/OZ)	1 696.65	+4.7%	+2.9%	GEL / EUR	3.4399	+0.3%	+7.1%
				GEL / GBP	3.9120	+0.4%	+6.3%
				GEL / CHF	3.2497	+0.0%	+7.0%
				GEL / RUB	0.0426	+2.7%	+6.5%
				GEL / TRY	0.4690	-0.5%	+1.3%
				GEL / AZN	1.8499	-1.0%	+10.1%
				GEL / AMD	0.0064	+1.6%	+8.5%
				GEL / UAH	0.1159	+0.3%	+3.3%
				EUR / USD	0.9144	-1.3%	+3.2%
				GBP / USD	0.8031	-1.5%	+3.7%
				CHF / USD	0.9662	-1.1%	+2.8%
				RUB / USD	73.7746	-3.7%	+3.2%
				TRY / USD	6.7044	-0.4%	+8.9%
				AZN / USD	1.7000	-	+0.2%

# PM's Advisor: The Country Has a Significant Expansion of Domestic Clusters

BY ANA DUMBADZE

**W**e have a significant expansion of domestic clusters in the country and, in fact, we are preparing to enter the peak phase of the epidemic, - said Advisor to the Prime Minister of Georgia, Irakli Chikovani.

He noted that new cases are being investigated and newly infected people are being identified.

"The highest increase in the number of cases of infection to date has been registered, and we already have 306 [Editor's note: now 336] confirmed cases of COVID-19 infection in the country. New cases are being investigated and the contacts of the newly infected people are being identified. We have a significant expansion of domestic clusters in the country, and in fact, we are preparing to enter the peak phase of the epi-



dem," Chikovani said.

He again reminded the public that given the increasing number of coronavirus cases in the country, the Georgian government has decided to prohibit all types

of movement, entry and exit to four major Georgian cities - Tbilisi, Rustavi, Batumi and Kutaisi, from April 15.

Restrictions will enter into force from 9 pm on April 15 and will last for 10 days.

"Citizens who are registered in these municipalities will be able to enter but they will not be able to leave those municipalities for 10 days. Only the individuals and citizens who are registered in other municipalities will have the ability and the right to leave these municipalities.

Restrictions will not apply to the following cases:

1. Movement of employees of medical facilities, given their official business;
2. International and local freight transportation;
3. Representatives of the diplomatic corps accredited in Georgia, given their official business;
4. Transfer of defendants and convicts;
5. Collection and secure transportation of cash, precious metals, and other valuables;
6. Movement with the aim of providing electricity, natural gas, or water supplies;
7. Movement with the aim of providing services related to telecommunications, postage, or waste management;

8. Movement for the purpose of service railway traffic, which is connected with technical transportation only;

9. Movement of media representatives with the purpose of carrying out journalistic activities;

10. Movement with the purpose of providing ritual services - transporting or burying the deceased;

11. Movement of international organizations for humanitarian purposes;

12. Movement for the purpose of providing private security;

13. Movement of the employees of those public institutions, the activities of which are of critical importance during the state of emergency;

14. Also, those entities that are carrying out economic activities permitted by the ordinance of the government, which are on the list that was agreed with the Operational Headquarters, whose movement is of critical importance while performing official duties under the state of emergency," the prime minister's spokesman stated.

## Health Official: Stay at Home, or We Won't Be Able to Count the Coffins!

BY ANA DUMBADZE

**T**oday, the whole of Georgia is a risk group; we may find ourselves in the same situation as Italy, - said Paata Imnadze, Deputy Head of the National Center for Disease Control.

The health official expressed concerns that if the population does not stay at home and keep social distance, the country will soon be facing a disaster.

"People should understand that if we do not stay at home, we will not survive and we will have a high number of victims. We all need to understand this," Imnadze told the Georgian Public Broadcaster.

In relation to the upcoming Easter holiday, Imnadze once again warned parishioners not to attend services in churches.

"I understand that this is our tradition, however, let's refuse to do it once in order to survive, in order to save the Church. Don't think going to church will save our Church!" he said, adding that

internal transmission of the infection has already started in the country, which means that now everyone has to be even more careful.

"We will not be able to count the coffins in Georgia! Do we want this? Stay at home!" he said.

With the joint decision of the Georgian government and the patriarchate, churches will not be closed on Easter night throughout the country. However, both sides emphasized that services will be conducted in accordance with the safety standards.

"We have decided that the parishion-



ers should come to the church before the start of the curfew (9 PM) and leave the church at 6 AM in the morning after the Easter service," noted Archbishop Andria Jagmaidze, the head of the press service of the Patriarchate.

In his words, "This is a very favorable condition that allows the parishioners to fully participate in the Easter service."

"I respect Paata Imnadze, but he should better count how many infected patients we really have," said Archbishop Jacob, one of the most influential figures in the Georgian Patriarchate in the recent past, in response to Imnadze's warnings. "Do you want to focus on the Church alone?! We don't even have real data on the number of infected patients in the country! Ask the doctors about it," he said.

## Fox News: COVID-19 Originated in Wuhan Lab as Part of Competition with the US

BY ANA DUMBADZE

**E**xclusive: There is increasing confidence that COVID-19 likely originated in a Wuhan laboratory not as a bio-weapon, but as part of China's effort to demonstrate that its efforts to identify and combat viruses are equal to or greater than the capabilities of the United States, multiple sources who have been briefed on the details of early actions by China's government and seen relevant materials tell Fox News, reads the article recently published by the leading American edition Fox News, written by Bret Baier and Gregg Re.

"The sources believe the initial transmission of the virus was bat-to-human, and that 'patient zero' worked at the laboratory, then went into the population in Wuhan," the authors of the publication emphasized.

The article further tells that this "increasing confidence" comes from classified and open-source documents and evidence. Fox News has requested to see the evidence directly.

Asked by Fox News' John Roberts about



the reporting, President Trump remarked at Wednesday's coronavirus press briefing, "More and more we're hearing the story...we are doing a very thorough examination of this horrible situation."

"Documents detail early efforts by doctors at the lab and early efforts at containment. The Wuhan wet market initially identified as a possible point of origin never sold bats, and the sources tell Fox

News that blaming the wet market was an effort by China to deflect blame from the laboratory, along with the country's propaganda efforts targeting the US and Italy," the authors note.

"Even today, I see them withholding information and I think we need to do more to continue to press them to share," Secretary of Defense Mark Esper told "America's Newsroom" on Wednesday,

referring to China. Esper added that he wouldn't speak to "intelligence reporting," but that "most people believe it began naturally -- it was organic if you will. I think in due course, once we get through the pandemic we're in right now, there'll be time to look back and really ascertain what happened and make sure we have a better understanding so we can prevent this in the future."

Speaking to "The Story" Wednesday evening, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo remarked: "What we do know is that this virus originated in Wuhan, China. We know there is the Wuhan Institute of Virology just a handful of miles away from where the wet market was. There is still lots to learn. You should know that the United States government is working diligently to figure it out."

China "100%" suppressed data and changed data, the sources tell Fox News. Samples were destroyed, contaminated areas scrubbed, some early reports erased, and academic articles stifled.

The sources tell Fox News the World Health Organization (WHO) was complicit from the beginning in helping China cover its tracks.

Additionally, the US has said it will suspend funding to the World Health Organization while it reviews the agency's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, President Donald Trump announced on Tuesday, saying the international health agency made mistakes that "caused so much death" as the coronavirus spread across the globe. He said the administration will conduct a "thorough" investigation that should last 60 to 90 days.

# Labor Law & COVID-19 in Georgia: What You Need to Know

**T**oday the world is facing a new challenge – to prevent the spread of the novel virus COVID-19 (the virus). The outbreak of the virus first occurred in Wuhan, China in 2019 and has spread worldwide since. On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization declared the virus to be a pandemic.

The first confirmed case of the spread of the virus in Georgia was identified on 26 February 2020 and since then the number of patients has increased. This led to adoption of several corresponding governmental regulations to prevent the spread of the virus. On 21 March 2020, the President of Georgia adopted Decree No. 1, which was later approved by the Parliament of Georgia and which declared a state of emergency on the whole territory of Georgia until 21 April 2020 (the State Emergency Decree).

The State Emergency Decree restricts the following rights guaranteed by the Constitution of Georgia: (i) human liberty; (ii) freedom of movement; (iii) right to personal and family privacy; (iv) right to fair administrative proceedings; (v) right to property; (vi) freedom of assembly; and (vii) freedom of enterprise. The State Emergency Decree stipulates that specific limitations to the above listed rights will be provided by the decree of the Government of Georgia (the Government). On 23 March 2020, the Government issued Ordinance N181 regarding Approval of Measures to be Taken for the Prevention of Spreading of the New COVID-19 (the Ordinance on COVID-19). Since its adoption, the Ordinance on COVID-19 has been amended multiple times to address the rapid changes and challenges of the existing situation.

The Government has recently strengthened the security measures and established the Operations Office to be able to better respond to the spread of the virus. The Operations Office will be authorized to establish exceptions to certain restrictions established by the Ordinance on COVID-19. The head of the Operations Office will be appointed and its regulations will be adopted by the Prime Minister of Georgia.

While the Government takes steps to prevent the spread of the virus, restrictive measures have put a strain on businesses, preventing them from being able to satisfy their obligations under contracts. This article aims to provide answers to frequently asked questions and provides general guidance on labour law issues around COVID-19 pandemic.

As the Government response to the outbreak evolves daily, we encourage employers to monitor guidance from the Government, the Ministry of Labour, Health and Social Affairs of Georgia (the Ministry of Health) and the Nation Centre for Disease Control and Public Health over the coming days and weeks.

## HEALTH AND SAFETY MEASURES IN THE WORKPLACE

The Ordinance on COVID-19 prohibits gathering of more than 3 people subject to certain exceptions, such as hospitals, prisons, offices of defence forces, public transport and conduct of infrastructural and construction works. These restrictions manifest the need for social distancing to help stop or slow down the spread of the virus. According to medical sources, deliberately increasing the physical space between people lessens the chances of catching COVID-19. There are various isolation and quarantine rules for those suspected of having been infected, while the businesses worldwide are encouraged to allow their employees to work from home instead of office.

Generally, Georgian law obliges every employer to ensure that health and

safety of its employees as well as third parties that visit the workplace is protected from any damage or harm. Moreover, the employers are required to take measures that avoid or prevent any risks of harm or damage and identify and eliminate the source of such risks.

Moreover, based on recent regulations, all permitted economic activities shall be conducted in compliance with the recommendations adopted by the Ministry of Health. These recommendations are available on their website. Accordingly, businesses that do not fall under restrictions established by the Ordinance on COVID-19 and are unable to have the employees work from home, can continue operation if they adhere to the recommendations of the Ministry of Health.

In light of increased health and safety risks and the need to prevent the spread of the virus, the businesses that continue operations are required to adopt special protective measures in the workplace. These measures have to be set out in the emergency plan. The emergency plan has to consider all possible sources and degrees of risk to which the employees are exposed in their working environment. In addition to the emergency plan, the businesses are further required to adopt isolation procedures and instructions for employees in case one of the employees shows COVID-19 related symptoms.

## STATUS OF EMPLOYMENT AGREEMENTS

Given the most recent health and safety guidance from authorities, employers should instruct employees to work from home where possible. Where it is not possible to work from home, some employers may conclude or be mandatorily required to temporarily shut down entire facilities, in which case the primary concern will be the question of payment of salaries during the shutdown. In the event that COVID-19 requires a long term or potentially permanent closure of facilities or layoffs of workers, employers should ensure that relevant redundancy laws are consulted. Employers shall also be aware of their options in case the employee tests positive for the virus, needs to be quarantined or self-isolated, or needs to care for an ill family member. These points will be addressed below.

