

A Journey Through Georgia's History and Culture

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Kim Kyung-jin

English PDF edition

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A Journey Through Georgia's History and Culture is an online AI Library book by Kim Kyung-jin. It covers Georgia's history, culture, religion, politics, travel, and the Caucasus crossroads between Europe and Asia.

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Preface

A Journey Through Georgia's History and Culture

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In May 2024, I crossed the Black Sea aboard a flight departing from Istanbul's Sabiha Gökçen Airport.

In less than two hours, I landed at Batumi International Airport. Islamic mosque spires from across the Bosphorus lingered in my memory, yet before my eyes stretched Orthodox crosses. In two hours by air, an entire civilization had shifted.

Batumi surprised me.

I had pictured a small coastal city on the Black Sea, but high-rise hotels and casinos lined the beach. The epithet 'Las Vegas of the Caucasus' proved no exaggeration. Every evening I watched the Ali and Nino statues draw close to one another, then pull away. An Azerbaijani Muslim youth and a Georgian Orthodox princess, their tragic love. The two figures forever repeating approach and departure seemed a mirror of Caucasian history itself.

On the road from Batumi to Tbilisi, I encountered this country's intricate reality for the first time.

Across the highway I passed construction sites bearing Chinese signage. Cranes swung, Chinese corporate logos gleamed. The Belt and Road Initiative was functioning as actual reality here. A logistics corridor joining Europe and Asia, with Georgia lying at its heart.

China's grand vision was hardening into concrete across this small nation's terrain.

Arriving in Tbilisi, I discovered yet another reality.

Russian signs met my eyes. In restaurants, markets, taxis, Russian exchanged freely. This was a nation that lost twenty percent of its territory to Russia in 2008. Yet downtown Tbilisi's Russian presence remained overwhelming.

Russian tourists crowded the streets. Buildings financed by Russian capital were remaking the skyline. The paradox: opposing an invader's nation while its economy keeps the country running. This was Georgia's existential bind.

The military highway to Kazbegi was a road of empire.

This road, carved by Russia to push beyond the Caucasus southward, climbs to 2,170 meters where the Church of the Holy Trinity of Gergeti emerges. Light breaks through clouds; the stone church, raised in the fourteenth century, appeared to stand at heaven's threshold. My breath caught. Not from

altitude alone. Russia lies beyond that mountain. The occupation line shifts daily, they said. Creeping Border. Here it happens: your home becomes Russian territory overnight.

In eastern Kakheti, I found eight thousand years of wine civilization.

I tasted amber wine aged in vessels called Qvevri. The vineyard owner said, 'My grandfather's grandfather made wine this exact way.' The number eight thousand grew real. Wine's true home is not France. It is here.

Passing through Gori, I stopped briefly before the Stalin Museum.

A man born in this village once led the Soviet Union, determining the fates of tens of millions. How do Georgians hold his memory? As a proud native son, or as the dictator who crushed his people? The answer shifted with each question I posed.

When my two-week journey ended, I understood: Georgia is not simply a tourist destination.

It is a crossroads where civilizations meet. Russia's shadow falls from the north. China's Belt and Road surges from the east. The European Union draws from the west. Turkey and Iran press from the south. Powers ring it. Yet in their midst, a nation of three point seven million holds fast to a five-thousand-year alphabet and an eight-thousand-year wine tradition.

Korea too navigates the peninsula's geopolitical fate. We who balance between America and China, Japan and Russia, cannot dismiss Georgia's story as foreign. It shows one way a small nation preserves cultural pride while enduring.

This book holds two gazes.

One belongs to a traveler: the feel of wine glass tilted, khachapuri torn, eyes raised to snowed peaks, sensation recorded. The other belongs to an analyst: how this nation threads between Russia, China, and Europe; how its young people take to the streets. Romance and reality both. Georgia is both.

I hope this book serves those dreaming of visiting Georgia as a practical companion, and those seeking to understand our world as a lens through which to view twenty-first-century geopolitics, the Caucasus as that lens.

From Seoul, Kim Kyung-jin

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Chapter 1: Opening the Gate to the Caucasus

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Part 1: A Journey Through Georgia

A. The Privilege of One Year Visa-Free Entry for Koreans and Entry Procedures

When you land at Tbilisi International Airport, the first thing you notice is the smell of the air. Dry yet carrying a hint of soil, the fragrance of the deep Eurasian continent tickles your nostrils.

When you line up at the immigration desk, your turn comes surprisingly quickly. From the moment you present your Korean passport until the officer nods and stamps it, less than a minute passes. From that moment on, you are granted 365 days, exactly one year, as a traveler.

Georgia is one of the world's most generous countries when it comes to visa policy for Koreans. Citizens of South Korea can stay freely for one year with just a passport, without filing a separate visa application or visiting an embassy.

This generous benefit has been in effect since 2015 and applies equally to citizens of 98 countries, including Korea. In a world where 90-day visa-free travel is the norm, the number 365 opens the possibility of something beyond mere tourism, changing the way one lives itself.

Documents required for entry are minimal. A passport with at least six months of validity remaining is sufficient.

Immigration officers may ask about your travel purpose or accommodation, but they rarely check thoroughly. Having round-trip flight confirmations or hotel vouchers ready puts your mind at ease, but most travelers pass through without further questions. Since visas are not issued at the border, travelers from non-visa-exempt countries must apply for an electronic visa (e-Visa) in advance. This does not apply to Koreans.

Once you leave the airport and catch a taxi, the driver speaks first. "Where are you from? Korea?" You nod, and he gives you a thumbs up. "Samsung! Hyundai! Good country!" During the forty-minute drive to Tbilisi, the driver tells you about his nephew who loves Korean dramas, about Georgi

an wine being the world's finest and how hospitality is the duty of every Georgian. And thus begins your Georgia journey. A country where stories start the moment you step outside the airport.

One year gives travelers a gift of leisure. There is no need to hurry.

You can spend a month in Tbilisi or fully witness the season of ripening grapes at a Kakheti winery. When winter comes, you can learn to ski on the snowy peaks of Gudauri, and when spring returns, you can walk among the wildflowers of Svaneti.

This is why digital nomads regard Georgia as a promised land. There are few countries on Earth where you can legally spend a year with just a laptop, without a work visa or residence permit.

What if you filled the entire year and still wanted to stay? The answer is simple. You can make a short trip to a neighboring country and come back. Yerevan, Armenia is five hours by car, and Trabzon, Turkey is a day's journey along the Black Sea coast. Spend one night across the border and return to Georgia, and a new year begins.

Of course, there are limits to continuous stays in this manner, and immigration authorities may deny entry at their discretion. However, for most travelers, this system operates flexibly.

Travel insurance is absolutely essential. Beginning January 2026, the Georgian government will require all entrants to have health and accident insurance. It is safer to print your insurance certificate in English, and a minimum coverage of 30,000 lari (approximately 16 million won) is recommended. While you can purchase insurance locally, it is better to arrange it before departure for peace of mind.

Besides Tbilisi Airport, there are international airports in Kutaisi and Batumi. Kutaisi Airport serves as a gateway for budget airlines like Wizz Air to offer affordable access from various parts of Europe.

Batumi Airport is convenient for travelers seeking Black Sea relaxation. Regardless of which airport you use, the procedures are identical, and the power of a Korean passport works equally everywhere.

Land entry is also possible. Many travelers cross the Sarpi border from Turkey or enter through Bagratashen from Armenia.

Border crossing is generally smooth, but relations with Azerbaijan are complicated. Due to the aftermath of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, land borders may be closed or restricted, so you must check the latest information before traveling. Routes through South Ossetia and Abkhazia into Russia are considered illegal border crossing not recognized by the Georgian government, so they must never be attempted.

Open the window of your first night's lodging after leaving the airport, and Tbilisi's night air floods in. Far off, the bells of an Orthodox church ring out. The year stretches before your eyes. Where to begin is entirely up to you.

B. A Small Country with Twelve Climate Zones: Seasonal Travel Strategies

Georgia's area is approximately 69,700 square kilometers.

Twelve distinct climate zones coexist on this small patch of land, about seventy percent the size of South Korea.

On the western Black Sea coast, palm trees sway in the wind, while on the eastern Kakheti vineyards, grape clusters ripen under the dry sun. Turn north, and snow-capped peaks over five thousand meters gleam with eternal snow. The saying that you can ski in the morning and swim in the sea at evening is not an exaggeration.

The secret to this climate diversity lies in geography. The Greater Caucasus Mountains to the north block cold air descending from Siberia, while the Black Sea to the west brings warm, humid winds. Moving eastward, the sea's influence diminishes and continental climate appears; the Lesser Caucasus to the south creates yet another climate boundary. All these elements interweave within this small nation to create twelve distinct climate zones.

Spring (April to June) is the finest season to explore Tbilisi and the lowlands. By April, winter's gray veil lifts, and flowers bloom throughout the city. Walking through the narrow lanes of the Old Town, you see flower pots on nearly every balcony as residents fling open their windows to greet the sun. Temperatures range between twelve and twenty-four degrees Celsius; short sleeves suit the days, while a light jacket is needed for evenings.

May in Kakheti is entirely green. New leaves sprout on the vines, and the wind crossing the Alazani Valley carries the scent of grass. From the hills of Sighnaghi, looking toward the Caucasus, you see unmelted snow glinting in the sunlight. When you visit a winery during this time, you can taste wine made the previous year in the cool darkness of the cellar. Nikoloz, a vineyard owner, told me: "Come in spring and you understand why wine is born from this land. Earth, wind, and sunlight, everything is prepared for the grapes."

However, mountain regions require caution. Kazbegi and Svaneti still have snow lingering until late May, and trekking routes often remain closed. Spring rains are frequent, so an umbrella or waterproof jacket is essential.

Summer (July to August) in Tbilisi is scorching. Temperatures hover above thirty-five degrees Celsius, and dry heat engulfs the entire city. Locals disappear into the shade during lunch hours, only venturing out again as dusk approaches. Staying only in Tbilisi during this season is unwise.

Summer is the time to go to the mountains. Ascend to Kazbegi, Svaneti, or Tusheti at two thousand meters altitude or above, and the world transforms.

Days are cool, and nights are so chilly you need blankets. One July day while trekking in the Juta Valley, sitting in the meadow eating lunch, a young man from Svaneti riding past on horseback handed me a cup of water. "If you don't come to these mountains in summer, you miss half of Georgia," he said. True to his words, summer high-altitude trekking is the crown jewel of Georgia travel.

Batumi to the west is a Black Sea beach resort that thrives most in summer.

Family tourists from Russia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan fill the beaches. Thanks to the subtropical climate, humidity is high and the botanical garden with its lush tropical vegetation is well-known. After

a swim, it is pleasant to watch the Ali and Nino statues move toward each other on the seaside promenade in the evening.

Autumn (September to October) is the most perfect season to travel Georgia. In this period, known as the "velvet season," the heat retreats and mountains and valleys bathe in golden light. Daytime temperatures hover pleasantly between fifteen and twenty-five degrees Celsius, and rain is rare.

From mid-September through early October, Kakheti celebrates "Rtveli," the grape harvest festival. Entire families head to the vineyards to pick grapes, barefoot treading the fruit to extract the juice, tasting freshly pressed grape must. Wineries open their doors wide to welcome visitors, and supra (traditional feasts) continue late into the night. Visit Kakheti during this time, and you become not merely a tourist but a guest sharing in the joy of harvest.

Trekking is possible through early October. The autumn foliage visible from the path ascending to the Gergeti Trinity Church in Kazbegi is an unforgettable sight. However, high-altitude areas see temperatures plummet from mid-October, and some roads begin to close with snow, so weather monitoring is essential.

Winter (December to February) is the skier's season. Gudauri, a ski resort two hours by car from Tbilisi, offers snow quality comparable to the Alps at a fraction of the cost. Even combining lift tickets and equipment rental costs less than 100,000 won per day. Bakuriani is popular with family skiers, while Hatsvali in Svaneti offers seclusion with stunning views.

Winter mountain regions can be dangerous. The road to Tusheti is completely closed from November through May, and some sections of Svaneti are restricted during heavy snowfall. However, Tbilisi and the lowlands remain relatively mild. Average temperatures hover around five to seven degrees above zero Celsius, and snow melts quickly when it falls. Soaking in a sulfur spring while sipping hot tea is a uniquely Georgian way to pass the winter.

January seventh is Christmas for the Georgian Orthodox Church. Following the Julian calendar, it comes two weeks after Western Christmas. The midnight service held that day at Tbilisi's Sameba Cathedral is solemn and beautiful. Candlelit worshippers fill the cathedral, and polyphonic chanting echoes through the domed ceiling.

C. From Marshrutka to Rental Car: Complete Transportation Guide

Georgia's transportation can be summed up in one word: adventure. Modern systems mix with the legacy of the Soviet era and the uninhibited driving style unique to Georgians. At first it is disconcerting, but after a few days, it all becomes part of the travel experience.

The marshrutka is Georgia's primary mode of transportation. These fifteen-seater minibuses connect cities to cities and villages to villages. They depart from designated terminals, but will pick you up if you wave from the roadside and will stop wherever you ask the driver. The fares are surprisingly cheap. The three-hour journey from Tbilisi to Kazbegi costs 15 lari (about 8,000 won).

Tbilisi's main marshrutka terminals are Didube and Ortachala. From Didube, routes depart to the north (Kazbegi, Gudauri) and west (Kutaisi, Batumi), while from Ortachala, routes go south (to the Armenian border) and east (to Kakheti). When you arrive at the terminal, touts calling out destination names rush toward you. Do not worry if you do not speak Georgian. Simply ask "Kazbegi?" or "Batumi?" and they will point to your bus with a gesture.

The marshrutka has clear drawbacks. The seats are cramped, air conditioning is often absent, and the bus departs only once it is full. Storage space is limited, so a large backpack may need to be cradled on your lap. The driving is typically rough. Overtaking, sudden braking, and honking are everyday occurrences. Yet as you watch the landscape blur past your window, accept an apple offered by the grandmother next to you, and listen to Georgian folk songs flowing from the driver's radio, you begin to think this is what real travel feels like.

Trains are a more comfortable and safer alternative to marshrutkas. Major cities including Tbilisi, Batumi, Kutaisi, and Zugdidi are connected by rail. The two-story express train (Stadler) running between Tbilisi and Batumi features modern amenities. Spacious seats, air conditioning, WiFi, and a dining car ensure that the roughly five-hour journey is never boring. Fares range from about 25 to 50 lari depending on seat class.

Night trains also operate. These services depart Tbilisi in the evening and arrive in Batumi in the morning, and using a sleeper car has the added benefit of saving on accommodation costs. However, not all routes are modern. Some routes to cities like Kutaisi are served by aging trains built during the Soviet era. During the summer peak season, tickets for popular routes sell out quickly, so it is advisable to book in advance through the Georgian Railways website (railway.ge) or the booking site (tre.ge).

Regarding urban transportation, I will explain with reference to Tbilisi. Tbilisi has two metro lines. Built during the Soviet era, they have a deep history, and the escalators move at a surprisingly fast pace. Both the metro and city buses are accessed with a transit card (MetroMoney), and a single journey costs only 1 lari (about 500 won). Recently, it has also become possible to pay directly by holding a Visa or Mastercard to the terminal.

It is wise to use taxi apps like Bolt or Yandex Go. When you summon a taxi through the app, the fare is set in advance, allowing you to avoid overcharging, and you can reach most places in the city for 10 lari or less. Taxis hailed from the street usually lack meters, so you must always negotiate the price before getting in. Be cautious, as drivers sometimes charge foreigners inflated fares.

Car rental is the best choice for those who want complete travel freedom. If you have an international driving permit, you can rent a vehicle at around 30 to 50 dollars per day. Several companies including Hertz and Localrent operate at Tbilisi Airport and in the city center.

However, driving in Georgia requires determination. Local drivers are aggressive, lane discipline is weak, and cattle, horses, and sheep herds regularly appear on the roads. Mountain roads have many unpaved sections, and some stretches run along cliffs without guardrails. When traveling to remote

areas like Tusheti or Ushguli, you must choose a four-wheel-drive vehicle, and if you lack confidence in your driving, hiring a car with a driver is the safer option.

A taxi driver named Giorgi, whom I met on the road to Mestia in Svaneti, said this: "This road requires courage, not driving skill. But do not worry. Georgians are born on this road." His words, tinged with pride and humor, explain everything about Georgian transportation.

d. Prices, Exchange Rates, and Smart Budget Planning

Georgia is called 'affordable Europe.' You can enjoy European atmosphere while spending at a level similar to Southeast Asia. However, with the recent surge in tourists and influx of foreigners, prices are rising, so smart budget planning is necessary.

Georgia's currency is the lari (GEL). The subunit is the tetri, with 100 tetri equal to 1 lari. As of 2025, 1 dollar equals about 2.7 to 2.8 lari, and 1 euro equals about 3.0 to 3.1 lari. Converting to Korean won, 1 lari is roughly 400 to 450 won. For calculation convenience, approximating 1 lari as 500 won is reasonably accurate.

It is difficult to exchange directly into lari from Korea. The common method is to bring US dollars or euros and exchange them locally. Exchange booths are scattered throughout Tbilisi, with large rate signs making comparison easy. Many people also use ATMs to withdraw lari directly with an international debit card, as the fees are low.

The payment environment is quite modern. Credit cards (Visa, Mastercard) are accepted in most hotels, restaurants, and supermarkets in Tbilisi and Batumi. However, rural guesthouses, traditional markets, marshrutkas, and small shops often accept only cash. It is good to prepare a mix of cash and cards.

Accommodation costs vary greatly depending on travel style. Hostel dormitories run 15 to 30 lari per night (about 7,000 to 15,000 won), and guesthouses range from 40 to 80 lari for a private room (about 20,000 to 40,000 won). Renting an entire apartment through Airbnb costs around 60 to 120 lari per day and includes kitchen facilities. Mid-range hotels cost 100 to 200 lari, and five-star hotels cost 300 lari or more. Central Tbilisi is somewhat expensive, but prices drop to half or less in provincial towns.

Food is one of the greatest pleasures of traveling in Georgia. At a local restaurant, you can eat your fill of khachapuri (cheese bread) and khinkali (dumplings) with a glass of beer for 20 to 35 lari (about 10,000 to 18,000 won). Even at an upscale restaurant, a multi-course dinner with a bottle of wine rarely exceeds 100 lari. In Western Europe, you would pay three times as much.

You can save even more on food by buying fresh fruit, vegetables, bread, and cheese at traditional markets and cooking yourself. At Tbilisi's Deserter's Bazaar, you can buy a kilogram of tomatoes for 3 to 4 lari, a whole watermelon for 10 lari, and freshly baked bread for 2 lari. Churchkhela (a traditional snack of walnuts preserved in grape juice), sold at one corner of the market, costs 3 to 5 lari each.

Transportation costs are very low, as mentioned earlier. City buses and metro rides cost 1 lari, Bolt taxi rides within the city run 5 to 10 lari, and intercity marshrutkas cost about 10 to 30 lari. Car rental runs about 80 to 140 lari per day (about 40,000 to 70,000 won), and petrol costs roughly 2.8 to 3 lari per liter.

Attractions and other expenses are also manageable. Most museum admission fees range from 5 to 15 lari, and many places are free. Winery tours cost around 50 to 100 lari and include tastings. Sulfur baths (Abanotubani) cost 80 to 150 lari for a private bath, and the per-person cost drops when shared among several people.

Tipping is not mandatory but is becoming increasingly common. At restaurants, you can leave about 10 percent of the total on the table or check whether a service charge is included in the bill. It is not impolite to skip tipping at taxis or hotels.

To summarize daily budgets: a budget backpacker can cover accommodation, meals, transportation, and attractions for 60 to 80 lari per day (about 30,000 to 40,000 won). If you prefer to travel more comfortably, plan for 120 to 200 lari per day (about 60,000 to 100,000 won). With this budget, you can stay at a clean hotel, dine at good restaurants, and visit wineries.

A French couple with whom I shared breakfast at a guesthouse in Signaghi said this: "With the money we would spend on lunch in Paris, we could live here for a day. But what is more surprising is that the food here tastes better." I nodded at their words while gazing out the window at the Alazani Valley spread below. Georgia's value for money does not simply mean 'cheap.' It means you can enjoy a rich experience on a modest budget.

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Chapter 2: Tbilisi: A Capital Where Past and Present Dance

A Journey Through Georgia's History and Culture

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a. A Walk Through Old Town: From Narikala Fortress to Sulfur Hot Springs

On the morning of my first day in Tbilisi, I stood in front of the cable car station at Rike Park.

I watched as red gondolas slowly crossed above the Mtkvari River and climbed upward. While standing in line to buy a cable car ticket, a middle-aged Georgian man standing next to me struck up a conversation. 'First time here? Tbilisi looks like a completely different city from up there.' His name was Giorgi. He said he was a lifelong native of Tbilisi. 'My grandfather herded sheep below that fortress. Now tourists come, but it's still a playground from my childhood.'

The moment I boarded the cable car and rose above the river, I let out a spontaneous gasp at the landscape spreading below me.

Old Town densely packed with red-tiled roofs, the river winding between them, and ancient fortress walls crouched upon the hilltop. I could hardly believe that for such a meager cost, just 5 lari, roughly 2,500 won, one way, I could be given such a magnificent panorama.

Narikala Fortress carries a history older than Tbilisi itself. When Persians first built walls on this hillside around the fourth century, they called it 'Shuris-tsikhe', the Fortress of Jealousy, because the position was so impregnable. When Arabs later conquered the place, they gave it the name 'Narikala,' which means 'small fortress.' Despite its name, this fortress was anything but small.

Walking atop the walls, I reflected on Tbilisi's history. Mongol invasions, Ottoman rule, endless wars with Persia. These walls endured all those turbulent times.

A great earthquake in 1827 brought down much of the walls, but the remaining stones stand firm. Within the fortress sits St. Nicholas Church, restored in the 1990s. Small in scale, the frescoes inside still convey the deep faith of the Georgian Orthodox Church.

Standing at the fortress's highest point, all of Tbilisi unfolds in a 360-degree panorama. To the east, the golden dome of Sameba Cathedral glints in the sunlight; to the west, modern high-rises form the skyline. Between them, Old Town's maze-like lanes twist together like tangled thread. Standing here at dusk, you witness the entire city awash in golden light.

There are two ways down from the fortress. You can take the cable car again, or you can walk down the steep footpath.

I chose to walk.

As I descended the path, a towering female statue caught my eye, the Mother of Georgia, Kartlis Deda. I will discuss this statue in detail later.

Continuing downward, I arrived at Abanotubani, the sulfur hot spring district, the very place steeped in Tbilisi's founding legend. Around the fifth century, King Vakhtang Gorgasali was hunting in this area. The king's falcon struck a pheasant, and both birds, entangled together, fell into a pool of hot water. When the king rushed over, he saw hot water gushing from the earth. Marveling at these healing waters, he cleared the forest and built a city. The name 'Tbilisi' derives from 'Tbili,' meaning 'warm' in Georgian.

What strikes you first upon entering the hot spring district are the distinctive domed roofs. Built of red brick, these domes show the influence of Persian architecture. Natural sulfur hot spring water rising from deep below maintains a temperature around 40 degrees Celsius. The sulfur's distinctive smell assaults the nose, but you grow accustomed to it quickly.

I met Nana, a woman in her sixties who operates a bath house. Her family has run this bathhouse for three generations. 'When Alexander Pushkin came here, my great-grandmother heated the water for him,' Nana said proudly. Indeed, the Russian literary giant Pushkin visited in 1829 and recorded that he had 'never witnessed such luxury as the hot springs of Tbilisi.' French novelist Alexandre Dumas also came here and offered lavish praise.

I rented a private room and soaked in the hot springs. The cost runs about 50 to 100 lari per hour, roughly 25,000 to 50,000 won. Immersed in the hot sulfur water, the fatigue of travel melts away. If you wish, you can receive a traditional Georgian exfoliation massage called kisa. Rough cloth scrubs your entire body; though it stings at first, by the time the massage ends your skin feels noticeably softer.

Leaving the baths, I found the Leghvtakhevi gorge waiting. At the end of this small canyon, hidden in the heart of the city, stands a waterfall.

From below the waterfall, I gazed up at the houses perched on the cliff, and beyond them, the walls of Narikala Fortress. All of this unfolded like a painting.

The lanes of Old Town wind like a maze. Narrow and twisting paths lead in unpredictable directions. Getting lost doesn't matter. Every path leads somewhere beautiful. Wooden balconies cling like vines to crumbling brick buildings, creating the district's distinctive character.

Buildings erected in the nineteenth century display a distinctive style blending Italian, French, Russian, and Georgian architectural traditions. This is called the 'Tbilisi style.' Hidden within these buildings are Italian courtyards. These are not merely architectural elements but spaces where neighbors gather to talk and children run and play.

What strikes you most in Old Town is religious diversity. The Georgian Orthodox Church, Armenian Cathedral, Jewish Synagogue, and Islamic Mosque coexist within close proximity of one another.

As a crossroads of the Silk Road, Tbilisi was for centuries a city where diverse peoples and faiths mingled. That tradition continues today.

Metekhi Church, standing atop Metekhi Cliff, was built in the thirteenth century. The silhouette of this church rising at the cliff's edge is among Tbilisi's most iconic images. Before the church stands an equestrian statue of King Vakhtang Gorgasali, who founded Tbilisi. The king gazes down at the city he built across the river.

Sioni Cathedral was first built in the sixth century, then destroyed and rebuilt multiple times. The present structure dates to the thirteenth century. The cathedral is the heart of the Georgian Orthodox Church and houses the Cross of Saint Nino. Saint Nino, who brought Christianity to Georgia in the fourth century, is said to have carried a cross made from a vine branch.

The oldest church in Old Town is Anchiskhati Basilica. Built in the sixth century, it ranks among Tbilisi's oldest structures. Small in scale, yet stepping inside, you feel the weight of more than a thousand years.

To conclude my Old Town walk, I ducked into a small café. Sitting on the terrace with Turkish coffee, I watched people moving through the lanes. Tourists and locals mingled, cats lounged lazily in the sun, laundry fluttered from balconies. This is the everyday life of Tbilisi's Old Town.

b. The Bridge of Peace and Sameba Cathedral: Symbols of the City

The Mtkvari River divides Tbilisi east and west. To the south lies Old Town; to the north spreads the modern new city. Connecting these two worlds is the Bridge of Peace, which opened in 2010 and stands as the preeminent symbol of Tbilisi's contemporary character.

A young architecture student named Levan, whom I met on the bridge, shared how Tbilisians reacted to it. 'When it was first built, there was a lot of controversy. Some people even mocked it, making certain comparisons,' he said with a laugh. 'But now everyone loves it. We cannot imagine Tbilisi without this bridge.'

Designed by Italian architect Michele De Lucchi, this pedestrian-only bridge is made of glass and steel. At 156 meters long and 5 meters wide, it traces graceful curves across the river, resembling a massive marine creature undulating in the waves. Placed among Old Town's venerable buildings, this ultramodern structure might initially appear incongruous. Yet over time it has seamlessly integrated into the city's landscape.

The Bridge of Peace truly comes alive at night. When darkness falls, thousands of LED lights ignite in unison, bathing the bridge in ethereal glow. This is no mere decoration. The lights flash in Morse code the chemical elements of the periodic table, conveying a message: all humans, regardless of race or nationality, are composed of the same elements. It is a symbol of peace and harmony.

The night view from the bridge ranks among Tbilisi's most romantic scenes. To the east, Narikala Fortress and Metekhi Church glow under lights. To the west, the glass dome of the presidential palace shimmers softly. Lights reflected in the river ripple and dance, creating an enchanted atmosphere. Lovers stroll hand in hand, and street musicians sing.

Crossing the bridge, you arrive at Rike Park, the city's cherished refuge. Families picnic on wide lawns while children run and play. One section of the park features a building shaped like a giant piano, used as a concert hall with a striking appearance. From the park, you can take the cable car up to Narikala Fortress.

While the Bridge of Peace displays Tbilisi's modern aspirations, the Holy Trinity Cathedral of Tbilisi, Sameba, symbolizes Georgia's spiritual roots. Majestically positioned on Elia Hill, this cathedral is visible from everywhere in Tbilisi. Its golden dome, catching the sunlight, stands unmistakably prominent in the city's skyline.

Sameba Cathedral is a relatively recent structure. Construction began in 1995 and was completed in 2004, erected to commemorate the 1,500th anniversary of Georgian Orthodox independence and the 2,000th anniversary of Jesus's birth. This occurred in the economically difficult period immediately following the Soviet collapse. Yet this monumental cathedral came to be through voluntary contributions from the people, a testament to Georgian faith and national pride.

As you draw near, the cathedral's scale becomes overwhelming. Standing between 87 and 101 meters tall, it ranks among the largest religious structures in the Caucasus and is one of the world's largest Orthodox cathedrals. It can accommodate 15,000 worshippers.

A guide named Mariam, whom I met at the cathedral entrance, shared the story behind its construction. 'My mother sent part of her salary each month to the cathedral building fund. This was at a time when we barely had enough to eat,' she said, her eyes bright with pride. 'This cathedral belongs to all of us. Rich or poor, everyone gave a little to build it.'

Entering the cathedral interior, I was breathless at the majesty. Soaring arches and columns, ornate frescoes and icons, marble floors and stained glass, everything evokes a sacred atmosphere.

Following Orthodox tradition, the cathedral interior has few chairs. Worshippers stand during prayer.

The architectural style harmoniously blends Georgian traditional church design with Byzantine forms. The exterior follows traditional Georgian church proportions, yet the scale and ornamentation reflect contemporary interpretation. The cathedral complex comprises not only the main building but also bell towers, a monastery, and a theological seminary.

When visiting the cathedral, dress appropriately. Men should wear long trousers; women should cover shoulders and knees. Women should wear a head scarf, considered respectful etiquette. Scarves can be borrowed at the entrance. Photography is permitted provided you do not use a flash.

Beneath the cathedral are tombs and a museum displaying artifacts related to Georgian Orthodox history. The cathedral gardens feature fountains and benches for peaceful walks. Ascending the bell tower affords a sweeping view of downtown Tbilisi.

When evening falls, the entire cathedral is illuminated with golden light. Sameba Cathedral, shining in the darkness, is like a lighthouse guiding the city. The cathedral's nighttime view from the Peace Bridge is a scene not to be missed in Tbilisi.

The two structures reveal Tbilisi's dual nature. The Peace Bridge symbolizes the city's aspiration to move toward the future. Modern design, cutting-edge technology, openness. Sameba Cathedral embodies the traditions and faith handed down from the past. Ancient architecture, deep spirituality, communal consciousness. Tbilisi is a city where these two coexist. A city that moves toward the future without forgetting the past, that preserves tradition while embracing change.

As you walk along the riverbank, there is a point where both structures fit into a single frame. Beyond the bridge of glass and steel, the golden dome shines. This view would be the image that best captures Tbilisi's identity.

C. Khachapuri and Khinkali, and the Techno Club Bassiani

Traveling through Georgia is like receiving an invitation to an endless feast of culinary delights. For a hungry traveler, no country could be more welcoming than Georgia. This is because you can enjoy abundant and delicious food at affordable prices.

Chef Dato, whom I met at a restaurant in the Old Town, explained the philosophy of Georgian cuisine like this: "Georgian food is not flashy. What matters is bringing out the natural flavor of the ingredients. And food is not eaten alone but shared together." True to his words, the Georgian table is not merely a place to eat. The traditional feast culture called "Supra" illustrates this well.

Supra is a Georgian feast. When you invite friends or guests, dozens of dishes are laid on the table. At the center of the celebration is the "Tamada," a toastmaster. Through toasts, the Tamada guides expressions of respect for ancestors, love for the homeland, and tribute to friendship and family. A toast is not merely the clinking of glasses. It is a social ritual through which poetry and stories are exchanged, and songs resound.

The star of the Georgian table is undoubtedly khachapuri. "Khacho" means cheese, and "puri" means bread. Literally, it is cheese bread. But the world of flavors contained in this simple name is endless. More than fifty variations of khachapuri exist throughout Georgia.

The most famous is Adjara Khachapuri. Originating from the Adjara region on the Black Sea coast, this khachapuri is a boat-shaped bread filled generously with cheese, topped with butter and raw egg yolk. There is a way to eat it. You pull off the pointed ends of the bread, then swirl together the hot cheese, egg, and butter. Then you scoop up this golden mixture with pieces of bread. At the first bite, a rich, salty flavor spreads across your mouth, and you cannot help but gasp.

Imeruli Khachapuri is round in shape. Cheese is placed inside the dough, flattened, and baked. Megrelian Khachapuri is similar to Imeruli but with an additional layer of cheese on top, making it richer. Penovani uses puff pastry dough with cheese, baked until crispy.

Khachapuri is not merely food to Georgians. It is a cherished national symbol, significant enough to be designated as UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage. The price ranges from 5 to 15 lari (approximately 2,500 to 7,500 won), making it affordable. It is sufficient for a hearty meal.

Another signature dish is khinkali. These are Georgian dumplings. Inside thick wheat dough are minced meat (usually a mix of beef and pork), spices, and rich broth. A single khinkali is quite substantial. Usually, five to ten pieces are ordered as one plate.

There is etiquette to eating khinkali. You do not use a fork or knife. You hold it by the knot at the top (the handle, called "Kudi" in Georgian). You gently bite into the dumpling wrapper and first sip the hot broth inside. Spilling the broth is a failure. Then you eat the rest. The knot portion is just a ball of dough, so it is usually left on the plate. It is also used to count how many khinkali you have eaten.

I practiced this entire process at a khinkali specialist restaurant in the Old Town. A local family at the next table laughed at my clumsy attempts. A man who appeared to be the father approached and demonstrated the proper technique. "Slowly, do not bite too hard. If all the broth spills out, you lose half the flavor." Thanks to his advice, from the second khinkali onward, I was able to eat properly. Ten pieces cost around 10 lari (approximately 5,000 won), filling you up at an affordable price.

Beyond these, Georgian cuisine offers a vast world. Satsivi is chicken with walnut sauce. It is also a holiday dish enjoyed at New Year. Lobio is slow-cooked kidney beans served in a clay pot. Pkhali is an appetizer made from vegetables such as spinach, beets, and beans, dressed with walnuts and garlic. When colorful pkhali arrives on a plate, your eyes delight first.

Georgian food culture is inseparable from its 8,000-year wine tradition. Wine invariably accompanies meals. Georgian wine will be discussed in detail in the chapter covering the Kakheti region.

Once your belly is full, it is time to experience Tbilisi's nightlife. Tbilisi has recently emerged as a global techno music mecca, earning the title "the new Berlin." At the heart of this scene is Club Bassiani.

Bassiani is located underground beneath the Dinamo Arena football stadium. A former swimming pool was converted into a club. The drained floor of the massive pool became the dance floor. The ceiling is low and concrete walls are left raw and exposed. The heavy bass echoes through this space, reverberating off the walls. There is a reason club enthusiasts worldwide are passionate about it.

Gaining entry to Bassiani is not easy. There is strict admission screening called "Face Control." At the door, staff members look you up and down. Clothing, demeanor, atmosphere. Everything is subject to judgment. Only those who can share the club's philosophy are allowed inside.

In 2018, police raided Bassiani under the pretext of drug enforcement. This incident sparked massive protests. Thousands of young people gathered in front of Parliament, playing techno music and dancing,

in protest. The slogan "We Dance Together, We Fight Together" echoed through the streets. Bassiani became more than just an entertainment venue; it became a symbol of Georgian youth's freedom and spirit of resistance.

In a conservative social atmosphere, Bassiani aspires to be a safe space open to all, including LGBTQ+ individuals. Discrimination against sexual minorities remains serious in Georgian society. Bassiani is a sanctuary where anyone can dance and enjoy themselves freely, without such discrimination.

I entered Bassiani on a weekend night. Admission ranges from 20 to 50 lari (approximately 10,000 to 25,000 won). After midnight when I arrived, the club was already filled with energy. Hundreds of young people moved as one to the DJ's beat, dancing. The party did not end even after 5 a.m. The music continued until sunrise.

Beyond Bassiani, Tbilisi has many high-quality clubs. Khidi is a club housed in a converted riverside warehouse, featuring an industrial atmosphere. Mtkvare is a club built on a boat floating on the river. Each club has its own distinct character, offering a different experience each night.

By day, you taste centuries-old qvevri wine in a traditional wine bar; by night, you surrender to world-class techno music. The flavors of tradition and the beats of modernity coexist. This is Tbilisi's surprising charm.

Around Rustaveli Avenue and the Old Town are trendy bars, pubs, and live music venues. These are vibrant spaces where young artists and travelers from around the world mix. They buzz with energy late into the night, even until dawn. Tbilisi is a city that never sleeps.

D. The Georgian Mother's Message About National Character

Anywhere in Tbilisi, if you look up at the hilltops, a colossal female statue catches your eye. Standing majestically atop Sololaki Hill and gazing down at the city is the "Mother of Georgia," or in Georgian, "Kartlis Deda."

This statue, erected in 1958 to commemorate Tbilisi's 1,500th anniversary, stands twenty meters high. Made of aluminum, it is the work of sculptor Elguja Amashukeli. A woman in traditional Georgian dress stands with confident bearing. She holds different objects in each hand.

In her left hand is a goblet filled with wine. In her right hand is a sharp sword. These two objects perfectly summarize the Georgian national character.

The wine goblet symbolizes hospitality. There is a Georgian saying: "A guest is a gift from God." Georgians consider lavish hospitality a sacred duty. When a stranger knocks, they offer the finest food and wine. Even when a guest is full, they insist on serving more. An empty plate at a Georgian

table is a mark of shame for the host.

I experienced this hospitality culture firsthand during my travels. While passing through a rural village, I asked for directions. Farmer Bakhta, instead of answering, invited me to his home. "Rest first before I show you the way." His wife quickly laid out a feast on the table. Khachapuri, lobio, pickled vegetables, and of course wine. "Drink, drink," Bakhta said, continuously refilling my glass. I spent two hours at that house. When I left, they pressed a basket of grapes into my hands. "Welcome to Georgia." This warm hospitality offered to a complete stranger. This is what the wine goblet represents.

The sword, by contrast, symbolizes resistance and courage. Georgian history is one of endless invasion and resistance. Persia, the Arabs, the Mongols, the Ottomans, Russia. Countless foreign powers coveted this small nation. This land, nestled between the rugged mountains of the Caucasus, was a crossroads between East and West. The Silk Road passed through here, and it was a strategic gateway connecting the oil-rich Caspian Sea to the Mediterranean.

Yet Georgians did not surrender. Even as kingdoms fell and they faced foreign rule, they preserved their language, alphabet, religion, and culture. They resisted to the end in mountain fortresses. When enemies attacked, women and children took up arms. This fierce vitality and spirit of independence is what the sword embodies.

Standing before the Mother statue, you can feel both aspects of this character simultaneously. Infinitely warm to friends, yet mercilessly resolute against enemies. Hospitality and resistance, gentleness and strength. The Georgian people embody the coexistence of these two qualities.

To see the Mother statue up close, take the walking trail from Narikala Fortress. After ascending from the cable car station to the fortress, walk along the fortress walls until you reach the hill where the statue stands. Just before the statue is a viewing platform overlooking the city of Tbilisi.

Standing at the platform, I gazed down at the city. The red roofs of the Old Town, the Mtkvari River flowing between them, Sameba Cathedral on the hill. It was a peaceful view. Yet reflecting on how much blood was shed to preserve this peace, I felt reverent.

An elderly man named Vaso whom I met at the platform was explaining the statue to his young grandson. "That wine goblet is to welcome good children like you. But that sword..." He patted his grandson's head. "It is to defend us when bad people try to harm us." The grandson nodded and gazed up at the statue.

I recommend visiting at sunset. As the sun descends in the west, the statue bathes in golden light. The entire city is suffused with red, and the Mother's silhouette stands sharply against the sky. The viewing platform crowds with people trying to capture this scene on camera.

The Mother statue has been replaced once since its original construction in 1958. The original wooden statue deteriorated from weathering and was replaced with the current aluminum version in the 1990s. The new statue faithfully replicates the original design but is larger and more durable.

The statue stood firm even during the Soviet era. Though a nationalist symbol at odds with communist ideology, Soviet authorities did not touch it. Perhaps they feared Georgian resistance, or perhaps they recognized its artistic value. In any case, the Mother statue silently preserved Georgian national pride under Soviet rule.

Today, the Mother statue is one of Tbilisi's most iconic landmarks. It appears without fail in city promotional materials and is an essential stop for tourists. Yet to truly understand the statue's meaning, one must know Georgia's history and culture. One must understand how the hospitality and resistance symbolized by the wine goblet and sword are inscribed in the Georgian nation's very DNA.

Leaving the Mother Georgia statue behind and descending the hillside, I found myself reflecting. This monument is far more than a simple sculpture. It is the self-portrait of a nation that has preserved its identity despite countless invasions by foreign powers over thousands of years. To friends, the finest wine; to enemies, the sharpest blade. This is Georgia.

The statue's gaze is both gentle and resolute. In that downward look upon the city, one senses the past's glory and suffering, along with hope for the future. Today as always, the Mother Georgia monument stands holding wine and blade, quietly conveying Georgia's spirit to all who visit Tbilisi.

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Chapter 3: Kakheti: The Sacred Ground of 8,000 Years of Wine

A Journey Through Georgia's History and Culture

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At the eastern edge of Georgia, where the Caucasus Mountains touch the sky like white teeth, lies Kakheti. Drive east from Tbilisi for about an hour and a half, and the landscape begins to transform. Endless vineyards stretch on both sides of the road. Between them sit farmhouses with earthen walls. Far off, snow-capped peaks slowly emerge through the morning mist. The fertile plains of the Alazani Valley have cradled grapes for thousands of years, and those grapes became humanity's first wine.

Around 6000 BCE, Georgians in the Neolithic age were already fermenting grapes to make wine. In 2017, archaeologists uncovered pottery shards at the Gadachrili Gora site south of Tbilisi containing grape residue. This discovery earned Georgia the official title of 'Cradle of Wine.' Eight thousand years. Throughout those long centuries, Georgians never stopped planting vines and making wine, even amid war, invasion, and the rise and fall of empires.

Kakheti accounts for 75% of Georgia's total wine production. As of 2024, Georgia exported 95 million liters of wine, generating revenues of \$276.1 million, most of it produced in this region. Tourism and wine production have become intertwined, making Kakheti the economic heart of Georgia. Small cities like Telavi, Signaghi, and Kvareli are now home to upscale boutique hotels, and between 2025 and 2028, approximately twenty additional luxury accommodations are scheduled to open nationwide.

Yet the true charm of Kakheti lies not in numbers but in the stories of the people you meet here. Follow a narrow dirt path between the vineyards, and you come upon a small farmhouse. Without fail, one corner of the farmyard holds a wine cellar called 'marani.' The homeowner presses a glass of wine into the hands of a stranger and cries out 'Gaumarjos', to victory. In Georgia, they believe guests are gifts sent by God.

A. The Secret of Qvevri Brewing and Amber Wine

The first thing to understand when visiting Kakheti is the 'qvevri.' A qvevri is a large egg-shaped earthenware vessel. Georgians bury these vessels in the ground to ferment wine. When UNESCO inscribed this brewing method as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2013, Georgian people celebrated. To them, the qvevri was not merely a brewing tool but the wisdom of their ancestors and the very identity of their nation.

Drive north from Telavi for about thirty minutes and you reach the small village of Imirheva. There I met a farmer named Giorgi, who has been making qvevri wine for over twenty years.

He was in his early sixties, with a weathered, bronze-colored face and a gentle smile. As he opened the cellar door, cool air washed over us, followed by the sweet-tart aroma of fermenting wine.

'This is a qvevri. We have been using these since my great-grandfather's time.'

The floor was dotted with round stone lids placed at regular intervals. As he lifted one, the mouth of a massive vessel buried deep underground was revealed. Giorgi stirred the contents with a long wooden ladle and drew up turbid liquid. It was still-aging wine, yet already glowing with amber hue.

The essence of qvevri brewing is 'nature' and 'time.' After harvest, grapes are first crushed in a wooden press called a 'satsnakheli.' Western methods use only grape juice, but Georgian tradition is different. Grape skins, seeds, and even stems all go into the qvevri together. Georgians call this 'chacha' or 'mother.' The name comes from the belief that wine grows healthy only when it develops in a mother's embrace.

Once grapes enter the vessel, natural fermentation begins. No cultured yeast or chemical additives are used. In early fermentation, the contents are stirred four to five times a day, but after two or three weeks,

the qvevri is sealed with clay and stone lids. It ages in this state for five to six months, sometimes more than a year. Because qvevri buried in the ground maintains a cool temperature of 13 to 15 degrees Celsius year-round, no additional cooling equipment is needed. The vessel cradles the wine like a mother's womb.

Wine made from white grape varieties that undergoes this process is not the clear yellow we know. Extended contact with grape skins releases pigments and tannins, giving it a deep amber or orange hue. This is what we call 'amber wine' or 'orange wine.'

I took a sip of the amber wine Giorgi poured into my glass. The first impression was unfamiliar. I had expected the freshness of white wine, but a heavy tannin weight wrapped around my tongue. Dried apricot and walnut, with whispers of honey, followed. A slight astringency lingered on the way down. It was a taste that seemed to drift between red and white wine.

'Everyone is surprised at first. But try it with our food. Then you will understand the real taste.'

Giorgi's wife brought out freshly baked shoti bread, eggplant stuffed with walnuts, and mtsvadi, lamb kebab. Alternating between rich food and amber wine, something remarkable happened: my mouth felt refreshed. The acidity of white wine and the tannins of red wine cut through the richness. Georgian cuisine and amber wine had evolved over thousands of years as a perfect match.

It is worth remembering two representative grape varieties of Kakheti. White varieties include Rkatsiteli and Kisi, while Saperavi is the prime red variety. Ferment Rkatsiteli using the qvevri method and you get amber wine; ferment it the European way with skins removed and you get standard white wine. The fact that the same grape can make two entirely different wines is what makes Georgian wine so fascinating.

Red wine made from Saperavi is so deeply colored that it appears nearly black-red when poured. Rich in tannins with strong berry aromas, it comes in styles ranging from dry to semi-sweet. Kindzmarauli, which Stalin was said to favor, is a semi-sweet red made from Saperavi.

That the qvevri method has survived to this day borders on miraculous. During the Soviet era, authorities suppressed traditional brewing as unsuitable for mass production. Many qvevri were destroyed or abandoned, and master craftspeople passed away. Yet some families protected their qvevri in secret, and after the Soviet collapse, younger generations began reviving the tradition. Since UNESCO inscription, qvevri wine has gained worldwide attention, and some wineries in France and Italy now experiment with clay-vessel fermentation.

As I was leaving Giorgi, he added one more thought.

'The qvevri is alive. It breathes. Plastic and stainless steel tanks do not. That is why our wine has a living taste.'

For Georgians, wine is not mere alcohol. It is a sacred medium for honoring God, nation, family, and friendship. When wine that has spent six months in a qvevri is opened the following spring, Georgians rejoice as if welcoming new life. Monks say the ideal is 'to ferment wine when a child is born and drink it together when that child marries.' The philosophy of qvevri brewing rests on the belief that only what endures time possesses true value.

Hotel Qvevrebis: An Introduction

In the heart of Kakheti, Georgia's wine country, on a hillside in the village of Shalauri outside Telavi, stands a hotel you will not find anywhere else in the world. Hotel Qvevrebis, which opened on September 5, 2023, is a boutique hotel run by a Georgian family. In 2018, they discovered the beautiful hillside in Shalauri and turned a long-held dream into reality. With bank financing and government support, construction began in late 2019. The COVID-19 pandemic halted work for over a year, but with the entire family's dedication, the hotel was completed in five years.

The accommodations consist of seventeen rooms in the main building and twenty standalone cottages shaped like qvevri. Each cottage is named after Georgian native grape varieties such as Rkatsiteli, Saperavi, and Kisi.

The qvevri-shaped rooms are formed like vessels lying on their side. Glass panes installed at the rounded entrance frame the family vineyard and the silhouette of the distant Caucasus Mountains.

Each cottage includes a king-size bed, private bathroom, kitchenette, and small terrace. The outdoor swimming pool, sauna, and hot tub are complimentary. Entertainment facilities include a billiards table, ping-pong table, and board games. At the main building's Amphora restaurant, you can enjoy Georgian traditional cuisine and European fare with views of the Caucasus Mountains.

Wine tastings and cooking classes are offered, and during harvest season you can tread grapes yourself using the traditional wooden press, the satsnakheli. With a rating of 9.6 on booking sites, this

hotel has become a highlight of any Kakheti visit.

Getting to Hotel Qvevrebis from Tbilisi

Minibuses from Tbilisi to Telavi depart from the Navtlughi bus terminal near the Samgori metro station. They run at 9 a.m., 11 a.m., 1 p.m., 3 p.m., 5 p.m., and 6 p.m., every day including weekends. A 7 a.m. service is added in summer. The fare is 15 lari per person (about

7,500 won), with travel time of two to two and a half hours. It is advisable to arrive thirty minutes before departure to secure a seat.

Taxi or Private Car

The distance from Tbilisi to Telavi is approximately 95 kilometers. Using the Bazaleti-Gombori-Telavi Highway (Sh38) takes about two and a half hours. The Gombori Pass is a winding mountain road, so in winter an alternative route via Gurjaani (160 km) is recommended. Taxi fares are roughly 100 to 140 lari (50,000 to 70,000 won) one way.

Final Leg to the Hotel

From Telavi town center to Hotel Qvevrebis is about a ten-minute drive. A taxi from the Telavi bus terminal costs ten to fifteen lari. Contact the hotel in advance and they will arrange pickup service.

B. Signaghi: The City of Love Where You Can Marry Twenty-Four Hours a Day

South of Kakheti, atop a hillside at 800 meters elevation, sits Signaghi. Drive two hours from Tbilisi up winding mountain roads and suddenly a fairy-tale village unfolds before you. Red tile roofs cluster together. Narrow stone paths weave between pastel-toned houses like a maze. From any balcony in town, the Alazani Valley stretches below, and on clear days, the eternal snows of the Caucasus Mountains gleam white in the distance.

Signaghi carries the romantic nickname 'City of Love.' There are several reasons this small town earned such a name. Most famously, it operates a twenty-four-hour marriage registry office. Opened in 2007 as part of Signaghi's restoration project, this registry allowed anyone with a passport, regardless of nationality, to register a marriage anytime. No appointment was needed, no complicated paperwork. The world knows only two such places: Las Vegas wedding chapels and Signaghi in Georgia.

Walk through the narrow alleys of central Signaghi and you come to a small square. On one side stands a statue of a girl standing on a chair, holding a bouquet of flowers. Across from it stands a modest building: the Wedding House. Inside, on the second floor, is the marriage registration office. Couples need only bring a passport and, if applicable, divorce documentation. Two witnesses are required, but if you do not have suitable ones, you can ask locals or fellow travelers passing on the street. Registration costs ninety lari on weekdays (about 40,000 won) or one hundred fifty lari on weekends (about 65,000 won). Within thirty minutes, you hold a legally binding marriage certificate.

However, recent information indicates that since the COVID-19 pandemic, operating hours have been adjusted. Currently, the office operates only from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. on weekdays, and is closed Mondays and Tuesdays. Gone are the days of stumbling in at 3 a.m. tipsy on wine to spontaneously marry, but Signaghi's romance endures. For couples planning to marry, it is best to book by phone at least an hour in advance.

There is another legend behind Signaghi becoming the City of Love. It is the tragic love story of Niko Pirosmiani (1862-1918), revered as Georgia's national painter. Pirosmiani, a poor self-taught artist, fell in love at first sight when he saw Margarita, a French actress, in a Tbilisi tavern. He sold everything he owned and carpeted the front of the hotel where Margarita was staying with tens of thousands of roses.

Legend has it that there were a million roses. This story became known worldwide through the song 'A Million Roses' by Russian singer Alla Pugacheva, and in Korea, Sim Soo-bong's rendition of 'A Million Roses' also won great love. Pirosmiani's love was never fulfilled. Margarita soon left Georgia, and Pirosmiani spent his entire life drawing in poverty.

and passed away alone. However, his devoted love made Signagi a symbol of eternal love.

At the Signagi Museum, you can view Pirosmiani's original paintings. His works, which he learned to paint through self-teaching without formal Western art training, are humble yet striking. Georgia's everyday scenes, people enjoying feasts, vineyards, and animals come alive through his rough brushwork. The fish and rooster paintings he favored can be found in Georgian souvenir shops everywhere.

Another sight in Signagi is the massive fortress walls encircling the town. Built during the reign of King Erekle II in the 18th century, these walls stretch 4 to 5 kilometers in total length with 23 to 28 watchtowers standing along them. Walking atop these walls, known as 'Georgia's small Great Wall,' offers a panoramic view of the entire town. A walk around the walls takes about 2 to 3 hours, with frequent opportunities to climb the watchtowers and take photographs.

The view of the Alazani Valley from atop the walls at sunset is enchanting. Endless vineyards glow red in the twilight, while the distant Caucasus Mountains turn violet. When night falls, lights illuminate the entire town, creating a landscape out of a medieval fairy tale. Staying overnight at accommodations like Kabadoni Boutique Hotel or BelleVue Boutique Hotel allows you to savor this nightscape.

Signagi's narrow alleys are lined with winery cafes, restaurants, and small galleries. A winery-restaurant called 'Pheasant's Tears' enjoys high repute even among locals. An American-born artist has settled in Georgia and produces wine using traditional methods, offering the experience of pairing dishes made with ingredients grown directly by local farmers with qvevri wine.

The best times to visit Signagi are spring (April to June) and autumn (September to October). In spring, shoots emerge on the vineyards and wildflowers bloom abundantly. In autumn, during harvest season, the entire town is swept up in a wine festival atmosphere. High summer (July to August)

brings intense heat and is best avoided. Winter offers spectacular views of the snow-covered Caucasus Mountains, though some facilities may close.

As a day in Signagi drew to a close, I observed a young couple posing for photographs in front of a wedding house. The bride wore a casual dress instead of white, and the groom was dressed in jeans and a shirt. They said they were from Azerbaijan. They laughed, saying they appreciated being able to marry the person they love without complicated procedures.

"There is a legend that if you marry here, you will never part forever."

the bride said. Georgians believe that couples married in Signagi share unwavering love for life. Though merely a legend, the romance offered by this small town makes that belief all the sweeter. Signagi, the city of love. There could be no better place to gaze at the moon rising over the vineyards and raise a glass of wine.

d. Alaverdi Monastery and the Footsteps of Saint Nino

Kakheti is both a land of wine and a land of deep faith. For Georgians, wine and Christianity are inseparable. The legend that Saint Nino, who spread Christianity to Georgia in the 4th century, brought a cross made from grapevine branches connects these two. Throughout the Kakheti region, her footsteps remain visible, and monasteries that have produced wine for over a thousand years continue to operate.

Twenty kilometers north of Telavi, Alaverdi Monastery stands majestically in the middle of the Alazani Valley plain. From a distance, the grand cathedral rises like a giant against the backdrop of the Caucasus Mountains. It began when Joseph Alaverdeli, a monk who came from Assyria in the 6th century, built a small church here. The current magnificent cathedral was built in the early 11th century by Kvirike III, King of Kakheti.

Standing over 55 meters tall, Alaverdi Cathedral was Georgia's highest religious structure until the completion of Sameba Cathedral in Tbilisi in 2004. Upon entering the cathedral, frescoes that have endured a thousand years glow dimly, and stone pillars darkened by candle smoke create an atmosphere of reverence. Among the sculptures adorning the altar are stones carved with large grape clusters, symbolizing the importance of viticulture and winemaking.

What makes Alaverdi Monastery unique is that it has produced wine for over a thousand years. Ancient qvevri vessels, estimated to have been made in the 11th century, are preserved within the cathedral grounds. Monks still produce wine using traditional methods in the monastery's marani, or wine cellar. Wine production was temporarily halted during the Soviet period, but resumed in 2006 when ancient qvevri vessels were excavated.

The monk who guided me through the monastery's wine cellar said:

"We think of wine as a prayer offered to God. We pray when sealing the qvevri, and we pray again when we open it the following spring. We do not know what happens underground for six months.

Only God knows."

The wine bottles from Alaverdi Monastery carry the phrase "Since 1011," marking the year wine was first produced here. The monks say it is ideal to prepare wine when a child is born and share it when that child marries. This reflects their belief that only what matures over time possesses true value.

Within the monastery grounds is a vineyard growing approximately 80 varieties of Georgian native grape cultivars. A small tasting area in the square in front of the cathedral offers the chance to sample matsoni (yogurt) topped with honey and walnuts, or to taste wines produced by the monastery. Every late September, a religious festival called 'Alaverdoba' takes place, drawing people not only from throughout Kakheti but also from distant mountain regions. Religious ceremonies accompany wine festivities, with traditional music and dancing continuing through the night.

About 2 kilometers from Signagi stands Bodbe Monastery, one of the holiest sites revered by Georgians. This is where Saint Nino, who spread Christianity to Georgia in the 4th century, ended her life and was buried.

Saint Nino was a woman from Roman Cappadocia, in present-day Turkey. According to legend, she received a cross made from grapevine branches in a dream from the Virgin Mary. After binding the cross with her own hair to secure it, she crossed the Caucasus and came to Georgia. This 'Grapevine Cross' became a symbol of the Georgian Orthodox Church and is currently kept in Sioni Cathedral in Tbilisi.

Nino healed Queen Nana of the Kingdom of Iberia (eastern Georgia) from illness through the power of prayer. Moved by this miracle, King Mirian proclaimed Christianity as the state religion, and Georgia became the second nation in the world to officially adopt Christianity as its official religion in 337 AD. (Armenia was first in 301 AD.

Nino is revered as Georgia's 'spiritual mother,' and her feast days on January 14th and June 1st are observed as near-national holidays.

Bodbe Monastery sits atop a cypress-covered hill. The cathedral housing Saint Nino's tomb is always crowded with pilgrims. People pray before the tomb, and some shed tears. The monastery now operates as a convent, and from its well-tended gardens and balcony, panoramic views of the Alazani Valley unfold before you.

Descending steep stairs below the monastery, you reach 'Saint Nino's Spring.' Legend holds that spring water emerged from the spot where Nino prayed. Many pilgrims believe this water possesses healing power and undergo baptism by immersion. The descent to the spring and return takes about 30 to 40 minutes. If the exertion seems challenging, you may skip the spring and instead spend peaceful time in the monastery garden.

As you travel through Georgia, you come to feel how deeply wine and Christianity are intertwined. The fact that Saint Nino brought a grapevine cross was no mere legend. For Georgians, the grapevine is life and blessing, and wine is a sacred conduit connecting God and humanity. At the sup

ra (traditional feast), the tamada's (toastmaster's) first toast is always a prayer of thanksgiving offered to God. I encourage you to visit the monasteries of Kakheti and experience the spiritual depth of this land.

e. Recommended Winery Tours and Tasting Guide

Kakheti is home to over 200 wineries. Many day-tour packages depart from Tbilisi, and it is also possible to rent a car and explore independently. With options ranging from large commercial wineries to modest family operations, you can tailor an itinerary to your preferences. Tasting fees range from approximately 30 to 50 lari (roughly 15,000 to 25,000 won) depending on the winery.

1. Khareba Winery - Secret Tunnels in the Mountains

Khareba Winery, located in Kvareli, is famous for its 'wine tunnels.' These are massive tunnels originally excavated for military purposes during the Soviet era, converted into wine storage. Stretching 7.7 kilometers in total length, the tunnels maintain a cool temperature of 12 to 14 degrees Celsius year-round. Walking through the tunnels, you encounter endless stacks of wine bottles lining both walls, creating a spectacular sight.

After the tunnel tour, you can taste wines at a tasting area set up inside the tunnels. With offerings ranging from accessible flavors to premium qvevri wines, beginners can enjoy the experience without hesitation. The winery also offers hands-on experiences like making 'churchkhela,' a traditional Georgian confection, and baking bread. Churchkhela is made by threading walnuts on a string and coating them in grape juice, and its sweetness and richness have earned it the nickname 'Georgian Snickers.'

2. Kindzmarauli Corporation - Stalin's Favorite Wine

This is a large winery located in central Kvareli, built atop the remains of a royal wine cellar from the 16th century. It is the source of 'Kindzmarauli,' a semi-sweet red wine renowned as Stalin's favorite. Made from Saperavi grapes, this wine offers sweetness combined with depth of flavor, making it easily approachable for wine novices.

The winery features both modern production facilities and traditional qvevri storage, allowing you to compare the two methods during a visit. Tour costs are reasonable, and its central location offers excellent accessibility, making it outstanding value for money. For those unable to drink wine, the grape juice produced here is excellent.

3. Shumi Winery - A Living Wine Museum

Shumi Winery, located in the village of Tsinandali, impresses with its gardens growing hundreds of grape varieties. With Georgian native cultivars alongside grapevines from around the world, it is called a 'living wine library.' The winery uses the legendary creature 'griffin' as its symbol, depicted on wine labels.

Inside the winery is a museum displaying ancient winemaking tools. After a museum tour, you can taste wine on the terrace while overlooking the vineyards. For a systematic understanding of Georgian wine history,

this place is recommended. English-language guidance is excellent, making it convenient for foreign visitors.

4. Tsinandali Estate - The Elegance of Nobility

This is the residence of Alexander Chavchavadze, a 19th-century nobleman and poet. He was the first to introduce European winemaking methods to Georgia and the first to bottle and sell Georgian wine. Strolling through the expansive English garden offers a glimpse into the life of 19th-century nobility.

The residence interior is arranged as a museum, with a historic wine cellar in the basement. The white wine produced here, 'Tsinandali,' is a blend of Rkatsiteli and Mtsvane varieties and is Georgia's most renowned white wine. If you wish to enjoy wine in an elegant and antiquated atmosphere, this is the perfect destination.

5. Family Marani - True Georgian Hospitality

The true charm of Kakheti lies in family wineries tucked away in unnamed small villages. You can book family winery tours at the tourism information centers in Signagi, Gina, and Telavi. Notable options include the Zandarashvili Guesthouse and Chona's Marani.

When you visit a family winery, the owner serves qvevri wine crafted by hand, poured directly from the clay vessels. White, red, and amber wines are offered alongside chacha, a grape brandy. Be careful with chacha, as it has an alcohol content of 40 to 60 percent. Generous helpings of freshly baked shotis bread, cheese, kebabs, and khachapuri arrive alongside the wine.

The most special experience is the supra, a traditional Georgian feast. The host serves as the tamada, the toastmaster, who leads the toasts. The first toast goes to God, the second to family, and the third to the homeland. This is followed by toasts on various themes: peace, friendship, love, and remembrance of the departed. Once the tamada finishes his toast, it is customary for guests to drain their glasses. However, if draining your glass feels difficult, it is acceptable to simply wet your lips.

Wine Tasting Guide and Tips

Saperavi: Georgia's signature red wine varietal. It has a deep color and rich tannins. It ranges from dry to semisweet. It pairs well with meat dishes.

Rkatsiteli: The most popular white and amber wine varietal. Made in the European style, it becomes a crisp white wine; made in the qvevri method, it becomes a full-bodied amber wine.

Kisi: A white varietal with more aromatic intensity than Rkatsiteli. When made as an amber wine, it offers attractive floral and peach aromas.

Kindzmarauli: A semisweet red wine made from Saperavi. It is approachable enough for wine beginners.

Tsinandali: A dry white wine blending Rkatsiteli and Mtsvane. It pairs well with fish dishes.

Chacha: A brandy distilled from grape pomace left over after winemaking. Be aware that it has an alcohol content of 40 to 60 percent.

When drinking wine in Georgia, people cry out "Gaumarjos," which means "to victory." It is customary not to drink before the tamada offers his toast. If you remember that for Georgians, wine is not merely an alcoholic beverage but a sacred conduit connecting God, family, and friends, your experience will be all the richer.

The best season for Kakheti winery tours is April through October. During the grape harvest in September and October, you can participate in the rtveli harvest festival. Traditional experiences like treading grapes to extract juice are also available. In spring (April through June), tourist numbers are lower, allowing for a more leisurely visit. Since driving is not advisable during tours, it is better to book a day tour package or hire a driver. Day tours departing from Tbilisi range from 50 to 100 dollars and can be booked through platforms like GetYourGuide or Klook.

In the red earth and deep wine aromas of Kakheti, taste eight thousand years of history. A glass of amber wine that slept and woke in the qvevri, sunset over the Alazani Valley seen from ancient fortification walls, the sound of bells ringing through the reverent silence of a monastery. All of these combine to create a landscape unique to Kakheti. Georgians say: "The land makes wine, time perfects it, and people share it." In Kakheti, you will understand the true meaning of those words.

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Chapter 4: Kazbegi and the Snowy Mountains of the Caucasus

A Journey Through Georgia's History and Culture

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A. The Georgian Military Highway, Following the Path of Empire

Morning in Tbilisi is unhurried. Georgians starting their day with strong Turkish coffee in the capital's cafes look at ease. But the moment you leave the city heading north, the landscape transforms entirely. Mountains grow taller, valleys deepen, the air turns cold and crystalline. This is the first impression the Georgian Military Highway grants travelers.

This road spanning from Tbilisi to Vladikavkaz, the Russian border city, is approximately 212 kilometers long. In numbers alone, it is not particularly long, just slightly farther than Seoul to Daejeon. But you cannot think of this road as merely a route from point A to point B. The road itself is an immense history museum, a work of art carved by nature, and a passage of civilization where merchants, armies, and pilgrims traveled for thousands of years.

The road's history reaches back to ancient times. From antiquity, this valley was one of the few passages across the Caucasus Mountains. Silk Road merchants passed through with bolts of silk and spices; Persian and Mongol armies attacked Georgia via this route. But the road took its present form in the early 19th century, during the Russian Empire. After Georgia was annexed in 1801, the empire expanded and paved this ancient trade route to move troops and supplies quickly. The name "Military Highway" originated here.

An hour north of Tbilisi, the view from your window shifts suddenly. The gray buildings of the city fade, and a vast emerald reservoir spreads before you. The Zhinvali Reservoir. Dammed in the 1980s during the Soviet era, this artificial lake now serves as a critical water source supplying drinking water to Tbilisi's residents.

First-time visitors to the reservoir marvel at the color of the water. On clear days, the lake gleams in deep blue-green, and with the surrounding mountains it recalls Nordic fjords. But beneath this beautiful lake lies sad history. Villages in the region were submerged when the dam was built. In winter when the water level drops, bridges and ruins of old settlements rise like ghosts from the surface.

Following the lake, a medieval fortress looms on the water's edge. Ananuri Fortress. Once the stronghold of the Aragvi ducal family ruling the region since the 13th century, it is on UNESCO's tentative World Heritage list. Within its sturdy walls stand two churches and watchtowers.

Inside the fortress stands the Church of the Assumption, built in the 17th century. Its exterior walls bear intricate carvings. Grapevines and crosses, animals and angels are rendered delicately in stone. These carvings, where Georgian traditional patterns blend with Persian artistic influence, display the essence of medieval Georgian architecture.

From the fortress walls, the blue waters of Zhinvali and the ancient stones come into view at once. This scene appears on the cover of Georgia's travel guides. No place photographs better. Yet Ananuri holds a history tragic despite its beauty. Fierce battles raged here across the 17th and 18th centuries, and once the residents sheltering inside perished in flames.

Beyond Ananuri, the road climbs steeply. Following the zigzagging mountain path upward, you reach a high plateau above 2,000 meters elevation. Gudauri. Georgia's largest ski resort fills with skiers from around the world in winter. Come summer and fall when snow melts, it transforms into a paragliding mecca. Paragliders soaring above the green meadows seem to embody the freedom of the Caucasus.

Beyond Gudauri near Jvari Pass, you discover a massive semicircular structure standing precariously on a cliff's edge. The Russia-Georgia

Friendship Monument. The Soviet Union built it in 1983 to commemorate the bicentennial of the Treaty of Georgievsk signed between Russia and Georgia.

Though called a monument, Georgians regard it with mixed feelings. The 1783 treaty made Georgia a Russian protectorate and led to complete annexation. The word "friendship" rings hollow. Yet setting politics aside, the ornate mosaic tile murals decorating the interior hold genuine artistic merit. Legends and history of Georgia and Russia come alive in colorful tiles.

The view from the monument's balcony is overwhelming. A vast gorge stretches below, its walls sheer. Locals call it Devil's Valley. The Aragvi River flows between the cliffs, and distant Caucasus peaks hang in clouds.

Jvari Pass is the highest point on the Georgian Military Highway, between approximately 2,379 and 2,395 meters elevation depending on the source. "Jvari" means "cross" in Georgian. Standing here, permanent snow-capped peaks surround you like a screen. In winter, avalanche danger closes the road. Spring conditions are much the same. Only by crossing this harsh pass do you reach Kazbegi.

Over the pass, the road follows Darial Gorge. Through this narrow, deep canyon the Terek River rushes between cliffs, long called the "Gateway to the Caucasus." Legend says Alexander the Great set an iron gate here to stop northern nomad invasions. Whether such a gate actually existed is unknown. But standing in this gorge, you understand why the legend arose. The gorge is a fortress nature itself built.

Traveling the Military Highway is a kind of adventure. It is the only overland route to Russia, so you commonly see massive cargo trucks waiting in long lines, occupying one side of the road and crossing the border. Dodging or passing these giants on the narrow mountain road is thrilling.

Yet the road's true masters are not vehicles but cattle and flocks of sheep. When you encounter cattle leisurely crossing the road ahead, you wait patiently for them to pass. Horns do nothing, the cows don't budge. This is the "beauty of slowness" Georgia's roads teach travelers. In the Caucasus, hurrying does not make you go faster.

Lunch in the roadside village of Pasanauri is a fine choice. It is known as the birthplace of khinkali, Georgia's signature dumpling. Filled with meat and broth, these dumplings are eaten by hand like locals do. Hold the top knot, bite the side to sip the broth first, then eat the rest. You leave the knot uneaten, it's how you count how many you've had.

Russian literary giants Pushkin and Lermontov also traveled this road. In 19th-century Russian literature, the Caucasus appeared as a land of romance and adventure. Pushkin wrote several works inspired by his travels in the region. Lermontov's novel *A Hero of Our Time* features vivid scenes of this landscape. The mountains and valleys they saw remain nearly unchanged today. The road is paved and cars run on it, but nature's grandeur endures.

B. Mount Kazbek, Where the Prometheus Myth Sleeps

As you approach the Military Highway's endpoint, a small village appears. Stepantsminda. During the Soviet era it was called Kazbegi, and many travelers still use that name. Its official name honors Saint Stephen, an Orthodox monk who performed ascetic practice in the region. This village of roughly 1,500 people sits at an elevation of 1,740 meters.

Arriving in the village, one thing immediately arrests your gaze. From anywhere in town, look up and you see a colossal mountain. Its white-crowned peak rises to pierce the sky. Mount Kazbek. At 5,047 meters, it is Georgia's third-highest peak and the seventh-highest in the entire Caucasus.

In Georgian the mountain is called Mkinvartsveri, meaning "ice mountain." Permanent snow and glaciers cover the upper reaches year-round. In morning sun on clear days, the mountain flushes rose-pink; at sunset it shifts from gold to violet. Locals also call it "The Bride of Khevi," Khevi being the region's name.

Mount Kazbek is a dormant volcano. Its last eruption is estimated to be in the 1890s. Crater marks still scar the upper slopes, and hot springs bubble forth in places. Geologists say the mountain is not completely asleep but may awaken someday. Yet that lies in the distant future. Now, in this moment, Kazbek stands serene and majestic, holding up the Caucasus sky.

An ancient myth dwells in this mountain. The story of Prometheus from Greco-Roman mythology. Prometheus was a Titan god who stole fire from the gods and gave it to humans. He gifted humanity the seeds of civilization. With fire, food can be cooked, cold staved off, tools forged. Because of his gift, humankind became something more than animals.

But Zeus grew furious. Giving mortals fire was unforgivable treason. Zeus bound Prometheus to a high rock in the Caucasus with chains. Each day he sent an eagle to peck at Prometheus's liver. At night the organ grew back. The next day the eagle returned. This torment was his eternal fate.

According to legend, the rock where Prometheus was chained is Mount Kazbek itself. Georgians call him Amirani. In Georgian myth, Amirani is a hero who defied the gods. He sided with humans and fought the gods, and for this he received eternal punishment. The

Georgian people do not see Amirani as merely mythological. He overlaps with their own history of resisting without yielding to powerful empires.

Somewhere high on the mountain lies Betlemi Cave, according to tradition. Legend says the cave holds Abraham's tent from scripture and the manger of Jesus. An iron door seals it, and "only the pure of heart can open it," they say. Records tell of monks who fled the world to perform ascetic practice in this cave for centuries. In fact, at roughly 3,650 meters sits Betlemi Hut, once a weather station. Today it serves as a base camp for climbers heading for the summit.

Mount Kazbek is a challenge for serious mountaineers. Called the "Pearl of the Caucasus," it was first summited in 1868 by a joint British and French expedition. Since then, hundreds of climbers attempt the summit each year. The route starting from Stepantsminda village, passing Gergeti Church and climbing to the glacier zone, is feasible for ordinary trekkers. It is not easy, though.

As elevation increases along the climbing route, the landscape transforms. At first, green meadows and wildflowers stretch before you, but gradually vegetation vanishes. Soon only black volcanic rock and white ice remain. It is desolate yet wondrous. Walking on glacier requires caution around crevasses, deep cracks often hidden under snow. Specialized equipment like crampons and ice axes is necessary, as is an experienced guide.

The ascent normally takes four to five days. One day from village to Betlemi Hut, one day round-trip from hut to summit, one day for descent. Bad weather extends it. The elevation gain of roughly 3,800 meters means you must prepare for altitude sickness. The best climbing season is July through September.

Mount Kazbek is famous for fickle weather. The village may be sunny while the summit is suddenly shrouded in clouds or battered by blizzard. Locals say "Kazbek is shy and rarely shows its face." Seeing the summit clearly on a fine day is considered lucky.