## CAN THE EMPLOYMENT AGREEMENT BE SUSPENDED DUE TO THE VIRUS?

In general, the Georgian law does not recognize the employer's right to unilaterally suspend employment relationships with employees, including to request their employees to take an unpaid leave. Although the State Emergency Decree has been issued, the Government has not adopted any acts that would provide legislative basis for employers to suspend some or all employment agreements. Moreover, the State Emergency Decree does not create any additional grounds for termination of employment agreements, other than those which are set out in the Labour Code of Georgia (the Labour Code).

The Labor Code of Georgia provides a list of the grounds when the suspension of the employment agreement is permitted. The relevant ground for the suspension of work due to the current situation might be temporary disability of the employees if the employee (i) tests positive for the virus; (ii) is in mandatory or recommended self-isolation or quarantine; or (iii) has to care for a dependant.

The above grounds for employee's absence have to be evidenced by a sick leave certificate or a certificate which has the equal power and are issued by

the Ministry of Health at the request of the employee.

## PAY CONSIDERATIONS

The employer is obliged to compensate the employee who submits the relevant sick leave certificate during his/her absence in accordance with the terms of the Order of the Ministry of Health on Temporary Disability Expertise and Issuance of Sick Leave Certificates.

Absent any contrary contractual provisions, employees who work from home will also be entitled to their normal pay. The same may apply to employees who are suspended by their employer on health and safety grounds. However, employees who refuse to attend work due to fears about the virus, and cannot work from home, are unlikely to be able to receive the sick leave certificate and may lose their right to be paid. Moreover, these employees may be found to be in breach of their employment obligations.

## UNILATERAL ACTIONS BY EMPLOYERS

Working from home may not be a suitable option for all work types. Some employers may have to temporarily shut down their operations due to health and safety concerns or due to Government requirements. In these cases the status of employment agreements becomes a key concern.

As noted, the Georgian law does not recognize the employer's right to unilaterally suspend employment relationships with employees, including to request their employees to take a paid or unpaid leave (this is a right of the employee). Furthermore, an employer in Georgia is not entitled to impose reduced hours and pay or request them to work in staggering and split shifts without the agreement of those employees who are affected. Any of these terms have to be agreed with employees and relevant amendments have to be made to a contract of employment or they may be set out in an ad hoc agreement.

## CAN THE EMPLOYMENT AGREEMENT BE TERMINATED DUE TO THE VIRUS?

The Labor Code of Georgia provides exhaustive grounds for the termination of the employment agreement. The current circumstances could amount to "an objective occasion when the termination of the employment agreement is justified" or the employment agreement may be terminated "due to economic conditions ... mandating the reduction of the workforce". In both cases, the employer is obliged to notify employees at least three (3) calendar days prior to termination, to pay the employees at least two months' salary as compensation and compensate them for unused vacation. In pursuing any of the above options, the relevant termination grounds shall be assessed on a case by case basis and the requirements of the Georgian law on elimination of discrimination shall be strictly observed. The employers in Georgia shall further be conscious of Labour Code requirements involving massive layoffs, i.e. termination of more than 100 (one hundred) employees within a span of 15 (fifteen) calendar days.

Termination of an employment agreement is a last resort and if there is any other possible less restrictive way to balance the interests of both parties the employer shall not terminate the contract.

## MEASURES TAKEN BY VARIOUS COUNTRIES WITH REGARD TO THE VIRUS

### UKRAINE

The Ukrainian government declared a quarantine throughout the whole country effective from 12 March to 3 April

2020. The quarantine affected certain aspects of the employment law as the Ukrainian Government introduced the following regulations:

Generally, an employer does not have the right to require the employee to work from home unless the employee accepts such condition. The new regulations grant the employer such right. However, remote work shall not result in decrease of the employee's salary.

In general an employer may grant an employee 15 calendar days of unpaid leave annually. However, due to quarantine the employer is obliged to grant an unpaid leave to a parent or custodian of a child under age of 14. The unpaid leave can exceed 15 calendar days. The employer shall not force employees to take an unpaid leave.

If an employer closes the business temporarily for commercial reasons it is obliged to continue paying at least two-thirds of the salaries to each employee.

Unless otherwise agreed with an employer, an employee shall be present at work. Otherwise, the employer has a right to terminate the employment agreement.

If an employer wants to suspend the work of an employee who is suspected to have the virus it can do so either by the arrangement to work remotely or as paid sick leave if the sickness is confirmed.

### LATVIA

In Latvia certain regulations were implemented relating to the virus. Rules that apply to the employment are the following:

An employee can address the relevant authority to issue the sick leave certificate if he/she has symptoms of the virus, or had a contact with the COVID-19 infected person and was identified as a contact person, or he/she had to take care of a sick child or if his/her child had a contact with the COVID-19 infected person.

An employer can support but cannot force the employees to use unpaid leave.

An employer is not allowed to reduce the salaries unilaterally.

If an employer has to close the business and is no longer able to provide work for employees it is considered that the employees fulfilled their obligations and the employer has to disburse the remuneration fully.

If the situation in the company cannot be improved and an employer is no longer able to provide work for employees the employment contract can be terminated due to the economic reasons.

The employment contract cannot be terminated during the period of (i) leave; (ii) temporary incapacity and (iii) while work cannot be performed due to other justifiable reasons.

The Latvian Government issued recommendation for employers to let the employees work remotely. Remote work shall be reimbursed on a regular basis.

### BULGARIA

On 13 March 2020, the state of emergency was declared in Bulgaria. On 24 March 2020, new law relating to the COVID-19 was implemented by the Parliament of Bulgaria that grants additional rights to employers. Particularly, these rights are:

Employers have a right to order distant work unilaterally while previously such decision had to be agreed with the employees.

Employers are entitled to require the employees to take ½ of the paid leave that is 10 days.

Employers are not allowed to reduce salaries unilaterally. However, employers are entitled to reduce the working hours and decrease the amount of salaries proportionally.

### LITHUANIA

The Parliament of the Republic of Lithuania adopted some measures to aid the employers. Namely, such measures that were imposed are the following:

Employers have a right to declare a downtime. If a downtime is announced due to the emergency or quarantine in the country an employee may not be required to be present at the workplace; salaries paid to the employees cannot be lower than the minimum monthly salary in Lithuania; working days or hours per day can be reduced.

Employers can require employees to work from home. If employee does not obey employer's request he/she can be removed from the office without payment of salary.

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In light of the present circumstances amid COVID-19 it is strongly advisable that the arising employment issues be resolved amicably. The respective employment mechanisms under the legal framework discussed above shall be implemented with great diligence. It is highly recommended to apply the least restrictive measures with regards to the employees and that these measures be consulted with the employees prior to their application. Please note, that the termination of employment should be the last resort to be exercised if the parties fail to reach an amicable solution.

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Note: this article does not constitute legal advice. You are responsible for consulting with your own professional legal advisors concerning specific circumstances for your business.



MG Law Office, through the contribution of partners Archil Giorgadze and Nicola Mariani, joined by senior associates Ana Kochiashvili, Tamar Jikia, associate Mariam Kalandadze, Junior Associate Ana Jikia and Paralegal Lasha Machavariani is partnering with Georgia Today on a regular section of the paper which will provide updated information regarding significant legal changes and developments in Georgia. In particular, we will highlight significant issues which may impact businesses operating in Georgia.

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# SSSG Names Russia's Expansionary Policy as Main Threat to Georgia in 2019

BY ANA DUMBADZE

The occupation of the territories of Georgia and the illegal military contingent of the Russian Federation deployed in the occupied regions still represent existential threats to the state of Georgia, reads the 2019 report of the State Security Service.

The report emphasizes that the Russian Federation methodically continues to use the political circles in the occupied regions for its own purposes.

"The Russian Federation has been traditionally actively using the 'political and economic' instability in occupied Abkhazia, which, in many cases, is inspired by it, and pushes the de facto regime to make decisions that serve the interests of Moscow. As for the occupied Tskhinvali region, the current de



facto regime openly supports the unification of the occupied territory with the Russian Federation," reads the report.

It further notes that the financial dependence of the regions on the budget

of the Russian Federation is still high, in particular, the share of Russian aid in the so-called state budget of Abkhazia is 47% and in the case of the Tskhinvali region, 85.2%.

The same report notes that the current situation in the occupied territories represents a favorable environment for illegal financial transactions.

The report assesses the activities of

Russian special services and military contingent illegally deployed in the occupied regions as a threat not only to Georgia but also to the region and Europe.

The State Security Service says that the units of the 7th and 4th military bases of the Southern Military District of Russia, illegally deployed in the occupied territories, conducted more than 100 different types of military exercises in 2019.

The report also notes that the occupation forces and the de facto regimes have deliberately created various artificial barriers to freedom of movement of the local population.

"Illegal borderization has been underway at different sections of the occupation line. The dynamics of borderization clearly showed that this process is well coordinated by the occupation forces with the de facto authorities," the report said.

# NY Times on Mother Language Day: Soviet Georgians Win on Language

BY ANA DUMBADZE

On April 18, 1978, The New York Times devoted an article to the Georgian population's fight to preserve Georgian as the official state language.

The article, written by Craig R. Whitney, titled 'Soviet Georgians Win on Language,' reads:

"In an extraordinary concession to local patriotic feeling, authorities in the Soviet Union's Georgian Republic have reinstated Georgian as the official state language after a protest in the capital city of Tbilisi."

"A clause specifying Georgian as the official language had been omitted in a draft constitution published March 24. When the republic's Supreme Soviet legislature met Friday to consider the

draft, hundreds marched on government headquarters in protest. The next day, the clause was inserted into the text. As published yesterday in the Tbilisi newspaper Zarya Vostoka, the text says, "The state language of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic is Georgian"-almost exactly as in the ID37 document the new charter supersedes," reads the publication from the archive.

"Such a concession to a demonstration of popular displeasure is unusual in this country. But the ethnic feeling among Georgians, who outnumber ethnic Russians in Georgia by nearly eight to one, is considered stronger than among most of the other major ethnic groups that form the basis for the Soviet Union's 15 constituent republics," the author notes.

The article further tells that two New York lawyers who were in Tbilisi on Friday said that they were detained on a visit to a factory on the edge of

town when the demonstrators converged on government headquarters downtown. The lawyers, Robert B. McKay and S. Eric Ragman said they had been told later that the demonstrators, carrying slogans demanding the "native tongue," were mainly Tbilisi University students.

"A Soviet journalist confirmed that protest had taken place and said the Georgian party chief, Eduard A. Shevardnadze, had come out to speak to the demonstrators.

"We were told that he had told them, 'My children, what are you doing?! and some of them had cursed him,' Mr. McKay said. Later, the American said, he was told that Mr. Shevardnadze had emerged again and said the position of the Georgian language would be preserved," The New York Times reported on April 18, 1978.

On April 14, Georgia celebrates Mother Language (Deda Ena) Day, which marks

the country's preservation of Georgian as the official state language.

On 14 April 1978, thousands of Georgians took to the streets, protesting the attempt by the Soviet government to alter the constitutional status of languages in Georgia, primarily aimed at depriving the Georgian language of its state language status.

More than 100,000 citizens protested at a central Tbilisi park, now known as the Dedaena Park. The participants demanded the legitimacy of the Georgian language as the sole mother tongue. The government was compelled to compromise - a highly unusual concession to an open expression of opposition to the Soviet state policy.

A special monument was later erected to honor the day's events.

The Georgian language, described as a "living culture of three writing systems," is included in the UNESCO's Intangible Heritage list.