Spending a day in Stepantsminda watching the mountain is worthwhile. Morning clouds hide it, then it suddenly appears in the afternoon. Dusk is the most beautiful hour. As the western sky turns red, Kazbek's snowy peak shifts gold, then violet. Many travelers wait on cafe and guesthouse terraces to witness this moment.

The village's most famous lodging is Rooms Hotel Kazbegi, a Soviet-era tourist hotel renovated in contemporary style. It features large windows overlooking the mountain, an outdoor pool, and spa facilities. Pricey, but you get an exclusive view of Kazbek. Budget-conscious travelers can stay at guesthouses run by local families, where you taste Georgian home cooking and experience local culture through conversation with the owners.

Recommended foods are khinkali and khachapuri. Mountain khinkali is juicier and more heavily spiced than lowland versions. Khachapuri is cheese-filled flatbread; here the popular version is Adjarian style topped with butter and an egg. Locals accompany meals with chacha, a grape spirit of high proof. Drink with care.

Whether Prometheus was truly chained to this mountain is unknowable. Myth is myth. Yet standing before Kazbek, you grasp why such stories arose. The peak's jagged rock and permanent ice form a face like a giant suffering yet unbowed. The hero who defied gods and suffered eternal punishment without regret, that story

may have been one that people living in the shadow of this harsh mountain told themselves.

C. Gergeti Trinity Church Above the Clouds

The highlight of any Kazbegi visit is unquestionably Gergeti Trinity Church. Standing alone on a steep hill at 2,170 meters elevation, this small church has become Georgia's defining symbol. It appears on the logo of Georgia's tourism board, wine bottle labels, and postcards in gift shops. Asked to explain Georgia in a single photograph, most people would think of this church.

The church was built in the 14th century. No precise construction date survives in records. In Georgian it is called Tsminda Sameba, meaning "Holy Trinity." Gergeti is the name of the village below the church. Hence the name Gergeti Trinity Church.

There is a reason why this church was built in such a high and treacherous place. Historically, Georgia has faced relentless invasions from foreign powers. The Mongols, Persians, and Ottoman Empire took turns trampling this land. Whenever enemies attacked, Georgians had to hide their nation's most precious treasures somewhere,

That place was exactly here. They moved sacred relics to this high location where humans could scarcely reach.

When the capital Tbilisi and the ancient capital Mtskheta faced danger, there are records that the most sacred relic of the Georgian Orthodox Church, the Cross of Saint Nino, was moved to this church. Saint Nino, who brought Christianity to Georgia in the fourth century, is like the mother of the nation to Georgians. Her cross is said to have been made from a grapevine branch, and it is the most precious relic of the Georgian Orthodox Church. This church was both a space of faith and a treasury of national treasures.

During the Soviet era, religious activity was forbidden. Many churches were destroyed or converted to other purposes. However, Gergeti Church survived because of its harsh location. It was a place where the authorities' reach could hardly extend. After the Soviet Union collapsed and Georgia became independent, the church came back to life. Today, regular services are held here, and pilgrims' footsteps never cease.

There are two ways to reach the church. First, you can walk up from the village of Stepantsminda. The distance from the village square to the church is about three kilometers, with an elevation gain of about five hundred meters. A steep uphill path continues. Depending on your fitness level, it takes roughly one hour and thirty minutes to two hours.

The hiking route splits into two paths. One is a steep direct route climbing the shortest distance, while the other winds around for a gentler ascent. If you are confident in your fitness, you can choose the steep path. The view from the climb is the reward. You pass through forests, cross meadows, and watch the church grow closer as you ascend. This journey itself is a pilgrimage experience. Trekking poles are helpful.

Second, you can drive up. Four-wheel-drive minivans called Delicas wait for travelers at the village square. In the past, the journey up the unpaved cliff road was both frightening and thrilling. The steep slopes where the vehicle seemed ready to tip, the vast cliffs visible beside the wheels, all of this was an attraction. However, in recent years the road has been paved, making access much easier. Now you can reach it even by regular taxi. The one-way fare varies by negotiation but costs roughly 20-30 lari (about 8,000-12,000 won).

Whichever way you choose, the moment you stand in the church courtyard, your breath stops. Turn around, and the eternal snow of Mount Kazbek seems close enough to touch. On clear days, the white peak stands in sharp contrast against the blue sky. Looking forward, the village of Stepantsminda lies below like a toy. When clouds hang low, the village hides beneath them while the church alone seems to float above the clouds. You realize the nickname 'the church closest to heaven' is no exaggeration.

The church building itself is humble. There are no lavish decorations. Rough stone walls, small windows, a round dome roof. Without electricity, the interior is dim. Only candlelight flickers softly, and old frescoes and icons hang on the walls, blackened by soot. In this darkness, far from grandeur, a reverent atmosphere is felt instead. The weight of prayers and silence held within stone walls that have endured more than six hundred years seems to pass through you.

If you climb a little higher on the hill behind the church, you reach a photo spot. From here you can capture both the church building and Mount Kazbek in one frame. That famous photo you saw on the internet was taken right here. Late afternoon on a clear day, when the sun begins to set from the west, is the best time for photography. Light enters the church, while the mountain behind casts an appropriate shadow.

Looking around the church, you see traces of old bell towers and fortress walls, as well as graves. These are remnants of monks who spent their lives in spiritual practice here. On windy days, the wind sounds like a hymn. Standing here and spending time, you begin to understand why people built this church in such a harsh place and have preserved it. This is not a simple building. It is a symbol of the Georgian people's faith and resilience.

D. A Complete Guide to Juta Valley Trekking

Once you have experienced the grandeur of Kazbegi, it is time to seek another kind of beauty. About thirty to forty minutes by car from Stepantsminda village lies a small village called Juta, which is the starting point for Juta Valley trekking. Known as 'Georgia's Dolomites,' this place offers delicate and lyrical mountain scenery different from Kazbegi's magnificence.

Juta village is located at an elevation of about two thousand two hundred meters. It is one of the highest inhabited places in Europe. In winter, heavy snow falls and the village is cut off from the outside world for six to seven months. When roads are blocked, villagers must live in isolation until spring arrives. Because of this, the natural landscape here is preserved in its primordial form.

There is no public transportation from Stepantsminda to Juta. You must charter a taxi or four-wheel-drive vehicle. You can negotiate with a driver at the village square. It is best to agree on the round-trip cost and waiting time in advance. Usually the driver waits at Juta village parking lot for five to six hours and then returns. The price varies by negotiation but costs roughly 100-150 lari (about 40,000-60,000 won).

Some sections of the road are in poor condition, and after rain the road can become impassable. In such cases, you must get out and walk for about an hour to reach the village. While this may seem inconvenient, the landscape you see while walking this path is quite beautiful. As you follow the path through meadows, you can see horses and herds of cattle grazing.

Once you arrive at Juta village, the trekking begins. From the village entrance, serious mountain hiking starts. The first twenty to thirty minutes are steep uphill. Just when your breath reaches your throat, the view opens up and a peaceful landscape appears. Then you see a mountain lodge. It is a lodge hotel and café called Fifth Season.

A cup of coffee sipped on the terrace of Fifth Season while gazing at the Chaukhi Massif is the highlight of Juta trekking. Sharply peaked rocky summits surround you like a folding screen. Because of this landscape, this place is called 'Georgia's Dolomites', compared to the Dolomite Mountains in Italy. Many travelers are so captivated by the scenery here that they simply sit and enjoy the view without continuing further.

Serious trekking begins after passing Fifth Season. From here, the slope becomes gentle. Lush green meadows with profuse wildflowers and clear valley streams flow together. In summer, yellow rhododendrons and various wildflowers bloom in abundance. Along the path, you commonly see horses and cattle herds grazing. It is a fairy-tale landscape where you might imagine Heidi living in the Alps.

After walking on level ground for about one to one and a half hours, you reach a small lake. This is Chaukhi Lake, also called Tin Lake. Created by melting glaciers, this lake shimmers with an emerald hue. Located directly below the massive Chaukhi rock face, it boasts a majestic backdrop. Even in July the water is so cold your hands tingle, but brave trekkers sometimes swim here.

The basic round-trip route from Juta village to Chaukhi Lake takes three to four hours total. The difficulty level is intermediate. Once you conquer the steep uphill section at the beginning to Fifth

Season, most of the route is level, so beginners and families can enjoy it easily. No special equipment is needed. Sturdy athletic shoes are sufficient.

If you have stamina and experience, you can go farther. Continuing past Chaukhi Lake, you reach Chaukhi Pass at an elevation of three thousand three hundred thirty-eight meters. Crossing this pass leads to a two-day, one-night route to a village called Roshka. The highlight of this route is Abudelaurei Lakes. Three lakes each display different colors.

Green, blue, white. The mystical water colors created by melting glaciers create a fantastic atmosphere in contrast with the surrounding gray rocks. This route is difficult and easy to get lost, so you should go with an experienced guide or carry GPS equipment.

The best season for Juta Valley trekking is from June through late September. From October onward, snow begins to fall, making access difficult or dangerous. Mountain lodges close for winter. Often the village itself becomes inaccessible because the road is blocked.

For trekking preparation, warm outer layers are essential. The weather in mountainous areas changes rapidly. Even on clear days, clouds can suddenly roll in and rain can fall. You need wind protection or a raincoat. There is almost no shade to protect you from the sun, so sunglasses and sunscreen are necessary. There are no shops along the route, so bring water and simple provisions.

Besides Fifth Season, there are mountain lodges and campsites like Zeta Camp within Juta Valley. If you want to enjoy nature without rushing and have time to spare, spending a night here is recommended. At night, without city lights, stars pour down. You can see the Milky Way with the naked eye. The sight of the Chaukhi Massif turning red at dawn is a privilege reserved for those who stay overnight.

Juta Valley is a place where you escape the noise of civilization and find only the sound of wind and water, with nature's overwhelming presence. If you wish to encounter Georgia's mountains in their delicate and lyrical beauty, different from Kazbegi's grandeur, this place is not a choice but a necessity. Walk across the meadows, then turn around, and suddenly the rocky peaks of Chaukhi pierce the sky. In that moment, you understand why people make the journey to this distant place.

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Chapter 5: Western Georgia: The Black Sea and Medieval Towers

A Journey Through Georgia's History and Culture

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As you turn your footsteps toward the west of Georgia, an entirely different world unfolds. Unlike the dry highlands of the east, here humid winds from the Black Sea blow in and subtropical plants grow luxuriantly. The Caucasus Mountains become higher and more rugged still, and in their deep valleys lie villages where time from a thousand years ago remains frozen. Western Georgia is a land where brilliant seaside cities, ancient cave monasteries, and medieval tower villages coexist. In this chapter, we encounter in turn Batumi, the Black Sea's Las Vegas, Svaneti's mountain villages where time has stopped, the mythic city of Kutaisi, and Varzia, a miracle carved into the cliffs.

A. Batumi, the Black Sea's Las Vegas and the Ali-Nino Statue

(1) A City of Relaxation Embraced by the Black Sea

In the southwestern corner of Georgia, just twenty kilometers from the Turkish border, lies Batumi. As the capital of the Adjara Autonomous Republic and Georgia's second-largest port city, it presents a face entirely different from the classical atmosphere of Tbilisi. People call Batumi the 'Black Sea's Las Vegas' or 'Mini Dubai'.

Standing along Batumi's coast, geometric and forward-looking towers unfold before your eyes. The Alphabetic Tower, 130 meters high and modeled on the DNA double helix structure, first captures your attention. The sight of Georgia's unique thirty-three letters wrapping around and climbing up the tower's exterior expresses the Georgian people's pride in their language in contemporary form. At the tower's summit stand an observation deck and a rotating restaurant where you can take in views of the Black Sea and the city skyline at a glance.

The Batumi Tower presents an even more peculiar appearance. This 200-meter structure has a functioning Ferris wheel embedded in its upper exterior. The experience of riding the wheel on the building's outer wall while looking down at the sea is difficult to find anywhere else in the world. Originally built as a technical university, it now operates as a hotel and casino.

There is a reason for Batumi's transformation into such a dazzling place. In Georgia, only a handful of regions permit casinos, and Batumi is one of them. Wealthy people from Turkey, Iran, and Armenia, where gambling is prohibited, stream across the border every weekend. When night falls, casinos along the coast illuminate their brilliant neon signs, and the streets bustle with languages from many nations.

(2) A Seven-Kilometer Seaside Promenade

The Batumi Boulevard is a roughly seven-kilometer seaside promenade created in the late nineteenth century. This tree-lined path, bordered by palms, bamboo, magnolias, and eucalyptus, is part of the daily life of Batumi's residents.

In the mornings, joggers fill it; in the evenings, couples and families out for walks crowd the path.

As you walk along the promenade, unique sculptures stand throughout. A colossal bicycle-shaped structure, a statue of hands reaching toward the sea, bronze figures playing instruments. As evening falls, a fountain show dances to music, and colorful lights paint the Black Sea's waves.

I met a young man named Giorgi who runs a bicycle rental shop in Batumi. He shared stories of the Soviet era. "According to my grandfather, Batumi was a resort even during Soviet times. People from Moscow and Leningrad came here every summer. It wasn't as brilliant as it is now, but the Black Sea wind and subtropical climate were just the same." He added while oiling a bicycle wheel, "Now many Turkish people come. The border is close, after all. On weekends, cars line up to cross over."

(3) Ali and Nino, Love's Tragedy in Motion

At the far end of Batumi's seaside promenade stands the city's most famous and most sorrowful sculpture. The Ali and Nino statue. Two figures standing eight meters tall, constructed of thin metal plates, appear like skeletons stripped to bone. Georgian sculptor Tamara Kvesitadze created this statue in 2010.

The statue's inspiration comes from a novel of the same name published in 1937 under the pen name Kurban Said. Set in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan in the early twentieth century, the novel tells the story of love between Ali, a young Muslim aristocrat, and Nino, a Georgian Christian princess.

Though the two fall in love across religious and cultural boundaries, they meet a tragic fate in the turmoil of Bolshevik revolution and war.

What makes the statue special is that it is not still. Every evening at seven o'clock, the two figures begin to move slowly. They approach each other, draw closer and closer, and finally overlap as if kissing. Yet because both are made of metal sheets, they cannot embrace. They pass through each other's bodies and slowly move apart again. This ten-minute movement, touching in one moment only to separate, visually shows the human fate of repeated meeting and parting.

Watching this 'dance of love' against the backdrop of the Black Sea sunset is a highlight of a Batumi visit. People always gather in front of the statue. Lovers stand hand in hand, photographers bustle about seeking the perfect angle. When the two figures come together, gasps of wonder ring out from all sides.

(4) Adjarauli Khachapuri and the Flavors of Batumi

There is a dish you must taste in Batumi: Adjarauli Khachapuri. Bread baked in the shape of a boat is filled with melted cheese and butter, topped with a soft-boiled egg. The way to eat it is this: while hot, break the egg yolk and mix it with the cheese and butter, then tear off the bread's sides and dip them

in the sauce.

When I first tasted this dish at a small restaurant in Batumi's old town, a local sitting beside me explained its origins. "Batumi is a port city, you see. There were many sailors. The bread was shaped like a boat for that reason. The egg yolk in the middle is the sun rising over the sea." He said this while tearing the bread's edge. "This food is actually meant to be eaten in the morning. You need to fill your belly properly before boarding a ship. But tourists eat it any time, lunch, dinner, whenever."

(5) Batumi Botanical Garden and Gonio Fortress

Behind the city's brilliance breathes quiet nature and history. Nine kilometers north of Batumi's center lies the Batumi Botanical Garden, also called the 'Green Cape'. Situated on a steep cliff overlooking the Black Sea, this garden spans more than one hundred hectares and grows thousands of plant species from nine different climate zones around the world.

Founded in 1912 by Russian botanist Andrei Krasnov, this botanical garden boasts more than a hundred years of history. Japanese gardens, Australian zones, Mexican cactus sections, and Himalayan regions unfold in sequence; as you walk the paths, the Black Sea comes into view below you. It is a green paradise created by Batumi's humid subtropical climate.

Traveling fifteen kilometers in the opposite direction, to the south, you reach Gonio Fortress. Existing since the first century before the Common Era, this fortress served as the eastern defensive line of the Roman Empire. Within its thick walls lie layered remains from Roman and Byzantine periods. Legend has it that the tomb of Matthias, one of the twelve apostles mentioned in scripture, rests here. Thus Batumi is a city where casino glamour and two thousand years of ancient history coexist.

B. Svaneti, the Village Where Time Stands Still, Guarded by Koshki Towers

(1) A Hidden Treasure of the Caucasus

Turning northeast from Batumi and beginning to climb the mountain roads, the landscape changes entirely. The subtropical coast's palms vanish, and coniferous forests and snow-capped peaks appear. After hours of winding mountain roads, you arrive at Svaneti, Europe's most isolated and mysterious mountain region.

Svaneti sits nestled in the deep heart of the Great Caucasus range. Surrounded like a folding screen by peaks reaching three to five thousand meters in elevation, this region's rugged terrain historically protected it from invasion by outside powers. The Mongol Empire, the Ottoman Empire, and the Persian Empire all failed to conquer Svaneti across these forbidding mountains. As a result, ancient customs, languages, and architectural styles that have vanished elsewhere in Georgia remain vibrantly alive here.

The people living in Svaneti are called Svans, a branch of Georgians who speak their own language, Svan. Though Svan shares roots with Georgian, it differs so greatly that residents of Tbilisi cannot understand it. Traditionally known as valiant warriors and skilled hunters, the Svans live in a place

where Georgia's culture of hospitality, where guests are regarded as 'gifts sent by God', is best preserved.

(2) Koshki, Medieval Skyscrapers Built for Survival

What dominates Svaneti's landscape are stone towers rising throughout the villages. Called 'koshki' in Georgian, these towers were built between the ninth and thirteenth centuries. Dozens of rectangular stone towers, twenty to thirty meters tall, stand in each village. From a distance, they resemble a forest of medieval skyscrapers.

These towers were not mere dwellings. They were fortifications against invasions from outside powers such as the Mongols or Persians, and refuges to protect families from avalanches in winter. Yet their most important purpose was different: defending families from blood feuds between neighboring clans. In Svan society, when someone was killed, the victim's family had the right to exact revenge on the perpetrator's family. These cycles of vengeance sometimes spanned generations. Thus each clan built its own defensive tower, retreating there when danger threatened.

Examining a tower's structure reveals its purpose clearly. Typically four to five stories tall, the first floor was space for livestock, the second housed the family, and the upper levels served as grain storage and defensive ramparts. The entrance was several meters above ground and could not be entered without a ladder. When enemies attacked, families climbed up, kicked away the ladder, and defended themselves by dropping stones or pouring hot water through narrow gun ports.

A guide named Levan I met in Mestia said his own family owned a four-hundred-year-old koshki. "Of course, there is no revenge now. But the tower remains a symbol of our clan. The taller and more sturdy the tower, the higher the clan's prestige." He told me how his grandfather would light fires every night from the tower's top to signal other villages. "Before telephones existed, the tower was a means of communication too. When signal fires were lit, other villages answered with fires of their own."

(3) Mestia, the Gateway to Svaneti

The starting point for a Svaneti journey is Mestia, a small village at an elevation of 1,500 meters with about twenty-five hundred residents. It takes one hour by plane from Tbilisi, or four to five hours by four-wheel-drive vehicle from Kutaisi. The roads are rough and narrow, often blocked by snow in winter.

Upon entering Mestia, you see more than thirty koshki towers standing throughout the village. Ancient stone towers and modern guesthouses coexist in an uncanny harmony. The Svaneti Museum of History and Ethnography, located at the village center, is a must-see. Gold and silver repoussé gospels made between the ninth and twelfth centuries, ancient coins, weapons, and traditional garments are on display. Because Svaneti was isolated from the outside world, Georgia's treasures, items that were looted or destroyed in other regions, were safely preserved here.

The Margiani House-Museum allows you to experience the interior of a traditional Svan house and koshki tower firsthand. An elderly woman named Machini shares stories passed down through her family. "My clan built this tower in the thirteenth century. Just thirty years ago, my grandfather still lived here. When heavy snows came in winter, the whole village became isolated, and we survived on provisions stored inside the tower."

(4) Ushguli, One of Europe's Highest Villages

Venturing deeper into the mountains from Mestia, you reach Ushguli, the highlight of a Svaneti journey. You must drive two to three hours on unpaved mountain roads in a four-wheel-drive vehicle. You cross rivers, pass alongside cliffs, and sometimes the vehicle forges through water where the road has washed away. The landscape revealed at the end of this arduous journey leaves you speechless.

Located at elevations of 2,100 to 2,200 meters, Ushguli is known as one of Europe's highest villages with year-round human habitation. Mount Shkhara, Georgia's highest peak at 5,193 meters, rises majestically just behind the village, and glaciers flow down from peaks covered in eternal snow. Before this majestic backdrop, about twenty ancient towers cluster together. A jade-green river runs through the village,

cattle and horses graze, and children run along narrow stone paths. It is a landscape of almost surreal beauty.

Ushguli is covered in snow for more than six months of the year, leaving it completely isolated from the outside world. Because of this, the people here have been able to preserve Svan culture in its purest form. The Lamaria Church, located on a hill in the village, is a small chapel built in the tenth century. Faded frescoes remain barely visible inside. According to legend, Queen Tamar, who led Georgia's golden age, spent her summers in the tower here to escape the heat. Even now, eight hundred years later, the residents speak of Queen Tamar as if she were a neighbor who lived just yesterday.

(5) Trekking and Svan Cuisine

Svaneti is a paradise for trekkers. The four-day trekking route from Mestia to Ushguli is famous worldwide. This route, which crosses glacial valleys, flower-filled meadows, and perpetual snow peaks, is considered the essence of Caucasus trekking. For a single-day trek, I recommend heading to Chalaadi Glacier or Koruldi Lakes.

When you come to Svaneti, you must taste the traditional food. Kubdari is the signature dish of Svaneti. Ground beef or pork is seasoned with Svan salt and spices, then baked inside thick bread. Created to restore energy in the harsh mountain environment, it has a rich and satisfying flavor. Svan salt is a local specialty found only in this region, made by mixing garlic and various herbs. It brings out the taste of any dish it seasons.

When I had dinner at a small guesthouse in Mestia, the owner's wife brought Kubdari along with Chacha. Chacha, Georgia's traditional spirit, is made from fermented grapes and has an alcohol content exceeding fifty percent. "We Svan people warm our bodies with this during winter. When the snow piles up to our waists and we cannot leave the tower, a glass of Chacha makes the cold disappear completely." The woman smiled as she poured another glass.

2. Kutaisi and Prometheus Cave

(1) The Land of the Golden Fleece Myth

Kutaisi, the central city of western Georgia, is the most important city after the capital Tbilisi. This city of approximately one hundred forty thousand people is one of the oldest cities in the world, with a history of habitation dating back to ancient times. It is located about two hundred twenty kilometers west of Tbilisi, roughly four hours by car. From Batumi, you can arrive in three hours heading north. Because many budget airlines operate at Kutaisi International Airport, travelers coming from Europe often enter Georgia through this airport.

Kutaisi's history traces back to Greek mythology. According to ancient Greek legend, the capital of the Kingdom of Colchis, which the hero Jason and the Argonauts visited in search of the Golden Fleece, is believed to have been located here. Medea, the princess of Colchis, helped Jason steal the Golden Fleece and fled with him. This myth may not be merely a legend. In ancient western Georgia, gold was actually extracted using sheepskin. The gold filtered into the sheepskin glistened in the sunlight, and this is said to have become the origin of the 'Golden Fleece' legend.

In the central square of Kutaisi stands the Colchis Fountain. Bronze statues created by enlarging golden ornaments excavated from ancient Colchis ruins stand on top of the fountain. Animal forms including horses, deer, lions, and oxen gleam with a golden hue, symbolically showing that this place was once a 'land of gold.'

(2) Bagrati Cathedral and Gelati Monastery

Bagrati Cathedral stands on a hilltop overlooking the entire city of Kutaisi. Built in the early eleventh century by Bagrat III, who unified Georgia, this cathedral is considered a masterpiece of medieval Georgian architecture. The emerald-green roof and grand dome are striking. Standing in front of the cathedral, the panoramic view of the Rioni River cutting through the city and the cityscape of Kutaisi unfolds like a postcard.

Bagrati Cathedral has a painful history. Destroyed largely by Ottoman attacks in the seventeenth century, it lay in ruins for hundreds of years. UNESCO inscribed this ruined cathedral as a World Cultural Heritage site. However, in 2012, the Georgian government decided to fully restore the cathedral, using modern materials such as steel and glass during the restoration process. UNESCO determined that this compromised the original historical authenticity and removed Bagrati Cathedral from the World Heritage list. Although there is debate, the restored cathedral's magnificent appearance and its value as a viewpoint overlooking the city remain considerable.

About ten kilometers east of Kutaisi city lies Gelati Monastery. Founded in the early twelfth century by David the Builder, one of the greatest rulers in Georgian history, this monastery was far more than a mere religious facility; it was the center of medieval learning and art. An academy that researched philosophy, theology, science, and astronomy was located here, and Georgia's finest scholars gathered. Gelati Monastery was called the 'Second Athens.'

Inside the monastery are elaborate mosaics and frescoes created in the twelfth century. Faces of saints, biblical stories, and geometric patterns cover the ceiling and walls completely, overwhelming the eye. The tomb of David the Builder is also here. He requested that his tomb be placed beneath the monastery's front gate so that everyone who came to visit would walk over his grave. Unlike Bagrati Cathedral, Gelati Monastery remains inscribed as a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage site.

(3) Prometheus Cave: Mystery of the Underground World

Another highlight of visiting Kutaisi is Prometheus Cave, an underground palace carved by nature over tens of thousands of years. It is located about twenty kilometers west of Kutaisi, near a small hot spring village called Tskaltubo. Discovered in 1984, this cave received its name from its proximity to a mountain associated with the legend of Prometheus from Greek mythology.

The cave is located near Khvamli Mountain, which carries the legend of Prometheus bound as punishment by Zeus, and thus gained its name.

Prometheus is a Titan who stole fire from the gods and gave it to humanity. In anger, Zeus bound him with chains to a rock in the Caucasus mountain range, and every day an eagle would devour his liver. At night his liver would grow back, and the next day the eagle would return to consume it again, a suffering repeated eternally. The stage for this legend is somewhere in this Caucasus mountain range. This is why the cave bears Prometheus's name.

The cave's total length is about eleven kilometers, but the section open to tourists is approximately one point four kilometers. The walk takes about one hour. Since the cave maintains a cool temperature of fourteen to fifteen degrees Celsius year-round, it is wise to bring long sleeves even in summer.

Upon entering the cave, a bizarre and beautiful world sculpted over tens of thousands of years unfolds. Stalactites hanging from the ceiling, stalagmites rising from the floor, and where they meet forming columns stretch endlessly. Some drape like curtains, and others stand like fortresses. The cave management authorities have installed colorful LED lights on these natural sculptures. When blue, purple, green, and orange lights illuminate the stalactites and stalagmites, it feels as though you have entered an underground palace from a fantasy film. Soft classical music plays in the background, adding to the mysterious atmosphere.

The highlight of the cave tour arrives at the end. You exit by boat along an underground river flowing inside the cave. In the darkness, you board a small boat and move slowly along the water's course. Stalactites hang overhead, and rocks illuminated by fluorescent lights shimmer in the water below. It feels like crossing the River Styx into the underground world of Hades from Greek mythology. A light

appears in the distance, and the moment the boat emerges from the cave brings a sense of liberation you will never forget.

(4) A Day in Kutaisi

Kutaisi is a city where you can visit the major sights in a single day. In the morning, visit Gelati Monastery, return to the city for lunch. In the afternoon, explore Prometheus Cave, and in the evening, take a walk along the Rioni riverbank on the 'White Bridge.' The White Bridge is a pedestrian-only bridge built in the nineteenth century, where couples gather in the evening to gaze at the lights reflected in the river.

The dish you must taste in Kutaisi is Imereti Khachapuri. Unlike the boat-shaped Adjarian Khachapuri from Batumi with an egg on top, Imereti Khachapuri is round bread filled entirely with cheese. The outside is crispy while the cheese inside stretches. Georgians take pride in saying that cheese from the Imereti region tastes the best.

The Kutaisi Central Market, known as the Kutaisi Green Bazaar, is a place where you can glimpse the daily lives of locals. Fresh fruits, vegetables, cheese, spices, dried fruits, and nuts pile high. Vendors constantly offer samples saying "taste this." It is difficult to leave without buying something.

3. Vardzia: The Majesty of a Cave City Carved into Cliffs

(1) The Cliff Where Prometheus Was Bound

In southern Georgia, not far from the Turkish border, stands Vardzia. It is about two hundred kilometers south of Kutaisi, roughly four hours by car. Passing through a city called Akhaltsikhe and continuing for about an hour along a narrow mountain road, the steep cliff of Erusheti Mountain appears. Hundreds of holes, like a honeycomb, are carved into that entire cliff face. That is Vardzia.

Vardzia was constructed in the late twelfth century during the reign of George III and his daughter Queen Tamar, who led Georgia's golden age. Originally a secret fortress city built to counter foreign invasions from the Mongols and Persians. The entire city was hidden inside the cliff so as to remain hidden from enemy eyes. From the outside, it appeared to be merely a steep cliff, and there was no way to know that a city capable of housing tens of thousands of people existed within.

I cannot forget the shock when Vardzia first came into my view. As I drove along a desolate gorge, my view suddenly opened wide, and an enormous cliff face entirely carved by human hands was revealed. It was as if a giant had cut a mountain with a sword. It is difficult to believe how people eight hundred years ago created something like this.

(2) An Impregnable Fortress That Sheltered Fifty Thousand

Vardzia at its height was of unimaginable scale. More than six thousand rooms were carved into a cliff thirteen stories tall. It is said that it could accommodate a maximum of fifty thousand people. It was not merely a refuge but a completely self-sufficient city. It possessed residential spaces, churches, libraries, pharmacies, bakeries, wine storage cellars known as marani, and an irrigation

channel system hundreds of meters long. It was designed so that it could withstand a siege by enemies for several months.

The caves were connected by a complex network of tunnels and stairs. Inside, one could move through the labyrinthine passageways, and there were several secret escape routes. If an enemy invaded, they would certainly become lost without knowing the internal structure. Small ventilation shafts and windows letting in light were carved into the walls, allowing people to breathe and light fires even in the deepest caves.

However, in 1283, a major earthquake revealed this secret city to the world. When the front part of the cliff collapsed from the earthquake, the previously hidden cave cross-sections became exposed to the outside. Two-thirds of the mountain is said to have collapsed. Having lost its function as a fortress, Vardzia subsequently transformed into a vast cave monastery. What remains today is only a portion of its original scale, but that alone is enough to fill one with wonder at the miracle created by human will.

(3) Queen Tamar's Fresco

At the center of Vardzia stands the Church of the Dormition of the Mother of God. This church, nestled deep within the cliff, was the spiritual center of Vardzia. Upon entering, faint frescoes from eight hundred years ago remain on the walls and ceiling. The faces of saints, biblical stories, and most precious of all, are murals depicting Queen Tamar as she appeared in life.

Queen Tamar is venerated as the greatest ruler in Georgian history. From 1184 to 1213, for approximately thirty years, she ruled Georgia, expanding the territory from the Black Sea to the Caspian Sea and leading a golden age of culture and art. During her reign, Georgia was the most powerful nation in the entire Caucasus. The fresco shows Queen Tamar as young and beautiful. It depicts her during her unmarried years, wearing a crown and gazing forward. There are few places throughout Georgia where one can see Queen Tamar's likeness from her lifetime.

There is an amusing legend about the origin of the name Vardzia. Young Princess Tamar came to the construction site with her uncle and became lost inside a cave. As her uncle searched desperately, she called out "Aq var, dzia." In Georgian, this means "Uncle, I am here." This cry later became the name of this place.

(4) A Living Monastery

Today, a small number of monks still live in Vardzia. Continuing the tradition of the cave monastery, they ring the bell every morning at seven o'clock. When the bell sound echoes through the desolate gorge, it feels as though time has rewound to eight hundred years ago.

When visiting Vardzia, you should wear comfortable shoes. The trail follows the cliff, ascending and descending with narrow passages and steep stairs. Some sections are dark and have low ceilings, requiring a flashlight. It takes one to two hours to tour the entire site.

At the entrance to Varzia, I met a caretaker named Giorgi who said he had worked there for over thirty years. 'I've played here since I was a child. I know every corner of the cave like the back of my hand.' He said the best time for him was when he could walk through the caves alone, without tourists. 'At dawn, when the sun rises, the light strikes the cliff and seeps into the cave. At that moment, I imagine what people eight hundred years ago thought when they saw this light. Did they too know this beauty?'

(5) Desolate Beauty

The landscape around Varzia is desolate. There are almost no trees, and brown hills stretch endlessly. Below the cliff, the Kura River (Mtkvari River) flows peacefully. This river passes through Tbilisi and flows into the Caspian Sea. Standing at the railing at the cliff's edge and looking down into the gorge, you hear nothing but the sound of wind and birds. In this silence, you feel the longing of the people who tried to defend this place eight hundred years ago.

Not far from Varzia, there is the Vanisis cave monastery. Though smaller than Varzia, it can be explored peacefully since there are fewer tourists. On the way back to Akhaltsikhe, it is also worthwhile to visit Rabati Castle. Built during the Ottoman era, this fortress was recently restored and is a unique space where a mosque, a church, and a museum coexist.

Varzia is not merely a historical site. It is a grand monument symbolizing the resilient spirit of Georgians who did not surrender even in the midst of turbulent history. In each of the thousands of holes carved into the cliff, you can sense their sweat, prayers, and tears. As you leave Varzia and look back, the cliff, reddened by the setting sun, seems to be bidding you farewell. This magnificent landscape will be one of the scenes that remains longest in your memory from a journey through Georgia.

Western Georgia has many faces in this way. Batumi's vibrant nightlife and modern architecture, Svaneti's mountain villages frozen in time, Kutaisi's ancient myths and underground caves, Varzia's miracles carved into cliffs. All of this lies within a few hours' drive. Traveling through western Georgia is like walking through several centuries at the same time.

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Chapter 6: Practical Travel Notes

A Journey Through Georgia's History and Culture

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A. Recommended Itineraries for One Week and Two Weeks

Georgia is only about 70 percent the size of South Korea. Yet once you begin traveling, you discover how vast this small land can feel. Winding mountain roads stretch endlessly, and at every village, landscapes worth lingering for unfold before you. A guesthouse owner in Tbilisi once told me: "On a map, Georgia looks like you could see it all in a day. In reality, even a month is not enough. Our land has a gift for consuming time."

Travelers quickly learn he spoke no exaggeration. Moving about Georgia is not simply going from point A to point B. Everything you encounter becomes part of your journey. You exchange glances with shepherds driving flocks along the roadside, stop the car before an emerald-blue reservoir that suddenly appears, and find yourself drawn into a village bakery by the aroma of freshly baked Shotis Puri bread.

(1) One-Week Itinerary: Passing Through the Heart of Georgia

One week is enough time to taste the essence of Georgia. The "Golden Triangle" route, which connects the capital Tbilisi with the vast mountain range to the north and the wine region to the east, proves most practical. This course represents a classic of Georgia travel and is an essential path any first-time visitor must follow.

Days One and Two: Tbilisi, Embraced by an Ancient City

Upon landing at Tbilisi International Airport, the first rule is to avoid hurrying. The journey from airport to city center takes about 40 minutes by bus number 37. Using the taxi app Bolt offers a somewhat more convenient option. Once you settle into your accommodation, head toward the Old Town.

Narikala Fortress, built in the fourth century, opens the entire city of Tbilisi beneath your feet when reached by cable car. The Kura River cuts across the city, and houses with red roofs cling tightly along the hillsides. Just beside the fortress stands the "Mother of Georgia" statue, Kartlis Deda. One hand holds a sword to strike down enemies; the other holds a wine cup to welcome guests. This statue captures the essence of the Georgian character: endlessly warm to friends, never yielding before enemies.

Walking through the narrow lanes of the Old Town, you arrive at Abanotubani, the sulfur bath district. Round brick domes rise from the ground in a row, and beneath them, hot sulfur spring water flows

forth. According to legend, in the fifth century, King Vakhtang Gorgasali saw a hawk chasing a pheasant fall into these springs and emerge healed. Witnessing this miracle, he built the capital here.

The name Tbilisi itself comes from the Georgian word "Tbili," which means "warm."

On day two, visit Mtskheta, a 20-minute drive from Tbilisi. This ancient capital of Georgia stands as the center of Christian history. From the Jvari Monastery perched on a hilltop, you witness the magnificent confluence of the Kura River and the Aragvi River. The waters flow in different colors, creating a distinct boundary line at their meeting point. Svetitskhoveli Cathedral, believed to hold the robe of Jesus Christ, stands as the holiest shrine for Georgian Orthodox believers.

Days Three and Four: Kazbegi, the Path to the Mountain of Gods

On the morning of day three, head north. The Georgian Military Highway was a strategic road built by the Russian Empire in the nineteenth century. This route, running from Tbilisi to the Russian border, passes through the most beautiful section of the Caucasus mountain range.

About an hour after departure, Ananuri Fortress appears. This fortress standing beside the emerald-colored Zhinvali Reservoir was the site of power struggles among feudal lords in the seventeenth century. Within its walls, two churches contain delicate carved ornaments.

Climbing higher, you reach Gudauri. In winter, the ski resort bustles with visitors, but during other seasons, it remains a quiet mountain village. The Russia-Georgia Friendship Monument here stands on a peak at 2,170 meters elevation, a massive circular tile mural built during the Soviet era. Ironically, the two nations fought a war in 2008. The valley view from the overlook takes your breath away.

Arriving at your destination, Stepantsminda, formerly called Kazbegi, you see the perpetual snows of Mount Kazbek rising behind the village. This 5,047-meter peak is believed in Greek mythology to be where Prometheus was chained. It is the very mountain where, for bringing fire to humankind, he was condemned to have an eagle devour his liver.

On the morning of day four, head toward Gergeti Trinity Church. You can trek for about two hours from the village or drive up in a four-wheel-drive vehicle. This fourteenth-century church standing alone at 2,170 meters is among Georgia's most iconic images. On clear days, Mount Kazbek's glacier shines behind the church.

If you have the stamina, it is worth venturing toward Juta Valley. Called "Georgia's Dolomites," the Chaukhi Massif spreads like a folding screen across the landscape. The trekking course here is relatively gentle, accessible even to beginners.

Days Five and Six: Kakheti, the Birthplace of Wine

On day five, turn east and move into the Kakheti region. This is the birthplace of 8,000 years of wine history. Vineyards stretch endlessly along the Alazani Valley, where large and small wineries await visitors.

Sighnaghi is a small town with the nickname "City of Love." A marriage registration office that operates 24 hours draws couples from around the world. Walking along the town walls, you see the snow peaks of the Caucasus range in the distance. Below the walls, the Alazani Valley's vineyards spread like a checkerboard.

Not far from Sighnaghi, Bodbe Monastery holds the tomb of Saint Nino, who brought Christianity to Georgia. The valley view from the monastery gardens offers peaceful tranquility. Descending below the monastery, you find a spring where holy water, believed to bring miraculous healing, flows forth.

On day six, take a winery tour. You can witness firsthand the traditional winemaking method of fermenting in large vessels called qvevri. The practice of burying massive terracotta jars in the ground and fermenting grapes with skin, seeds, and stems intact is inscribed as UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage. The amber wine produced this way differs from ordinary white wine, displaying a honey color and bearing a distinctive tannic flavor.

Day Seven: Return to Tbilisi

Spend the final day back in Tbilisi at a leisurely pace. Dry Bridge Market is a flea market selling antiques and handicrafts from the Soviet era. Wandering among old cameras, military medals, silver ornaments, and embroidered tablecloths, you feel Georgia's complex history in your hands.

(2) Two-Week Itinerary: Meeting Every Face of the Caucasus

With two weeks, you can add western Georgia to the one-week course. This itinerary, spanning from the medieval tower villages of Svaneti to Batumi on the Black Sea coast, allows you to experience Georgia's full diversity.

Days One Through Seven: Same as the One-Week Itinerary

Follow the Tbilisi, Kazbegi, and Kakheti itinerary described above.

Days Eight and Nine: Gori and Kutaisi

On day eight, move westward and stop in Gori, the birthplace of Joseph Stalin, the Soviet Union's dictator. The Stalin Museum displays the small cottage where he spent his childhood and his personal railway carriage. How Georgians remember Stalin remains a complicated question. Some take pride in him as "a world-renowned figure of Georgian origin," while others condemn him as a dictator who murdered millions.

Not far from Gori, Uplistsikhe is a cave city where people have lived since around 1000 BCE. Traces of streets carved from rock, a theater, and temples remain. This ancient center of pagan belief before Christianity arrived allows you to imagine the lives of ancient Georgians.

Kutaisi is Georgia's second-largest city and the gateway to the west. It is said to have been the capital of the Colchis kingdom in Greek mythology, Jason's destination in his quest for the Golden Fleece. Gelati Monastery, founded by King David IV in the twelfth century, showcases the pinnacle of

medieval Georgian culture. Do not miss Bagrati Cathedral and Prometheus Cave.

Days Ten Through Twelve: Svaneti, the Land Where Time Stands Still

The road to Svaneti is rugged but worth the effort. From Kutaisi to Mestia takes about five hours by car. A small charter plane can get you there in 45 minutes, but flights are frequently canceled due to weather.

Upon arriving in Mestia, medieval defensive towers called *koshki* rise across the town like a forest. These towers served as shelters during invasions or blood feuds between families. The Svaneti people, having lived in Georgia's most isolated environment, have preserved their own language and customs.

On day eleven, drive a four-wheel-drive vehicle toward Ushguli. Located at 2,200 meters elevation, this village ranks among Europe's highest permanently inhabited settlements. Thousand-year-old towers line the landscape against the snow-covered Mount Shkhara (5,193m), a surreal sight. During winter, when snow isolates residents for months from the outside world, the people of Ushguli have maintained a self-sufficient existence.

Days Thirteen and Fourteen: Batumi, Black Sea Resort

Descending from Svaneti, head toward Batumi on the Black Sea coast. Batumi is Georgia's most modern city. Azerbaijani oil capital has flowed in, with high-rise buildings and casinos lining the beaches. The "Ali and Nino Statue" takes its form from a novel depicting the tragic love between an Azerbaijani Muslim man and a Georgian Christian woman. Each evening, the metal sculptures of the two figures approach each other, then pass by one another.

Batumi Botanical Garden, nurtured by subtropical climate, grows plants from across the world. It is an ideal place to conclude your journey watching the sunset over the Black Sea. You can depart directly from Batumi International Airport or return to Tbilisi by overnight train.

(3) Points to Consider When Planning Your Itinerary

Travel time in Georgia typically stretches longer than expected. Actual travel duration far exceeds map distances. Mountain roads wind endlessly, and road conditions vary widely. Encountering herds of livestock blocking the road is common.

The regions accessible to travelers vary by season. Ushguli in Svaneti becomes unreachable in winter when snow blocks the roads. High-altitude trekking courses in Kazbegi remain dangerous due to snow until May. By contrast, Tbilisi in July and August suffers oppressive heat approaching 40 degrees Celsius, making walking tours uncomfortable.

The best time to visit is mid-May through June, and from September through early October. During these periods, the weather is mild, and in September during the grape harvest, you can participate in the 'Rtveli' festival at wineries, where grapes are crushed to make juice.

B. Supra Feast, Tamada Culture, and Guest Etiquette

To truly understand Georgia, you must attend a Supra. Supra is not a simple meal. It is a ritual in which the identity of the Georgian people is concentrated, a sacred time to confirm the bonds of community that they have maintained for thousands of years. An elderly man I met at a winery in the Kakheti region told me this: "Without Supra, you cannot understand Georgia. We are born at this table, we love at this table, and we leave the world at this table."

(1) Supra: A Universe Spread Across the Tablecloth

The word Supra literally means 'tablecloth'. In Georgia, however, the meaning of this word is far deeper. Supra is held at family celebrations, visits from friends, village festivals, and even funerals. At a child's baptism, at a wedding, when someone moves into a new home, when someone returns to their hometown after a long absence, Georgians gather around the table, share food, drink wine, and sing together.

The scale of Supra varies. It ranges from small gatherings of family members to large feasts attended by hundreds of people. Yet there is something that never changes, regardless of scale. Food is served abundantly enough to bend the table legs, and guests are treated like family members.

There is a Georgian proverb that says, "The guest is a gift sent by God." For Georgians, hospitality is not a simple virtue but a sacred duty. It is common for a foreign traveler, even a stranger, to be suddenly invited to dinner after making eye contact with a local or asking for directions. While this may be startling at first, it is the most natural thing in Georgia.

Once Supra begins, food appears in unending succession. Khachapuri is Georgia's signature dish, boat-shaped bread with melted cheese, egg, and butter inside. Khinkali are dumplings the size of a fist, filled with meat juices. Pkhali is an appetizer made from pureed vegetables like spinach or beets mixed with walnuts. Mtsvadi is skewered meat grilled over grapevine branches. Dozens of other dishes follow to fill the table.

Wine is as important as the food. Georgians do not view wine as mere alcohol but as a medium connecting the divine and human worlds. At Supra, wine is both a tool of prayer and a symbol of blessing. Traditionally, wine is served in kantsi, a cup made from a bull's horn. Since a horn cup has no flat bottom, once you lift it, you must drink it completely.

(2) Tamada: The Master of Ceremonies

Every Supra has a Tamada. The Tamada proposes toasts and guides the flow of the feast. In English, this is often translated as "Toastmaster," but this word hardly captures what a Tamada is.

A Tamada serves simultaneously as a master of ceremonies, poet, philosopher, and priest.

The Tamada is usually the most respected person in the gathering. Simply being elderly does not automatically make one a Tamada. One must be eloquent, well-versed in history and literature, possess a sense of humor, and most importantly, be able to unite people's hearts. A feast led by a

skilled Tamada passes in a flash, while one led by an inexperienced Tamada can drag on endlessly.

The Tamada's most important role is to propose toasts. A Georgian toast is not a simple phrase like "To your health" or "To happiness." The Tamada delivers poetic and philosophical speeches lasting five minutes, ten minutes, or longer. He quotes historical anecdotes, expounds on proverbs, and sometimes recites improvised poetry.

The themes of the toasts follow a prescribed order. The first toast is usually dedicated to God or peace. Next comes the homeland Georgia, then the departed ancestors, then parents, family, children, friendship, love, and finally the guests gathered at the table. Between each toast, there is time to eat and converse. A full Supra typically lasts from four to eight hours, with the number of toasts sometimes exceeding twenty.

After the Tamada finishes his toast, the floor opens to others. This is called Alaverdi. The person given the Alaverdi adds their own thoughts to the Tamada's theme. When they finish speaking, authority returns to the Tamada, who moves on to the next toast.

While the Tamada speaks, it is proper not to chat, eat, or drink. All attention should be focused on the Tamada. When the toast concludes and the Tamada cries out "Gaumarjos!", everyone raises their glass, responds, and drinks the wine. Gaumarjos means "To victory!"

(3) Etiquette for Guests

If invited to a Georgian Supra, it is good to know a few rules of conduct. Even if you cannot follow them perfectly, your effort to do so will deeply move your host.

How to Accept an Invitation

When a Georgian invites you to a meal, it is proper to accept if possible. Refusing may hurt their feelings. When accepting an invitation, never arrive empty-handed. Bring a bottle of wine, chocolates, or

a basket of fruit. If bringing flowers, avoid even-numbered bouquets, which are used for funerals. Always choose an odd number of flowers.

When taking your seat, wait for the elder or guest of honor to sit first. It is customary to sit where the Tamada directs. Guests are typically placed next to the host or near the Tamada.

Toast Etiquette

It is rude to sip wine before the Tamada begins his toast. Wine should be drunk only when the Tamada proposes the toast and everyone has raised their glass. In Georgia, wine is not merely a beverage but a tool of ritual.

When toasting, clink glasses while meeting the other person's eyes. Avoiding eye contact can appear insincere. If a horn cup appears at a traditional Supra, you must drink all the wine in it. Since a horn

cup cannot stand on its own, keeping it in your hand looks awkward.

If you cannot drink or wish to moderate your consumption, politely ask for understanding. If you say you have a health issue or need to wake up early tomorrow, the host will understand. However, rather than outright refusing the toast, it is better to at least touch your glass to your lips and go along with the spirit of the occasion. It is traditional to avoid toasting with beer. This is because of an old belief that in the past, beer was drunk when wishing defeat upon enemies.

How to Eat the Food

Khinkali must be eaten with your hands. Cutting it with fork and knife releases all the meat juices, diminishing the flavor. Hold the khinkali by its knob (the bundle of dough at the top) between your thumb and forefinger, flip it upside down, bite into one side to prevent hot broth from spilling out, and first drink the meat juices. Then eat the rest. The knob is usually not eaten and is left at the edge of the plate. Some say this is to count how many you have eaten, others say it is because the dough there is thick and tasteless.

Adjarian Khachapuri is boat-shaped bread with cheese, egg, and butter in the center. Break off the pointed ends of the bread with your hands, mix the cheese and egg in the center, and dip the bread into it. As you gradually work inward, tearing the bread piece by piece, you naturally finish it all.

Georgians consider it a virtue to serve food so abundantly that some is left over. If food seems scarce, it reflects poorly on the host. Therefore, you need not feel burdened to eat everything. If you are full, take smaller portions instead. But do not hesitate to praise the food. "Gemrielia!" means "It's delicious!"

Conversation and Participation

At Supra, conversation is as important as food and drink. Your host will take interest in you and ask many questions. Where are you from? What have you seen in Georgia? How do you like Georgian food? Answering these questions thoughtfully and expressing interest in Georgia's history and culture will earn you even warmer hospitality.

As Supra reaches its height, someone begins to sing. Georgian traditional polyphony is a unique form in which multiple people sing different melodies simultaneously. Listed as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, this music sounds dreamy and mysterious on first hearing. If invited to join in the singing, it is good to hum along and match the mood, even if you do not know the words. When dancing begins, joining in and enjoying it together is the finest response.

(4) How to Experience Supra

The best way for travelers to experience a traditional Supra is to stay at a guesthouse. At small family-run guesthouses, Supra naturally unfolds at dinner time. Such opportunities are common at wineries in the Kakheti region and in mountain villages of Svaneti.

In Tbilisi, there are restaurants and tour companies that offer Supra experience programs. Though designed for tourists and different in atmosphere from traditional Supra, they provide a good introduction to toast culture and Georgian food.

The most unforgettable experiences arrive by chance. You might receive an invitation while asking directions, visiting a winery, or chatting with someone next to you on a train. Trust Georgian hospitality and keep your heart open.

C. Cautions and Safety Rules for Accessing Conflict Areas

Overall, Georgia is a safe country with good public order and is safe to travel in. Several European surveys rank it among the top countries where it is safe to walk alone at night. You can wander through Tbilisi's Old Town past midnight with virtually no sense of danger. However, Georgia has a geopolitical specificity you must understand. Approximately 20 percent of its territory lies outside the control of the Georgian government.

(1) Historical Background of Conflict Areas

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Georgia declared independence. However, immediately after independence, separatist conflicts broke out in two regions inhabited by ethnic minorities. These were Abkhazia on the northwestern coast of the Black Sea and South Ossetia in the northern mountainous region.

Wars in the early 1990s displaced hundreds of thousands of Georgians from their homes. The conflict, frozen in a ceasefire state, reignited in August 2008 when Russia intervened. After a five-day war, Russia recognized the independence of both regions and stationed military forces there. Most of the international community does not recognize this, and the Georgian government regards both regions as territories occupied by Russia.

Currently, Russian military forces are stationed in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, beyond the reach of Georgian government administration. A de facto border line called the Administrative Boundary Line (ABL) separates these regions from mainland Georgia.

(2) Regions Travelers Must Avoid

Abkhazia

Abkhazia is a beautiful subtropical region on the Black Sea coast. During the Soviet era, it was famous as a vacation destination, and its capital, Sukhumi, flourished as a beach city. However, wars in the 1990s expelled most Georgians, and it now remains under Russian de facto control.

Entering Abkhazia is problematic in several ways. If travelers enter Abkhazia via Russia, it is considered illegal entry under Georgian law, and they may be arrested or denied entry when later entering mainland Georgia. Conversely, if travelers attempt to enter Abkhazia from Georgia, Russia will not permit it, and they may be turned away or detained at the border.

South Ossetia

South Ossetia is a mountainous region in central-northern Georgia. About 50,000 people live there, centered on its capital, Tskhinvali. It was the direct flashpoint of the 2008 war and remains under firm Russian military control.

Entry to South Ossetia is forbidden from either direction. Travelers entering via Russia face punishment by Georgia, and if they attempt to enter via Georgia, they will be stopped at checkpoints. Barbed wire and observation posts are installed near the administrative boundary line.

(3) Creeping Border: The Moving Border Line

The administrative boundary line of South Ossetia is called by the unsettling name "Creeping Border", literally, a moving border line. This is because Russia and South Ossetia are gradually pushing the boundary line toward Georgian territory. Overnight, barbed wire may be erected in the middle of a village, or farmland a farmer thought was his own may become occupied territory by morning.

Near Gori, in the Shida Kartli region, there are villages close to the administrative boundary line. Travel in this area requires special caution. Travelers should verify the location of the boundary line using maps and move according to local advice. Photography or loitering near the boundary line without permission may result in detention.

(4) Legal Considerations

Georgia has a law concerning occupied territories. According to this law, entering Abkhazia or South Ossetia without Georgian government permission is illegal. Violations may result in fines of 500 lari or more, or detention.

Specific situations travelers should be aware of are as follows. First, if there is a record of entering Abkhazia or South Ossetia via Russia (passport stamps, visas, etc.), subsequent entry to Georgia may be denied. Second, attempting illegal entry from mainland Georgia to occupied territories may result in arrest by Georgian police or Russian military. Third, even if problems arise within occupied territories, obtaining consular assistance from the embassy is practically impossible.

The South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs and most countries recommend travelers "avoid" or "do not travel to" these two regions.

(5) General Safety Guidelines

Excluding conflict zones, Georgia is a very safe travel destination. However, there are a few precautions to take.

Traffic Safety

The biggest hazard in Georgia travel is the roads. Drivers often ignore traffic regulations, and overtaking and lane changes happen recklessly. Mountain roads are narrow and winding, with many sections lacking guardrails. Animals such as cattle, horses, pigs, and sheep casually walking across roads are also common sights.

When traveling by rental car, defensive driving is essential. Nighttime driving should be avoided. If uncertain about driving, it is safer to use a marshrutka (minibus), taxi apps, or hire a private driver.

Mountain Trekking

The weather in the Caucasus Mountains is notoriously unpredictable. Clear skies in the morning can suddenly darken with clouds by midday, with rain or snow that may clear just as quickly. At high elevations, temperatures can drop sharply even in summer.

When trekking, warm clothing, rain gear, sufficient water, and snacks are essential. Make it a principle to descend before sunset, and hire a local guide when taking unfamiliar routes. In remote areas like Svaneti and Kazbegi, cellular signal is often unavailable, so solo trekking should be avoided.

Stray Dogs

Georgia's cities, including Tbilisi, have many stray dogs. Most wear yellow ear tags indicating they have been vaccinated and are generally docile. However, for those afraid of dogs, the sight of large dogs roaming in packs can feel threatening. Even if dogs bark or approach, it is best to avoid provoking them and pass quietly.

Pickpocketing and Theft

Serious crime is rare, but pickpocketing can occur in crowded tourist areas like the Old Town, subway, and flea markets. Valuables should be kept in hotel safes, and bags should be worn in front for security.

Emergency Response

Georgia's emergency number is 112. Police, fire, and ambulance services can all be reached at this number, with English-language service available. Tbilisi also has tourist police to assist foreign travelers.

Beginning January 1, 2026, all tourists visiting Georgia will be required to have health and accident insurance. It is advisable to prepare an English-language insurance certificate in advance, as it may be required upon entry.

(6) Safe Alternative Routes

Georgia's beauty can be fully experienced without visiting conflict zones. Safe regions abound with sights: the vineyards of Kakheti, the eternal snows of Kazbegi, the medieval towers of Svaneti, and

the Black Sea beaches of Batumi.

However, some popular trekking routes pass near the administrative boundary line and require caution. Truso Valley near Kazbegi extends close to the South Ossetian border, so travelers must stay on designated trails and follow the instructions of border guards.

I remember words spoken to me by a guesthouse owner in Tbilisi: "It is a sad thing that our country remains divided. But it brings us joy to see travelers safely enjoy Georgia. We hope that one day we will be able to show you both the beaches of Abkhazia and the mountains of Tskhinvali together."

D. Essential Georgian Phrases and Reading the Alphabet

Georgian is one of the most unique languages on Earth. It resembles no other language. It is neither European nor Turkic, and has no relation to Persian or Arabic. Georgian belongs to the Kartvelian language family, a small linguistic group whose languages are used only in Georgia and surrounding regions. It is a language created and preserved by people who have lived south of the Caucasus Mountains for the past 5,000 years.

(1) Thirty-Three Alphabetic Characters: A UNESCO-Recognized Script

Georgian uses its own unique alphabet. This writing system, called Mkhedruli, consists of 33 characters and is inscribed in UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. It is one of only 14 independent writing systems in the world.

Georgian letters, when first seen, resemble twisting noodles or dancing figures. The abundant curved, flowing lines create an impression entirely different from Roman or Cyrillic scripts. An interesting feature is the absence of uppercase and lowercase distinctions. All letters, whether at the beginning or middle of a sentence, are written in the same form.

The origins of Georgian script are debated among scholars. Traditional belief attributes its creation to King Pharnavaz in the 3rd century BCE. Scholars generally believe it was developed around the 5th century under the influence of Greek letters alongside the spread of Christianity. Regardless of its origins, Georgians regard their script as a cornerstone of national identity and take great pride in it.

(2) How to Read the Alphabet

The Georgian alphabet has nearly one-to-one correspondence between pronunciation and written letters. Unlike English, there are fewer irregularities where the same spelling is pronounced differently. Once you learn the letters, reading itself is relatively straightforward. The challenge is not knowing what the words mean, but you can read signs and signboards.

Here are some basic letters that would be useful for travelers to know.

Vowels (5)

□ (a): The 'ah' sound. This is the most commonly used vowel.

□ (e): The 'eh' sound.

□ (i): The 'ee' sound.

□ (o): The 'oh' sound.

□ (u): The 'oo' sound.

Frequently seen consonants

□ (g): The 'g' sound. This is the first letter of Sakartvelo (საქართველო), meaning Georgia.

□ (d): The 'd' sound.

□ (t): The 't' sound. This is the first letter of Tbilisi (თბილისი).

□ (m): The 'm' sound.

□ (n): The 'n' sound.

□ (r): The 'r' sound. This is a rolled 'r'.

□ (s): The 's' sound.

□ (b): The 'b' sound.

□ (l): The 'l' sound.

□ (v): Similar to the 'v' sound.

□ (k): The 'k' sound.

One characteristic of Georgian is that multiple consonants often appear in succession. Words like mtsavane (მწვანე, meaning 'green') have four consonants in a row. Tbilisi (თბილისი) also begins with 't-b', which can be difficult for Korean speakers to pronounce. It's fine if you cannot pronounce it perfectly. Georgian people will be delighted simply by your effort.

(3) Essential Conversation for Travelers

In Georgia's tourist areas and major cities, English is widely spoken, especially among younger generations. In rural areas or among older people, Russian may be more common. However, if you greet someone in Georgian even once, the response transforms completely. A stiffened expression becomes bright, and suddenly they treat you warmly as though you were an old friend.

Basic greetings

Gamarjoba (გამარჯობა) - "Hello"

This is the most fundamental and important greeting. Literally translated, 'Gamarjoba' means 'I wish you victory.' Georgia's long history of resisting invasion from outside forces is embedded in this greeting. You can use it anytime, whether morning or evening. When meeting someone for the first time, entering a shop, or sitting down at a table in a restaurant, simply say 'Gamarjoba.'

Nakhvamdis (ნახვამდის) - "Goodbye"

This is a farewell greeting. It carries the meaning of 'See you again soon.'

Madloba (მადლობა) - "Thank you"

Use this when expressing gratitude. If you want to emphasize it, you can say 'Didi Madloba.' 'Didi' means 'great,' so it becomes 'Thank you very much.'

Ara gmadlobt (არა გმადლობთ) - "You're welcome"

This is the response when someone thanks you.

Bodishi (ბოდიში) - "I'm sorry/Excuse me"

Use this when apologizing or asking for permission.

Rogor khar? (როგორ ხარ?) - "How are you?"

This is an expression used when asking how someone is doing. It is often used among close friends.

Basic conversation

Ki (კი) / Ara (არა) - "Yes / No"

These are affirmative and negative responses. 'Ho' is also used to mean 'yes.'

Sakartvelo (საქართველო) - "Georgia"

This is what Georgian people call their own country. 'Georgia' is an external name, while they themselves call it 'Sakartvelo.' 'Kartveli' means 'a Georgian person.'

Sad aris ____? (Sad aris ____?, სად არის ____?) - "Where is ____?"

Use this when asking for directions. Insert the location you're looking for in the blank.

Ra ghirs es? (რა გირს ეს?, რა ღირს ეს?) - "How much is this?"

Use this when asking the price at a market or store.

Menu gtxovt (მენუ გთხოვთ, გთხოვთ მენუ) - "Please give me a menu"

Use this at a restaurant.

Angarishi gtxovt (Angarishi gtxovt, □□□□□□□□ □□□□□□) - "Please give me the bill"

Use this when paying after a meal.

Food-related expressions

Gemrielia! (Gemrielia!, □□□□□□□□!) - "It's delicious!"

Use this when you've been served food. It's a great compliment to the host.

Gaumarjos! (Gaumarjos!, □□□□□□□□!) - "Cheers! / To victory!"

This is what you shout when clinking glasses at a drinking gathering. It's the expression you'll hear most often at a supra.

Gvino (Gvino, □□□□□) - "Wine"

This is one of the most important words in Georgia.

Supra (Supra, □□□□□) - "Feast / Dining table"

Tamada (Tamada, □□□□□□) - "Toast master"

Emergency situations

Dakhmareba! (Dakhmareba!, □□□□□□□□!) - "Help me!"

Politsia (Politsia, □□□□□□□) - "Police"

Ekimi (Ekimi, □□□□□) - "Doctor"

Saapoteka sad aris? (Saapoteka sad aris?, □□□□□□□□ □□□ □□□□?) - "Where is the pharmacy?"

(4) Reading numbers

It's useful to know basic numbers as well.

1: Erti (Erti, □□□□)

2: Ori (Ori, □□□)

3: Sami (Sami, □□□□)

4: Otkhi (Otkhi, □□□□)

5: Khuti (Khuti, □□□□)

10: Ati (Ati, □□□)

100: Asi (Asi, □□□)

Georgia's currency unit is the lari (Lari, ლარი). One lari is 100 tetri (Tetri, ტეთრი).

(5) Pronunciation challenges and how to overcome them

The most difficult aspect of Georgian pronunciation is consecutive consonants. There are many consonant combinations unfamiliar to English or Korean speakers. For example, the first sound of Tbilisi (თბილისი) has 't' and 'b' following directly without a vowel between them.

It's more important to try, even roughly, than to pursue perfect pronunciation. Georgians greatly appreciate the effort foreigners make to learn their language. If you greet them with clumsy pronunciation of "gamarjoba," they will kindly correct you while smiling warmly.

A cafe owner in Tbilisi told me: "When a foreigner speaks English, they're just a customer. But when they greet us in Georgian, they become a friend. A single word opens our hearts."

Duolingo is a helpful app for learning Georgian, and Google Translate also supports Georgian. Practicing basic expressions before your trip will greatly enrich your experience on the ground.

I hope the information in this practical travel guide becomes a reliable compass in the unfamiliar land of Georgia. Maps and itineraries provide the framework for a journey, but true travel arrives in unplanned moments. You'll discover Georgia's true face in a neighborhood bakery you stumbled upon while lost, at a supra table where you were invited by chance, in the bright smile that returned to a clumsy greeting in Georgian.

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Chapter 7: 8,000 Years of Civilization at the Crossroads

A Journey Through Georgia's History and Culture

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Part Two: History and Identity

A. Colchis and the Land of the Golden Fleece Myth

To speak of Georgia's history, one must go back before recorded time, into the age of myth. Western Georgia, situated along the eastern shore of the Black Sea, was known to ancient Greeks by the name Colchis. This land was far more than a geographical designation; it was a source of mystery and wealth that fired the imagination of the ancient world. In Greek mythology, one of the great adventures was the quest of Jason and the Argonauts, who sailed in search of the Golden Fleece, and their final destination was this very land.

The myth begins thus. A prince from Thessaly in Greece named Jason is given an impossible task by his uncle to reclaim his stolen throne. He is commanded to sail to the kingdom of Colchis, said to exist at the end of the world, and bring back the Golden Fleece. Jason gathers the fifty greatest heroes of his age and boards a ship called the Argo, crossing the Black Sea. When they arrive in Colchis, they discover a powerful kingdom ruled by King Aeëtes, son of the sun god Helios.

King Aeëtes sets three impossible trials before Jason. He must plow a field with fire-breathing bulls, defeat the warriors that spring from dragon teeth sown in the earth, and seize the Golden Fleece guarded by a sleepless serpent. At this moment, the king's daughter, Princess Medea, who is skilled in magic, falls in love with Jason. Medea gives Jason magical salve and healing herbs to help him pass the trials, and together they flee to Greece.

This myth captures interest because it is not mere fiction. Archaeological discoveries and historical research show that the Golden Fleece legend reflects actual practices in ancient Georgia. In mountainous regions of the Caucasus, including Svaneti, inhabitants used sheep's wool to collect gold dust from rivers. Fine particles of gold would catch between the dense fibers of the fleece. When the sheepskin, long soaked in water, was lifted and dried in sunlight, it gleamed with a golden light. This is the true origin of the legend of the golden fleece.

In fact, between roughly 3000 and 2000 BCE, this region possessed highly developed metalwork and metallurgy. Excavations conducted over more than a century in the Vani region of western Georgia have yielded remarkable finds. Temple ornaments from the 4th century BCE, intricately worked gold necklaces and bracelets, and bronze statues have emerged in abundance. These artifacts prove how prosperous a civilization Colchis was.

The capital of the Colchis kingdom is believed to be Kutaisi, today Georgia's second-largest city. Kutaisi has been inhabited since around 2000 BCE and is one of the oldest continuously occupied sites in the world. The Rioni River, which flows through the city, is the same river that ancient Greeks called the Phasis. Along this river, trade between the Black Sea and the interior flourished, and exchanges with Greek merchants were frequent.

In central Kutaisi stands the Colchis Fountain, erected in 2011. The fountain is decorated with some thirty sculptures created by enlarging Bronze Age golden ornaments discovered at sites like Vani. Lions, horses, and figures of Tamada, the traditional feast master who raises cups in salute, spout water from above the fountain. These sculptures reveal at a glance how refined and elaborate the goldworking skills of ancient Georgians were.

Princess Medea carries meaning far beyond that of a mythological character. She is said to have possessed remarkable skill in working with herbs and poisons. Some scholars claim that the modern word medicine derives from Medea's name. Whether this theory is true remains uncertain. What is clear is that the Colchis region earned great renown in the ancient world for its herbs and healing arts. A statue of Medea holding the Golden Fleece stands at Europe Square in Batumi on the Black Sea coast, symbolically showing how deeply Georgia is connected to ancient European civilization.

The geography of Colchis was ideal for ancient civilization to flourish. This region, stretching from the eastern Black Sea coast to the southwestern slopes of the Caucasus Mountains, receives such heavy rainfall, reaching four thousand millimeters annually in some areas, that subtropical rainforests and wetlands formed. Wheat and millet could be cultivated, and cattle and horse herding thrived. Abundant iron and gold mines, along with exports of honey and timber, made the region wealthy.

Herodotus, the ancient Greek historian, recorded observations about the Colchians in the 5th century BCE. He described them as having dark skin and curly hair and noted similarities to Egyptians. Of course, scholars today debate the accuracy of this account. What matters is that the Greeks of that era perceived Colchis as an exotic and mysterious land.

The Colchis kingdom began to take formal shape as a state around the 6th century BCE. Urbanization advanced from the late Bronze Age, and by the 8th century BCE, it appears in records of the Urartu Empire under the name Qulḫa. It later became a vassal of the Achaemenid Persian Empire, regained independence, and then underwent further changes. In 83 BCE it was absorbed by Pontus under Mithridates VI, and in 65 BCE it was conquered by Rome's Pompey.

During the Roman period, several Greek colonies were established in the Colchis region. Examples include Dioscurias, corresponding to modern Sukhumi, and Phasis, corresponding to Poti. These cities prospered as hubs of Black Sea trade. Colchis later continued as the kingdom of Lazica, maintaining its own position between the Byzantine Empire and Sassanid Persia.

Ancient texts contain one more fascinating story. Greek and Roman records associated the Caucasus region with Amazons, a legendary group of female warriors. According to the accounts of geographer Strabo and historian Plutarch, the Amazons lived near the Caucasus Mountains. Travel

records from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries also contain eyewitness accounts of women in this region who rode horses skillfully, handled weapons well, and participated in battle. This may be understood as accounts of the hardy character of Georgian women, who had to survive in rugged mountain terrain and resist foreign invasion, interwoven with myth and passed down through tradition.

The Colchis civilization forms the roots of Western Georgia's identity. Modern Georgians regard themselves as direct descendants of this ancient civilization. Before the fountain in Kutaisi, tourists pause for photographs; beneath the Medea statue in Batumi, lovers make promises; and in the Vani Museum, students gaze at golden artifacts with eyes bright with pride in thousands of years of history. This land has served since ancient times as a crossroads of civilization linking east and west.

B. The Birth of the World's Earliest Christian Nation

Georgia's identity is made up of two key elements. One is wine, and the other is Christianity. Georgia is the second country in the world to adopt Christianity as its official religion, doing so in 337 AD (some records say 326 AD). Armenia was the first, adopting Christianity as state religion in 301 AD, and Georgia followed. This decision came before the Milan Edict, when the Roman Empire officially recognized Christianity in 313 AD, or nearly at the same time.

This was not a simple religious choice. At that time, the kingdom of Iberia in eastern Georgia lay within the sphere of influence of the Sassanid Persian Empire, which had adopted Zoroastrianism as its state religion. Accepting Christianity was a sophisticated diplomatic move to break free from Persian cultural and political influence and align with the Roman (Byzantine) Empire. For nearly seventeen hundred years afterward, though surrounded by Islamic forces, Georgia was able to preserve its Christian faith and its own distinctive script and culture because of the choice made at this moment.

Georgia's Christianization began with one woman's dedication. Saint Nino, a missionary of female gender, came from Cappadocia, in what is now central Turkey. According to legend, she received a vision in her dreams from the Virgin Mary. The Virgin gave Nino a cross made of grapevine branches and commanded her to go to the kingdom of Iberia (the name for eastern Georgia at that time) and preach the Gospel. Nino cut her own hair and used it to bind two grapevine branches together into a cross.

This Grapevine Cross differs in form from the ordinary cross. The arms of the cross droop slightly downward, resembling grapevines hanging down. This distinctive cross form became the symbol of the Georgian Orthodox Church. It is a symbol in which Georgian faith and wine culture merge into one. The original grapevine cross of Saint Nino is said to be preserved in the Sioni Cathedral in Tbilisi.

When Nino arrived in the kingdom of Iberia, she first met Queen Nana. The queen had long suffered from illness. Nino healed the queen's illness through prayer, and touched by this, Nana converted to Christianity. However, King Mirian III was not so quick to change his mind.

The turning point came unexpectedly. When King Mirian went hunting, the sky suddenly darkened and he could see nothing. The king prayed to the gods he had worshipped, but nothing happened. Desperate, he prayed to the god Nino served. Light returned. After this experience, King Mirian III accepted Christianity and soon proclaimed it the official religion.

Whether this story is actual historical fact or legend added later is difficult to confirm. What is certain is that in the early 4th century, the kingdom of Iberia adopted Christianity as its official religion. King Mirian III sent envoys to Constantinople requesting support for church construction, and the Byzantine Empire dispatched clergy and church builders to assist.

The stage for Christianity's adoption was the city of Mtskheta. Located some twenty kilometers north of Tbilisi, this city was Georgia's ancient capital. Georgians call Mtskheta the second Jerusalem. The entire city is designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

At the center of Mtskheta stands the Svetitskhoveli Cathedral, rebuilt in the 11th century. Svetitskhoveli means the pillar that gives life in Georgian. This name carries a legend. It is said that the holy robe that Jesus wore when he was crucified is buried there.

According to legend, a Jew named Elioze from Mtskheta witnessed Jesus' execution in Jerusalem. He purchased Jesus' garment from a Roman soldier and brought it home to his native city. When Elioze's sister Sidonia held the garment in her hands, she was overwhelmed with holy feeling and breathed her last on the spot. People could not remove the garment from her hands, so she was ultimately buried with the robe of Jesus. Later, a great cedar tree grew from her grave, and a column was made from this wood to build a church, according to the tale.

The Svetitskhoveli Cathedral is the place where Georgian kings throughout history have been crowned. Royal funerals have also been held there. For Georgians, this cathedral is not a mere religious building but the heart of the nation and its holiest sanctuary.

Svetitskhoveli Cathedral

On a mountaintop overlooking Mtskheta stands Jvari Monastery, built in the 6th century. Jvari means cross in Georgian. It was built on the site where Saint Nino first erected a great wooden cross. According to tradition, there was a pagan temple at that location before.

The view from Jvari Monastery looking down on Mtskheta is counted among Georgia's most iconic scenes. The point where the Mtkvari River (called Kura in Georgian) and the Aragvi River meet is visible at a glance. The two rivers differ in color and do not immediately mingle where they join, instead flowing side by side for some distance. Nineteenth-century Russian poet Mikhail Lermontov saw this view and wrote the narrative poem Mtsyri.