Source: The New York Times

# Former British MEP: Georgia's Ascension into NATO is Well Underway

BY BEKA ALEXISHVILI

We should not forget other friends such as Georgia, on Europe's vital eastern flank, one of just six Black

Sea states, and a country where Britain has interests at stake, - British politician and a former Member of the European Parliament, Geoffrey Van Orden, said in an article published by New Europe.

Van Orden highlighted that "when NATO's cohesion is under threat, and most European allies spend far too little on defense, Georgia is regarded as one of NATO's closest operational partners. It contributes troops to the NATO missions in Afghanistan at a higher level proportionately than any other country".

The former military officer also com-

mented on the pro-western vector of the Georgian government and added that "the pro-Western government in Tbilisi is determined to fulfill the decision made by NATO at its 2008 Bucharest Summit that Georgia will become a member of the Alliance. This is a goal shared both by the ruling Georgian Dream party and by the population at large, where support for NATO membership runs at around 80%".

Orden stressed that "Britain is no stranger to the Caucasus and fully supports Georgia's economic and security aspirations, including Georgia's integration into European and Euro-Atlantic structures." He added that "a small country, 20% of which has been illegally occupied by Russia since 2008, joining the largest Western military alliance - the process is in fact well underway."

Currently heading two consulting companies, the former representative under-



lined Georgian and British relationships post-Brexit and what would that entail. "Georgia was among the first of our

friends to back post-Brexit Britain and seek a close future partnership. In return, we must now show our good faith and

strengthen our relationship both with Georgia and with its friendly neighbors," Van Orden stated.

# Georgia to Receive \$3bln in International Aid

**F**inancial resources amounting to about \$3 billion in international aid will become available to Georgia by the end of the year as a result of successful cooperation with international donor organizations, the Prime Minister of Georgia stated during the session of the Anti-Crisis Economic Group under the Interagency Coordination Council today.

The Anti-Crisis Economic Group was created under the Interagency Council led by Giorgi Gakharia with the purpose of providing even more effective and coordinated management. Within its framework, representatives of sector committees of Parliament and the National Bank will work together with the economic team of the government.

Parliament Chairman Archil Talakvadze, Sector Economy and Economic Policy Committee Chairman Roman Kakulia, Budget and Finance Committee Chairman Irakli Kovzanadze, European Integration Committee Chairman Davit Songhulashvili, Environmental Protection and Natural Resources Committee Chairperson Nino Tsilosani, Agrarian Issues Committee Chairman Otar Danelia, National Bank President Koba Gvenetadze, Tbilisi Mayor Kakha Kaladze, Business Ombudsman Mikheil Daushvili, Prime Ministerial Advisors Sozar Subari and Beka Liluashvili, Investors' Council Secretary Giorgi Cherkezishvili, and the Administration of the President are actively involved in this format, together with the ministers of the government's economic team.

The head of government stressed the critical importance of the economic situation in parallel with dealing with the pandemic, noting that minimizing



Source: Press Service of the Government Administration

damage to the economy is the main objective of the government.

"However, we must all understand that at the moment we are in a period of crisis management and we are talking about management during a crisis. Therefore, this Anti-Crisis Economic Group, which is designed to be an extension of the Interagency Council, is of the utmost

importance for the purpose of making concrete decisions, rather than engaging in some theoretical discussions. The task is simple: To do everything to gradually restore economic life to its usual pace as quickly as possible. We will not be able to return to the starting positions that we had at the beginning of 2020 in one or two months but we must recover

within 1.5-2 years. We must unequivocally thank the Ministry of Finance and the National Bank for working together and in a coordinated manner with the donors, primarily the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The fund's expanded cooperation package, which amounts to \$450 million - \$200 million of which will appear in the country's budget in the

form of budgetary aid in the coming days, by the end of April - is of extreme importance. As a result of working with the donors, the country's budget and its economy will receive \$1.5 billion of state funding in aid. The donors have also expressed readiness to make the same amount of financial resources available to our commercial banking sector. To sum up, resources amounting to about \$3 billion in international aid will be available to us by the end of the year. No country has achieved such results. We will be the first ones to agree on an updated extended program with the International Monetary Fund, which is very important. This is the essential first step that needed to be taken during the crisis," Giorgi Gakharia stated.

According to the Prime Minister, at the same time it is essential to discuss the provision of targeted assistance to citizens, businesses, and the economy in the post-crisis period. The head of government believes that the effectiveness of the fight against the epidemic is directly related to lifting the restrictions and moving on to the stage of economic recovery.

Giorgi Gakharia thanked the European Union, the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the European Investment Bank, the German Development Bank, and the French Development Agency once again for their support of Georgia.

The Anti-Crisis Economic Group will meet regularly via videoconferencing. The public will be continuously updated with information on the decisions made during the sessions.

## Great World Pandemics: The Black Death & Georgia

BY EMIL AVDALIANI

**A**s the world continues to experience deep effects (death rate; economic downturn, slowdown of globalization) of the novel coronavirus, we are looking at various global pandemics which affected Georgia.

The Black Death is mostly associated with the appearance of the Mongols on the world stage in the early 13th century. Surprisingly, the disease in Europe most likely spread from the Crimea peninsula when Mongol leader Khan Janibeg besieged Caffa (nowadays Feodosya) in 1346. Since the town served as a crucial commercial city with contacts with Italian cities of that age, a quick spread of the infection was guaranteed. As one contemporary, Gabriel de' Mussi, relates, the infection spread among the Mongol troops, and Janibeg deliberately catapulted infected bodies over the city walls of Caffa. This effec-

tively marked the first real use of biological warfare.

The name "Black Death" originated from the specifics of the disease itself, as the infection usually turned the skin a black color, with such symptoms as fever and joint pains.

The psychological impact from the spread of the infection in Europe was immense. For instance, Giovanni Boccaccio in his famous book 'Decameron' (1348) described the symptoms of the plague the following manner:

"...in men and women alike it first betrayed itself by the emergence of certain tumors in the groin or armpits, some of which grew as large as a common apple, others as an egg, some more, some less, which the common folk called gavocciolo. From the two said parts of the body, this deadly gavocciolo soon began to propagate and spread itself in all directions indifferently; after which the form of the malady began to change, black spots or livid making their appearance in many cases on the arm or the thigh or elsewhere..."

The Italian chronicler, Agnolo di Tura



Black Death At Tournai, 1349, Le Muisit, Gilles (1272-1352) /Bibliothèque Royale De Belgique, Brussels/Bridgeman Images

del Grasso, who also happened to be a contemporary to the events and experienced the event firsthand as he lost his wife during the pandemic, mentioned that an infected person initially experienced symptoms similar to flu. Later on there was a "swell beneath their armpits and in their groins." There were two ways to contract the infection: one was through an insect bite and another airborne. In both cases, the infected usually lived no more than 3-4 days.

Also interesting, particularly in light of current events unfolding across the world, is another passage recounted by Boccaccio where the author describes what we nowadays call 'social distancing':

"Tedious were it to recount how citizen avoided citizen, how among neighbors was scarce found any that showed fellow-feeling for another, how kinsfolk held

aloof, and never met, or but rarely; enough that this sore affliction entered so deep into the minds of men and women that in the horror thereof, brother was forsaken by brother, nephew by uncle, brother by sister, and oftentimes husband by wife: nay, what is more, and scarcely to be believed, fathers and mothers were found to abandon their own children, untended, unvisited, to their fate, as if they had been strangers."

As stated, Caffa had close trade relations with the Mediterranean world, which conditioned the fast spread of the disease. However, it is also believed that because of Caffa's commercial contacts with the Georgian world, namely Sebastopolis (modern Sokhumi), the Black Death also entered Georgia.

Indeed, it is recorded that the spread of infection took place during the reign of David IX (1346-1360), confirmed by a

note dated 1348 in which 'great death' (most likely 'Black Death') is mentioned.

According to Georgian historian Prince Vakhushti Batonishvili, the pandemic endured long after the reign of David IX. It is also reported that the epidemic was so widespread during Bagrat V (1360-1393) that even the queen died, along with many others. The infection was recurrent, accelerating and abating its spread over the following centuries.

According to existent sources, the impact of the Black Death on the European mainland was more profound than in the South Caucasus. A geographically closed off Georgia in the 14th century seems to have fared relatively well in comparison with the commercially interconnected Europe, where obliteration of nearly 1/3 of the population (some think about as much as 1/2 of the entire populace) took place.

# THE ISET ECONOMIST

A BLOG ABOUT ECONOMICS AND THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

[www.iset-pi.ge/blog](http://www.iset-pi.ge/blog)

The ISET Policy Institute (ISET-PI, [www.iset-pi.ge](http://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.

## Should the World Sacrifice the Economy to Save Lives Today?

BY TAMTA MARIDASHVILI, ISET

Two countries that both have a McDonald's have ever been at war wrote American political commentator and author Thomas L. Friedman in 1996. Since then, of course, there have been plenty of instances of countries with McDonald's warring, including Russia and Georgia. Though, one should not take Friedman's phrase too literally. Rather, he implies that the spread of McDonald's is a part of a worldwide phenomenon of countries integrating with the global economy, which, in turn, makes wars less likely. Well, Kudos to globalization.

But also, thanks to globalization, the world is facing a new threat. Global viral outbreaks like coronavirus have become increasingly more common and scientists are anticipating that there are still more to come. Viruses are not a new thing, but in the past they were more constrained by geographical location. For example, China has become far more mobile than during the SARS outbreak in 2003, giving a virus a simple route to the world at large.

Worse still is that this new global enemy is much more subtle, thus depriving governments of their ability to react immediately. There's an old brain teaser that runs: A lily pad doubles in size every day. If on the 60th day the pond is filled by the lily pad, on what day will the pond be only quarter covered? The answer is the 58th day. Where on the 40th day, one would barely see the pad in the pond. The same logic applies for COVID-19 as its epidemiologic metric R0, describing the contagiousness of the infectious agent, is estimated to range from two to four, implying that one person can infect more than two people on average.

Moreover, it takes time to learn the genetics, mutations, and modes of transmission of the virus, before one can fully model its spread. Thus, while a problem is still uncertain, individual countries are hesitant to report, as notifying others comes with certain economic costs, such as reduced travel and trade. For instance, in 2003 the US did report mad-cow disease at its initial stages, and even though it managed to contain the disease in a short time, imports worth more than a billion were cut off by Japan for a full year.

Now, when the problem finally became certain, countries have started reporting, but some (e.g., the United States, Sweden, Belarus) are still hesitant to take drastic, or any, measures to combat the virus as they fear it batters economies.

"This is first and foremost a medical emergency and there has to be joint action to deal with that. But the more you intervene to deal with the medical emergency, the more you put economies at risk" - warns Gordon Brown, Ex-PM of the United Kingdom.