Figures who cannot be overlooked in the development of Georgian Christianity are the Thirteen Assyrian Fathers who came from Syria in the 6th century. They established monasteries throughout Georgia and spread Christianity to villages and regions across the land. David Gareja is a complex of monasteries founded by one of them, Saint David. Located in a border area with Azerbaijan, this

monastery was carved into the barren rocky mountainside as caves. Tradition says that as many as five thousand monks once resided there.

The Christianization of Western Georgia came somewhat later than the east. Between the late 4th and 6th centuries, the kingdom of Lazica (successor to Colchis) adopted Christianity. This region formed closer ties with the Byzantine Empire and was more strongly influenced by Greek Orthodoxy.

In the 5th century, Georgian Christianity faced a grave test. The Sassanid Persian Empire sought to impose Zoroastrianism on Georgia. King Vakhtang I Gorgasali rose up in resistance. He made Tbilisi the capital and worked to secure the independent status (autocephaly) of the Georgian Orthodox Church. The Georgian Orthodox Church remained linked with the Patriarchate of Constantinople for centuries after but came to be recognized as an autocephalous church around the 5th century, or possibly later.

A history of religious persecution made Georgian faith all the stronger. Through the invasion of Arab Islamic forces (from the 7th century onward), Mongol rule (13th century), and the pressure of the Ottoman Turks and Safavid Persia (15th to 18th centuries), Georgians defended their church like a fortress. When wars came, the church became a final refuge and a vault in which to hide sacred objects and treasures.

In the Old Town of Tbilisi, walking through narrow alleys, one sees multiple religious facilities existing side by side. A Georgian Orthodox cathedral, an Armenian Apostolic church, a Catholic chapel, a Jewish synagogue, and an Islamic mosque are clustered within minutes' walk of each other. This is evidence of centuries of religious tolerance that has continued.

Today, more than eighty percent of Georgia's population are Orthodox believers. On Sundays, churches are filled with families of worshippers. Baptism, marriage, funeral, at every important moment in life, the church is present. For Georgians, Christianity is not a mere religion. It is the very identity that has bound the nation as one for seventeen hundred years.

C. Queen Tamar's Golden Age and the Mongol Invasion

If one asks at what point in history Georgia shone most brilliantly, Georgians would answer with one voice. It is the Golden Age that stretched from the late 11th century to the early 13th century. During this period, Georgia commanded supremacy in the Caucasus region, ruling vast territories from the Black Sea to the Caspian Sea. Culture and the arts bloomed, and epic literature, the pinnacle of Georgian literary history, was born.

The figure who opened the door to the Golden Age was David IV (1073-1125). He is known by the epithet Aghmashenebeli, meaning the Builder King. When he took the throne, Georgia lay devastated by invasions from the Seljuk Turks. Much of the realm was in the hands of enemies, and even the capital city of Tbilisi was under the control of Islamic forces.

David IV rebuilt military strength and put internal affairs in order. He settled Kipchak Turkic nomads in Georgia and made them a core military force. On August 12, 1121, David IV fought the combined

forces of the Seljuk Turks near Didgori not far from Tbilisi. The enemy force outnumbered Georgian troops by more than four to one. Yet through David IV's tactical genius and the valor of Georgian soldiers, a great victory was won. Georgians call this battle the Miracle Victory or Dzlevai Sakvirveli.

In 1122, the year after the Battle of Didgori, King David IV finally recaptured Tbilisi. For the first time in four hundred years, Georgia's capital returned to Georgian hands. He did not stop at conquest but devoted himself to construction. Near Kutaisi, he founded the Gelati Monastery and cultivated it as the foremost educational institution of the age and a center of science and philosophy. The Gelati Monastery is said to have been comparable to the Academy of Athens.

David IV's granddaughter was Queen Tamar (1160-1213). During her reign (1184-1213), Georgia reached the zenith of its glory throughout history. Tamar was Georgia's first female ruler. Her father, King Giorgi III, appointed her as co-ruler during his lifetime to make her his successor.

The nobility resisted a woman ascending to the throne. Yet Tamar suppressed the opposition through outstanding wisdom, diplomatic skill, and military leadership. Georgians called her not 'Queen' but 'King', in Georgian, Mepe. In Georgian, the word for ruler carries no gender distinction. But this title carried recognition of her absolute authority and ability.

Tamar's first marriage was political in nature. She married Prince Yuri Bogolyubsky from Kievan Rus (present-day Ukraine), but the marriage was unhappy. Yuri led a dissolute life, and Tamar made an unprecedented decision. She divorced her husband.

In the medieval era, for a woman, and especially a ruler, to declare divorce from her husband was extremely unusual. Her second husband was David Soslan from Ossetia, and this time she enjoyed a happy marriage.

Under Queen Tamar's rule, Georgia's territory expanded to its greatest extent. Georgian influence reached into present-day eastern Turkey, Armenia, parts of Azerbaijan, and northern Iran. In 1204, seizing the chaos of the Fourth Crusade's capture of Constantinople, she supported the establishment of the Trebizond Empire. The Trebizond dynasty was Tamar's relative, and the empire served as Georgia's vassal state.

Military victories followed. In the Battle of Basiani in 1202, she achieved a decisive victory over the Seljuk Turkish sultanate, and by 1210 had advanced as far as Ardabil. Georgian forces threatened Tabriz itself. During this period, Georgia was truly the preeminent power of the Caucasus.

Queen Tamar's era was not only a period of military expansion but also of cultural flourishing. The literary work that epitomizes this age is the epic 'The Knight in the Panther's Skin' by Shota Rustaveli. This work celebrates humanity, friendship, and love, and is regarded as the pinnacle of Georgian literature. The work was dedicated to Queen Tamar.

Rustaveli depicted the image of an ideal ruler in this work. I share one of the work's most famous passages.

"A lion cub is a lion, whether female or male."

This passage is interpreted as an allusion to Queen Tamar. It conveys the message that a true leader should be judged by her ability, regardless of gender.

Remarkable achievements were realized in architecture as well. The great cave city of Vardzia, carved from cliff face to defend the southern border, was completed during this period. Vardzia was not a simple fortress. It was a complex city equipped with tunnels and stairs connecting caves, churches and chapels, storerooms and irrigation systems. It could accommodate up to fifty thousand people, according to tradition. The Church of the Assumption in Vardzia preserves a fresco depicting Queen Tamar during her lifetime. It is one of the few historical sources showing her actual appearance.

Queen Tamar died in 1213. The location of her tomb remains a mystery to this day. It is said that she was buried in secret to protect her grave from invasion by foreigners. The Gelati Monastery is a leading candidate, but nothing has been confirmed.

After Tamar's death, Georgia was succeeded by her son Giorgi IV Lasha. Yet the end of the brilliant golden age had already been foretold. From the east, history's most destructive conqueror was approaching.

In the 1220s, the Mongol army led by Genghis Khan reached the Caucasus. When Mongol vanguards first attacked Georgia in 1221, Giorgi IV was wounded in battle and died the following year. The throne passed to Tamar's daughter Rusudan.

In 1226, Jalal ad-Din, sultan of the Khwarazmian dynasty, fleeing the Mongols, attacked Tbilisi as he retreated westward. He conquered the city and imposed a cruel ordeal on its inhabitants. He placed icons on the bridge over the Mtkvari River and threatened to spare Georgians who trampled them and passed over. He demanded they renounce Christian faith. According to legend, one hundred thousand Georgians chose death rather than abandon their faith. The waters ran red, it is said. This event is remembered by the tragic name 'Bridge of the Hundred Thousand Martyrs.' While the historical accuracy is difficult to confirm, this story symbolizes the faith and resistance spirit of the Georgian people.

In 1236, the Mongols' full-scale invasion began. In 1243, Queen Rusudan maintained her throne by submitting to the Mongols and paying tribute. Georgia became a vassal state of the Mongol Empire. Population plummeted, cities and monasteries were destroyed, and the economy collapsed.

In the fourteenth century, signs of recovery appeared briefly. During Giorgi V's reign (1314-1346), called 'the Illuminator,' Georgia seized the weakness of the Mongols to recover independence and reintegrate its territory. Yet this recovery did not last long.

Between 1386 and 1403, Tamerlane, the conqueror of Central Asia, invaded Georgia eight times. Tamerlane's invasions were more destructive than the Mongols'. Cities burned, populations were massacred, and cultural treasures were plundered. The cave city of Vardzia also suffered greatly

during this time. Through the twin blows of earthquakes and invasion, much of the cave complex collapsed.

After Tamerlane's invasions, Georgia never recovered as a unified kingdom. In the late fifteenth century, Georgia fragmented into several small kingdoms and principalities. The eastern regions of Kartli and Kakheti, the western region of Imereti, and the mountainous areas of Svaneti, Samegrelo, and others each subsisted as independent political units.

Divided Georgia had to walk a tightrope between two great Islamic empires, the Ottoman Turks and Safavid Persia. The two empires fought endlessly over Georgia, and the Georgian people suffered immense damage in the process. Population loss, slave trade, and forced conversion continued for centuries.

Yet the Georgian people did not disappear. They built defensive towers called 'koshki' deep in the mountains. They guarded their churches and preserved their faith and language. Isolated mountain villages like Svaneti became time capsules preserving medieval culture in nearly original form.

Queen Tamar's era is an unforgettable memory of glory for the Georgian people. Though those days never returned, that memory served as a spiritual pillar binding the nation together even through centuries of hardship. Even today, streets and squares, schools and businesses throughout Georgia bear Tamar's name. Her portrait appears on Georgian currency. The queen of the golden age still lives in the hearts of Georgians.

c. The Shadow of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union

For centuries isolated from the threats of Ottoman Turks and Safavid Persia, Georgia reached out to Russia, the great Christian nation to the north, to ensure its survival. The hope was that Russia, sharing the same Orthodox faith, would protect Georgia from Islamic forces. Yet this choice became the catalyst that drove Georgia's fate into another tragedy and chaos.

In the late eighteenth century, Georgia was in an extremely ravaged state. Ceaseless invasions by the Ottoman Empire and Persia, internal division, and population loss had brought the nation to a crossroads of survival or destruction. Erekle II, who ruled the Kartli-Kakheti kingdom of eastern Georgia, sought a way forward through alliance with Russia.

In 1783, Erekle II signed the Treaty of Georgievsk with Catherine the Great of Russia. Under this treaty, Georgia received Russian protection in exchange for delegating its foreign policy to Russia. Georgia maintained autonomy in internal affairs but had to conduct foreign relations through Russia. Erekle II believed the treaty would guarantee both Georgia's independence and security.

But reality was different. In 1795, Agha Mohammad Khan of Persia led a great army and invaded Georgia. He captured Tbilisi and systematically destroyed the city. Tens of thousands of residents were massacred or dragged into slavery. The city became a heap of ashes. According to the treaty, Russian military support should have been provided, but Russian forces did not arrive.

Erekle II gazed upon his destroyed capital in despair. He died in 1798, and his successor, Giorgi XII, became increasingly dependent on Russia. Giorgi XII hoped to guarantee his dynasty's status in exchange for incorporating Georgia into the Russian Empire. But when he died in 1800, Russian Emperor Paul I (followed by Alexander I) unilaterally declared annexation without consulting the Georgian royal family.

In 1801 (some records say 1802), the Russian Empire annexed the Kartli-Kakheti kingdom. Georgia's royal line was severed. Members of the Bagrationi dynasty were exiled to Russia or placed under surveillance. In 1810, the Imereti kingdom of western Georgia was also annexed, and subsequently Guria, Samegrelo, Svaneti, and other regions were progressively absorbed into the Russian Empire.

Russian rule suppressed Georgian identity. In 1811, the Russian Empire stripped the Georgian Orthodox Church of its independent status (autocephaly) and made it subordinate to the Russian Orthodox Church. Russian was imposed as the official language instead of Georgian. Georgian nobility resisted the Russification policy.

but were crushed by force. In 1832, a large-scale conspiracy was uncovered, and participants were executed or exiled to Siberia.

The Russian Empire used Georgia as a base for expanding southward. Through the Caucasian War (1817-1864), it conquered the North Caucasus regions of Chechnya and Dagestan, and seized Armenia and Azerbaijan from Persia and the Ottoman Turks. During this process, the Georgian Military Highway linking Tbilisi to the Russian city of Vladikavkaz was constructed. It was a strategic road for moving troops and supplies. Ironically, today this road has become Georgia's most beautiful tourist route.

Russian imperial rule had not only negative aspects. It served as a catalyst for the influx of European culture and the promotion of modernization. Tbilisi, where the Viceroy of the Russian tsar resided, acquired the appearance of 'the Paris of the East' as European-style architecture and culture were introduced. Railways were laid, and schools and theaters were built.

In the late nineteenth century, the Georgian nationalist movement emerged. Ilia Chavchavadze (1837-1907) was the leading intellectual of this period. He was a poet, journalist, and political activist who led the revival of Georgian language and culture. He is famous for a motto.

"Ena (Language), Mamuli (Homeland), Sartsmuneba (Faith)"

Language, homeland, faith. It was a declaration that these three were the essence of Georgian identity. Chavchavadze devoted himself to the development of Georgian literature, peasant education, and the awakening of national consciousness. He was assassinated in 1907. While there are various theories about who was behind it, it is clear that his nationalist activities posed a threat to someone. The Georgian Orthodox Church canonized him as a saint in 2012.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 opened new opportunities for Georgia. On May 26, 1918, Georgia declared independence and established the Georgian Democratic Republic. It was one of Europe's

first social democratic governments. The government led by Noe Zhordania guaranteed women's suffrage, established freedom of the press, and pursued land reform. Independent Georgia received recognition from European nations including Britain, France, and Germany.

But this independence was short-lived. In February 1921, the Red Army invaded Georgia. Soviet Russia claimed to be supporting a Bolshevik uprising within Georgia, but it was actually an invasion by regular forces. Georgian forces resisted bravely but were outmatched. In March, the Georgian government abandoned the capital, retreated to Batumi, and then fled into exile abroad.

Georgia became part of the Soviet Union. Initially it was part of the Transcaucasian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic alongside Armenia and Azerbaijan, but from 1936 it became an independent union republic as the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic.

Paradoxically, the Soviet Union's supreme leader Joseph Stalin (born Ioseb Jughashvili) was from Gori, Georgia. Stalin used Georgian as his native language and was educated in a Georgian Orthodox theological seminary. Yet he was hostile to Georgian nationalism. Under his rule, Georgia's intellectuals and nationalists became targets of the Great Purge. In the 1930s, countless writers, artists, politicians, and clergy were executed or sent to forced labor camps (gulag) in Siberia.

During the Soviet period, Georgia experienced rapid industrialization. Railways and factories were constructed, and illiteracy declined. Batumi became a hub for oil exports. Yet this development proceeded alongside suppression of language and culture, religious persecution, and political repression.

Georgian sacrifices during World War II were enormous. Approximately 700,000 Georgians, about 20 percent of the population, served in the military, and more than 300,000 were killed in action. Georgian generals commanded major battles for the Soviet Army.

After Stalin's death in 1953, complex emotions erupted in Georgia. When Khrushchev began the de-Stalinization campaign in 1956, massive protests broke out in Tbilisi. Some protesters defended Stalin, while others raised nationalist demands. Soviet troops fired on the crowd, and dozens were killed.

Nationalist protests continued into the 1970s. In 1978, when the Soviet government attempted to strip Georgian of its official language status, thousands took to the streets in protest. In the end, the Soviet government backed down. This victory became a source of national pride for Georgians.

Gori still has a Stalin Museum today. There is the small cottage where he was born, his private railway carriage, and a museum exhibiting his life. Conflicting emotions cross visitors' minds. For Georgians, Stalin exists between pride, a world leader produced by the small nation of Georgia, and shame at being the dictator who murdered millions. This ambivalence manifests differently depending on generation and political outlook.

In the late 1980s, as the Soviet Union's dissolution became tangible with Mikhail Gorbachev's reform policies, perestroika and glasnost, nationalist movements intensified within Georgia. On April 9, 1989,

a peaceful demonstration demanding independence was held on Rustaveli Avenue in Tbilisi. Soviet troops suppressed it with force. They beat protesters with spades and sprayed poison gas. Twenty-one people died, mostly young women. This tragedy, known as the April 9 Tragedy, became a decisive catalyst for Georgia's independence movement.

On April 9, 1991, Georgia declared independence. It was among the first republics to withdraw before the Soviet Union's collapse. Its first president was nationalist activist Zviad Gamsakhurdia.

However, the path after independence was not smooth. The Gamsakhurdia government disregarded democratic procedures and showed authoritarian tendencies. Civil war broke out from 1991 to 1992, and he was overthrown. Eduard Shevardnadze, the former Soviet Foreign Minister, seized power. The economy collapsed, and crime and corruption became rampant.

Separatist wars broke out in the Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions. Russia intervened in the conflict and supported separatist forces. As a result of the Abkhazia War from 1992 to 1993, approximately 250,000 Georgians lost their homes and became internally displaced persons.

The Rose Revolution in 2003 brought down the Shevardnadze government, and Mikheil Saakashvili became president. He pursued radical reforms to root out corruption and spur economic growth. However, in August 2008, war broke out between Georgia and Russia over South Ossetia. In the five-day war, Georgian forces were defeated, and Russia recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent nations. With Russian troops stationed in these territories, approximately 20 percent of Georgia's territory is effectively under occupation.

Near South Ossetia, the creeping border phenomenon continues today, with border fences gradually advancing into Georgian territory. News stories feature farmers who woke one morning to find their vineyards had been enclosed within the occupied zone.

Georgia has pursued integration with Western society with the goal of joining the European Union and NATO. Though it gained EU candidate status in 2024, debate continues both domestically and internationally over the current government's policy direction. EU flags and Ukrainian flags hung throughout Georgia represent the fierce aspiration of Georgians to escape Russia's shadow and become full members of Europe with complete freedom.

Georgia's history is a record of relentless struggle for survival amid great powers. Persia and the Ottoman Empire, Mongols and Timur, the Russian Empire and Soviet Union. Countless conquerors trampled this land, but Georgians preserved their language, faith, and culture. The epic of a small nation that has never been broken continues today.

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Chapter 8: Language and Script: the Strength of the Soul

A Journey Through Georgia's History and Culture

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A. The 33-Letter Alphabet, a Unique Script Recognized by UNESCO

Upon arriving at the airport, a first-time visitor to Georgia encounters unfamiliar script from the very first moment. The letters on the signs are neither Arabic nor Cyrillic. They flow like grapevine tendrils entwined in dance. Some letters resemble peaks of the Caucasus Mountains, while others curve smoothly like flowing rivers. This is the Georgian alphabet, one of the world's most distinctive and beautiful writing systems.

Though thousands of languages exist worldwide, only some fourteen possess their own unique writing system. Latin, Cyrillic, Arabic, Hangul, Hebrew, and Greek scripts are among them. Georgian belongs to this rare family of writing systems. There is something even more remarkable. Georgian connects to no major language family. It belongs neither to the Indo-European languages nor to Turkic or Semitic tongues. Linguists call Georgian a Kartvelian language, or a South Caucasian language. Only four languages belong to this family: Georgian itself, along with Mingrelian, Svan, and Laz. In a sense, Georgian stands like an island in a vast sea of languages.

The modern Georgian alphabet consists of 33 letters. Each letter corresponds precisely to a single sound. You read as written and write as spoken. There is no troublesome gap between spelling and pronunciation as in English. There are no capital and lowercase distinctions, which is also unique. Grammar does not distinguish gender, so there is no need to say "he" and "she" separately. A single neutral word suffices to refer to someone.

Yet Georgian pronunciation presents a considerable challenge to foreigners. Words with three, four, or even five consecutive consonants abound. The word for "water," tskali, begins with the consonant cluster ts-k-a-l-i. The verb meaning "he stripped our skin," gvprtskvnis, requires such a contorted tongue that speakers twist in knots. Georgians pronounce these complex consonant clusters effortlessly, and they take quiet pride in watching foreigners struggle.

The history of Georgian script parallels the arrival of Christianity. After Christianity was recognized as the state religion in the fourth century, the need arose to translate the Bible into Georgian, and through this process, the writing system developed with precision. Georgian script has evolved through three distinct forms historically. The fact that all three forms remain alive today is a phenomenon without parallel in world writing history.

The first is Asomtavruli. The oldest form, used from around the fifth century, it is characterized by round geometric shapes. It was used mainly on monuments, church walls, and titles of biblical manuscripts.

When you visit ancient churches or monasteries around Tbilisi, you can see Asomtavruli letters carved into stone. Despite fifteen hundred years passing, they remain sharp and clear.

The second is Nuskhuri. Appearing from around the ninth century, this script has a more angular, connected cursive form. It was developed so monks could write quickly on parchment, and it was used mainly in religious texts. Asomtavruli and Nuskhuri were used together, the former serving as capitals and the latter as body text. This combination is called Khutsuri, or "the script of priests."

The third is Mkhedruli, which Georgians use in daily life today. This typeface, meaning "the script of knights," began to be widely used in secular contexts from around the eleventh century. It appeared in royal decrees, business documents, and personal letters before gradually spreading to all domains. Mkhedruli is characterized by flowing curves, and you encounter this script everywhere in modern Georgia on signs, in books, in newspapers, and online.

Though the three scripts look entirely different, they all share the same alphabet order and letter names. They are written from left to right alike. Like three brothers from one family, each wearing different clothes yet sharing the same blood, these three scripts are different vessels holding the single soul of the Georgian language.

In 2016, UNESCO inscribed the "Living culture of three writing systems of the Georgian alphabet" on the list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Experts assessed that the coexistence of three writing systems within a single language, each maintaining its unique function over centuries without disappearing, is unique worldwide. Asomtavruli still holds its place in monumental use, Nuskhuri in religious ceremonies, and Mkhedruli in daily life. The past does not break from the present but stacks layer upon layer, living and breathing.

This continuity makes something remarkable possible. Georgian children today can read ancient documents written in the eleventh century without great difficulty. Writing from a thousand years ago is understood as if written yesterday. Compare this to how Korean speakers find it difficult to read the original text of the Hunminjeongeum Haerye manuscript, and you grasp the stunning stability of Georgian script.

To Georgians, language was something to be defended at any cost. Under Imperial Russia in the nineteenth century, and during the Soviet era in the twentieth, the use of Russian was forced upon them. Georgian language instruction was restricted in schools, and official documents had to be written in Russian. Language oppression was like the soul suffocating.

In April 1978, a decisive moment arrived. Soviet authorities attempted to strike from the Georgian constitution the provision naming Georgian as the official language. When this news spread, thousands of students and citizens poured into the streets of Tbilisi. They cried out, "Protect our language!" The crowd grew and tensions escalated. Ultimately, Soviet authorities backed down.

Georgian retained its status as the official language. Behind the Iron Curtain, popular resistance that reversed a Soviet decision was extremely rare. To commemorate this day, April 14 is now designated as "Georgian Mother Language Day," celebrated with festivals across the nation.

In central Tbilisi stands Deda Ena Park. The name means "Mother Language." Within it stands a language monument shaped like outstretched hands reaching toward the sky. It was built to preserve forever the memory of that 1978 victory.

In Batumi, the Black Sea coastal city, stands an even more striking structure. The Alphabet Tower rises 130 meters high. Its surface is embedded with 33 enormous Georgian letters shaped like a DNA double helix. At night, illumination adorns Batumi's skyline. The message of this tower is clear: Georgian script is the very DNA of the Georgian people. It is not merely a communication tool but a "fortress of the soul" within which Georgians preserved their identity through centuries of invasion by great powers.

B. Shota Rustaveli and The Knight in the Panther's Skin

Wherever you go in Georgia, you encounter the name of one man. Tbilisi's main street bears his name. His portrait appears at subway stations, in theaters, even on banknotes. Shota Rustaveli. This twelfth-century poet who lived in Georgia's golden age was no mere writer. He is a pillar of the Georgian spirit, a soul that lives and breathes in Georgian hearts even today, eight centuries later.

The late twelfth century when Rustaveli was active was the most brilliant period in Georgian history. It was the time when the great female sovereign Queen Tamar reigned from 1184 to 1213. The Georgian kingdom expanded its territory across the Caucasus, and Tbilisi flourished as a center of culture and art. At the pinnacle of this golden age, Rustaveli completed his life's masterwork, *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*, and dedicated it to Queen Tamar.

This epic poem is a vast work composed of roughly sixteen hundred quatrains. The surface narrative is as follows. Princess Tinatin of the Arabian kingdom loves the valiant knight Avtandil. One day an unknown knight appears in the kingdom. This mysterious figure, wrapped in a panther skin and wandering in tears, is Tariel. He is a prince of the Indian kingdom, and his beloved, Nestan-Darejan, has been abducted by an evil band and imprisoned somewhere. Tinatin orders Avtandil to help Tariel. After years of adventure, Avtandil finds Tariel, and the two knights form a strong bond. A third knight, Pridon, joins them. The three friends unite to attack the fortress of evil and rescue Nestan-Darejan. All end in happiness.

From this plot alone, the work seems no different from any medieval chivalric romance. But *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* has captivated Georgian souls for eight hundred years because of the profound philosophy contained within the story.

Rustaveli sang of the sacredness of friendship. Avtandil leaves his beloved Tinatin's side and rushes into unknown danger. Solely to help Tariel in his suffering. True friendship does not fear self-sacrifice. The devotion and loyalty shown by the three knights are values most treasured by Georgians today.

Respect for women is also central to the work. For the twelfth century, this is remarkable. The women in the narrative are not passive. Tinatin is the agent who assigns Avtandil his mission, while Nestan-Darejan is a strong character who never surrenders even in captivity. Rustaveli wrote thus:

"Lion cubs are equal, be they male or female."

This verse embodies the idea of gender equality. It reflects the progressive social vision of the era of Queen Tamar, the female sovereign.

The theme of "good's victory over evil" runs throughout. The scene where the three knights ultimately bring down the fortress of evil is not merely a triumph of force. It is a declaration that human noble values, courage, friendship, love, triumph over darkness. Georgians found hope in this message amid centuries of foreign invasion.

The panther skin itself that Tariel wears is symbolic. The panther represents savage instinct and fierce passion. Tariel, wracked with pain at the loss of his beloved and verging on madness, wraps himself in the panther skin and wanders the wilderness. Yet he finally recovers his reason and moves toward a noble goal. The message is this: to master and transform the bestial impulses within the human heart, that is true chivalry.

Georgian families held a long tradition. When a daughter left to marry, she took a copy of *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* as part of her dowry. This book was cherished as a spiritual guide second only to the Bible. When family gathered, elders would recite passages from the epic. "Never abandon friendship as Tariel did." "Sacrifice for your beloved as Avtandil did." Rustaveli's verses became a moral compass for Georgians.

The work's literary value is recognized internationally. It has been translated into more than fifty languages. The British orientalist Marjory Wardrop published the first complete English translation in 1912, introducing the work to the West in earnest. The Hungarian painter Mihály

Zichy, moved by the work, created a series of illustrations that can be seen throughout Georgia today.

Little is known of Rustaveli's life. Legends surrounding him fill the gaps. The most widely known story is that he secretly loved Queen Tamar. A love he dared not speak aloud. For this reason, he never married, expressing his heart only through verse. After the queen passed from the world, the grieving Rustaveli is said to have made pilgrimage to Jerusalem and spent his remaining years in the Monastery of the Cross there. A fresco image of a figure believed to be Rustaveli remains on a pillar of that monastery, lending credence to the legend.

Rustaveli Avenue cuts through the heart of Tbilisi. Over roughly one and a half kilometers, it is lined with the Parliament building, the Opera House, the National Museum, and theaters. Georgian politics and culture are concentrated on this street. At the avenue's beginning stands a statue of Rustaveli, looking down on the passing crowds. A bust of him stands at the entrance to Rustaveli subway station. The airport itself bears his name; Tbilisi International Airport is known as "Shota Rustaveli Airport." Even now, eight hundred years later, he lives woven deep into the fabric of Georgian daily

life.

C. Ilia Chavchavadze, the Spirit of "Homeland, Language, and Faith"

If Shota Rustaveli was a spiritual pillar of medieval Georgia, there is another figure revered as the father of modern Georgia: Ilia Chavchavadze, 1837-1907. When Georgian language and identity faced annihilation under nineteenth-century Imperial Russia, he took up the pen and awakened his nation's soul.

In 1837, Chavchavadze was born into an aristocratic family in the Kakheti region. It was thirty-six years after the Russian Empire annexed Georgia. Outwardly peaceful, Russification policies were gradually eroding Georgian society. Russian was mandated in schools, and Russian was essential for civil service. Among young Georgian nobility, a climate emerged where using Russian and following Russian culture was considered "cultivated" behavior.

Chavchavadze studied at the University of Saint Petersburg and experienced Russian culture and thought. Paradoxically, it was there that he developed an awareness of his own roots, Georgian language and culture. With like-minded young men, he formed a group called Tergdaleulebi, meaning "those who drank the waters of the Terek River," referring to Georgian intellectuals educated in Russia. They were a generation that had their eyes opened to Russian culture but simultaneously developed a deeper awareness of their identity as Georgians.

Returning to Georgia, Chavchavadze conducted national enlightenment through literature, journalism, education, and finance. His greatest legacy is compressed into three words.

Mamuli, homeland. Ena, language. Sartsmunoeba, faith.

These three were core values that Georgians must never abandon to exist as Georgians.

Homeland did not mean merely land. It was soil inscribed with thousands of years of history, a space soaked with the blood and sweat of ancestors. It was a declaration that Georgia must be preserved as an independent historical and cultural subject, not as part of the Russian Empire.

Language was for Chavchavadze a matter of soul. He said, "When a people loses its language, that people is dead." Protecting Georgian in a Russian-dominated world was no mere cultural preservation. It was a struggle for existence itself. In 1877, Chavchavadze founded the newspaper Iveria and wrote articles in Georgian. He established the Society for the Spreading of Literacy among Georgians and founded schools across the nation.

Distributed Georgian textbooks and established schools. By the end of the 19th century, the schools founded by this association exceeded 50 in number, and thousands of children learned to read and write in Georgian.

Faith (sartsmunoeoba) meant loyalty to the Georgian Orthodox Church. Since the 4th century, Christianity had been the spiritual center binding Georgians together. Even amid invasions by Arabs, Mongols, Persians, and Ottomans, Georgians did not lose their identity thanks to Orthodox faith.

Chavchavadze viewed the church as a symbol of national unity.

Though born noble, Chavchavadze advocated the abolition of serfdom and dedicated himself to enlightening ordinary people. His literary works depicted Georgian rural life with realism and critiqued social contradictions sharply. His poem "The Hermit" lamented a world corrupted by materialism and called for spiritual awakening. Through novels and essays, he argued for the importance of education, women's rights, and social justice.

As his influence grew, so did the threats against him. Russian authorities regarded him as a thorn in their side, and radical socialists denounced him as a moderate. In August 1907, Chavchavadze was attacked and killed by armed assailants of unknown identity on the road from Tsinandali to Tbilisi. He died at the age of

70. The perpetrators were never identified, but the theory that Bolshevik forces were responsible is compelling. His death kindled the flames of Georgian nationalism even more fiercely.

Today, Ilia Chavchavadze has been canonized by the Georgian Orthodox Church as "Saint Ilia the Righteous." A writer and politician rose to sainthood. This shows how deeply he is revered by Georgians in religious terms.

On Mount Mtatsminda, which overlooks Tbilisi, stands a Pantheon. It is a sacred burial ground where Georgia's greatest writers, artists, and scholars rest. Chavchavadze's tomb occupies the center of this place. Georgians still place flowers at his grave and pay their respects.

In Tsinandali in the Kakheti region, the Chavchavadze family estate has been preserved as a museum. It was a salon where 19th-century Georgian intellectuals gathered to discuss literature and debate new European ideas. With its beautiful English-style gardens and historic winery, it is beloved as a must-visit destination for travelers. Walking among the vineyards, one feels the passion of the young people who pondered Georgia's future in this place 150 years ago.

"Homeland, language, faith." These three values that Chavchavadze proclaimed live and breathe as Georgia's national motto even today. When Georgia gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, when it won democracy through the Rose Revolution in 2003, during the 2008 war with Russia, and in the 2020s as it aspires toward European Union membership, Georgians always return to Chavchavadze's spirit. His vision became the foundation of Georgia's modern constitution and the root of the desire for European integration.

b. The Mystery of Polyphonic Music

The final key to understanding Georgia's soul is music. Among these, polyphonic music called "Polyphony" is the essence of Georgian culture. The moment one hears this music for the first time, people are seized by wonder. How can such deep and rich harmonies be created with nothing but human voices, without a single instrument?

Polyphony refers to a musical form where multiple independent melodic lines proceed simultaneously and harmonize with each other. In Western music history, polyphony developed from medieval church music and reached its peak in Bach's fugues. However, in Georgia, complex polyphonic musical traditions existed as early as the 6th-5th centuries BCE, long before Christianity spread. Compared to Western music taking over a thousand years to develop from monophony to harmonic music, the origins of Georgian polyphony remain something of a mystery.

Georgian polyphony is typically composed of three voice parts. The soprano, alto, and bass each sing independent melodies while achieving exquisite harmony. Sometimes four or more voice parts blend together. Most often there is no instrumental accompaniment. Harmonies built purely through human voices, layered upon each other. It is like constructing an invisible cathedral of sound.

It differs from Western harmonic theory. Georgian polyphony boldly uses sounds that would be classified as "dissonance" in Western music theory. A distinctive progression that sounds jarring at first but then resolves to perfect harmony in an instant. This rhythm of tension and release gives listeners a sense of mystery and spirituality. Musicologists call this Georgia's unique "harmonic language."

In 2001, UNESCO designated Georgian polyphony as a "Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity." In 2008, it was officially inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. It was recognized not as mere folk music but as a heritage of artistic value that all humanity should preserve.

In 1977, the United States National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) launched the Voyager 1 and Voyager 2 spacecraft into space. These spacecraft carried a gold-plated phonograph record called the "Golden Record." It was a message to introduce Earth and humanity should an extraterrestrial civilization ever discover the spacecraft. The record contains 27 pieces of humanity's greatest music, including works by Bach, Beethoven, and Mozart. Among them is Georgia's traditional polyphonic folk song "Chakrulo."

Chakrulo is a powerful choral song sung by men at banquets and festivals. This song, originating from the Kakheti region, is characterized by complex harmonies and dynamic rhythm. When the soprano soars upward in a falsetto reminiscent of yodeling, the alto and bass provide a solid foundation. It is as if the rugged peaks and deep valleys of the Caucasus Mountains are painted in sound. NASA scientists determined that this song could represent Earth's diverse musical traditions. Even now, the Voyager spacecraft flies through interstellar space beyond the solar system, carrying the melody of Chakrulo.

Even within Georgia's small territory, the polyphonic style differs markedly from region to region.

The songs of the Svaneti region, situated deep in the Caucasus Mountains, resemble the region's rugged terrain. They are solemn and majestic, carrying traces of ancient ritual. They are characterized by a resonant, weighty quality rather than complex harmonies. It is said that songs of the Svan people, who have lived in isolation for thousands of years, retain elements from the

pre-Christian pagan era.

The polyphony of western Guria feels entirely different. A distinctive technique called "Krimanchuli" is used. High-pitched falsetto similar to yodeling floats freely above the melodic line. Improvised and rapid rhythm, complex melodic lines intertwining with each other. It is as if several people are speaking simultaneously, yet mysteriously all the words can be heard. Gurian songs are sometimes counted among the world's most complex polyphonies.

Eastern Kakheti, known as the wine region, has equally rich songs. The style features a lyrical melody laid over a long-sustained drone bass. There is a diverse repertoire ranging from work songs sung during grape harvest to toasts sung at banquets.

In Georgia, singing is not a performance but life itself. For every important moment in life, there is a fitting song. When plowing fields, harvesting grapes, going to war, at weddings, at funerals, even when treating wounds. No event is complete without song.

In the Georgian traditional feast called "Supra," polyphony is an indispensable element. Supra is not merely a meal but a communal ritual. When a toastmaster called "Tamada" recites a toast, all attendees raise their glasses in response. When the toast ends, song naturally begins. No one conducts, yet perfect harmony emerges from only the glances and breathing between them. To see people sitting around a table suddenly singing like a professional choir is extraordinary. First-time foreign witnesses are left speechless.

Traditional instruments sometimes provide accompaniment. The Panduri is a lute-shaped instrument with three strings. The Chonguri is a four-string instrument with a softer sound. The Salamuri is a woodwind instrument with a clear sound like a flute. The Duduk adds a deep, resonant bass. Yet the essence always remains the human voice. Instruments are merely supplementary; the harmony created by voices is the true nature of Georgian music.

Georgians say, "There is no Georgian who does not sing." It is no exaggeration. From elders in rural villages to young people in cities, Georgians proudly continue their polyphonic tradition. Numerous amateur choirs are active throughout the country, and schools teach polyphony.

If you happen to hear this grand choral singing on a street in Tbilisi, in a restaurant, or at a feast in a rural village, pause and listen carefully. Georgians singing in harmony without sheet music or conductor, matching their voices while looking at each other. The harmonies they create carry thousands of years of history. The memory of a people who survived by relying on each other amid foreign invasions. The strength of a spirit that has endured as steadfastly as the Caucasus Mountains. That is Georgian polyphony.

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Chapter 9: The Orthodox Church and Georgian DNA

A Journey Through Georgia's History and Culture

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A. The Church's Dominant Social Influence

To understand Georgia, you must first understand their faith. Whether you walk any street in Tbilisi, cross the vineyard hills of Kakheti, or enter a secluded mountain village in Svaneti, the first thing that catches your eye is the cross. Golden-domed cathedrals, monasteries precariously perched on cliffs, small chapels at the edge of villages. The Georgian Orthodox Church is the landscape of this country itself. Yet this is not merely architecture. For Georgians, the Orthodox Church is more than religion. It is the soul of the nation, the guardian of five thousand years of history, and the last refuge that kept them "Georgian" even through countless invasions and domination.

The Birth of the Grapevine Cross

Georgia's adoption of Christianity begins with a woman. Saint Nino. In the early fourth century, this young woman from Cappadocia is said to have received a vision from the Virgin Mary. In a dream, the Virgin handed Nino a cross made of grapevine branches and said, "Go to Iberia, the ancient Georgia, and preach the gospel. By the power of this cross, you will plant the flag of faith in that land." Nino awoke, and in her hand lay grapevine branches. She bound them together with her own hair to make a cross. The flexible grapevine was not firmly fixed, so both arms drooped downward. This uniquely shaped cross is what we know today as the Grapevine Cross, the symbol of the Georgian Orthodox Church.

Nino arrived in the Kingdom of Iberia around 320. She settled in the capital, Mtskheta, and began to preach the gospel. At first, people did not listen to this foreign woman. But when Nino healed the sick and performed miracles, the situation changed. The decisive moment came when Queen Nana fell gravely ill. Nino prayed, and the queen recovered. The queen converted to Christianity immediately.

But King Miriam III did not change his mind easily. He continued to worship the gods his ancestors had revered for generations. According to legend, one day when the king was out hunting, he was suddenly engulfed in total darkness. He could see nothing. Frightened, the king prayed desperately to his ancestors' gods, but they gave no answer. Finally, he prayed to "the God of Nino." At that moment, the darkness lifted and light returned. The king returned to his palace and was baptized immediately. In 337 (some records say 326), King Miriam declared Christianity the official religion of Iberia. Georgia became the second country in the world to adopt Christianity as its state religion, after Armenia.

Nino's grapevine cross is now kept in the Sioni Cathedral in Tbilisi. This cross wandered through several places over centuries, passing through the turbulent history of Persian invasions, Ottoman threats, and Russian imperial annexation. Since it was returned to Georgia by Russian Emperor Alexander I in 1802, this cross has been revered as the most sacred relic of the Georgian nation. The four small crosses depicted on Georgia's flag today are stylized versions of this grapevine cross.

Seventeen Hundred Years of Resistance

Georgia's adoption of Christianity was not a simple religious choice. It was a matter of survival. Geographically, Georgia was a small nation caught between vast empires. To the east lay Persia, to the south the Arabs and Ottomans, and to the north Russia. All these powers invaded, conquered, and ruled Georgia in turn. But no matter what was taken from them, Georgians preserved their faith.

During the seventh-century Arab invasion, Muslim conquerors forced Georgians to convert. Those who refused were executed. Records show that more than one hundred thousand Christians were martyred along the Mtkvari River in Tbilisi. They were offered their lives if they would step over a cross icon floating on the water, but they refused. Instead, they jumped into the river and died kissing the icon. This is why Tbilisi residents commemorate May 13th as 'Day of the Hundred Thousand Martyrs' each year.

It was the same during Persian rule. Persia made Georgia a vassal state and pressured conversion to Zoroastrianism or Islam. Some nobles compromised, but the majority of common people stubbornly refused. The church became their only refuge. Clergy translated the Bible into Georgian, composed hymns, and recorded history. Monasteries became schools, and churches became libraries. Preserving faith meant preserving language, and preserving language meant preserving the nation.

In the fourteenth century, when Timur of the Mongols ravaged Georgia, Georgians had to move their national treasures and sacred objects to safety. The place they chose was the Gergeti Trinity Church perched on a cliff on Mount Kazbek at an elevation of 2,170 meters. In this remote church rising above the clouds, they hid precious relics including Saint Nino's cross. They believed that no matter how strong the enemy was, they would not be able to climb so high. Today, Gergeti Church has become one of Georgia's most famous tourist attractions. But for Georgians, this place means far more than a tourist site. It is a sacred shrine symbolizing the resolve of ancestors who never abandoned their faith in any adversity.

Soviet Atheism and Resurrection

Ironically, the most severe persecution of the Georgian Orthodox Church came from Russia, part of the same Christian cultural sphere. After the Russian Empire annexed Georgia in 1801, the Russian Orthodox Church stripped the Georgian Church of its autocephaly. The Georgian Patriarchate was abolished, and the Georgian Church was demoted to an exarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church. Georgian-language worship was prohibited or restricted, and Russian clergy occupied key positions. For Georgians, for whom the church was the nation's identity itself, this was colonization of the soul.

But a harsher trial awaited. In 1921, the Soviet Red Army occupied Georgia. The Communist Party systematically suppressed the church according to the doctrine that 'religion is the opium of the people.' Hundreds of churches were destroyed or converted into warehouses, factories, and prisons. Thousands of clergy were executed or sent to Siberian camps. Religious education was forbidden, and openly expressing faith brought social and professional disadvantage.

But the faith of Georgians did not disappear. It went underground. Grandmothers secretly taught prayers to their grandchildren, and village elders lit candles in secret on the ruins of destroyed churches. Baptisms were conducted in secrecy, and Bibles were hand-copied and passed down. Despite seventy years of atheist rule, the spark of faith was never extinguished.

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 and Georgia declared independence, the Orthodox Church resurged at a remarkable pace. Suppressed faith burst forth explosively. Ruined churches began to be restored, and new cathedrals were built. Most symbolic among them was Tbilisi's Holy Trinity Cathedral, called 'Sameba' in Georgian. Completed in 2004, this cathedral is the largest Orthodox Church building in the South Caucasus. This massive structure, 101 meters tall, is visible from anywhere in Tbilisi. For Georgians, Sameba Cathedral is not merely a building. It is a monument to spiritual resurrection achieved by overcoming Soviet atheism.

Its Influence in Modern Society

Today, roughly 83 to 85 percent of Georgia's population belongs to the Orthodox Church. These numbers alone cannot fully explain the church's influence. The Georgian Orthodox Church is not merely a religious institution for believers. It is a massive force that defines national identity, sets social norms, and influences political decision-making.

According to a 2021 International Republican Institute poll, Georgian Patriarch Ilia II held an 88 percent approval rating, making him the most respected public figure in Georgia. No president, prime minister, or politician came close to this number. Portraits of Patriarch Ilia II, who has served since 1977, appear commonly not only in government buildings but also in private homes, shops, and restaurants. For Georgians, he is not merely a religious leader but something close to a founding father.

The church's influence is even more pronounced in politics. Constitutionally, Georgia is a secular state. However, through a Concordat signed in 2002, the Orthodox Church enjoys special status distinct from other religious organizations. The government provides substantial financial support to the church, and the church receives various privileges including tax exemption. In 2024, 35 million lari (approximately 1.5 billion won) was allocated to the Patriarchate's education and cultural development fund by prime ministerial order.

Politicians never fail to visit the church during election season. Photographs of the Patriarch's blessing are standard fare in campaign posters. Analysts suggest that the implicit support of the Orthodox Church played an important role in the 2012 general election victory of the 'Georgian Dream' party led by billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili. This collusion between the government and the

Patriarchate has drawn criticism for weakening the foundations of secularism and the rule of law.

The church also speaks powerfully on social issues. The sharpest point of conflict is the question of LGBTQ+ rights. The Georgian Orthodox Church defines homosexuality as 'mortal sin' and opposes it strongly. In his 2021 Easter message, Patriarch Ilia II warned that same-sex marriage is 'a powerful taboo' and that the traditional identities of 'male' and 'female' and 'family values' that define humanity are being erased. That same July, when a Pride march was planned in Tbilisi, the church and conservative groups organized fierce protests. Some protesters even assaulted Pride organizers' offices and journalists.

This rigid stance of the church also creates friction with Georgia's efforts to join the European Union. The EU requires member states to meet human rights standards including protection of LGBTQ+ rights. However, opposed by the church and conservative forces, Georgia's government has made no progress on this issue. In 2024, the government passed a 'Family Values and Minors Protection Law' in response to EU anti-discrimination requirements, but this law effectively restricts LGBTQ+ rights and has drawn criticism from international human rights organizations.

Traditions and Limits of Religious Tolerance

Although the Georgian Orthodox Church wields overwhelming influence, Georgia has historically been a land of religious tolerance. Walking through Old Tbilisi reveals evidence of this. Along narrow alleys stand the Georgian Orthodox cathedral, the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Jewish synagogue, and the Islamic mosque side by side. The history of the Silk Road crossing point, where diverse peoples and religions coexisted for centuries, remains fully intact.

The western coastal city of Batumi is another example of this diversity. In Batumi, capital of the Ajara Autonomous Republic, the Orthodox Church, Catholic Church, Armenian Church, Jewish synagogue, and Islamic mosque all coexist in one city. This region, which had a substantial Muslim population due to long Ottoman rule, is regarded as a symbol of interreligious coexistence.

But this tradition of tolerance is being tested recently. As politicians emphasize 'preservation of traditional values,' there are concerns that voices of discrimination and exclusion toward minority religions and ethnic groups are growing. Some analysts note that hardliners with anti-Western and anti-liberal tendencies are expanding their influence within the Orthodox Church itself. They reject Western secular values, calling them 'pseudo-liberal ideology.'

What does the Orthodox Church mean to Georgians? It is not merely a chapel to visit on Sundays. It is an identity imprinted on their DNA. It is a spiritual homeland that kept them Georgian even through thousands of years of invasion and domination, persecution and suffering. An elderly man making the sign of the cross toward a church outside a Tbilisi bus window; a farmer lighting candles in a ruined chapel in a rural village; a young man in a university cafe wearing a cross necklace while debating heatedly with friends. For all of them, the Orthodox Church is an invisible thread connecting past and present.

Yet this powerful thread sometimes ties Georgia down in its move toward the future. Between yearning for Europe and preservation of traditional values, where will the Georgian Orthodox Church head? The answer to this question will be one of the key variables determining Georgia's future.

B. Supra Culture: The Community Ritual Beyond Mere Dining

Travelers in Georgia hear one phrase constantly: 'We're having a supra at our place tonight, come along.' At first, you don't know what supra is. You think it's just an evening dinner invitation. But hours later, after watching the dawn break amid endless toasts and songs, tears and laughter, you understand. Supra is not mere dining. It is a gateway into the depths of the Georgian soul.

A Universe Contained in a Tablecloth

The word supra literally means 'tablecloth.' Derived from the Persian word 'sofre,' it originally referred to the cloth on which food was laid out. But in Georgia today, supra means the traditional feast itself. Weddings, baptisms, funerals, birthdays, national holidays, memorial gatherings, receiving guests, or friends gathering together, whenever there is an important moment in a Georgian's life, a supra unfolds without fail.

In 2017, the Georgian government designated the supra tradition as intangible cultural heritage. But for Georgians, supra is a culture far too alive to be called 'heritage.' It is not an antique displayed in a museum but life itself, unfolding every night in someone's home, a restaurant, or the middle of a vineyard.

How old is the supra tradition? According to linguist Levan Bregadze, the form of supra we know today became established after the Russian annexation in the early nineteenth century and spread throughout the country by the late nineteenth century. The Georgian word 'sadgeprdzelo' (meaning 'for a long life'), which denotes a toast, first appears in written records in the mid-nineteenth century. However, historian John R. Perry argues that supra's roots lie in the banqueting culture of Persia's Safavid dynasty. He contends that the Georgian court, influenced by sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Safavid Iran, adopted the Persian customs of 'sohbat' (a place of fellowship) and 'sofre' (a banquet) and developed them in their own way.

Regardless of which theory is correct, the fact that supra is central to Georgian culture remains unchanged. Among bronze sculptures from the seventh century BCE, there is a figure holding a drinking horn (kantsi) aloft. Today, this sculpture is called the Tamada statue, and replicas are displayed in several locations throughout Tbilisi. It is evidence that three thousand years ago, Georgians gathered, raised their glasses, and offered toasts to someone's health.

Tamada: Master of the Table

Every supra must have a tamada. The tamada is the host and conductor of the feast. But that description fails to capture the role fully. Georgians jokingly say 'the tamada is a dictator of the table.' But a tamada is closer to a teacher or priest than a dictator. A good tamada is a poet and philosopher, a psychologist and entertainer.

The qualifications for a tamada are rigorous. First, they must be articulate. They should be able to express commonplace ideas in original, beautiful language. The finest tamadas are almost extemporaneous poets. Second, they must be organized. Deciding when to propose which toast, when to incorporate songs and dances, coordinating the entire flow of the feast, all this is the tamada's responsibility. Third, they must be sensitive. They read the atmosphere at the table and ensure that all participants feel included and enjoy themselves. Fourth, they must have authority. As the night deepens and alcohol loosens inhibitions, people's attention drifts. At that moment, the tamada must firmly restore order. Fifth, they must be good drinkers. A tamada must empty their glass at every toast, yet must never become intoxicated. A tamada who becomes drunk and behaves shamefully brings disgrace.

In small family gatherings, usually the eldest household member naturally takes on the role of tamada. But at large events like weddings or funerals, the family preselects a tamada. The custom is to ask a relative or friend who is articulate and enjoys the role. When friends gather, they sometimes choose the tamada on the spot. Usually, the eldest suggests, 'What if Kote served as tamada for us tonight?' The others nod in agreement, and if the nominated person offers no objection, they become the tamada.

When the supra begins, the tamada's first toast follows. But before that, there is first a toast for the tamada. The person who proposed the tamada, usually the host or the eldest person, stands up and calls out, 'To the master of ceremonies who has taken on the tamada for us this evening!' and all participants raise their glasses and toast to the tamada. This is the ceremony that marks the beginning of the supra.

The Order and Art of Toasting

At a supra, a toast is not merely shouting 'To your health!' and drinking. It is a speech, a prayer, and sometimes a poem. When the tamada presents a theme, he delivers a long and beautiful oration on that theme. Historical anecdotes, quotations from literary works, philosophical reflections, and personal memories are woven together. The speeches may last anywhere from two to three minutes to over ten minutes.

The themes of toasts follow a general order. While there are variations depending on the region and circumstance, traditional supra typically follows this sequence:

To God: The first toast is offered to God. While this reflects Georgia's Christian tradition, even atheists show respect for this toast.

For Peace: Given Georgia's tumultuous history, one can understand how precious peace is.

For the Homeland: Sakartvelo is what Georgians call their country. This toast expresses love and pride in one's homeland.

To Our Ancestors: This is a moment to honor those who have passed. In this toast, all participants stand and silently empty their glasses.

For Our Parents: This expresses gratitude and longing for parents, whether living or deceased.

For Our Siblings: This toast reaffirms the value of family.

For Women: In Georgian culture, the role of women, particularly mothers, is held as sacred.

For Our Children: This toast carries hopes for future generations.

For Our Guests: This toast welcomes and blesses those who have come to the supra.

For Friendship: This toast affirms the bonds among friends.

Beyond these, various other themes such as love, health, happiness, and success may be added. At a wedding, toasts to the bride and groom take center stage; at a funeral, toasts honoring the departed are paramount. The crucial point is that only the tamada may propose toasts. Other participants cannot freely drink or make toasts without the tamada's permission.

Once the tamada finishes his toast, he may declare 'alaverdi.' Alaverdi means passing the floor to another participant. The designated person adds their own thoughts or feelings about the theme the tamada presented. In this way, multiple people take turns speaking about the same theme, and at the end, everyone cries out 'Gaumarjos! (To victory!)' and empties their glasses. All of this occurs within a single toast. If twenty or thirty toasts follow throughout the night, participants will have heard, shared, and experienced that many stories.

Wine: A Sacred Medium

In the supra, wine is not merely a drink. It is a sacred medium that connects God and humanity, the living and the dead, the past and the present. For Georgians, the grapevine is the 'tree of life' and a symbol of the Virgin Mary. The legend that Saint Nino fashioned a cross from a grapevine reveals the deep connection between wine and faith.

Georgia is the world's oldest wine-producing nation. According to archaeological evidence, the cultivation of grapes and production of wine in Georgia began approximately eight thousand years ago. Of the roughly fifteen hundred grape varieties

found worldwide, more than five hundred are native Georgian varieties. Exotic-sounding grapes such as Rkatsiteli, Saperavi, Mtsvane, and Kisi flourish in Georgian vineyards.

Traditional Georgian wine is produced through a distinctive method called the qvevri. A qvevri is a massive clay vessel buried underground. When grapes along with their skins, seeds, and stems are placed in the qvevri and sealed, natural fermentation occurs at the stable temperature of the earth. The wine produced this way has an amber hue and is also called 'amber wine.' In 2013, UNESCO designated the qvevri winemaking method as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

In Georgian households, the wine cellar called the 'marani' is regarded as the most sacred space. Producing and aging wine in the marani is the sacred duty of the head of the household. Pouring wine

at the supra is not a task anyone may perform. There is a specific role called the 'meriqipe,' the wine pourer, and it is proper etiquette that the tamada does not pour wine into his own glass.

At a traditional supra, the principle is that all participants empty their glasses with each toast. When the tamada cries out 'Bolo mde! (Bottoms up!),' one must drink without leaving a single drop. To leave wine in one's glass is both disrespectful to the tamada and irreverent toward the subject of the toast. For this reason, enormous quantities of wine are consumed at the supra. Yet it is intriguing that Georgians regard drunkenness as shameful. To drink much while maintaining one's dignity, that is the virtue one must uphold at the supra.

The Guest Is a Gift Sent by God

Georgia has a saying: 'Stumari ghvtisagan aris', 'The guest is a gift sent by God.' This phrase encapsulates Georgian hospitality culture in a single statement. The supra is the place where this spirit of hospitality finds its purest expression.

Georgians readily invite even a stranger to their homes. Once invited, a guest is treated like royalty. The table never runs short of food. Georgian signature dishes pile plate upon plate: khachapuri (cheese bread), khinkali (meat dumplings), mtsvadi (kebab), badrijani (eggplant rolls with walnut sauce), and pkhali (vegetable paste). When food dwindles, the host replenishes it immediately. To see an empty plate at the supra is a disgrace.

Guests are never overlooked in toasts. The tamada is sure to propose a toast for the guests, praying for their health, happiness, and safe travels. If there are multiple guests, each is toasted in turn. When there is a foreign guest, the tamada marshals all his knowledge of that country to craft a splendid toast. Before such hospitality, the guest's duty is to accept with gratitude and to participate in the toasts, expressing thanks to the host.

Polyphony: The Harmony of the Soul

As the supra reaches its fullness, song begins somewhere. When one person starts a melody, others join one by one. Without instrumental accompaniment, multiple voices layer upon one another to create intricate harmonies. This is Georgian traditional polyphonic music, polyphony.

In 2001, UNESCO designated Georgian polyphony as UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. UNESCO praised Georgian polyphony as 'one of the world's oldest and richest polyphonic musical traditions.' In 1977, the NASA Voyager spacecraft launched into space carried the 'Golden Record,' a message to extraterrestrial intelligence. Among the twenty-seven pieces of music on this record is the Georgian polyphonic song 'Chakrulo.'

At the supra, song is not mere entertainment. It is spiritual communion of the community. Through song, Georgians share sorrow, multiply joy, and soothe one another's souls. What toasts cannot convey through words, song conveys through melody. Long after the supra ends, what lingers in people's memory is not the taste of food or the bouquet of wine, but the harmonies of the songs sung together that night.

The Healing and Unity of Community

The essential function of the supra is to strengthen community bonds. The supra is not simply a festive gathering. It is a ritual that resolves conflict, heals wounds, and reaffirms the community's values. Kevin Tuite, an American scholar of Georgia, has likened the supra to 'a form of group therapy session.'

At the supra, matters difficult to speak of ordinarily find voice. Within the framework of toasts and with the aid of wine, people bring forth emotions held deep within. Old misunderstandings dissolve, and lingering grievances melt away. Family disputes, conflicts between neighbors, even quarrels within the village community sometimes find resolution through the supra. The tamada's wise toasts seat those in conflict at the same table, have them drink from the same cup, and ultimately bring them to reconciliation.

The supra held after a funeral, called 'kelekhi' in Georgian, is a place where sorrow is shared. Through toasts honoring the deceased, the living endure the pain of loss together. Sprinkling the last few drops of wine remaining in the cup onto bread is an offering to the departed. Through this ritual, the dead live on in the memory of the living, and the living find strength to continue their lives.

Today, commercialized supras held in city restaurants and experiential supras for tourists are becoming more common. In these settings, the length and form of toasts are simplified, and younger generations sometimes regard them merely as 'Georgian food parties worth posting on Instagram.' Yet among families and at the village level,

traditional supras still maintain strict etiquette and systems of symbolism. The coexistence of tradition and modern consumer culture, this is the reality of the Georgian supra today.

The supra is a small Georgian society re-enacted around a single table. Orthodox values, patriarchal order, and communal solidarity are woven into food and wine, toast and song. To be invited to a supra, to hear their songs, and to drink their wine is to enter deep into the soul of the nation called Georgia.

Generational Conflict Between Traditional Values and Westernization

In May 2024, the streets of Tbilisi filled with young people. In their hands were Georgian flags and flags of the European Union. They chanted, 'Choose Europe!' and 'Say no to Russia!' It was a protest against the government's 'Foreign Influence Transparency Law,' also known as the foreign agent law. Police responded with water cannons and tear gas. Hundreds were detained, and many were injured.

What distinguished this protest was the age of its participants. Those born after the late 1990s, called 'Generation Z' or 'Zoomers,' stood at the forefront of the demonstration. Many of them were taking part in a political protest for the first time. It was not an organized mobilization by established parties or civic organizations but a spontaneous gathering through social media. Their slogans transcended opposition to a specific bill. 'Don't steal our future.' This was a generational declaration.

A Country Standing Between Two Worlds

Today Georgian society is taut with tension between two forces. On one side stand traditional values that have carried forward for thousands of years: Orthodox faith, family-centered ideology, conservative gender roles, communal bonds. On the other side lies the aspiration toward Europe: individual freedom, human rights, rule of law, democracy, respect for diversity. These two forces sometimes harmonize, but increasingly they collide. And this collision appears as conflict between generations.

Georgia's constitution stipulates Euro-Atlantic integration as a national goal. According to opinion polls, 80 to 85 percent of Georgians support EU membership. In December 2023, the European Commission granted Georgia candidate status for EU accession. For Georgians, "Europe" is not a mere geographical concept. It represents prosperity and stability, freedom and democracy. It means escaping Russia's shadow and becoming a "normal" nation.

Yet simultaneously, a significant portion of Georgian society harbors suspicion toward "Western values." The Orthodox Church calls individualism, secularism, and LGBTQ rights "pseudo-liberal ideology" and defines them as "foreign culture that threatens Georgia's tradition and faith." The ruling party, Georgian Dream, actively uses this conservative discourse. They assert that the opposition and civil society organizations "receive funding from the West to attack the church and damage family values through LGBT propaganda."

The Young Generation: Identity as Europeans

According to surveys of the 2024 protests against the Foreign Agents Law, the most actively engaged in participation and support were young people aged 18 to 34. For them, Georgia's future clearly lies in Europe

. They define themselves as "Europeans." According to a 2024 Carnegie Europe report, the slogans Georgian youth chanted in the streets transcended foreign policy. "Equality," "Integration" (overcoming Georgia's social polarization), "Respect for fundamental human freedoms," "Universal, quality education for all," "Gender equality"... This was a declaration of the lifestyle they envision.

The young generation's pro-European orientation has historical roots. Since the 2003 Rose Revolution, Georgia has pursued a strong pro-Western policy. English education was strengthened, and exchanges with Western nations became more active. Young people who studied abroad in Europe and America and returned have spread throughout society. The five-day war with Russia in 2008 left a decisive trauma on this generation. Fear and anger toward Russia, along with the desperate sense that they must receive Western protection, became etched in their consciousness.

This generation, having grown up in a digital environment, connects to the world in fundamentally different ways from previous generations. Through social media, they are exposed in real time to information and values from across the globe. They directly see how young Europeans live and what they fight for. They acutely perceive the gap between Georgia's reality and Europe's ideal. To them, the government's anti-European actions feel like having their future stolen.

The Established Generation: Guardians of Stability and Tradition

The older generation, those who experienced the Soviet era, holds a different perspective. Many of them are familiar with Russian and carry memories of Soviet times. Their feelings toward Russia are not as straightforward as those of the young generation. Hostility mingles with cultural familiarity and realistic awareness of economic dependence.

In 2024 reporting by Al Jazeera, a middle-aged Georgian museum worker said: "I also want change. Georgia should join the EU. Our tradition is similar to Europe's. But Georgia is a small country. We must maintain better balance than Ukraine. We must maintain relations with both Russia and the EU." This is realism born of survival. Behind their cautious stance lies the fear of provoking Russia and the desperate wish that another war not occur.

Religious conservatism also creates generational differences. Many in the older generation respect the authority of the Orthodox Church and agree with the traditional values it presents. To them, Western liberalism can appear as "family breakdown," "sexual decline," "moral licentiousness." When church leaders define LGBTQ rights as "mortal sin," they nod in agreement. When young people demand a Pride parade, they say "that is not our culture."

Conflict Within the Family

Generational differences in values appear not only in street protests but also at the dinner table. Georgia is traditionally a society with very strong bonds of family and community. The relationship between parents and children, frequent exchanges with relatives, and communal obligations such as hospitality have been prioritized over individual choice. Marriage, career selection, and independence have been matters for the family, not individual decisions.

Yet the young generation, educated in the Western style and with strong individualistic tendencies, finds these traditions stifling or burdensome. They want to break free from "endless family gatherings," "relatives' meddling," and "parents' expectations" to live their own lives. Growing numbers of young people do not marry despite reaching marriageable age, declare they will not have children, or reject traditional gender roles. This inevitably creates friction with their parents' generation.

Particularly, young people who have experience studying or working in Western Europe or the United States experience sharper family conflict after returning home. They try to apply what they learned in the West, self-determination, respect for diversity, individual freedom, to their home country's reality. But their parents' generation clings to "the ways passed down through generations of ancestors." Expectations of unconditional obedience, filial piety, and traditional gender roles collide.

The Foreign Agents Law and Generational Warfare

When the Georgian government reintroduced the Foreign Influence Transparency Law in 2024, the bill immediately became a symbol of generational conflict. This law requires nongovernmental

organizations (NGOs) and media outlets to register as "organizations representing foreign interests" if they receive more than 20 percent of their funding from abroad. Critics contend that this mirrors Russia's notorious Foreign Agents Law and serves as a tool to suppress civil society and suppress freedom of the press.

The young generation received this bill as "an attempt to steal our European dream." They poured into the streets. They waved EU flags and cried "We are Europe!" Some became violent. Clashes erupted with police, tear gas was deployed, and water cannons were fired. Hundreds were detained, and many suffered beatings and injuries.

The government and conservative forces, meanwhile, presented a different frame. They claimed the law was "for transparency" and "to protect Georgia's sovereignty from foreign interference." They portrayed the protesters as "puppets funded by the West" and "forces trying to destroy Georgia's tradition." Some politicians denigrated young protest participants as "a drug-addled generation" and "a morally corrupt generation."

In the October 2024 general election, Georgian Dream declared victory with 54 percent of the vote. However, the opposition, the president, and international election observers claimed there was large-scale fraud. Accusations were raised of ballot stuffing, voter bribery, and intimidation. President Salome Zourabichvili declared before protesters: "You have not lost this election. They have stolen your votes and they have tried to steal your future."

When the government announced in November 2024 that it would suspend EU accession negotiations until 2028, the protests intensified. These protests continued into 2025. According to a 2025 Carnegie International Peace Foundation report, Georgia's protests became one of the world's longest-running, continuing almost daily since 2024 alongside Serbia's anti-corruption demonstrations.

Georgia in Transition

Georgia stands now between two worlds. On one side are eight-thousand-year-old wine jars and pious faith marked by the sign of the cross, the binding ties of the supra and the Orthodox Church's golden domes. On the other side are young people dancing through the night in the techno club Bassiani, protesters waving EU flags and crying out for freedom, and the yearning for a life that honors individual choice and diversity.

These two worlds are not merely opposed. They coexist within the same person. A young person who attends protests by day and hears grandfather's toast at the supra by night. A middle-aged person who supports European integration while cherishing traditional family values. A believer who goes to church but opposes the government's authoritarianism. Georgia's reality cannot be divided into black and white.

Cultural policy researchers note that Georgian society continues efforts to protect traditional culture while strengthening multiculturalism, minority rights, and civic education. Even within families, there are attempts at "respecting children's cho

ices while preserving core traditions" type of compromising attitudes are becoming more common. Conflict and adjustment are proceeding simultaneously.

In the end, the Georgian "DNA" of today is being newly formed as traditional elements, Orthodox faith, a supra-centered communal consciousness, family values, repeatedly engage in tension and dialogue with modern values: European rights, individual autonomy, diversity. This conflict is not a process of Georgia losing its identity. Rather, it is the fierce growing pains of moving toward a new future without losing the roots of the past.

Georgia's young people know clearly what they are fighting for. One young protester told Al Jazeera: "The government says we do not love our country. But the truth is, we are filled with patriotism. Generation Z is protesting now to protect our country, our sovereignty, our Euro-Atlantic future."

The coexistence and collision of the traditional toasts cried out by Tamada at the supra table and the slogans of young people waving EU flags and crying out for freedom, this is what Georgia looks like today. No one yet knows how this tension will end. But one thing is clear: Georgians have preserved their identity through countless crises over thousands of years of history. They will find their way forward once more, in their own fashion.

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Chapter 10: From the Rose Revolution to Democratic Retreat

A Journey Through Georgia's History and Culture

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Part III: Politics and International Relations

A. The 2003 Rose Revolution and Saakashvili's Reforms

On November 22, 2003, tens of thousands of citizens gathered in front of the Georgian parliament building in Tbilisi. Young politician Mikheil Saakashvili, holding a red rose in his hand, stepped forward from the crowd. He wore jeans and a black leather jacket. He rushed into the parliament chamber, and President Eduard Shevardnadze, who had been speaking, was surrounded by security personnel and hastily left the building. Saakashvili walked to the podium and drank the tea from the cup that Shevardnadze had left behind. This symbolic act opened a new chapter in modern Georgian history.

Portrait of a Failed State

To understand the Rose Revolution, we must first look at the conditions Georgia faced at that time. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, independent Georgia experienced a dark period marked by civil war, separatist conflict, and economic collapse. In the early 1990s, wars of secession broke out in the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, creating hundreds of thousands of refugees. State functions were effectively paralyzed.

In 2003, Georgia could not escape being labeled a "failed state." The government could not even pay civil servants' salaries properly. The electricity situation was dire. Power was supplied only a few hours a day, and even that was irregular. This was true despite the country's abundant hydroelectric potential. The 135-kilometer journey from Zugdidi to Mestia took five hours because the roads were in terrible condition. The international airport was dilapidated and shabby.

The police were not an institution that protected citizens; they were closer to bandits on the street. It was routine for traffic police to stop drivers and demand bribes. Civil service positions were bought and sold, and every administrative procedure came with "unofficial fees." According to a World Bank survey, Georgia was ranked among the most corrupt countries in the world at the time. For years, the state could not collect even 70 percent of its expected revenue.

The Rule of the 'Thieves-in-Law'

What actually governed Georgian society during this period was not the government but a criminal organization called the 'Thieves-in-Law' (Georgian: *kanonier kurdevi*). This criminal subculture,

formed in Soviet-era prisons, had its own independent code of conduct and organizational hierarchy. Central

government's control weakened, they penetrated deep into the political and economic structure.

The Shevardnadze regime had neither the ability nor the will to solve this problem. Some suspected the regime itself was complicit with criminal organizations. The people were exhausted. A longing for law, order, and justice was building.

The Spark of Revolution

The parliamentary election held on November 2, 2003, was the spark. Exit polls showed that the United National Movement led by Saakashvili had won overwhelmingly. But the official results announced by the government were the opposite. It was blatant electoral fraud. Angry citizens poured into the streets.

The protests continued for twenty days. The independent television station Rustavi-2 broadcast the demonstrations live, and the youth movement group Kmara (meaning "enough!") organized citizens. George Soros's Open Society Foundation provided funding and technical support. The documentary "Bringing Down a Dictator," which detailed nonviolent resistance strategies, was broadcast. The experience of bringing down Slobodan Milosevic's regime in Serbia had been transmitted to Georgia.

On November 22, when Shevardnadze began his speech at the first session of the newly elected parliament, protesters forced their way into the parliament building. Security personnel escorted the president out, and the next day Shevardnadze announced his resignation. It was a bloodless revolution. The military and police stood with the protesters. The transfer of power without bloodshed was unprecedented in the former Soviet region.

The Emergence of a 36-Year-Old President

In the presidential election held on January 4, 2004, Saakashvili was elected with 96.2 percent of the vote. Europe's youngest president was born. He was thirty-six years old. He was an elite who had graduated from Columbia University Law School, spoke fluent English, and had the support of the Western world. In his inaugural address, he declared that he would make Georgia part of Europe.

Saakashvili's government's reforms were swift and radical. The pace astonished not only Georgians but the international community as well. The World Bank named Georgia the "world's top reforming country" for five consecutive years from 2006 to 2011.

Police Reform: A Change That Seemed Impossible

The most symbolic reform was the complete dismantling and rebuilding of the police force. In July 2004, the Saakashvili government fired every traffic police officer, who were a breeding ground for corruption. Police officers numbering from approximately 16,000 to 30,000 lost their jobs overnight. It was a bold decision. Dissolving the entire police organization and rebuilding it from scratch was an unprecedented experiment.

The recruitment and training of new police officers followed. Experts from the United States and Europe oversaw the training. Salaries were significantly increased. Because past police salaries were abysmal, taking bribes was seen as a means of survival. The new government resolved to break this vicious cycle. Reports indicate that police officer salaries were increased tenfold or more. In return, a zero-tolerance policy was applied to bribery.

The effects of the reform were dramatic. Police officers who stopped drivers on the road and demanded bribes disappeared. Citizens could trust the police for the first time. In a 2009 opinion poll by the International Republican Institute, the police became the third most trusted institution in Georgia, after the Georgian Orthodox Church and the military. This was an unimaginable change just five years earlier. By 2006, Georgia had one police officer for every 214 citizens. Before the reform, it was one for every 78 citizens. Quality was chosen over quantity.

War Against the 'Thieves-in-Law'

Saakashvili declared all-out war against organized crime. "As long as I am president, I will not tolerate any criminal power," he declared. The new government imposed harsh punishment on the 'Thieves-in-Law.'

A law was enacted. Simply holding the status of a 'Thief-in-Law' could result in punishment. The property of crime bosses was confiscated by the state. Multimillion-dollar mansions belonging to major mafia figures like Zakhar Kalashov were seized and converted into police stations or government offices.

Many criminal organization members were arrested or fled abroad to Russia, Ukraine, Turkey, and other countries. In the process, there were controversies over human rights violations. Some criticized coercive investigations that disregarded due process. However, the majority of the population welcomed this change. It allowed them to escape the daily threat of criminals on the streets.

Administrative Modernization and Economic Reform

Anti-corruption efforts spread throughout the administration. The "House of Justice," which opened in 2011, was a symbol of this reform. Citizens could now handle various administrative procedures including passport issuance, real estate registration, and business licensing all in one place and quickly. Previously, they had to visit each agency separately and were asked for bribes each time. In the new system, all procedures were conducted transparently.

The tax system was also simplified. The complex tax structure was replaced with a single flat tax of 20 percent. Business registration became possible in a single day. Foreign investment surged. Despite Russia's energy blockade, trade sanctions, the 2008 war, and the global financial crisis, the Georgian economy grew at nearly 7 percent annually from 2004 to 2012.

State revenue also increased dramatically. Compared to the past government's inability to collect even 70 percent of expected revenue, this was a revolutionary change. These resources were used

to modernize infrastructure and improve cities. Salaries and pensions were increased. Georgia soon became a net energy exporter. This occurred in a country that, just after the Rose Revolution, had electricity for only a few hours a day.

Pro-Western Foreign Policy

The Saakashvili government also attempted a dramatic shift in foreign policy. It set EU and NATO membership as the country's top priority. It declared that Georgia was a European country and must become part of Europe. Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania's statement "I am Georgian, therefore I am European" succinctly expressed this policy direction.

This pro-Western orientation inevitably worsened relations with Russia. Russia perceived Georgia's attempt to align with the West as a threat to its own security. In 2006, Russia

banned imports of Georgian wine and mineral water. It also used energy supply as a weapon. Relations between the two countries deteriorated rapidly.