Economic damage is mounting across the globe. While the mortality rate of the COVID-19 is more or less certain,

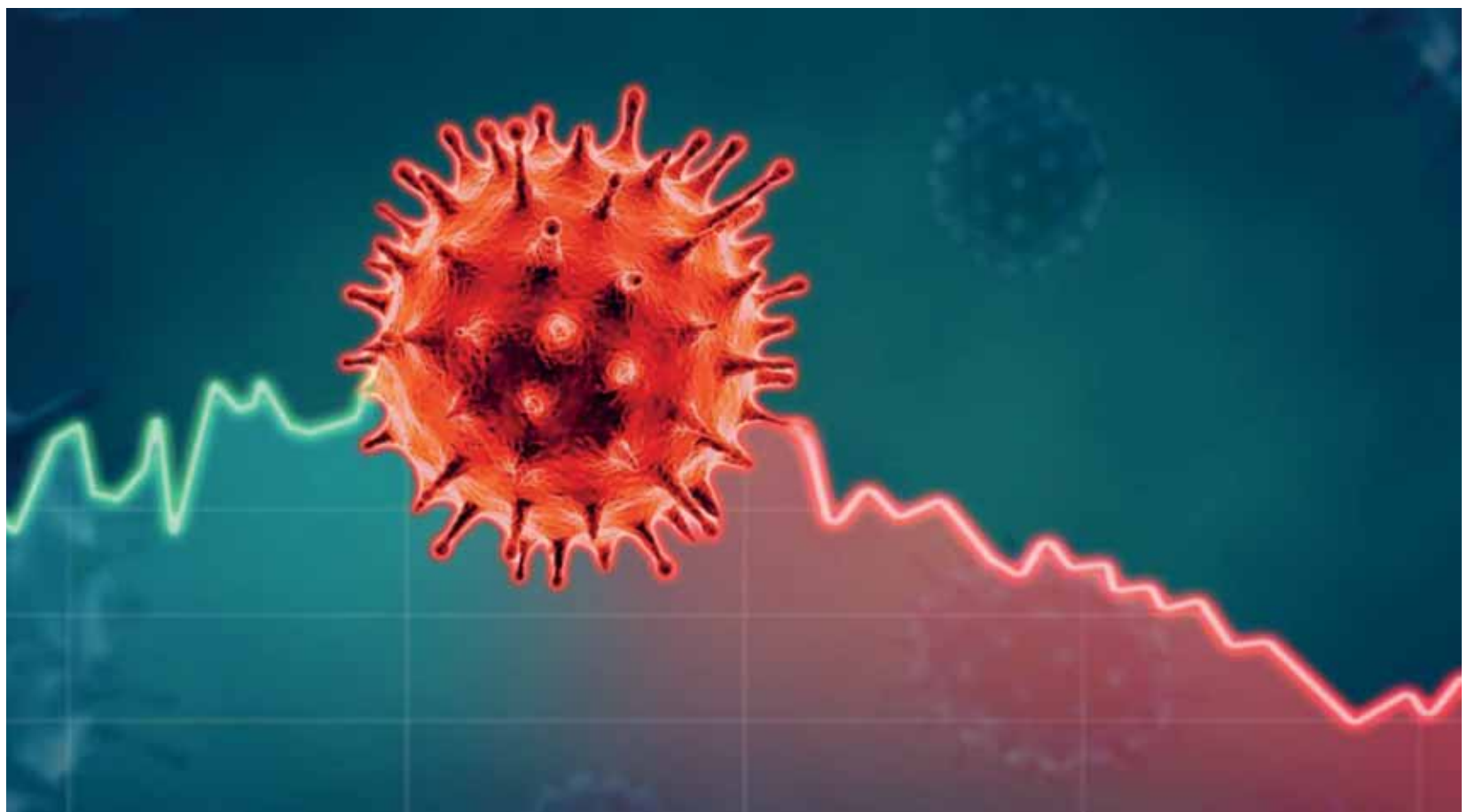


Image source: see.news

unfortunately, it is harder to estimate the forthcoming impact of such economic damage on people's lives. As a result of the Great Recession of 2008-2009, a study on 54 countries estimated an additional 5000 deaths from suicide alone in 2009. The IMF predicts that the coronavirus pandemic will cause a global recession in 2020 that could be even worse than that of 2008-2009.

Should then the world sacrifice the economy to save lives today? Or does a tradeoff exist? For British and South Korean authorities, any form of tradeoff appears to be imperceptibly. Though similar in this respect, these two countries have chosen two fundamentally different approaches.

### THE UK'S PESSIMISM

During a press conference on 12 March, British authorities, backed by supposed scientific advice, warned the public that the huge burden of illness and death was inevitable as they were skeptical about restrictions. This is how the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, addressed Britons during the press conference: "I must level with you, with the British public, that many more families are going to lose their loved ones before their time".

The reason behind the skepticism was that "fatigue" could set in - meaning people would grow tired of bans and would find ways around them. The only way out British authorities could envisage was to create 'herd immunity', allowing enough people to get the illness. Social distancing measures would only be needed for managing the number of infected over time, in order to minimize the strain on the health system and, therefore, reduce the death toll. Thus, it

was believed it would be better to reserve social distancing measures for when the UK would be closer to the peak of the epidemic. Simply put, when the number of infected reaches 10,000, doubling it adds only 10,000, whereas 100,000 doubled adds an additional 100,000, significantly increasing the burden on the health system.

Returning to the issue of fatigue, behavioral research indeed shows that pervasive media coverage on social problems may lead to desensitization, implying an emotional responsiveness to negative stimulus diminishes after repeated exposure. It was also found that the same phenomenon can occur with health events - individuals may be more likely to take precautions against becoming ill on the first reports of a health threat, but sensitivity to these reports may diminish over time, and social distancing practices may be relaxed.

The narrative UK authorities proposed on 12 March turned out to be harder to sell as it required society to accept that they would get sick, and that may cause mortalities. Such fatalism was especially difficult to sell alongside examples of other nations taking aggressive countermeasures. The pressure to shift strategy also came from outside, as French President Emmanuel Macron warned Boris Johnson that France would shut their border if Britain did not toughen its coronavirus measures. Subsequently, on 24 March, the PM finally ordered a UK lockdown.

### SOUTH KOREA'S SURVEILLANCE SYSTEM

South Korea is an example of a country which has been largely successful in

maintaining its economic life, while equally stopping the virus spreading until a global scientific and medical effort is fully underway.

In the discussion of the Korean experience, the focus has largely been on its significant virus testing capabilities. What has been less widely reported is the country's heavy use of surveillance technology, notably CCTV cameras, monitoring bank cards, and mobile phone usage, to track infected patients and their contacts, and therefore identify who to test in the first place. The effectiveness of technology lies in the following: firstly, it helps identify those patients who have mild or no symptoms (if these patients cannot be found, the testing capacity becomes less effective). Secondly, when the infection increases rapidly throughout the country, it overwhelms health officials' ability to carry out contact tracing. And this is when and where technology comes in.

As Business Insider recently reported, a number of countries, including Europe and the US, have also followed South Korea and started to use digital tracking to stop the spread of the virus. However, there are fears that such surveillance technology will continue to be used by governments when the outbreak is over and it will become the norm, which, in turn, will hurt democracies or strengthen authoritarian regimes further.

While those fears are well-grounded, surveillance technology is hardly a novelty, as the location tracking industry has been around for years; it was developed through an interplay of technological advancements and profit seeking. Authorities might have already started to misuse location data, or are intending

to do so, independent of the current emergency. In any case, the ability to deter governments from abusing their power depends on the strength of civil society and the openness and competitiveness of the economic and political environment.

### GEORGIA OPTING FOR A LOCKDOWN

Unlike in Korea, the tradeoff turned out to be real for Georgian authorities. On 30 March, a nationwide lockdown and partial curfew were announced.

While the virus might be the top concern for the middle- and higher-income classes in Georgia, hunger and loss of shelter are a greater threat to those people who live hand to mouth. To stay at home may be well-intentioned guidance, but it may also fail to take into account the most vulnerable groups of society.

We should hope then that the lockdown does not last long and the country is able to find other methods to circumvent the spread of the virus. But if the lockdown is extended, hopefully, the British authorities will not prove right about people growing tired of bans and thus seeking ways around them, happening at a time when more people are infected in the country.

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To end on a more general note, if many more pandemics are to come amid increasing globalization, the world will have to be in a state of constant readiness. For that purpose, nation-states will need to form "standing armies" as once they did to defend themselves from physical or cyber enemies.

# EPRC Recommendations on How to Exit Total Lockdown

The Economic Policy Research Center (EPRC) has prepared an analytical document with opinions and recommendations to the state on how to exit from the total lockdown regime imposed throughout Georgia amid the spread of the new coronavirus (COVID-19).

The objective of the document is to assist the government in developing measures that will enable it, with help from society, to maintain economic activity at a reasonable level necessary to primarily protect the most vulnerable groups against the virus, to create and maintain a normal psychological and public health climate, and to gradually exit the crisis and restore the normal rhythm of life.

Recommendations on economic measures have been developed with the following considerations in mind:

It is necessary to overcome the false dichotomy, whereby human life should not fall victim to economic interests. True, human life is incomparably more valuable than the economy, but the economy, in this particular case, represents an entire spectrum of human relations, which, if totally dismantled, will make it nearly impossible to protect the vulnerable;

Public pressure largely conditioned an inconsistent response to the problem in Georgia's large partner countries. Although this problem is not as acute in Georgia, we must understand that if the coronavirus outbreak still occurs, even briefly, the government could be left without the possibility to maneuver. Therefore, the recommendations also aim at alleviating the pressure on the government as much as possible so that it is able to act reasonably and decisively;

Time must be used for a more accurate assessment of the gravity and scale of the problem, as it is necessary for the implementation of adequate and proportionate measures within the limits the country's resources allow;

In the fight against the crisis, it is important to realize that it consists of numerous components that may require different approaches. While some measures produce short-term, others produce long-term results, especially in economic life. Hence, it is necessary to abstain from offering and planning initiatives, the results of which are questionable;

We must understand that the maintenance of the lockdown for a long period will inevitably trigger negative changes in daily life, economy, social life, etc. Numerous studies have proved that it may lead to a sharp rise in many diseases (including weakening of the immune system, infections), disruption of public order, conflicts and other disturbances. Thus, the "cost" of lockdown will increase over time;

The global media is dominated by news from those countries where the situation has gone wrong. It should be noted that the experience of countries differs and, in general, the trends that are observed are rather positive. These trends need to be cautiously studied, considered and covered in as academic a style as possible. It should also be noted that several developed countries intend to change lockdown rules in the near future, which must be taken heed of;

Measures should be planned in light of demographic factors (for example, distribution of the population by region, age structure, etc.). A great deal of attention should be paid to mortality risk and morality ratio. This data is available in Georgia and it is possible to estimate the so-called "excess mortality" rate and to track current statistics of Eurostat and European countries, along with the statistics on deaths from coronavirus, as this is necessary for mobilizing resources for a healthcare system in adequate proportions.

Measures with long-term effects proposed to the government rest on several basic considerations. Based on these considerations, the risks associated with the created situation are assessed from the perspective of GDP, GDP components, impact on households, employment and the state budget. A possible value of negative change in this or that parameter is assessed, for example, a 5% drop, etc. Then the suitability and effectiveness of measures currently proposed by the government is discussed. Finally, specific measures for overcoming the crisis are suggested.

The document reads:

## STIMULUS MEASURES PROPOSED BY THE STATE

On 1 April, the Government of Georgia took the decision to allocate GEL 2 billion from the budget as direct support to the economy; it will be used to maintain companies, jobs, ongoing operations of companies and businesses. This amount will be allocated from the reserves envisaged in the crisis budget. The amount does not include the funds allocated from the budget directly to healthcare (GEL 351 million). Relevant measures are detailed below:

### 1) Loans

Banks will individually restructure the loans of those businesses that find them difficult to repay. Conditions of postponement/restructuring are unknown as banks offer conditions to clients and achieve an agreement with them individually. Restructuring (which is often subject also to commission fee) increases the total amount of the loan, because with the repayment term prolonged, the total amount of interest increases. As of February 2020, the total loans in the national currency issued to resident legal persons by commercial banks exceeded GEL 4.5 billion, while the total loans in foreign currency was up to GEL 10.5 billion. The total loans in national currency to the hotels and restaurants sector (the most vulnerable sector as of today) was GEL 226 million, while that in foreign currency exceeded GEL 1.2 billion (the data of the National Bank of Georgia).

### 2) Postponement of property tax

The state will postpone the payment of property and income taxes for four months (until 1 November) to companies engaged in tourism-related business, such as hotels and restaurants, tour agencies, transportation companies, guide service providers, organizers of cultural and sports events, etc. This measure will affect 18,000 taxpayers and more than 50,000 employees. As calculated by the government, this will enable this sector of the economy to retain more than GEL 100 million.

### 3) Subsidies on utility fees

During three months (March, April, May) the government will cover utility fees of all those citizens of Georgia who consume up to 200 kWh of electricity and/or up to 200 M3 of natural gas per month; this also includes monthly water supply and cleaning fees. According to the Prime Minister, this measure will affect 1,200,000 electricity and 650,000 natural gas consumers. Apart from the social programs, no concrete economic sectors and businesses have been named yet that will get support from the mentioned funds.

### 4) Sectoral support

The Enterprise Georgia Agency presented co-financing mechanisms designed to support the guesthouse, small-size and medium-size hotel industry. This mechanism implies co-financing of annual interest on loans of entrepreneurs over a period of six months from 1 March, 2020. Co-financing extends to a maximum 80% of loans in national currency and 70% of loans in foreign currency.

The size of a loan must not exceed GEL 1 million, \$300,000 or €250,000. Furthermore, the subject of a loan agreement must be the construction/expansion/equipment/repair/reconstruction of the hotel.

Furthermore, to supply financial resources to companies, the government will double VAT refunds, and until the end of the year, the Ministry of Finance will refund GEL 1,200 million instead of GEL 600 million to the companies.

In addition to all the above said, the state will enhance the support of capital projects in the country as an additional stimulus to the economy. Consequently, the capital expenditures envisaged in the 2020 budget will increase by an additional GEL 300 million. The budget assignment plan of 2020 envisages more than GEL 2 billion 221 million of capital expenditures, including around GEL 425 million in the first quarter (Ministry of Finance of Georgia). In parallel to the allocation of amounts, it is important to monitor the spending of already available amounts and to analyze their effectiveness.

### 5) Subsidies on prices of nine food products

The state will spend GEL 10 million from the budget to ensure nine food products, identified by the decision of the Coordination Council on COVID-19 (rice, spaghetti, buckwheat, vegetable oil, sugar, corn, wheat flour, milk powder and beans), against a price rise. This amount is a subsidy that the state will spend to prevent the prices on particular products from rising due to exchange rate fluctuation. According to the program, from 15 March through 15 May 2020, the difference in expenses that importing companies will incur in foreign currency (USD, Euro) due to exchange rate fluctuations when importing the products, will be covered from this subsidy. Specifically, importers will benefit from the subsidy if the value of USD 1 exceeds GEL 3 and that of € 1 exceeds GEL 3.3 by the National Bank of Georgia's official exchange rate on the day of conversion. Considering the fluctuation of the exchange rate, the allocated GEL 10 million might prove insufficient and a need might arise to allocate additional sums from the budget.

At the same time, sanctions have been defined if a company fails to fulfill the assumed obligation and after receiving the subsidy, increases the prices on its products. More specifically, if a company fails to fulfill the obligation, it will have to refund the amount of the subsidy and additionally pay a fine in the amount of the subsidy received, but not less than GEL 10,000.

### 6) Financial sector

Since 31 March, the financial sector has also changed its mode of work. By the decision of the Government of Georgia, the activity of lending entities, currency exchange points, credit unions, tax service providers, independent registrars of securities, asset management companies, central depository, stock exchange, founder of a non-state pension scheme, credit information bureau have been temporarily suspended from their offices. These establishments may perform their activities, if practicable, only through remote channels (except for currency exchange points), without attendance in their offices.

EPRC

აქტიური მოსახლეობის მხარდაჭერის პროგრამის განხორციელების მიზნით



period to 30 June. The grace period started on 13 March and will continue until 30 June and will not apply to repayments for more than three months.

The grace period is extended to all natural and legal persons that currently use the credit products of commercial banks. The grace period also applies to customers with overdue loans. Depending on the number of overdue days, individual discussions will be required with certain customers. The contractual rates of loans will not change. However, monthly payments will increase after the completion of the grace period as banks will redistribute the interest accrued during the grace period over the remaining loan maturity period. The term of the loan will increase for loans with schedules while the mentioned conditions will apply to all borrowers. Those borrowers who do not want to use the grace period will be able to turn down the offer by replying with a corresponding message.

### 9) Early payment of pensions aged 70 and older

Liberty Bank, in cooperation with the Government of Georgia, took the decision and on 23 March announced a GEL 100 million worth program to pay pensions due in April at an earlier date. At this stage, this program applies to people qualified as the most vulnerable group, who are 70 years old or older.

### 10) Social/tax benefits and assistance

According to the Minister of Finance, work is underway to revise the budget and enact social protection mechanisms, for example, to introduce electricity vouchers for the extremely poor and/or those who have lost a source of income. Partial income tax breaks could also be considered. Decisions on these matters have yet to be taken.

One-time social assistance measures include the free distribution of masks to single people aged over 70, from 23 March.

### 11) Special measures of the National Bank

To meet the fast-growing demand for the national currency, the National Bank will provide commercial banking institutions and microfinance organizations with liquidity equivalent to \$400 million, in total, through swap schemes. This measure, all other things being equal, is timely and reasonable since the whole set of immediate activities may pose a threat of liquidity shortage to banks in the short term. At the same time, the National Bank must necessarily start thinking about the time and the resources for moving the banking sector back to a normal mode of activity as one year defined for the initiative is too long and corresponds to such a scenario of pandemic that it casts doubt on all large-scale economic estimates.

### 12) Expansion of the spectrum of permitted activities

After issuing the ordinance #181 on 23 March, the government amended it several times to extend the list of permitted activities. These amendments are commendable but they are of a sporadic nature and one needs to think of the effectiveness of this sporadic expansion of permitted spheres of activities against the halt of the remaining economy and, especially, against the restrictions in movement and anxiety in the population.

The analytical document prepared by EPRC further discusses and assesses the expected results of the crisis.

At the same time, the operation is carried on uninterrupted, both at offices and remotely, by commercial banks, tax system operators, microfinance organizations, tax service providers and agents who provide service through pay boxes, ATM machines and POS terminals. Providers of the service necessary for the operation of pay boxes, ATM machines, and POS terminals also continue their work uninterrupted.

### 7) Measures to support the national currency

From the start of the crisis, 9 March till 27 March, the Lari exchange rate against USD devalued from 2.77 to 3.485, though as of 4 April, it has rebounded to 3.2158. Despite fast devaluation observed at the beginning of the period, the Monetary Policy Committee of the National Bank of Georgia, at its meeting on 18 March, 2020, took the decision to maintain the refinancing rate unchanged. As noted in the subsequent press release, it is difficult to determine at this stage as to which factor will influence inflation to a greater degree - the devaluation of the Lari (upward pressure on inflation) or contraction in aggregate domestic demand (downward pressure on inflation). At present, the monetary policy rate is 9.0%. Furthermore, according to the President of the National Bank, a discussion has started with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) on the receipt of financial assistance. Let us recall that in December 2019, Georgia extended the IMF-supported three-year arrangement under the Extended Fund Facility for an additional year and it will be completed in April 2021. The government continues to work with donors in this direction.

On 24 March, an auction of Ministry of Finance Treasury bonds was held which resulted in the sale of securities with the nominal value of GEL 80,000,000 and five-year maturity. Because of the panic on the market, \$100 million was spent on strengthening the Lari.

### 8) Postponement of payment on loans

According to official information, the campaign for postponement of loan payments was the private initiative of commercial banks. The initiative, which envisages three months of so-called grace period, has been offered with similar conditions by all commercial banks:

Customers will be able to postpone loan repayment throughout the grace

# Stepping Up COVID-19 Awareness in Georgia's Municipalities

**A**s the coronavirus pandemic reaches Georgia's regions, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) is assisting municipalities across the country to prepare for the threat and keep citizens informed.

Over 30,000 leaflets and posters on COVID-19 prevention, as well as outdoor stickers for marking social distancing, were delivered to the seven municipalities: Mtskheta, Zugdidi, Tetrtskaro and high-mountainous Ambrolauri, Oni, Lentekhi and Tsageri, that were put under strict quarantine on 10 April after multiple cases of infection were discovered. The materials were distributed by local public servants working with activists' groups to avert a wider outbreak.

"The pandemic is an unprecedented threat that is testing our resilience as a society and our ability to stand together in the face of a common challenge," said UNDP Head Louisa Vinton. "Cooperation between citizens, civil society and local governments is key to limiting the spread of the virus in rural areas, and ensuring that all citizens, including vulnerable and marginalized groups, receive timely and accurate information."

Supported by Switzerland, Austria and Denmark, in coordination with the Government Administration and the Ministry of Regional Development and Infrastructure, this information campaign is part of UNDP's broader COVID-19

response.

The same partners also came together to organize the printing and distribution of 35,000 leaflets on COVID-19 in Armenian and Azerbaijani languages to ensure that the citizens of municipalities with large concentrations of ethnic minorities received adequate information. The southern municipalities of Marneuli and Bolnisi have been in lockdown since the first cases were detected there on 23 March. UNDP also supported the creation of the Armenian-language version of the government's much-praised official website on the coronavirus pandemic, StopCoV.ge.

In addition, UNDP is providing the United Water Supply Company, a crucial water utility, with \$18,000 worth of protective gear, including facemasks, coveralls, gloves, hand sanitizer and disinfectant, to ensure that front-line staff, responsible for maintaining water supplies in many of the country's urban municipalities, can do their jobs safely.

In the first days of the COVID-19 outbreak in Georgia, UNDP set in motion a rapid response mechanism to help identify and address pandemic-driven needs at central and local levels. Working closely with the government, donors and partners, UNDP is helping to spread the message about the pandemic and reaching out to the vulnerable and marginalized groups, communities in remote mountainous regions, persons with dis-



Income losses are expected to exceed \$220 billion in developing countries, impacting education, human rights and, basic food security and nutrition. Photo by Nino Zedginidze/UNDP

abilities and national and ethnic minorities.

This assistance to municipalities is made possible through rapidly designed and agreed adaptations to programs to

support regional and local development, good governance and decentralization reform that UNDP has been implementing in Georgia since 2012 in partnership with the Swiss Agency for Development

and Cooperation (SDC), the Austrian Development Cooperation (ADC), the Danish Government and the Ministry of Regional Development and Infrastructure.

## Coronavirus: Young Children in Denmark Return to School

BY NINI DAKHUNDARIDZE

**D**enmark has allowed children up to age 11 to return to nurseries and schools, making it the first European country to loosen the restrictions on education imposed due to COVID-19. Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen welcomed children as they went back to school in Copenhagen.

Denmark was among the first countries in Europe to impose a lockdown, with schools closed on 12 March.

Infection rates have lowered in Denmark: the country now has 6,681 confirmed cases of the coronavirus infection and 309 total deaths, 10 of which are new and related to the illness. Experts have expressed their worry, saying that it might still be risky to relax restrictions. Elisa Rimpler of the BUPL, the Danish



Source: BBC. Image source: Reuters

Union of Early Childhood and Youth Educators, told the BBC that the educational institutes that have reopened have

the children wash their hands many times during the day, and as they have no masks, their biggest challenge is keeping a good

distance from each other.

Denmark's move came as European Commission Chief Ursula von der Leyen

set out a roadmap on Wednesday for a gradual lifting of restrictions across the 27-state bloc, but made clear it was not a signal to act immediately.