The Scars of the 2008 War

The tensions exploded into full-scale war in August 2008. An armed conflict over the South Ossetia region escalated into Russian military intervention. Georgia was defeated in the five-day war. Russia recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and stationed troops in these regions. Georgia lost effective control over approximately 20 percent of its territory.

There is debate over responsibility for the war. An independent commission established by the EU (Tagliavini Commission) concluded that Georgia initiated the military operation first. However, it also noted that Russia's response exceeded the principle of proportionality. The Saakashvili government argued that it was responding to Russian provocation. The war dealt a serious blow to Saakashvili's political standing.

Shadows of Reform

The achievements of the Saakashvili era are difficult to deny. However, there were shadows. During the reform process, power became concentrated in the president's hands. The independence of the judiciary was weakened. Opposition figures claimed there were politically motivated investigations and prosecutions. In 2007, anti-government protests were suppressed violently. The independent broadcaster Imedi television was forcibly closed.

The human rights situation in prisons was also problematic. Allegations of torture and ill-treatment of prisoners were raised. Just before the 2012 presidential election, videos of prison abuse were made public, sparking public outrage. While the Saakashvili government invoked the rule of law, it faced criticism for not distinguishing between "rule by law" and "rule of law." The goal of reform was justice, but there emerged a paradox in which justice was compromised in the process.

As his tenure progressed, fatigue accumulated. The generation that had grown up after the Rose Revolution began to criticize the government's authoritarian tendencies. In the 2012 election, the

people chose change. The time had come for new forces to emerge.

B. Bidzina Ivanishvili and Twelve Years of the 'Georgian Dream'

In October 2012, the Georgian Dream coalition won the parliamentary elections. This marked the first peaceful transfer of power since the Rose Revolution. Such a transfer of power through elections was rare in the former Soviet Union. The international community welcomed this as a sign of Georgia's democratic maturity.

The Enigmatic Billionaire

The founder and leader of Georgian Dream is Bidzina Ivanishvili. He is Georgia's wealthiest person. According to Forbes, his net worth is approximately 4.9 billion dollars, equivalent to 15 percent of Georgia's gross domestic product. In the 1990s, he accumulated enormous wealth through businesses in metals, finance, and real estate in Russia. At one point, he even owned the Russian Credit Bank, then Russia's largest private bank.

His ties to Russia were controversial from the start. The opposition and civil society labeled him a Russian oligarch. The Saakashvili government even attempted to revoke his Georgian citizenship. Ivanishvili countered that he had conducted business in Russia but had no connection to the Russian government. He publicly stated his support for Georgia's membership in the EU and NATO.

In the 2012 election, Ivanishvili's coalition intensely attacked the Saakashvili administration's authoritarian practices, human rights abuses in prisons, and economic inequality. Video footage of prison abuse released just before the election proved decisive. The people wanted change, and Georgian Dream emerged as the alternative.

Early Years in Power: Expectations and Reality

Ivanishvili served as prime minister for approximately one year, from October 2012 to November 2013. He subsequently stepped down from his official position. However, his withdrawal from politics was merely formal. As the party's "honorary chairman" and Georgia's wealthiest person, he continued to wield influence over the entire government. Even when prime ministers and ministers changed, the actual source of power remained constant. The fact that many government officials came from companies or banks owned by Ivanishvili attests to this. A former prime minister and former deputy minister of the economy have records of working at his family-owned bank. The interior minister was his former bodyguard. There are also reports that the health minister during the COVID-19 pandemic was Ivanishvili's wife's personal dentist.

In its early years, the Georgian Dream government advocated a balanced foreign policy, maintaining relations with the West while seeking normalization of ties with Russia. In 2014, it signed an Association Agreement with the EU, and in 2017, a visa-free travel agreement with the EU came into effect. Georgian citizens were able to

travel freely to Schengen Area countries. This was significant progress toward European integration.

Signs of Democratic Decline

However, beginning around 2017, signs of democratic decline began to appear. International democracy indices recorded a decline in Georgia's rankings. Judicial independence weakened. Pressure on press freedom increased. Civil society organizations faced constraints on their activities.

In April 2023, the U.S. State Department imposed sanctions on four Georgian Supreme Court judges. The reasons were political corruption and undermining the judicial system. For the first time in Georgian history, the country's own judiciary faced foreign sanctions.

Anti-corruption reforms also stalled. Reports indicated that the "law of thieves" culture, which had been eradicated during the Saakashvili era, was beginning to resurface. Some suspected that those in power were developing informal collaborative relationships with criminal subcultures to mobilize voters and control prison inmates. The government denied this. Nevertheless, concerns grew that the radical reforms achieved during the Saakashvili era were gradually being eroded.

2022: A Turning Point: After the Ukraine War

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 decisively altered the direction of Georgian politics. This war was not a distant affair for Georgians. They watched a larger-scale repetition of what they had experienced in 2008. The majority of the population expressed solidarity with Ukraine.

However, the Georgian Dream government's response fell short of expectations. Georgia voted in favor of Russia's expulsion from the Council of Europe and supported the International Criminal Court's investigation of Ukrainian war crimes. But it did not participate in economic sanctions against Russia. It did not provide weapons to Ukraine. Rather, trade with Russia surged dramatically. Statistics show that trade volume with Russia increased 79 percent in 2022 compared to the previous year. In 2023, Russian flights resumed operations.

The government argued for caution. It claimed that Georgia should refrain from additional provocations while in a state of conflict with Russia. The logic was that premature actions could threaten national security given that Russian forces were stationed across the border. Critics characterized this as a shift toward a pro-Russia stance.

The Global War Party Conspiracy Theory

During this period, Ivanishvili and Georgian Dream leadership began employing strange rhetoric. They claimed that the United States and EU were trying to drag Georgia into war with Russia to open a "second front." They asserted that a force they called the "Global War Party" existing in the West was threatening Georgia's peace. They warned that this force was plotting a revolution in Georgia through Western-funded NGOs.

The ruling party framed itself as "guardians of peace" and the opposition and civil society as "forces of war." It called Saakashvili's United National Movement the "collective UNM," highlighting the "crimes" of the previous administration. It reinterpreted the 2008 war as the result of Saakashvili's

"reckless provocation."

This narrative resembled the tone of Russian state media. It condemned Western "interference in internal affairs" and attacked liberal values under the guise of preserving traditional values. Critics pointed out that this mimicked Russian disinformation strategies.

EU Candidate Status and the Reversal

In December 2023, the EU granted Georgia candidate status. This was significant progress toward a goal that the vast majority of Georgians longed for. Polls showed that about 80 percent of the population supported EU membership. The constitution explicitly states EU and NATO membership as national goals.

However, the Georgian Dream government's actions contradicted this goal. Assessments indicate that only three of the twelve reform priorities presented by the EU were implemented. In 2024, bills that the EU strongly opposed passed one after another. The "Foreign Agents Transparency Law" and the "Law on Family Values," which restricts LGBTQ rights, are prime examples. The EU warned that these laws would become obstacles to accession negotiations.

The Shocking Announcement of November 2024

On November 28, 2024, Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze made a shocking announcement. Georgia would suspend EU accession negotiations until 2028. It also rejected EU financial assistance. The government itself abandoned a national goal explicitly stated in the constitution. The regime blocked the path to European integration that the overwhelming majority of the people supported.

Regarding the reason for this announcement, the government claimed that "the EU does not treat Georgia with dignity." It argued that the West was interfering in internal affairs and did not respect Georgia's sovereignty. However, critics countered that this was merely an excuse. The real reason, they said, was the government's lack of willingness to meet the democratic standards required for EU membership. Some interpreted it as a choice to continue authoritarian rule under Russian influence.

Following this announcement, massive protests erupted across Georgia. Citizens took to the streets waving European and Georgian flags. The government responded with harsh crackdowns. The most serious political crisis since the Rose Revolution of 2003 had begun.

c. The 2024 General Election Fraud Allegations and Large-Scale Protests

The Georgian parliamentary elections held on October 26, 2024, were viewed as a watershed moment for democracy's direction. It was a test of Georgian Dream's bid for a fourth consecutive term after twelve years in power. The opposition coalition, calling for a return to the European integration path, appealed for a change of government. There was widespread recognition that the election's outcome would determine whether Georgia would move toward Europe or return to Russia's sphere of influence.

A Tilted Playing Field

Concerns about fairness were raised even before the election. International election observers, including the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR), pointed out serious problems in the electoral environment. The ruling party exploited enormous administrative resources and financial advantages. State-owned and pro-government private media outlets delivered biased coverage.

Reports indicate that there was systematic pressure on public sector employees. In the days before voting, civil society activists and opposition figures received anonymous threatening calls. Some experienced physical violence. Posters appeared in several cities labeling NGO leaders and journalists critical of the government as "traitors" and "enemies."

Election Results and Suspicions

According to official results, Georgian Dream won by a landslide with approximately 54 percent of the vote. The opposition coalition received 38 percent. However, the opposition rejected these results. President Salome Zourabichvili declared, "This is complete fraud, a complete theft of your votes." She claimed the election was part of a "Russian special operation."

International election observers also expressed serious concerns. In its final report, OSCE/ODIHR noted that while the election provided "a choice between different candidates," it expressed concern about the impact of recently adopted laws on "fundamental freedoms and civil society." Specific cases of electoral fraud were reported, including ballot box stuffing, voter bribery, and intimidation.

Concerns were also raised about the possibility of manipulation in the electronic voting system. According to reports, situations were discovered in some polling stations where voting choices could be observed from outside. This constituted a violation of the secret ballot principle. It meant that voters were not assured of an environment in which they could vote freely without fear of retaliation.

Opposition Boycott and Single-Party Parliament

Four opposition parties exceeded the 5 percent threshold for parliament. Three of these parties' elected representatives renounced their seats. The remaining party also refused to take office, claiming parliament was illegitimate. As a result, a single-party parliament was effectively established.

In February 2025, even more extreme measures followed. Georgian Dream MPs passed a resolution stripping 49 opposition MPs of their seats for refusing to take office. Criminal charges against opposition figures mounted. Former Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia was indicted for abuse of authority and faced a possible prison sentence of 13 to 15 years. He is currently residing overseas.

The government is also attempting to ban the activities of opposition parties, including the United National Movement. There are moves to eliminate the voting rights of Georgians living abroad. In the 2024 election, Georgian Dream's support among overseas voters was only 13 percent.

Anger in the Streets

Protests began the day after the election. Tens of thousands of citizens gathered on Rustaveli Avenue and Freedom Square in Tbilisi. They waved Georgian flags, EU flags, and Ukrainian flags. Chants of "Return my vote" and "Georgia is Europe" echoed through the streets.

After the announcement of the suspension of EU negotiations on November 28, protests intensified. According to ACLED data, more than 100 demonstrations occurred across the country in the sixteen days that followed. An unprecedented figure. Protests spread beyond the capital of Tbilisi to provincial cities including Batumi and Kutaisi.

The protesters were diverse. University students, civil society activists, opposition supporters, and ordinary citizens all joined in. By September 2025, the protests had continued for more than 300 days. Georgian media reported that "a broad spectrum of Georgian society" was participating, from students to civil activists to the opposition.

The State's Violence

The government's response was brutal. Police special forces fired tear gas, water cannons, and rubber bullets at peaceful demonstrators. Hundreds were arrested. On December 18, 2024, Georgia's Public Defender announced that a delegation had interviewed 327 detainees, of whom 225 had reported mistreatment, and visible signs of physical injury were found on 157.

International human rights organizations including Transparency International Georgia criticized "Georgian Dream" for "planning systematic torture of peaceful demonstrators." Georgia's Public Defender concluded that the nature and severity of injuries deliberately inflicted on protesters "constituted acts of torture."

According to a BBC investigation, the government used the chemical substance camite against demonstrators. The UN Special Rapporteur on Torture characterized this as "a clear violation of human rights law." Evidence also circulated on social media showing that plainclothes police and thugs linked to the ruling party attacked protesters and journalists. They became known as "Titushky," the term applied in Ukraine to hired enforcers whom the Yanukovych regime deployed to suppress demonstrations.

Fractures Within

What was striking was the fracture that appeared within the security forces. According to Gocha Berize, former head of maritime safety for the Batumi coastal guard, forty-nine Interior Ministry officers resigned. This included the head of the riot control unit, Irakli Shaidze, and four of his subordinates, sixteen special forces instructors, the director of psychological training and twelve staff members, and all sixteen water cannon operators.

Shaidze left Georgia for his family's safety and later testified in interviews. According to him, police violence was systematic and command-driven. The orders, he said, came from Zviad Kharazishvili, the head of special operations, and Ivanishvili. He stated that no internal investigation into police violence had been conducted and none was planned.

The International Response

The international community expressed grave concern about the situation in Georgia. On November 28, 2024, the European Parliament passed a resolution by an overwhelming vote of 444 to 72 (with 82 abstentions) rejecting the legitimacy of Georgia's election results. On February 13, 2025, an additional resolution passed denying legitimacy to the results of both the parliamentary and presidential elections.

The United States, Britain, and others imposed sanctions on senior officials of "Georgian Dream." The United States sanctioned Ivanishvili personally and froze his assets in America. Secretary of State Antony Blinken accused Ivanishvili and "Georgian Dream" of "undermining democratic institutions, enabling human rights violations, and derailing Georgia's Euro-Atlantic future for Russian interests." Britain imposed travel bans and asset freezes on five senior officials including the Interior Minister, Deputy Interior Minister, Tbilisi Police Chief, and the head of Special Operations.

On December 20, 2024, thirty-seven OSCE member states invoked the "Vienna Mechanism." This procedure allows OSCE members to inquire about the human rights situation in other member states. They expressed concern about mistreatment of detainees, violence against journalists, and police immunity, demanding a response within ten days.

The President's Solitary Resistance

President Salome Zourabichvili refused to recognize the legitimacy of the election results and the new parliament. On December 14, 2024, when parliament elected Mikheil Kavelashvili as the new president,

she declared the election void. She maintained that she remained the rightful president.

On December 29, Kavelashvili held his inauguration. As Zourabichvili left the Orbeliani Palace where she had resided, she said the building was "only a symbol." She denounced the inauguration as "a mockery of democracy" and characterized "Georgian Dream" as a regime that was "isolated, fearful, corrupt, illegal, unrecognized, and under sanctions."

Zourabichvili opened a new office and continued her efforts to resolve the crisis through meetings at home and abroad. But her practical power was limited. Georgia is a parliamentary republic, and the president holds a largely ceremonial role. Her resistance carried great symbolic weight, yet her influence on the actual political situation was minimal.

B. The "Foreign Agents Law" and the Specter of Russian Control

The most contentious legislation to shake Georgia in 2024 was the official "Law on the Transparency of Foreign Influence," commonly known as the "Foreign Agents Law." The law split Georgian society in two. Supporters argued it was essential for "protecting sovereignty." Critics warned it was a copy of "Russian law" that would destroy democracy.

The Legislation's Contents

The law mandates that non-governmental organizations and media outlets receiving twenty percent or more of their funding from abroad register themselves as "organizations pursuing foreign interests." Registered entities must submit detailed financial and activity reports. Violations incur severe fines. Administrative fines reach as high as 5,000 lari, approximately 1.9 million won. Repeated violations can result in criminal prosecution.

The Anti-Corruption Bureau established under this law was given broad discretionary powers. It can monitor, investigate, and penalize target organizations. Critics feared the bureau would be used as a tool to suppress civil society organizations critical of the government.

A Copy of Russian Law

The law earned the name "Russian law" for good reason. In 2012, Russia enacted legislation with nearly identical provisions. Since then, the law has served as a primary tool for suppressing civil society and independent media in Russia. Organizations critical of the government, once branded "foreign agents," became isolated from the public and their activities withered. Numerous NGOs, including the human rights group Memorial, were dissolved under this law.

Belarus and Azerbaijan adopted similar legislation. All three represent a typical tactic used by authoritarian regimes to control civil society. The Venice Commission, an advisory body to the Council of Europe, strongly criticized Georgia's law as violating freedom of association and freedom of expression, incompatible with democratic pluralism, and recommended its repeal.

The First Attempt and Its Failure

"Georgian Dream" first attempted the legislation in 2023. But faced with massive protests, it had to withdraw. Tens of thousands demonstrated against it in the streets of Tbilisi, and some clashed with police in front of the parliament building. International criticism was also severe. The EU warned that passage would pose a serious obstacle to Georgia's integration into Europe. In the end, the government backed down.

But this was only a temporary retreat. The bill was resubmitted in April 2024. This time, the government did not relent.

The Resistance of Spring 2024

Large-scale protests resumed immediately after resubmission. Tens of thousands gathered daily in front of the parliament building. According to Human Rights Watch, dozens of journalists and media workers were injured by police use of force. Credible reports indicate that on May 1, police used rubber bullets.

In the weeks before passage, activists and politicians faced organized intimidation and threats. Hundreds of activists and their families, even their young children, received repeated anonymous threatening calls. Posters bearing photographs of NGO leaders and critical journalists appeared in cities across the country. The posters branded them "traitors" and "enemies." Between late April and

June, more than a dozen activists suffered physical violence from unidentified assailants. Many required hospital treatment for head injuries and other wounds.

Passage and Its Aftermath

Despite all the resistance, the bill passed finally in May 2024. The president exercised her veto, but parliament overrode it. The law took effect.

The United States responded immediately. The State Department imposed visa restrictions on dozens of Georgian nationals for their role in "undermining democracy in Georgia." The leaders of the EU's twenty-seven member states announced that Georgia's accession process had been effectively suspended. EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen criticized the law as "violating the core values of the EU."

Abkhazia also adopted similar legislation in 2023. This showed that Russia was spreading the same control mechanism across regions within its sphere of influence.

The Pretext of Protecting "Traditional Values"

Another repressive law pushed alongside the "Foreign Agents Law" was the "Law on Family Values and Protection of Minors." It was, in effect, anti-LGBTQ legislation. The ruling party claimed that Western NGOs sought to destroy Georgia's traditions and church through "pseudo-liberal ideology" and "LGBTQ propaganda." The logic was that constitutional amendments and legislation were necessary to prevent this.

The law went beyond suppressing LGBTQ rights to attack Western values and human rights standards themselves. At the same time, it served as a political tool to mobilize conservative voters. The Georgian Orthodox Church wielded enormous influence, with approximately eighty percent of the population registered as members.

The government sought to build an image as a "guardian of traditional values" through its alliance with the church.

The Expansion of Repression

After the Foreign Agents Act took effect, pressure on civil society intensified. NGO offices critical of the government were raided. Documents were seized and staff were interrogated. Sanctions against independent media strengthened. Reports indicate that in 2025, several independent media outlets were forced to suspend operations.

Penalties against protest participants also intensified. Administrative violations that previously resulted in fines are now treated as criminal offenses. Protest participants can be detained for up to 60 days. Previously it was 15 days. These measures are being taken despite the absence of serious violent clashes or property damage in recent months. Critics describe the punishments as excessive.

A Polarized Society

The controversy surrounding these bills has deeply polarized Georgian society. One side argues that the government is protecting Georgia's sovereignty from foreign interference. The other side accuses the government of following Russia's playbook and destroying democracy.

Supporters of the ruling party argue that Western-funded NGOs have improperly interfered in Georgia's domestic affairs. They cite, in particular, certain environmental groups that opposed state projects such as hydroelectric dam projects. According to them, these organizations acted under foreign direction to obstruct national development. A government official states, "We are simply demanding transparency."

The opposition counters that this is merely a pretext. The real purpose, they argue, is to silence government critics. The label "foreign agent" has the effect of branding these organizations as "spies" or "traitors." It erodes public trust and chills their activities.

The European Path, a Closed Door

The passage of these bills has effectively halted Georgia's EU accession process. The EU has made clear that these laws are incompatible with its core values. The door was already closing before the government itself declared a suspension of EU negotiations in November 2024.

Georgia's constitution lists EU and NATO membership as national goals. Approximately 80 percent of the population supports EU membership. Yet the current government's actions directly conflict with this popular aspiration. Critics argue that "Georgia's Dream" is severing Georgia from the Western democratic sphere and returning it to Russia's sphere of influence.

The government denies this. Prime Minister Kobakhidze wrote in an opinion piece for Euronews that "Georgia's European orientation is firm and irreversible." He argued that "Georgia's path is European, peaceful, and principle-based." Yet the gap between words and deeds continues to widen.

The Path to Authoritarianism

As of 2025, Georgia is assessed to be sliding toward authoritarianism at the fastest pace since independence. Opposition leaders and activists are regularly arrested or forced into exile. Reports suggest that the number of political prisoners relative to population exceeds even Russia's.

There are also concerns that Chinese-made facial recognition cameras are being installed nationwide. Many protest participants have begun wearing masks to avoid identification. Amnesty International has characterized Georgia's new laws as "repressive."

An analyst at the Carnegie Endowment assessed that Georgia is moving toward "managed democracy." The analysis suggests that, lacking the resources or external patrons that Azerbaijan, Belarus, and Russia possess to build a robust and durable authoritarian system, Georgia may find a complete transition to dictatorship difficult. However, pressure on the opposition and civil society continues to mount. Some observers note that by the next election in 2028, the regime may be attempting to transform "the divided opposition into a convenient sparring partner existing purely for

show."

Resistance Continues

Yet resistance among Georgian citizens continues. Protests have persisted for over 300 days. The younger generation shows particularly strong resolve in resistance. Imprisoned activists send messages of solidarity through letters from prison.

When pro-Western forces won Moldova's parliamentary election in September 2025 despite Russian interference, some Georgian protesters waved the Moldovan flag. A Polish political analyst assessed that the Moldovan flag had become "a symbol of resistance" and "a symbol of Russian defeat."

Georgia's future has not yet been determined. A tense tug of war continues between street resistance and government repression. While Europe's door has not completely closed, reopening it under the current regime seems impossible. The moment is approaching when Georgians themselves must decide their own future.

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Chapter 11: The 2008 War and Divided Territories

A Journey Through Georgia's History and Culture

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A. The Origins of the South Ossetia and Abkhazia Conflict

Unfold a map of Georgia and you see Abkhazia on the northwestern Black Sea coast and South Ossetia in the north-central mountain region marked with dotted lines. These two regions occupy roughly 20 percent of Georgia's entire territory. The Georgian government calls them "Occupied Territories," while Russia claims they are independent nations. Most of the international community recognizes them as Georgian territory, but in reality, these lands are de facto separatist regions with Russian military forces stationed there. This conflict did not begin suddenly in 2008. It was the eruption of accumulated fissures that formed each time the political system shifted from empire to federation to nation-state.

(1) Ethnic Composition and Historical Background

The Abkhazians are a people of the northwestern Caucasus with their own distinct language and culture. They speak Abkhazian, which is unrelated to the Georgian language, and have maintained a distinct identity along the Black Sea coast throughout history. In medieval times, the Kingdom of Abkhazia was once unified with the Georgian Kingdom and experienced a period of strength. Later, under the influence of the Ottoman Empire, many residents accepted Islam. In the nineteenth century, as the Russian Empire conquered the Caucasus, Abkhazia became a direct Russian possession. In this process, many Abkhazians migrated to or were expelled to the Ottoman Empire. Georgians, Russians, Armenians, Greeks, and others filled their place.

The Ossetians are descendants of the Alans, an Iranian-speaking nomadic people. With the Caucasus Mountains between them, they came to live divided between the north (North Ossetia, now part of the Russian Federation) and the south (South Ossetia, within Georgian territory). From the seventeenth century onward, Ossetians who migrated from the northern Caucasus settled with the permission of the Kingdom of Kartli (eastern Georgia) at that time. For centuries, Georgians and Ossetians lived as neighbors, intermarried, and exchanged culture. However, when the Russian Empire took direct control of North Ossetia in the nineteenth century, a sense of solidarity with Russia began to form among Ossetians on both sides of the mountains.

(2) Soviet Divide-and-Rule Governance and the Establishment of Autonomous Units

When the Red Army occupied Georgia in 1921 and Sovietized it, the national question entered a new phase. The Bolshevik leadership, especially Stalin, who was Georgian-born, employed a

divide-and-rule strategy. They established the "Abkhazian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR)" and the "South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast" within the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic. On the surface, the justification was to protect the rights of national minorities, but in practice, it was a measure to plant a countervailing force within Georgia so that Georgian nationalism could not challenge the central government in Moscow.

According to documents from 1922, territories in South Ossetia, Zakatala, and other areas were transferred to other republics or autonomous units. At that time, anti-Soviet resistance forces in Georgia criticized this territorial division as an attempt to reduce Georgia to a mere administrative division of Russia. A December 1921 report documents conflicts between pro-Georgia and pro-Russia factions within Abkhazia, and records that allied forces of Russians, Armenians, and Abkhazians oppressed Georgians, confiscated their property, or expelled them.

During the Soviet era, the autonomous republics and autonomous units were only nominally autonomous. All major decisions came from Moscow, and interethnic conflicts were suppressed under Communist Party control. Yet they did not disappear entirely. In 1978, protests erupted in Abkhazia demanding incorporation into the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR), which Russia tacitly supported. Cultural and linguistic conflicts over the official use of Georgian also flared intermittently. A time bomb was accumulating, prepared to explode as the Soviet Union weakened.

(3) The Soviet Collapse and Armed Conflicts of the 1990s

In the late 1980s, Mikhail Gorbachev's reform policies (glasnost and perestroika) unleashed suppressed nationalism. In Georgia, the desire for independence surged, and in April 1989, Soviet troops fired on peaceful demonstrators in Tbilisi, resulting in the tragic death of about twenty people. This event

ignited Georgian nationalism. At the same time, nationalism also emerged in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. They began demanding separation and independence from Georgia.

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 and Georgia declared independence, latent conflicts erupted into full-scale armed confrontation. A war took place in South Ossetia from 1991 to 1992. Georgian forces bombarded the autonomous region's capital, Tskhinvali, and Russia supported the separatist forces. Thousands were killed and about one hundred thousand became refugees. A ceasefire agreement (the Sochi Agreement) was signed in 1992, and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) deployed a peacekeeping force. However, this ceasefire was not complete peace but the beginning of a "frozen conflict."

The Abkhazian War (1992-1993) was even more devastating. Abkhazian separatist forces, with Russia's tacit support and the help of mercenaries from the northern Caucasus (including Chechen armed groups), fought against Georgian forces. About fifteen thousand people died during the war, and roughly two hundred fifty thousand Georgians, who made up the majority of Abkhazia's population, were massacred or expelled in what became known as "ethnic cleansing." The

Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) recognized this as ethnic cleansing. The Georgian government forces were defeated and driven from Abkhazia, barely holding the upper reaches of the Kodori Gorge.

As a result of these wars, Abkhazia and South Ossetia effectively escaped the control of the Georgian central government. Their legal status became an ambiguous "gray zone," and they became havens for organized crime, smuggling, and drug trafficking. An illegal trade network connecting Russia, Turkey, and Georgia formed, providing the economic base for the separatist regimes. Russian peacekeeping forces were stationed in the region, managing the status quo, but for Georgians, this "peacekeeping" was simply another name for occupation.

(4) Rising Tensions After the Rose Revolution

After coming to power in the 2003 Rose Revolution, President Mikheil Saakashvili made territorial integration a top priority alongside a strong pro-Western policy. While pursuing domestic reforms including anti-corruption measures, police reform, and tax expansion, he attempted to recover control over the separatist regions. He gained confidence after successfully expelling the pro-Russia leader Aslan Abashidze from the Adjara Autonomous Republic in 2004.

However, South Ossetia and Abkhazia were different from Adjara. Russian military forces were stationed in these regions, and Russia actively supported the separatist regimes. From 2002 onward, Russia issued Russian passports on a massive scale to residents of these regions. This was a policy of "passportization." By the time the war began, 80 to 90 percent of the South Ossetian and Abkhazian populations had acquired Russian citizenship. This had created a pretext for Russia to intervene militarily in the name of "protecting its citizens."

Georgia's attempt to join NATO irritated Russia. At the NATO summit in Bucharest in April 2008, Georgia and Ukraine's accession was discussed. Despite opposition from Germany and France, the Membership Action Plan (MAP) was postponed, but a declaration stating that "Georgia and Ukraine will become NATO members" was adopted. Russia viewed this as a crossing of the "red line." From spring 2008 onward, provocations and clashes became frequent in the border regions of South Ossetia. The August war was inevitable.

B. The Truth of the Five-Day War and the Silence of the International Community

On August 8, 2008, while the world's attention was focused on the Beijing Olympic opening ceremony, the Caucasus erupted in the first interstate military conflict in twenty-first-century Europe. The Russia-Georgia War, commonly called the Five-Day War, lasted only five days, yet its aftermath continues to this day.

(1) The Outbreak of War and Debates Over Responsibility

The accounts of how the war began differ sharply between the two sides. Georgia claims that South Ossetian separatist forces had continuously bombarded Georgian villages, and that it launched military operations in response to restore constitutional order. Russia counters that Georgia launched

a preemptive attack on Tskhinvali and massacred civilians, and that it intervened to "protect its citizens" and "punish attacks on its peacekeeping forces."

On the night of August 7, 2008, Georgian forces began a massive bombardment of Tskhinvali, South Ossetia's capital. President Saakashvili explained it as a response to provocations by separatist forces and an unavoidable measure to restore territorial integrity. However, Russian forces were already positioned at the Roki Tunnel, the only mountain pass connecting North and South Ossetia, and deployed massive forces within hours of Georgia's attack beginning.

The Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia (IIFFMCG), commonly known as the Tagliavini Commission, was supported by the European Union and published its report in September 2009. The report concluded that "Georgia initiated the large-scale attack on Tskhinvali first." However, it also noted that "Russia's response exceeded the scope and proportionality required, and both sides violated international humanitarian law." The report also presented evidence that Russian reconnaissance forces had already infiltrated South Ossetia before the war and that Russian air forces had been prepositioned in advance.

Georgia criticized the report for failing to adequately reflect Russia's premeditation and provocations. Russia argued that Georgia's "adventurism" triggered the war and that its response was justified. The truth likely lies somewhere between the two claims. What is clear is that the war was the eruption of tensions that had accumulated over a long period, and both sides were prepared for military conflict.

(2) Five Days of All-Out Warfare

On August 8, Russian forces poured into South Ossetia through the Roki Tunnel. Simultaneously, the Russian air force bombed military and infrastructure facilities on Georgian soil. Cities including Gori, Poti, and Senaki came under air attack. In the Black Sea, the Russian Navy sank Georgian naval vessels.

On August 9, the offensive also began on the Abkhazian front. Abkhazian and Russian forces attacked the upper Kodori Gorge, which Georgia had been the only force to control. Georgian forces and civilians had no choice but to withdraw. Georgia lost its last foothold in Abkhazia.

On August 10, Russian tanks advanced deep into Georgian territory beyond South Ossetia. Gori, Stalin's hometown, was occupied. The Russian forces advanced toward the capital, Tbilisi, but stopped about 45 kilometers outside the city. The Georgian government felt threatened with regime change. President Saakashvili appealed to the West for emergency assistance, but no military intervention came.

On August 12, a ceasefire agreement was reached through the mediation of French President Nicolas Sarkozy. The so-called "Sarkozy Six Principles" included the cessation of use of force, the cessation of hostilities, guarantees of humanitarian access, the return of Georgian forces to their positions, the withdrawal of Russian forces to their pre-conflict positions, and the beginning of international discussions on the status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

The five-day war resulted in approximately four hundred deaths among Georgian forces and civilians, with some seventeen hundred wounded. Russian military casualties were reported at sixty-seven, with one hundred sixty-two losses on the South Ossetian side. About one hundred ninety-two thousand refugees were displaced, most of them Georgians. Georgia claimed that Russian forces deliberately attacked civilians, and OSCE reports confirmed Russian air strikes on civilian areas.

(3) Russia's Recognition of Independence and Military Presence

Two weeks after the ceasefire agreement was signed, on August 26, Russia formally recognized South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent nations. This move surprised the international community. Russia justified its decision by citing NATO's 1999 support for Kosovo's independence as a precedent.

However, most of the international community did not recognize Russia's decision. Of the 193 United Nations member states, only a tiny handful, including Russia, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Syria, and Nauru, have recognized South Ossetia and Abkhazia's independence. The United States, the European Union, and the United Nations still consider these regions Georgian territory. Since 2008, the United Nations General Assembly has adopted resolutions each year affirming the return rights of Georgian refugees and displaced persons.

Russia did not implement the ceasefire agreement's key provision calling for "withdrawal of forces to their pre-conflict positions." Instead, it constructed large military bases in South Ossetia and Abkhazia and stationed thousands of troops there. Currently, an estimated thirty-five hundred to four thousand Russian troops are deployed in South Ossetia, and about five thousand in Abkhazia. While officially stationed at the request of the two "independent nations," this military presence is effectively Russian occupation.

(4) The International Response and Its Limitations

During the war, Georgia appealed for strong military intervention from the international community. However, the response was disappointing. The Bush administration declared a "Russian threat" and promised humanitarian assistance, but provided no military support. The United States was tied down in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan at the time, and direct conflict with nuclear-armed Russia was unthinkable.

The European Union achieved a ceasefire through President Sarkozy's mediation but imposed no meaningful sanctions on Russia. European countries were dependent on Russian natural gas, and economic interests overwhelmed principled responses. NATO suspended Georgia's Membership Action Plan (MAP). The concern was that including Georgia in the alliance might create obligations for military confrontation with Russia.

Shortly after the war, the European Union deployed the European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia (EUMM). Beginning operations in October 2008, EUMM continues to patrol near the conflict areas with the mission of preventing renewed conflict and facilitating the return to normal life. However, EUMM cannot access Abkhazia and South Ossetia's interior due to Russia's and the

separatist authorities' refusal. It operates only in Georgian-controlled areas where monitoring is possible, a significant limitation.

In the United Nations Security Council, Russia exercised its veto, preventing the adoption of resolutions concerning Georgia. China, Iran, and others also supported Russia's position. Georgians received the international community's response as "silence." Tazo, a local guide and war refugee at that time, said this

says. "The world had enough time to fight against Russia's imperialism. However, Russia paid no price for its 2008 invasion."

Many experts analyze that the West's tepid response in 2008 sent a wrong signal to Russia's subsequent expansionism. Six years later, in 2014, Russia annexed Crimea, and in 2022, it launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. For Georgians, the 2008 war is not a forgotten past but an ongoing pattern that repeats itself in today's Ukraine war.

c. 'Creeping Border': An Occupation Line That Moves Every Day

The war ended in five days. Yet what horrifies Georgians more is the 'borderization' process that began after. Russian forces and separatist authorities are transforming the Administrative Boundary Line (ABL) between Georgian-controlled and occupied territories into a de facto international border. Barbed wire, trenches, and guard posts are erected, and this boundary line gradually shifts toward Georgian territory. Locals call this the 'Creeping Border.'

(1) Moving Barbed Wire

Starting in 2009, Russian border guards (FSB) and South Ossetian authorities began installing barbed wire, trenches, and green markers along the administrative boundary line. This barrier is not fixed. At night or during periods of sparse EUMM patrols, the barbed wire shifts toward Georgian territory by meters to hundreds of meters. Farmers woke to find barbed wire erected where their fields had been the day before, a common occurrence.

According to an EU report from 2013, a fence spanning approximately 200 kilometers along the South Ossetian administrative boundary line was completed. In this process, an estimated 10 to 20 percent of Georgian-controlled land was consumed. The barbed wire sometimes runs through the center of villages. Remarkably, one house had its bedroom on Georgian territory and its bathroom on 'South Ossetian' territory. Some families found that ancestral burial grounds fell inside occupied territory, making grave visits impossible.

Similar phenomena are occurring along the boundary line between Abkhazia and Georgian territory, including the Gali region. Reports indicate that in the early 2020s, the boundary line advanced as much as 5 kilometers toward Georgian areas in some sections. The Georgian government refrains from physical response to avoid armed conflict, instead relying on diplomatic protests and appeals to the international community.

(2) Abductions and Detention: Fear Made Routine

The most direct victims of the 'Creeping Border' are residents living near the boundary line. Routes freely traveled yesterday become 'illegal border crossings' today. Hundreds of incidents occur annually in which farmers herding cattle or cutting wood are arrested by Russian forces or South Ossetian border guards on charges of 'unauthorized border trespass.' Detained residents are held in detention facilities in Tskhinvali and released only after paying fines of 200 to 500 dollars. Some are held for weeks to months.

In 2023, a Georgian man named Tamaz Ginturi died after being shot by border guards while attempting to enter a church near the boundary line to pray. He was only trying to open a closed church door. Such tragic incidents have become routine sources of fear for residents near the boundary line.

These arrests and detentions are not simple 'border management.' They are strategic harassment designed to weaken the Georgian government's authority and psychologically force border residents into submission. Residents face situations where they are either driven from their own land or must risk their lives to defend it. Young people leave these unstable regions for Tbilisi or abroad, leaving behind only the elderly and empty houses.

(3) Economic Strangulation and Humanitarian Crisis

The barbed wire cuts across people's livelihoods. Farmers are blocked from orchards and pastures. An estimated 10,000 hectares or more of farmland is lost annually. Herders who tended cattle and sheep lose access to grazing routes. Roads to market are closed. The local economy slowly suffocates.