Denmark was one of the first countries in the European Union to shut schools in an effort to stop the spread of COVID-19, imposing restrictions on educational institutions on March 12.

Georgia shut school doors on March 4, and from March 16 most schools and colleges had made a switch to remote learning. The non-traditional method of teaching was to continue until April 21, the last day of the State of Emergency in the country. Now the Government of Georgia has demanded the state of emergency be extended at least until May 10. The extension of the state of emergency automatically extends the remote learning. So, if the President and Parliament approve the initiative, Georgian students will have to keep on Zooming until then.



## GEL 5000 Raised for Man Fined for Selling Tulips on Palm Sunday

BY ELENE DZEBISASHVILI

**M**isha Karaulashvili, 73, was fined GEL 3000 for selling tulips near the church on Palm Sunday. Misha said he decided to sell the flowers as he had no money to buy medicine for a family member in need.

"I went out at half past four and took 70 tulips with me, to earn some money for medicine. I sold just 9 tulips. I begged the police not to fine me, as I have three orphans at home, one of them sick; but they did not take this into account," said the florist.

After one Georgian citizen launched a campaign on Facebook to raise money

for Misha, people started showing enthusiasm to help. GEL 5000 was collected in just two hours.

On the same day, dozens of people gathered in Georgian churches to celebrate Palm Sunday, yet none of them were fined for violating the State of Emergency.

The hardships caused by the coronavirus pandemic came at a particularly bad time for Misha. Spring is the busiest time of year for florists, and many fully depend on the revenue they generate.

Georgia was recently shaken by the similar story of a 63-year-old florist from the Kakheti region of Georgia, Kako Jeiranashvili, who lost around GEL 2000 as the lifeblood of the flower industry dried up amid the coronavirus pandemic. Georgian citizens were quick to collect GEL 5000 for Kako.



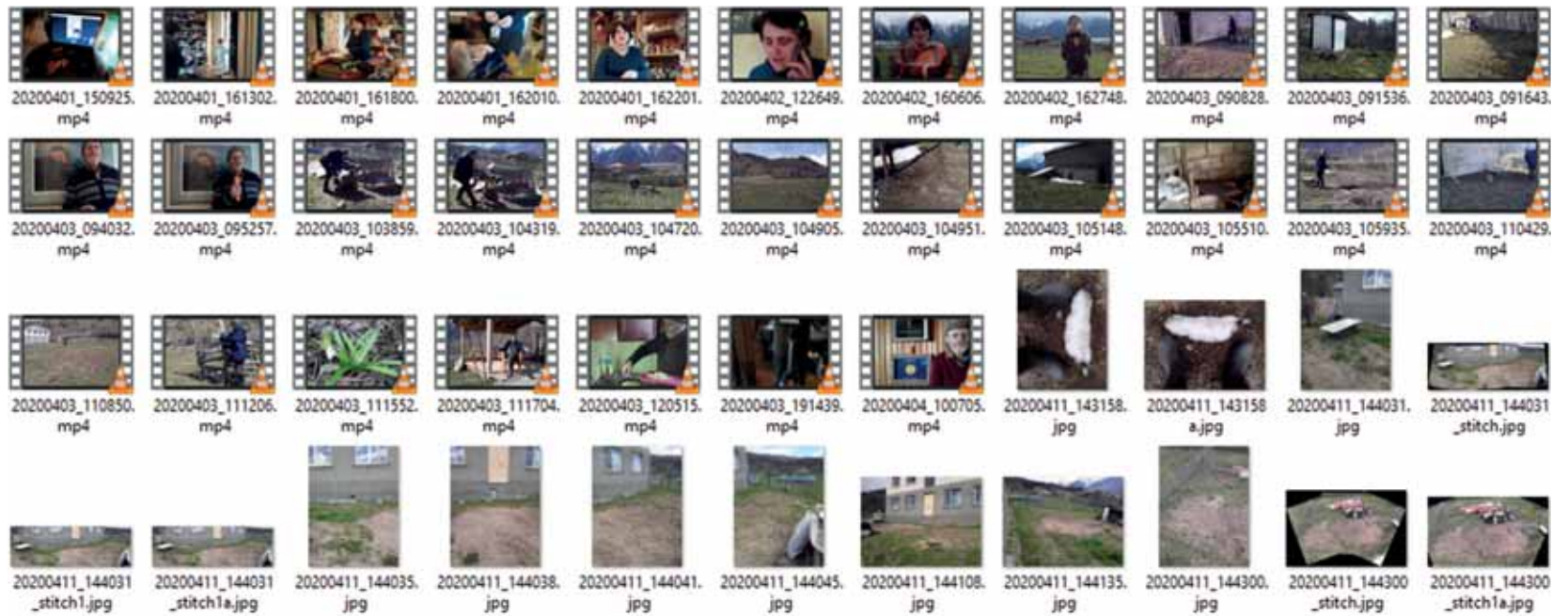
# TViral: Etseri, Svaneti

BLOG BY TONY HANMER

One of the first times I got involved with a Georgian national TV channel was entirely via internet and cell phone. Living in Ushguli, we were blocked in by avalanches across the only road out. A bulldozer had come and cleared them, but the same day it left, they returned. No one was particularly worried, this being late winter 2009 and everyone used to the idea of closed roads, stocked up with provisions for themselves and their livestock. I wasn't that concerned either, following their lead. But it made a good illustration of what life in Europe's highest village could be like, when the road from Mestia to Ushguli (not to mention from Jvari all the way to Mestia) was little more than a dirt track, and poorly maintained in winter.

I walked down to the avalanche scene, took photos, went home and edited them on my laptop, posted them to my blog of the time using my cell phone as modem, and contacted Rustavi 2 TV with the story. I told them they were free to copy the photos straight from the blog. They phoned me that evening, got a brief interview in Georgian, and it was on next morning's news. All with no one coming up all that way, just bits of images and sound crossing the airwaves.

Now, many TV appearances later... my old friend Lasha Kveseladze, who narrated the main Ushguli clip for the Post Scriptum show soon after the avalanche blurb, had noticed my wife and me recording and posting our daily readings of Pinocchio chapters in English and Georgian during our self-isolation. He messaged me: would we be interested



in being in a segment of Mtavari Arkhi's (Main Channel's) Post Factum Sunday evening TV news broadcast, about how we were coping with the Viral crisis? Sure! This time, as with the avalanche, a film crew could not come up. Could I do all the filming myself, add lots of archival stills, and send it all to him to edit into a story? Sure!

I made a very simple but quite adequate adapter to secure my cell phone to my tripod, so I could be in some of the clips instead of only behind them. (This is much better quality than selfie mode). Screen-grab-recorded a new video call with my original host family in Ushguli, dear friends ever since, to link past and present. Filmed my wife doing her best at English teaching by Facebook group video chat. Added lots of still photos from Ushguli, our village of Etseri, school

and home life. Some more archival video footage from past years, and some of the Pinocchio chapters. A video chat interview with Lali and me by Lasha, which he recorded at his end. Footage of my daily activities: barn and chickens, wood chopping, gardening, interviews with a few neighbors, more.

It amounted to about 7GB of raw material, but thanks to a cheap unlimited reasonably high-speed internet option from Magti, I was able to send it all to Lasha to compile over about two days, he adding some of the Post Scriptum 2009 Ushguli segment which had put me and Ushguli into the spotlight. As we don't actually receive the Main TV Channel in our satellite TV package, we saw the thing live via the channel's Facebook page: more miracles of technology. Lasha kindly sent me a link to a Google Drive upload of the

finished video file, which I downloaded and then uploaded myself to our own Facebook page, along with a link to download it if anyone wanted to keep a copy.

So this was my first TV appearance consisting of almost all self-shot footage, instead of that filmed by professional videographers. I'm delighted with the way Lasha was able to take all that work and edit it down to a coherent TV story lasting about 12 minutes. It shows that, up here in faraway Svaneti, we are coping with the loss of tourism which is one of our main incomes. Farming season has begun, as winter gives way to spring: manure load dumping and raking out onto fields, plowing soon before planting seed potatoes. The livestock are finally free to roam (carefully controlled as to field access) and graze on fresh grass instead of winter's dry hay. The

cutoff of tourists is protecting our health while it necessarily deprives us of income. We are keeping positive, keeping in touch, praying, and doing all the odd jobs little or large for which we now have all the time in the world. And we hope, dear reader, that you are coping too.

Link to the Main Channel TV story: <https://www.facebook.com/anthony.tony.hanmer/posts/10157981198696578>  
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/](http://www.facebook.com/groups/SvanetiRenaissance/). He and his wife also run their own guest house in Etseri: [www.facebook.com/hanmer.house.svaneti](http://www.facebook.com/hanmer.house.svaneti)

# The Trying Times of Coronavirus: Europe is Slowly Reviving

BY NINI DAKHUNDARIDZE

The coronavirus has affected every aspect of life we know. But after weeks of restrictions, many European states are slowly beginning to reopen their stores, schools, and construction sites; now pondered whether more damage will be done if the lockdown is kept in place. A need for a plan of revival was acknowledged back in late March, with the European Union's state leaders calling on the Union's leadership to create one. On Wednesday, European Commission Chief Ursula von der Leyen set out a roadmap for a gradual lifting of restrictions across the 27-state bloc, but made clear it was not a signal to act immediately. Some European countries had already started to slowly ease the restrictions set in an effort to curb the spread of COVID-19, the virus that as of April 14 had killed 80,548 people in Europe alone.

On Tuesday, Italy, the epicenter of Europe's coronavirus crisis, had some bookshops and children's clothing stores reopened, while Spain allowed workers to return to factories and construction sites, despite the high death toll and low demand. Austria agreed to reopen thousands of hardware and home improvement stores, as long as workers and customers agree to wear masks. From May 1, the country will also allow outdoor sports such as tennis, golf and athletics. The Czech government has already made that move, having lifted a ban on communal sports this week.

After the European Commission Chief's call to lift the bans on society, Denmark moved to let children back to school. Danish children up to age 11 have returned to nurseries and schools. With this, Denmark became the first European country to loosen the restrictions on education imposed to combat COVID-19. Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen welcomed children as they went back to school in Copenhagen.

Elisa Rimpler of the BUPL, the Danish Union of Early Childhood and Youth Educators, told the BBC that the educational institutes that have gone back to functioning have the children washing their hands many times during the day, and as they have no masks, their biggest challenge is keeping a good distance from each other.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel also announced plans to slowly relax restrictions now in place in the country to fight COVID-19.

While the Chancellor said the country "must keep focused and keep going," she noted they "do not have a lot of room for manoeuvre," but recognized that Germany had achieved "fragile intermediate success" through the measures taken. Germany's plans include loosening social distancing rules from May 3, and reopening schools gradually from May 4. From Monday, small shops are expected to be reopened, though bars, cafes, restaurants, cinemas and music venues will all remain closed until August 31, as large public gatherings will be prohibited until then.

Interestingly, Germany was the last country to issue guidance on wearing face masks in public, and is still not mak-



Image source: Bloomberg

ing it mandatory: Chancellor Merkel asked the population to wear masks when in public "to protect other people."

However, some EU countries still seem wary of reviving their social lives in any aspect. While Belgium has announced it is keeping its restrictions intact at least until May 3, France went on to extend the country's lockdown measures until May 11.

In Russia, it is society which is asking the government to postpone large gatherings, the BBC reports, and veteran groups have called on President Vladimir

Putin to postpone the World War II 75th anniversary victory parade planned for May 9.

Georgia on the other hand is tightening its coronavirus measures. Four of the country's largest cities are in lockdown due to the fear that the upcoming Easter holiday would otherwise see many citizens traveling between cities and to villages, increasing the risk of the spread of the virus. The government has demanded an extension of the state of emergency until May 10, when it originally was set to end on April 21.

Yet while everything in the country remains shut, including schools, the churches still have their doors open. With the joint decision of the Georgian government and the Patriarchate, churches will not be closed on Easter night throughout the country. However, both sides emphasized that services will be conducted in accordance with the safety standards. At the same time, health and government officials of Georgia continue to call on people to show their "wisdom" and #stayhome to save their own, and others' lives.

# Isolation Diaries #2: Cooking & Campfire Pancakes

BLOG BY AMY JONES

**T**his week was a tough one. A week when one month of no human contact accumulated into a painful pit of loneliness. On bad days, no amount of video calls, Zoom meetings, and messages can replace the warmth of a hug.

Saturday marked my first virtual birthday party, lighting a candle and eating cake in front of my laptop screen to celebrate my sister-in-law's birthday with my family. With Easter coming this weekend, I hope Georgians will decide to celebrate in a similar way: at home.

Days have assumed a steady routine: work, dog walks, running, cooking, eating. Before lock-down, Tbilisi's restaurants kept me well-fed (perhaps, too well, even). One good thing to come out of this pandemic is my new found enjoyment in cooking. My kitchen has become a rattle of pots and pans, my spice box is overflowing, and my freezer is full of enough to see me through an apocalypse.

But sometimes, no amount of new recipes can keep me preoccupied. On Saturday, the four walls of my flat and my new mun-



dane reality seemed more encasing than ever. For these moments, nature is the best cure. And, you don't have to go far. Tbilisi has plenty of trails on its steep slopes. Off I went up the hill near my flat, with my frying pan and pre-made pancake mix in my rucksack. I cooked overlooking the city on an open fire, far away from people and far away from any anxiety.

So, why not try cooking something new this week to keep yourself busy? I recently cooked chutney for the first time, and it is delicious. You can use any vegetables, even if they are over-ripe. This recipe is from Mary Berry, a well-loved British chef. Once bottled, it will keep up to two years. Store it in the fridge when opened.

## CHUTNEY RECIPE

**Ingredients:**  
900g tomatoes  
3 peppers  
3 onions  
1 aubergine\*  
4 cloves of garlic  
Ginger  
Chilli  
Paprika  
Mustard or mustard seeds  
Apple cider vinegar  
Sugar  
Salt/pepper  
\*you can use any vegetables as long as they amount to around 2.5 kg.

## METHOD

1. Blanche, skin, and chop the tomatoes. Put them in the pan with any juice.
2. Chop all the vegetables and add to the pan.
3. Add grated ginger and chilli and cook on a low heat. Simmer for around one hour, stirring occasionally, until the vegetables are soft.
4. Add 1 tbsp paprika, 1 tsp salt, 1 tsp mustard, and some pepper to taste. Pour in 300 ml of vinegar and 350g sugar, and stir.
5. Once the sugar dissolves, turn up heat and bring to the boil

6. Now you need to reduce the mixture. Stir it occasionally, making sure it doesn't catch on the bottom of the pan. When most of the liquid is gone, your chutney is ready.

7. Add to sterilized jars, making sure there are no air bubbles. Chutney should last around 2 years. Once opened, store in the fridge.

## 12 WAYS TO EAT CHUTNEY

1. Have it on a sandwich
2. Serve it alongside a cheese, and/or cured meat platter
3. Serve it with grilled sausages
4. Serve it with roasted chicken or turkey
5. Warm goat cheese or brie, pour chutney over it and serve
6. Mix it with Greek yogurt to make a dip
7. Puree it with roasted sweet potatoes, butternut squash, etc.
8. Puree it and use as a dipping sauce for egg rolls, samosa, any fried food!
9. Puree it and add it to salad dressing
10. Serve it with a grilled cheese sandwich
11. Serve it on the side of Indian dishes like curry
12. Serve it on a burger, especially a cheese or veggie burger.

## CULTURE

# World Art Day 2020

BY NINI DAKHUNDARIDZE

**D**eclared by the International Association of Art (IAA) in order to promote awareness of creativity and celebrate it internationally, World Art Day was established eight years ago. The specific date of April 15 was chosen to honor Leonardo Da Vinci, making the artist a "symbol of world peace, freedom of expression, tolerance, brotherhood and multiculturalism, as well as art's importance to other fields." According to UNESCO, "World Art Day celebrations help reinforce the links between artistic creations and society, encourage greater awareness of the diversity of artistic expressions, and highlight the contribution of artists to sustainable development. It is also an occasion to shine a light on arts education in schools, as culture can pave the way for inclusive and equitable education."

On this day every year, different events

are organized to celebrate the beauty of art worldwide. This celebration, like everything else, was disrupted this year by the coronavirus pandemic.

Georgian Minister of Science, Education, and Sports Mikheil Chkhenkeli, published a statement on World Art Day, congratulating the Georgians working in the sphere of culture.

"April 15 marks World Art Day in many countries around the world. Congratulations to our compatriots working in various fields of culture on this day. Our ancient and rich culture is based on universal, supreme human values, and at the same time enriches the world cultural treasures with its own unique colors," Chkhenkeli noted.

"Today, when the whole world, including our society, is facing an unprecedented challenge, the search for new, creative ways is of particular importance, so I would like to thank our artists, writers, museums, theaters, galleries, archives, and other cultural and creative organizations, who were enthusiastically engaged in the project 'Culture Online', thus making their contribution for a bet-

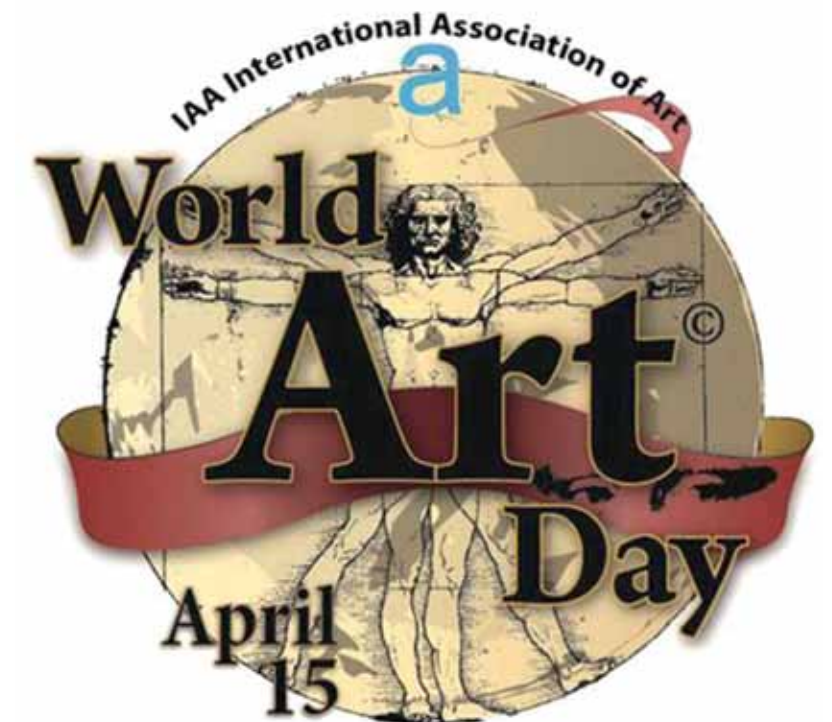
ter tomorrow".

Within the scope of the project Culture Online that Chkhenkeli referred to, any interested individual can watch video clips on cultural heritage sites, view and visit virtual museums and art galleries, and experience King's Palace Memorial Halls, through the social network of the National Agency for Cultural Heritage Preservation of Georgia. However, that's not all that the project is offering.

Writer's House is conducting a literary workshop, with teacher David Gabunia delivering online lectures on literature and art, through the Zoom online conference platform.

Moreover, the project "Children Writers' House" continues, and is once again led by children's author Vaso Guleuri, who reads poems and works of various authors and fairy tales online three times a week. The US Embassy in Tbilisi has started up a similar project, with American diplomats reading one of their favourite short stories in English live on the platform of the Embassy's Facebook page.

In addition to Culture Online, the



National Film Center offers films by famous Georgian filmmakers in the format of online film screenings: "Name" - directed by Zaza Khalvashi, "Moira" - directed by Levan Tutberidze, "Is there a theater there?" - Directed by Nana Janelidze, and many more, all perfect to catch a break from the worrying news

of the coronavirus.

The Ministry has promised to continue offering a variety of "exciting and thrilling online activities" in the future. These online efforts can still somehow compensate for the coronavirus depriving us from celebrating World Art Day in real-life art environments.

# Discovering 19th Century Georgia in Images, Part 1

BY TONY HANMER  
FOR WHERE.GE

**G**eorgia has had long contact with outsiders who entered and began getting to know it, both those hostile and seeking to conquer it and those who were conquered by its beauty and numerous charms. The 19th century really saw the numbers of such visitors increase and, as this century had also seen the birth and popularization of photography in its 3rd decade, many of the country's first photographs were taken by foreign visitors as well as by Georgians themselves.

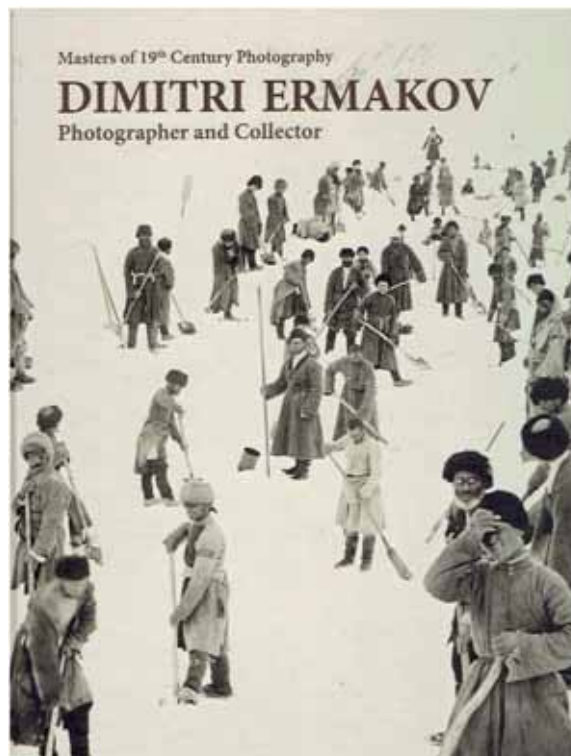
Typically the equipment used was large, unwieldy, slow, tripod-mounted, manually focused and using only natural light. Before the convenience of film, a single large glass plate was coated with light-sensitive photographic emulsion in

as near total darkness as possible, dried, then stored and transported in the same darkness. It would then be inserted into the back of the camera box, adjustments of focus and aperture made, and the image recorded, possibly lasting some seconds but up to a few minutes if indoors and using window light.

Subjects had to remain as still as possible during the process so as to avoid being blurred during the exposure; with varying degrees of success. That gave you ONE image; repeat as many times as necessary for more. None of this point and click!

The resulting negative, for some decades only in black and white, could then be chemically fixed on the glass, and light passed through it onto photographic paper in a darkroom to make a positive, or print.

If one takes into account the levels of comfort on roads and rural areas in the 19th century, transporting one's entire body of equipment



intact around a country must not have been cheap or easy. The carriages and horses or donkeys needed, plus perhaps drivers and porters, all added to the expense and slowness of pace. Many village roads would have been far rougher, and more subject to the vagaries of weather muddying or freezing them up, than today, when they can nonetheless be a challenge. It is perhaps a wonder that photographs were taken at all; but as someone himself obsessed with the art and craft, this writer can attest that one does what one can to record the moment, in any situation.

Some of Georgia's early photographers were Russians, and the country itself already absorbed into the Russian Empire, so whether they were foreigners or not is an open question. Others were definitely from beyond the pale, further away. One of the most famous of the former is Dmitri Yermakov (1846-1916); of the latter, Vittorio

Sella (1859-1943). However, one must also include many others, and many Georgians too, especially such as Aleksandre Roinashvili (1846-98), rightly considered the father of Georgian photography, for a complete study of the period's noted regional artists in the medium, active anywhere from Tbilisi itself to as far away from it as they could reach.

Yermakov was important as both a photographer of Georgia and elsewhere, and as one who collected and thus successfully preserved the images of many Georgian photographers of his day. In this way he reached far beyond his own body of work, multiplied what he could do alone many times over, and widened the photographic record of his times into many genres and styles, lovingly gathered and assured an audience for decades and centuries to come. He amassed 119 albums, nearly 26000 photos, over 15000 negatives and almost 28000 stereoscopic images.

# The Amazing Carla Serena: Pioneer Solo Woman Traveler in Georgia, 1875-1881



BY PETER SKINNER

Since April 1991, when Georgia regained her independence, the nation has been attracting an ever-increasing number of visitors. At first, not too many facilities existed to welcome tourists, though now, in most parts of the country, they enjoy excellent services. But any early visitor who might think, "Well, I was a pioneer: when I came in the 1990s, the going was tough," would do well to consider Madame Carla Serena and her extraordinary solo travels on horseback throughout Georgia, from Abkhazia through the heartlands to Kakheti and beyond, between 1875-1881. She could truly claim to be a pioneer who roughed it, and her detailed, colorful and analytic travel narrative, lavishly illustrated with woodcuts based on excellent photographs, fully reflects her extraordinary capabilities and achievement. Moreover, any deeper exploration of her little-known life reveals even greater qualities.

Who was Carla Serena? And why doesn't she immediately spring to mind? Part of the answer is that ironically such was her background and life that no one nation has done anything significant to

claim to her or to promote her achievements. She was born in 1824, in Antwerp, Belgium, as Caroline Hartog Morgensthein. In 1847, she married Leone Serena, a wealthy Venetian shipping-broker, taking on the name Carla Serena. In 1849, the ruling Austrian government exiled the Serenas for pro-independence activities, and after sojourning in Marseille, Paris, and Belgium, they settled in London, actively maintaining their Italian ties through the curiously named "Société anti-etiquette," a salon that Carla hosted in her home. Some 25 years of domestic life followed, during the early years of which, between 1850 and 1858, Carla gave birth to two sons and three daughters. She also sent news articles to *Le Précurseur*, a newspaper published in Antwerp. In 1873, the paper sent Carla, now 54 with five children still at home, to Vienna, for the Universal Exposition being held to celebrate "culture and education."

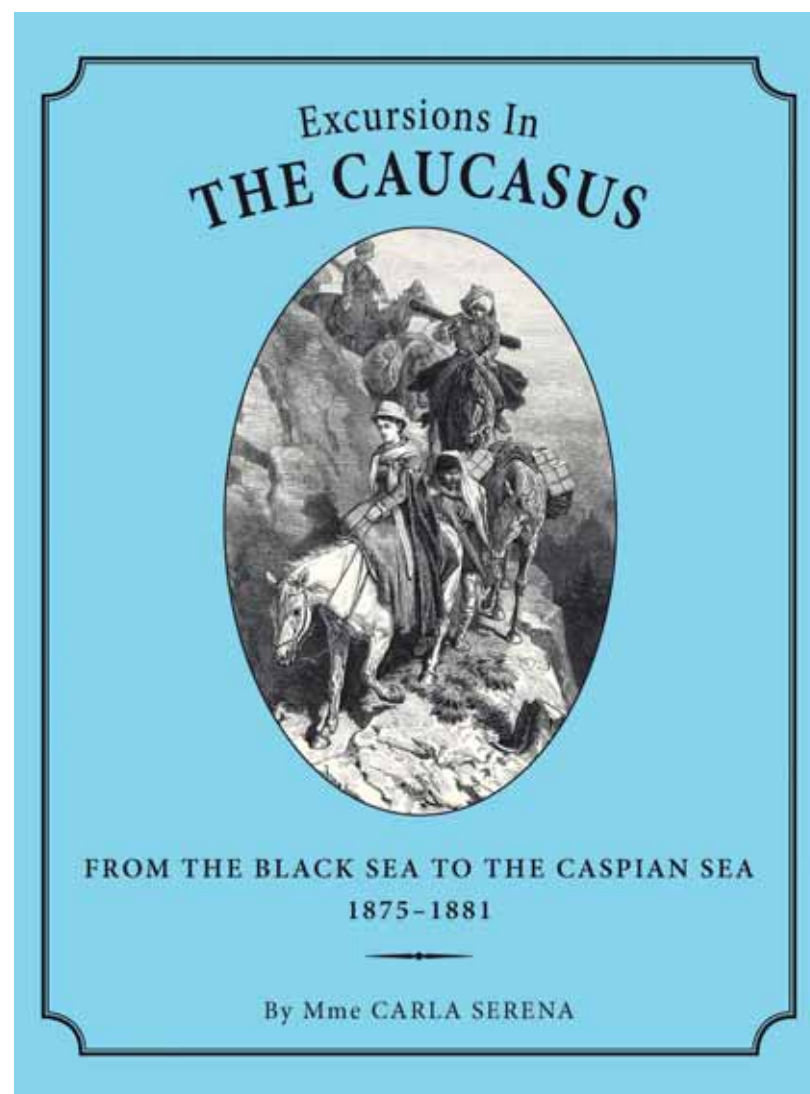
Carla added to her assignment by setting off on extensive travels that took her to Sweden and Russia and thereafter as far south and east as Turkey and Syria. In late November 1875, Carla was in Constantinople – and decided to return to England via the Black Sea, Georgia, and Russia, hoping to arrive for New Year, 1876. The plan proved to be hugely over-optimistic – and, indeed, she revised her plans, focusing upon a lengthy explora-

tion of Georgia.

Even a brief summary of her travels reflects her fortitude and achievement. She landed at Poti in January 1875, went to Tbilisi, and then on to Imereti, with a stay in Kutaisi. Then to Mingrelia, with a stay in Zugdidi, and on to Samurzakano and Abkhazia. Carla's reportage lacks a clear chronological spine, but late in 1876 she appears to have gone by sea from Sukhumi to Yalta and the Crimea. Thereafter (and again she provides no chronology), she traveled via Simferopol, Rostov and Vladikavkaz to re-enter Georgia via the Darial Gorge. She then went down the Georgian Military Highway to Tbilisi. She reports being in Tbilisi in January 1877, preparing to leave for Kakheti. After three months of travel throughout Kakheti, she returned to Tbilisi. She then sojourned in Persia for the worst of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78, before accepting an invitation to visit Guria, returning via Gori, Borjomi and Akhaltsikhe to arrive in Tbilisi in October or November 1881. She then went on to Persia and subsequently to Greece, where, at the age of 60, she contracted an illness and died. Unfortunately, Carla was a more efficient traveler than chronologist and attempts to reconstruct her timeline pose problems.

To recognize Carla primarily as an adventurous, capable, and imaginative solo traveler in an age when such women were extremely few would be to greatly undervalue her. Even official male visitors ran into delays and problems when on the road. But not only did Carla successfully navigate the problems of securing guides and horses in remote areas but she also managed to compile the material from which she derived her first-class travel narratives; accounts that exhibit much sensitivity to location and scenery and much insight into differing peoples, their customs and ways of living. Nor does her value end here: she photographed numerous sites, buildings and people, creating a valuable record of Georgia in the very early years of photography, when the Georgian pioneer photographers Ermakov and Roinashvili were making their names. As no practical process yet existed for the printing of photographs at intervals within texts, Carla ensured that her publisher (the French geographic magazine *Le Tour du Monde*) had many photos carefully engraved as woodblock or copperplate images that could be included within blocks of text. (*Le Tour du Monde* published Carla's 11 Georgian travel narratives between 1880 and 1884; all 11 appear in English in Narikala Publications, Inc.'s 2015 publication *Excursions in the Caucasus*.)

Nor does the cornucopia stop with the travel articles; Carla also wrote books, and in their differing levels and types of content she demonstrates her own clear



and skillful differentiation of her readerships. In her two-volume memoir *Mon Voyage: Souvenirs personnels: Vol. I De la Baltique à la Mer Caspienne* and *Vol. II Une européenne en Perse* (both published in Paris in 1881), Carla decided to write a "popular" narrative and adopted an engaging personal tone and expresses her emotions and feelings; the reader "joins" her in her joys and sorrows. She also juxtaposes East and West and comments on underlying differences to a greater extent than in her *Le Tour du Monde* travel narratives, which comment on peoples and places rather than indulging in East-West comparisons. But Carla has other intellectual qualities to display. She wrote two substantial additional books, *Seule dans les steppes. Épisodes de mon voyage aux pays des Kalmoucks et des Kirghiz* (1883) and *Hommes et choses en Perse* (1883). In these works, Carla does not abandon establishing a direct personal rapport with her readers, but does offer them scientific and ethnographic comments in greater quantity than in her other works.

It is difficult to understand how Carla could be such a productive writer when she spent so much time in the field. But the record shows that despite her protracted journeys Carla remained connected to the European intellectual community, maintaining memberships in the German, Spanish and French national geographic societies. She also received a solid measure of recognition in 1882, when King Umberto I of Italy awarded her a specially struck gold medal. Clearly, Carla did not choose to be a public figure, active on the lecture circuit and appearing in Europe and America's major city. It is also difficult to understand why Carla is not better known; why her works (other than the *Le Tour du Monde* articles) have not been translated and reissued. It might be that her frequent changes of abode (born in Belgium, raised in France, married in Venice, settled in London) and a decade traveling in the little-visited Caucasus and the near-unknown Kalmouck and Kirghiz steppes

and the interior of Persia. Very few libraries indeed hold any of her four books, and it appears that only volume I of *Mon Voyage, Souvenirs personnels* is available in print-on-demand.

Perhaps there is a hidden clue in Carla's naming of her London salon: *Le Société anti-etiquette*. Is there a hint of both socializing and also breaking the rules, doing the unexpected? Overall, we know tantalizingly little about Carla. Indeed, both Daniela Pizzagalli's biography *Il viaggio del destino. Carla Serena da Venezia al Caucaso* (2006) and Daniele Artoni's monograph *Carla Serena (1824-1884): A Solo Western European Woman Traveller and Her Multifaceted Easts* indicate a focus on travel. Neither title offers any promise of information or details about Carla's personal and family life, and neither text offers very much at all on these areas. To date, no cache of diaries or letters has come to light. There appears to be no records of correspondence between Carla and her husband Leone, and none of the five children, of whom the youngest was 26 at the time of her mother's death, appear to have left any diaries or accounts of their mother or their responses to her long absences.

Much else remains hidden, including any significant information on Carla's finances, though it is clear that her husband was wealthy. Carla's chosen routes are worth pondering; she was almost always in nations or regions where geopolitics were in play, particularly when she was in Georgia, Persia and Russia in 1877-1878. We can only deduce that she had good official connections. But despite all the mysteries, we can be thankful for having Carla's excellent *Le Tour du Monde* pieces, collected and translated as *Excursions in the Caucasus, 1875-1881*.

Readers of this article may be interested to know that *Excursions in the Caucasus, 1875-1881* can be purchased from Prospero's Bookshop, 34 Rustaveli Avenue, from Central Books London, or from Narikala Publications, New York.



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