Access to medical care and education is also restricted. Residents of villages near the boundary line must take long detours if the nearest hospital or school is on the 'other side.' During the COVID-19 pandemic, reports indicated increased deaths due to restricted access to medical care. The EUMM and international humanitarian organizations urge humanitarian access, but Russia and separatist authorities refuse it.

The OSCE Assembly has noted that this situation 'weakens regional security and poses severe humanitarian challenges to residents,' adopting resolutions urging Russia's immediate withdrawal and the allowance of humanitarian access. Yet nothing changes on the ground. The barbed wire continues to shift, and residents' lives continue to be consumed.

(4) A Tool of Hybrid Warfare

The 'Creeping Border' can be understood as part of Russia's 'Hybrid Warfare' strategy, achieving objectives without large-scale combat. When tanks push forward, the international community responds. But the movement of barbed wire by 20 meters is treated as 'management,' not an 'incident.' It is strategy through the accumulation of small measures to yield major results.

Russia uses this moving border as a tool to pressure the Georgian government. A pattern is observed where boundary line advances intensify or civilian arrests increase whenever Georgia moves closer to NATO or the EU. This is also psychological warfare designed to instill in Georgians the sense that 'the government cannot protect us.'

Recently, Georgia's domestic politics has instrumentalized the occupied territories and war memory. The ruling party, Georgian Dream, propagates claims that the West and Ukraine seek to draw Georgia into war with Russia to open a 'second front.' Through the frame of 'peace or war,' they stoke voters' war trauma while claiming only they can prevent another war with Russia. Critics counter that the government cultivates fear for political gain rather than strengthening security.

In international law, this boundary line does not exist. The Helsinki Final Act prohibits changing European borders by force. Yet in reality, this 'fake border' is a lethal line where crossing risks arrest or death. The gap between law and reality is confirmed daily in Georgian life.

d. Daily Life in a Country That Has Lost 20 Percent of Its Territory

(1) The Lives of the Internally Displaced and Dreams of Return

Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) resulting from the 1990s wars and the 2008 war number approximately 270,000 to 300,000. Most are Georgians expelled from Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Unable to return home, they live in settlements on the outskirts of Tbilisi or near Gori.

The Tserovani settlement, located about 30 minutes north of Tbilisi, was built for 2008 war refugees. Home to approximately 6,500 residents living in identical small houses arranged in rows, the settlement has water and electricity but lacks jobs. The poverty rate among the displaced exceeds 40 percent, and unemployment far exceeds the general population rate. Young people leave for Tbilisi or abroad seeking opportunity, while the elderly remain, waiting for the day they can return home.

Since 2008, the UN General Assembly has annually adopted resolutions on 'The Status of Internally Displaced Persons and Refugees from Georgia.' These resolutions affirm the right of return and call for humanitarian access. Yet Russia and separatist authorities do not permit large-scale Georgian returns. Return remains a political slogan, and as generations change, memories of home fade.

(2) Isolation and Economic Dependence in Occupied Territories

Russian-controlled Abkhazia and South Ossetia are internationally isolated. Since most countries do not recognize their independence, they are excluded from international trade, finance, and investment. These regions' economies are almost entirely dependent on Russian subsidies and military spending.

South Ossetia has an estimated population of about 50,000. Young people leave for mainland Russia seeking employment, leaving behind only the elderly and military personnel. Corruption is rampant and economic opportunity nearly nonexistent. Abkhazia has a population of approximately 240,000, of which Abkhazians comprise about 50 percent. The remainder includes Armenians, Russians, and

Georgians, mainly in the Gali region. Tourism has developed somewhat in Abkhazia, but it depends primarily on Russian tourists.

Recently, Abkhazia has experienced a surge in cryptocurrency mining, worsening power shortages. Mining farms exploiting cheap electricity and regulatory absence have proliferated, straining residents' power

supply. Since the Russia-Ukraine war, reports indicate that some South Ossetian residents have been deployed to the Ukraine front as members of the Russian military. Occupied territory residents are being drawn into another tragedy.

(3) Divided Families and Economic Costs

Territorial division has torn families and communities apart. Children unable to attend the funeral of a parent across the river, relatives unable to attend a wedding, grandparents who have never seen a grandchild. Strict movement restrictions have made such tragedies routine. Tens of thousands of Georgians still live in Abkhazia's Gali region, but reaching relatives on Georgian territory requires complex procedures. Since 2019, separatist authorities have stopped issuing travel permits, making movement even more difficult.

Economic costs are substantial. Sokhumi in Abkhazia was a major Black Sea resort and trading port during the Soviet era. Now it is completely separated from Georgia's economic circulation. Investors factor in an 'instability premium' to prices, and insurance and logistics costs rise. Border regions experience population outflow and economic decline. Estimates indicate that Georgia's annual economic losses from territorial division reach a significant portion of GDP.

(4) The Coexistence of Trauma and Resilience

Every public institution and school in Georgia displays the phrase '20% of Georgia is Occupied.' This is not mere slogan but the daily reality Georgians face. Regardless of which government is in power, 'territorial recovery' remains the core election issue. Domestic political debate over responsibility for the 2008 war continues. On one side, 'we were invaded' becomes political language; on the other, 'we fired first.'

Throughout Tbilisi's streets, Georgian flags fly alongside Ukrainian ones. Walls bear graffiti proclaiming 'Russia is an occupier' and criticism of Putin. Georgians do not view Ukraine's war as someone else's affair. 'When we see Russian tanks in Ukraine, we remember the tanks that were in Gori,' they say.

Yet paradoxically, Georgia teems with Russian tourists and Russians fleeing conscription. Since the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, tens of thousands of Russians have migrated to Georgia. Russian is heard in Tbilisi and Batumi, and Russian cargo trucks travel Georgia's military roads. Georgians accept them for economic benefit and because of their distinctive hospitality culture. Yet beneath the surface, deep caution and complex emotions coexist.

Though 20 percent of its territory is occupied and war's threat looms, Georgians make wine, sing songs, and welcome guests. Standing on Tbilisi's Metekhi hill is 'Mother Georgia (Kartlis

Deda)' statue symbolizes this nation's spirit. In her left hand she holds a wine goblet for friends; in her right, a sword for enemies. Loss in gazing upon stolen land and resolute resilience to continue living coexist.

Divided territory is not forgotten past for Georgians. It is painful reality encountered each morning upon waking, and part of identity that must be reclaimed. Instead of military recovery, the Georgian government officially pursues a policy of 'peaceful integration,' aiming to build a 'better Georgia' through EU membership and economic development, encouraging occupied territory residents to return of their own volition. Whether that day comes is unknowable. Yet holding to that hope is the Georgian way.

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Chapter 12: Longing for Europe and Disillusionment

A Journey Through Georgia's History and Culture

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A. Acquisition of EU Candidate Status and its Abrupt Halt

On December 14, 2023, the European Council summit held in Brussels formally granted Georgia the status of EU candidate country. At the moment this decision was announced, a roar of cheers erupted in Freedom Square in Tbilisi. In a wave of intermingled EU flags and Georgian flags, people embraced one another. Since gaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Georgians have regarded themselves as part of European civilization. Article 78 of the constitution even stipulated that 'all measures for European and Euro-Atlantic integration must be ensured.' Candidate status seemed like official recognition of that long-held aspiration.

Yet candidate status was a 'ticket of entry,' not 'crossing the finish line.' The European Commission presented Georgia with nine essential steps that must be implemented before advancing to the negotiation stage for membership. Strengthening judicial independence, establishing an anti-corruption system, improving electoral law, strengthening capacity to counter disinformation, and de-oligarchisation were among them. To put it plainly, the structure was 'congratulations, but now the real work begins.' The EU gave Georgia an opportunity while making its conditions clear.

The problem began in spring 2024. The ruling party 'Georgian Dream' reintroduced what was called the 'Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence.' The bill had been attempted once in 2023 but was withdrawn due to massive protests. The core of the bill was to require non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and media outlets receiving over 20 percent of funding from abroad to register as 'organizations pursuing the interests of foreign forces' and to subject them to strict surveillance.

Critics called this bill the 'Russian law.' Its structure was nearly identical to the 'Foreign Agent Law' that Russia introduced in 2012 to suppress civil society. Georgian civil society organizations, independent media, and human rights groups had long relied on support from Western foundations and international organizations. The moment you frame this connection as 'foreign agents,' you can brand all critical forces as 'anti-national.' Russia has done exactly that.

In May 2024, despite large-scale protests, the ruling party forced the bill through. The parliamentary vote was 84 to 11. President Salome Zourabichvili exercised her veto, but the parliamentary majority overrode it. The bill passed.

The EU response was immediate and firm. The European Commission declared that the law was 'incompatible with European core values.' The Venice Commission recommended repeal of the bill. In

June 2024, the European Council concluded that Georgia's actions were 'jeopardizing the European accession path' and declared a de facto halt to the accession process. Budget assistance going directly to Georgia was frozen, and high-level political dialogue was suspended.

What is interesting here is the dual attitude of the Georgian government. The ruling party officially declared EU integration as the nation's top priority while simultaneously strengthening anti-Western rhetoric. Government officials circulated conspiracy theories about a 'Global War Party,' attacking the West. The claim was that the West was trying to drag Georgia into war with Russia. From the EU's perspective, this rhetoric created a fundamental trust problem that went beyond simple diplomatic friction.

Parliamentary elections were held on October 26, 2024. According to official results, 'Georgian Dream' won with 54 percent of the vote. However, opposition parties and international election observers reported widespread irregularities. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) election monitoring mission cited issues including voter intimidation, bribery, and double voting. The European Parliament adopted a non-binding resolution on November 28 questioning the legitimacy of the election and calling for new elections.

By this point, candidate status had become essentially hollow. Of the nine conditions presented by the EU, Georgia had made progress on only three. The most critical challenges, anti-corruption, judicial independence, and improving the civil society environment, were assessed as having actually deteriorated. The hopeful mood of late 2023 had shifted to deep mistrust and crisis in less than a year.

The Georgian government framed the EU's conditional approach as 'violation of sovereignty' and 'interference in internal affairs.' Meanwhile, the EU maintained the position that candidate status itself is a conditional contract, and that democracy, rule of law, and fundamental rights are not optional courses but required subjects. As each side defined the other as 'political interference' or 'breach of commitment,' the conflict transcended a diplomatic issue and became an identity war within domestic politics.

The EU kept this position. As each side defined the other as 'political interference' or 'breach of commitment,' the conflict transcended a diplomatic issue and became an identity war within domestic politics.

This process feels cruel for a reason. The halt occurred in a situation where the vast majority of the Georgian people strongly supported European integration, that is, when 'public sentiment' and 'power's choice' diverged. According to polling, over 80 percent of Georgians supported EU membership. When politics breaks the people's compass, diplomacy becomes an identity crisis. Georgia found itself at the center of that crisis.

Meanwhile, questions were raised about the figure who effectively controls the ruling party 'Georgian Dream.' Bidzina Ivanishvili, a businessman who became a billionaire in Russia, founded the party in 2012 and has wielded influence over Georgian politics since. The view that he exercises real power

without holding an official position is widely held. Critics argue that his Russian business background and connections influence Georgia's diplomatic course. The ruling party dismisses such claims as 'conspiracy theories.' Wherever the truth lies, this suspicion became a symbolic element representing the lack of transparency in Georgian politics.

As a result, acquiring candidate status was a symbolic achievement of Georgia's long-held European aspiration, but when the legal and institutional changes of 2024 and the ruling power's governance methods collided with the 'European standards' demanded by the EU, the euphoria of advancement was quickly cooled by the 'procedural freeze.' Georgia became a country that reached Europe's threshold and then stepped backward of its own volition.

B. The Shock of the 'EU Negotiation Freeze Until 2028' Declaration

On November 28, 2024, the statement made by Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze at a press conference is recorded as one of the most shocking diplomatic announcements in modern Georgian history. He stated 'Georgia will not place the beginning of EU membership negotiations on the agenda until the end of 2028.' He also added a message: 'We will reject all budget support from the EU.'

To understand why this statement was so shocking, you need to look at the context. 2028 is not a 'next quarter.' In political terms, it is enough time to skip through one full presidential term and one full parliamentary term. In a country like Georgia, where candidate status functions as a resource of legitimacy within domestic politics, a four-year freeze is closer to a choice of regime than a foreign policy.

The timing was also meaningful. This announcement came after the October 2024 parliamentary elections, which took place amid controversy, and right after the European Parliament adopted a resolution questioning the fairness of the election. It looked perfectly timed to serve as a counter-strike to EU criticism.

The government's logic went like this: The EU is 'blackmailing' Georgia by using 'negotiations' and 'aid' as leverage. Prime Minister Kobakhidze said 'we reject integration that treats us as a favor.' The claim that the West is pressuring Georgia to plunge into war with Russia was repeated. The so-called 'War Party' conspiracy theory.

From the EU perspective, this kind of framing was difficult to accept. Candidate status and membership negotiations are, after all, bundles of conditions. You cannot hold negotiations while ignoring democratic backsliding. On the November 28 announcement, the EU expressed 'deep regret' and made clear that Georgia's choice was a signal of deviation from the European path.

It was pointed out that this declaration also creates constitutional problems. Article 78 of the Georgian Constitution states 'constitutional bodies must take all measures to ensure full integration with the EU and NATO.' The government declaring that it would unilaterally freeze negotiations for four years could be interpreted as a direct violation of this constitutional obligation. The opposition and civil society called this a 'constitutional coup.'

Economic impacts followed. The EU suspended 123.3 million euros in direct financial support to the Georgian government. Support worth 30 million euros through the European Peace Facility was also halted. In 2025, no new EU support was provided to Georgia. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund pointed out that geopolitical tensions and domestic political crisis are downside risk factors for Georgia's economy.

Downward pressure was placed on Georgia's currency, the lari (GEL). Investor and consumer confidence was shaken. Businesses and young people who had expected an economic leap through EU membership fell into despair. For many young people, EU membership was more than simple political integration; it was the only escape route to access the European labor market and gain opportunities for better lives.

The news of 'discussion halt until 2028' was like having the ladder of hope kicked away from beneath them.

In January 2025, the EU Council adopted additional measures. The decision to suspend visa exemption benefits for Georgian diplomats and holders of courtesy passports was one such move. This was interpreted as a direct sanction against the Georgian government's democratic backsliding. By September of the same year, nineteen EU member states had completed domestic procedures to implement this decision.

The United States also took action. Sanctions including visa restrictions on senior Georgian officials who had undermined democracy were reviewed. Concern grew in Washington that Georgia, a partner of the West for decades, was rapidly changing its geopolitical course.

Protests erupted across Georgia immediately after the announcement. Tens of thousands gathered in front of the parliament in the capital, Tbilisi. By mid-December, it had escalated to a crowd of 100,000. The protests were not simply 'pro-EU demonstrations.' They were politics rooted in a sense of betrayal: 'The government has betrayed the nation's long-term goal.' President Salome Zourabichvili condemned the government's decision as 'treason.'

At this point, a frame war unfolded between government and citizens. The government tried to shift the focus by turning it into an emotional dispute about 'who is bullying whom.' The language of substantive reform, judicial independence, anti-corruption, press freedom, and civil society environment, was replaced by moral stigmatization. Pro-West and anti-West, patriotism and betrayal, sovereignty and dependence. This kind of binary thinking is the easiest way to make policy debate impossible. Human society has always liked the easy path.

As the calendar moved into 2025, the freeze declaration transformed from 'talk' into a 'policy package.' When the Georgian parliament passed legislation seeking to place foreign grants under government approval, further restricting civil society space, this trend continued. This aligns exactly with the direction the EU has been criticizing, democratic backsliding. The 2028 freeze is not a one-time statement but becomes a symbol of a trajectory where the style of power operation itself diverges from EU standards.

On one hand, the Georgian government showed signs of trying to strengthen economic relations with China and Russia. Analysts pointed out that there is a risk of the country becoming a haven for evading Western sanctions. Some assessments called it a gamble that threatens the nation's long-term security and prosperity.

'Freeze until 2028' is not simply about delayed EU membership. It was a signal that Georgian politics had downgraded European integration from a 'national consensus' to a 'factional choice.' From that moment on, Europe becomes not a destination but a battlefield. The anger displayed by Georgian society was rooted not just in 'love for the EU.' It came from the sensation that 'the future of my country has been put on hold against my will.'

Concerns about long-term impacts grew. The constitution's EU-oriented provisions faced a threat of nullification. Some analyses suggested that Russia's de facto integration of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, territories Russia occupies, could accelerate. There were also interpretations that Georgia was signaling a complete return to Russia's sphere of influence by severing relations with the West.

This declaration is ultimately recorded in history as an 'elite coup' by the ruling faction, a symbolic event of European aspirations gone unfulfilled.

C. The Flag Revolution and Z-Generation Resistance

'Flag Revolution' is not a formal political science term. It is closer to a nickname that compresses scenes repeatedly witnessed on Georgian streets in 2024. EU flags appeared overwhelmingly at major protest sites, and the younger generation raised that symbol less as a 'diplomatic choice' and more as a 'way of life', so the flag was a message, not a decoration.

To understand this phenomenon, we must first examine what the Z-generation was responding to. What they responded to was not the EU itself. It was 'the way the path to Europe was being blocked.'

The direct spark for the spring 2024 protests was the foreign influence bill. The people who took to the streets, especially younger crowds, saw the law as operating through 'enforced silence' rather than 'transparency.' Civil society organizations, independent media, and human rights groups had long relied on support from Western foundations and international organizations. The moment this connection is framed as 'foreign agents,' all critical forces can be turned into 'non-nationals.' It is widely noted that this logic resembles Russian-style governance repertoire.

The Z-generation was born between 1997 and 2012. They did not experience the Soviet era and grew up enjoying a free internet environment and Western culture. For them, Europe was not a choice but a basic premise of life. Raising both the Georgian flag and the EU flag, rather than a party flag, was their way.

From April to May 2024, demonstrations continued for approximately fifty days on Rustaveli Avenue in Tbilisi. Protests persisted despite tear gas and rubber bullet suppression. They reignited after the October parliamentary elections and continued for seventeen consecutive days after the November 28 freeze announcement. There were days when up to 200,000 people gathered.

The Z-generation's protest methods revealed several characteristics.

First, the preemption of identity politics. Before the government could use 'pro-Western' as an attack frame, the Z-generation preemptively seized it with 'yes, we want Europe.' It was attack, not defense. The EU flag was redefined as a symbol of 'my chosen norms, that is, rule of law, freedom, freedom of movement, educational opportunity', not 'worship of foreign powers.'

Second, creative and persistent resistance. Through smartphones they shared protest situations in real time. TikTok and Instagram were the main mobilization tools. Even before police tear gas and water cannons, they continued dancing or singing in peaceful resistance. They adhered to the principle of nonviolence. Sit-ins, singing, and all-night vigils were the primary methods.

Third, fear management and persistence. Protests brought the risk of suppression and confrontation. Instances of violence and intimidation against journalists and protesters were documented by international organizations and human rights groups. Yet

younger people shared a sense of history that "if we step back, the country will revert." This is a psychological structure that tends to lead to sustained mobilization rather than one-time anger.

Fourth, the expression of distrust toward political elites. Gen Z's street politics appeared not as loyalty to a specific opposition leader but as a warning against "institutional politics in general." The message "what we want is not a specific party but direction" could make the opposition uncomfortable. Mobilization is easy; organization is hard. Yet it is simultaneously uncomfortable for those in power. A question about direction always demands responsibility.

The government deployed special forces to suppress the protests. Hundreds of students and activists were arrested. In June and July 2024, eight opposition leaders received prison sentences of seven to eight months and were barred from holding public office for the next two years. Criticism arose that the judicial system was being used as a tool for political retaliation.

According to reports from international organizations, beatings, torture, and harsh treatment of detained protesters were practiced widely. Police attacked not only protesters but also journalists covering the scene and damaged their equipment.

Yet as suppression intensified, even the parent generation joined the protests, and the flames of resistance grew larger. Cascading strikes and resignations by university professors, diplomats, and civil servants followed. Student strikes were organized at forty universities. Youth organizations like Da oni and Atinati came to the forefront.

Interesting phenomena also occurred. Some protesters held up the pirate flag from the Japanese manga "One Piece." Fan culture symbolizing freedom and anti-authoritarianism merged with political resistance. It was a scene displaying Gen Z's characteristic global sensibility.

The "flag revolution" spread into larger flames following the legitimacy crisis after the October 2024 general election and the declaration of a "2028 freeze" on November 28. In a situation where

controversy and mistrust over the election results had already accumulated, the freeze declaration poured fuel on the feeling that "the authorities had abandoned the long-term goals of the majority of citizens." Subsequent protests became not merely opposition to a bill but resistance against the "forced alteration of the national path."

The ruling party tried to define the protests as "an attempt at revolution" or "manipulation by outside forces." Such framing easily becomes a tool to justify strengthening public authority and regulatory legislation. The protesters, meanwhile, visualized through flags the message that "we are not an outside force but the people." Ironically, the more flags appeared, the simpler the debate became. This is because the failure of complex institutional reform gets reduced to "Europe or not." When politics simplifies complex problems, what it gains is mobilization, and what it loses is resolution.

Global solidarity also formed. Messages of support came from Ukraine and Poland. Georgian protesters also waving Ukrainian flags was a symbol of solidarity in fighting against Russian invasion.

The meaning of Gen Z resistance can be read on two levels. One is the visualization of generational aspirations toward European integration. The other is an early warning system for signs of democratic backsliding. The EU flag is a diplomatic symbol, but what they are actually holding is a marker of the fear that "once we slip here, it will be hard to return."

Georgia's Gen Z did not demand a "political choice." They demanded "prohibition of political retreat." This is the more fundamental demand. Their resistance was recorded as the largest youth movement since the 2003 Rose Revolution and became evidence that Georgian democracy had not yet been completely extinguished.

The image of a young woman not releasing the EU flag even before tear gas and water cannons became the symbol of this "flag revolution." It was a scene that showed the whole world the firm resolve of the younger generation about where Georgia's future must lie.

D. President Salome Zourabichvili's Solitary Struggle

The position of President Salome Zourabichvili in 2024-2025 Georgian politics is unique. While at the center of power, she struggles to control the core decisions of power, and while being the face of the state, the state's steering wheel is held in another's hands. Thus her struggle is less a popular heroic narrative than a battle to endure within institutional limits using only "veto power, voice, and symbolic capital."

Zourabichvili was born in Paris in 1952. She is a descendant of an exiled Georgian noble family. She built a career as a French diplomat and later renounced French citizenship to return to Georgia. From 2004 to 2005 she served as minister of foreign affairs in the government of Mikhail Saakashvili. In the 2018 presidential election she was elected with 54 percent of the vote with the support of the "Georgian Dream."

However, around 2021 she broke with the ruling party. As the government pivoted increasingly toward authoritarianism and a pro-Russian direction, she began speaking out publicly against it.

Her "solitude" is not simply a matter of a lonely temperament. It is structural.

First, the constraint of constitutional role. Georgia has a system with strong parliamentary cabinet characteristics. The president's powers are limited. A parliamentary majority can override the president's veto. The foreign influence bill issue in spring 2024 is emblematic. Zourabichvili invoked her veto, characterizing the law as unconstitutional and an obstacle to Georgia's European path. But the ruling party had the power to overturn it. She could cry "Stop!" but not press the "pause" button.

Second, isolation in party politics. The more forcefully the president advocates the European line, the easier it is for the ruling party to cast her as being "with the opposition." After the freeze announcement at the end of 2024, the president strongly criticized the government's decision and appeared to align with street protesters. At this moment the president risks being framed not as a symbol of "national unity" but as one axis of "national division." Yet simultaneously, if she falls silent, criticism follows that "the president acquiesced to the nation's change of direction." No choice brings praise. That is politics.

Third, asymmetry in international relations. The EU and Western partners must negotiate with Georgia's official government. Yet they must simultaneously express concern about democratic backsliding. In this process the president can serve the West as evidence that "within Georgia there exists an institutional voice seeking to defend Europe." Some in Western political circles issued messages of support for the president. The EU also expressed regret at Georgia's government decisions and urged a return to course. Yet in state-to-state relations the key partners are the executive and the parliamentary majority. While the president's statements can create international sympathy, they cannot force immediate policy change. So she remains on the international stage in a position that is "strong symbolically but weak in enforcement capacity."

Still, the points at which Zourabichvili's struggle holds meaning are clear.

First, preservation of the "legitimacy" of the European line. When the government moves to freeze EU procedures and tighten civil society space, the president's open statement of opposition creates a record that "all of Georgia did not agree to go in that direction." In political struggle even an immediate loss leaves a record that becomes a weapon in the next struggle.

Second, a breakwater role for civil society. On matters like the foreign influence bill, the president's veto was ultimately overridden. Yet in that process it had the effect of internationally raising awareness of the law's dangers and domestically blocking "normalization." Even a negated veto at least shatters the narrative that "this is a harmless law passed through normal democratic procedure."

Third, the connection between the streets and institutions. Georgia's protests are both "anti-government" and "pro-European." When the president does not completely ignore the language of the streets, street rage can be drawn to some degree into institutional channels rather than rushing toward wholesale rejection of the system. Of course this connection is a double-edged sword. The ruling party can attack it as "presidential political interference," and the opposition can consume the

president only as a "mobilization resource." Yet there are simply people who believe connection better than complete rupture. Humans generally come to understand the value of connection only when standing before a cliff.

Zourabichvili spearheaded a political agreement called the "Georgian Charter" to unite the fractured opposition and civil society. The charter contained the reform tasks pro-European opposition parties would need to carry out if they won the 2024 general election and a roadmap for returning to EU membership procedures. Through this charter she sought to guide opposition parties to cooperate under a single goal and to peacefully replace the government through elections, returning Georgia to the European path.

The president sought to use her limited authority to the fullest to prevent government unilateralism. She confronted judicial persecution by pardoning two opposition politicians imprisoned in connection with 2024 protests. She wielded veto power or maintained critical positions on bills or appointments that would compromise judicial independence.

The ruling party attempted impeachment, denouncing her as "an agent under foreign influence." An impeachment attempt occurred in October 2024 but failed. The government sought to obstruct the president's diplomatic activities or limit her powers through the constitutional court. Petty retaliation followed, including budget cuts.

With her term ending in December 2024, President Zourabichvili remained in the presidential palace continuing her resistance, saying "I will not transfer power to a successor chosen by an illegitimate parliament." She strongly criticized the government's decision as a "constitutional coup."

Through interviews with foreign media including CNN, she informed the international community about Georgia's situation, closely communicated with EU leaders, and appealed for support for Georgian citizens. She was invited to speak before the European Parliament in December 2024 and revealed that "Georgian Dream is an agent of Russia."

Each time protests intensified, she greeted citizens in the square before the palace, encouraging them that "your journey to Europe will not stop." The waves of flags from protesters visible from the presidential palace in Tbilisi gave her strength, yet simultaneously the weight of responsibility she bore before Europe's door closed until 2028 pressed more heavily upon her.

Even into 2025, assessments continued that Georgia's relationship with the EU had grown rougher rather than restored. Parliament showed moves to more stringently control foreign funding and civil society activities, and the EU warned that this direction would undermine Georgia's own EU aspirations.

Zourabichvili's struggle is not a narrative of victory. It remains evidence that even when a nation suddenly changes course, the voice of opposition does not completely vanish. In international politics, evidence sometimes endures longer than borders.

Despite being a president under a parliamentary cabinet system with limited real power, she transformed the presidential palace in Tbilisi into a fortress of democracy. Despite facing impeachment threats and political isolation by the ruling party, she became a spiritual pillar for street protesters.

Salome Zourabichvili's struggle was not the resistance of a president losing power. It was Georgian democracy's desperate thrashing to turn the nation's steering wheel westward again. Her solitary struggle was an ember of hope showing that Georgian democracy had not yet been completely extinguished.

As of 2025, even amid threats of renewed impeachment, she awaits historical judgment, throwing down her final stake in the struggle for Georgia's democratic recovery. For Gen Z protesters she became a symbol. It was the solitary struggle of one woman against a massive ruling party, yet for Georgian citizens it became a beacon symbolizing hope for a "European Georgia."

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Chapter 13: Tightrope Walking Between Great Powers

A Journey Through Georgia's History and Culture

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When you unfold Georgia's map, the weight of this small nation's geopolitical destiny becomes immediately apparent. To the north, Russia looms beyond the Caucasus Mountains. To the south, Turkey and Iran claim spheres of historical influence. Across the Black Sea to the west lies Europe, and beyond the Caspian Sea to the east await Central Asia and China. Georgia is a pawn placed in the center of this vast chessboard.

This is why a nation with 3.7 million people and a territory only two-thirds the size of South Korea has become a frequent subject of international news. Georgia's diplomacy is not merely a matter of policy choice. It is a daily tightrope walk with the nation's survival at stake.

A. Russia's Shadow and Energy Pipelines

(1) The Indelible Scars of War

In August 2008, Russian forces invaded Georgia. It was a brief but brutal five-day war. Russian tanks advanced to Gori, just forty kilometers from the capital, Tbilisi. Gori is also Stalin's birthplace. A historical irony.

The war's consequences were devastating. Russia recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states and stationed troops there. Georgia lost effectively twenty percent of its internationally recognized territory. Only Russia and a handful of other nations such as Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Syria recognize the independence of these two regions. The rest of the international community considers them Russian illegal occupation.

There is a term called "Creeping Border." It refers to the slow encroachment of the border. The story is that Russian soldiers and South Ossetian security forces gradually move barbed wire toward Georgian territory overnight. An orchard is found within occupied territory one day. An ancestor's burial ground becomes unreachable. This is not a rumor. It is documented reality, recorded by the European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM).

In 2015, there were reports that portions of the Baku-Supsa pipeline were incorporated into occupied territory. Energy infrastructure itself is not immune to the threat of this "creeping border."

(2) Strategic Value as an Energy Corridor

In this land shadowed heavily by Russia, the reason Georgia attracts international attention is paradoxically geographical. Georgia is the sole passage through which Caspian Sea energy can reach Europe while circumventing Russia.

The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline is the prime example. It runs 1,768 kilometers from Baku in Azerbaijan through Tbilisi in Georgia to Ceyhan on Turkey's Mediterranean coast. It carries roughly one million barrels of crude oil daily. It does not set foot on Russian territory. It is a strategic asset carefully built by the United States and Europe after the Cold War ended to secure energy independence.

There are also gas pipelines. The South Caucasus Pipeline (SCP) carries natural gas produced at Azerbaijan's Shah Deniz gas field through Georgia to Turkey. This gas then continues to Europe via the Trans-Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP) and Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP). It is a crucial segment of the so-called Southern Gas Corridor.

According to International Energy Agency (IEA) data, Georgia's pipeline system connects to Russia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Turkey. Georgia itself is an energy-poor nation that produces little crude oil or natural gas. Yet its value as a transit country is enormous. It gains not only transit fee income but also the right to secure a certain volume of gas at discounted prices.

(3) The Shadow of Energy Weaponization

Russia has long used energy as a diplomatic weapon. The prime example is the January 2006 incident when Russian energy company Gazprom sharply raised the price of gas it was supplying to Georgia and cut off the supply. It was the

height of winter. All of Georgia froze. It was interpreted as retaliation against President Mikheil Saakashvili's pro-Western orientation.

This experience spurred Georgia to diversify its energy sources. It increased imports of Azerbaijani gas. It accelerated construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (BTE) pipeline. As a result, Georgia's dependence on Azerbaijani gas rose sharply.

However, complete independence from Russia did not materialize. According to a March 2025 report from the Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI), Georgia imports substantial quantities of liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) from Russia. Dependence on Russian refined products such as gasoline and diesel has risen again since 2021. In 2024, Georgia's imports of natural gas from Russia reached 145.7 million dollars.

According to a March 2025 analysis from the Jamestown Foundation, Georgia plans to import twice as much natural gas from Russia in 2025 compared to 2024. This is despite Azerbaijan's ability to fully meet Georgia's gas needs. This is interpreted as part of the ruling Georgian Dream government's effort to improve relations with Russia.

(4) The Middle Corridor and the Future of Green Energy

The Ukraine war has highlighted Georgia's strategic value once again. As the risks of the Northern Corridor through Russia became apparent, the Middle Corridor emerged as an alternative, a route that runs through Central Asia and the Caspian Sea, then through Georgia and Turkey to Europe.

Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Georgia are the key nations of this corridor. According to the Asian Rail Alliance, freight traffic along the Middle Corridor in 2024 increased more than sixty percent from the previous year. It still accounts for only 7.8 percent of total China-Europe container traffic, but growth is steep.

In December 2022, four nations, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Romania, and Hungary, signed an agreement to build undersea power cables across the Black Sea. It is the Green Energy Corridor project to transmit electricity generated by wind and solar power along the Caspian coast to Europe. It is an initiative the EU is advancing to reduce its dependence on Russian fossil fuels.

Once completed, this project will allow Georgia to leap beyond being merely a transit country for oil and gas to become a hub supporting Europe's renewable energy security.

(5) Balance in Contradiction

Georgia's energy politics are full of contradictions. It contributes to Western security interests through pipelines that bypass Russia, while simultaneously importing gas and petroleum products from Russia. Though its territory is occupied by Russia and it has severed diplomatic relations, it welcomes 1.9 million Russian tourists as of 2024. Russia is Georgia's second-largest trade partner.

According to a 2025 Wilson Center analysis, bilateral Georgia-Russia trade in the first half of 2025 reached approximately 1.3 billion dollars, a seven percent increase from the previous year. However, remittances flowing from Russia into Georgia plummeted sixty-five percent in 2024 to just 540 million dollars.

There is even more troubling evidence. The Wilson Center report raises the possibility that Georgia is being used as a channel for Russia to circumvent international sanctions. The basis for this is statistics showing that Georgia, which has no oil resources, exported 99,000 tons of "Georgian oil" to Spain between 2023 and 2024. In 2024, the volume of yachts exported to Georgia reached record levels, a phenomenon difficult to explain for a country with below-average incomes.

Russia's shadow exists not only through military occupation. It permeates Georgian society in the forms of energy commerce, trade, finance, and information warfare. Between the West's need for energy security and Georgia's imperative for economic survival, this small nation maintains a precarious balance.

B. The Meaning of the U.S. USAID Support Suspension

(1) Cracks in a Thirty-Year Partnership

Immediately after the Soviet Union's dissolution in 1991, the United States became Georgia's most important patron. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) began operations in

Georgia in 1992. Over the subsequent thirty years, roughly 6 billion dollars was invested in this small nation. USAID's touch extended to nearly every field: building democratic institutions, police reform, modernizing the judicial system, agricultural technology transfer, fostering small and medium enterprises, education, and health.

On the road from Tbilisi airport into the city stands George W. Bush Street. It was named to commemorate President George W. Bush's 2005 visit to Georgia. Such was the depth of Georgia-U.S. relations.

In 2024, serious cracks appeared in this relationship.

(2) The Foreign Agent Law and Western Backlash

In May 2024, Georgia's parliament passed the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence. It mandated that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and media outlets receiving twenty percent or more of their funding from abroad register as "organizations pursuing foreign influence." Refusing registration incurs a fine of 25,000 lari, approximately 9,300 dollars.

Critics call this law the "Russian Law." This is because it is nearly identical to Russia's foreign agent law, which Russia has used since 2012 to suppress civil society and independent media. President Salome Zourabichvili exercised her veto, but parliament overrode it.

On Rustaveli Avenue in central Tbilisi, protests gathering tens of thousands of people continued day after day. EU flags and Georgian flags flew side by side. Police responded with tear gas and water cannons.

The United States responded forcefully. In July 2024, the U.S. State Department announced a freeze on 95 million dollars in aid to the Georgian government. A USAID spokesperson stated, "We will halt assistance that directly benefits the government, but we will continue programs that directly help the Georgian people." This meant that support for students, farmers, civil society, and independent media would continue.

(3) Trump Administration's USAID Cuts and Shockwaves

In January 2025, the situation deteriorated further. The Trump administration declared a ninety-day freeze on all foreign aid through executive order on its first day in office. The stated rationale was to review whether programs aligned with "America First" policy.

In February, Secretary of State Marco Rubio announced that after reviewing USAID's six thousand foreign aid programs, only five hundred would be maintained. This represented an eighty-three percent cut. USAID personnel shrank from more than eight thousand to fewer than three hundred. President Trump posted on social media, "CLOSE IT DOWN." Elon Musk called USAID a "criminal organization."

The impact on Georgia was immediate. According to Global Voices reporting in February 2025, Georgia's NGOs and international aid activities had "ground to a halt." Programs including the

Constitutional Court's annual summer school and research projects at the Lugar Lab came to a standstill. The Lugar Lab is a U.S.-supported research institute against which Russia has long promoted conspiracy theories claiming it is a "biological weapons development facility."

(4) The Ruling Party's Welcome and Anti-Western Rhetoric

The ruling "Georgian Dream" government welcomed the U.S. reduction of USAID. Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze characterized this as "a defeat of the American deep state."

According to Jamestown Foundation analysis from February 2025, Prime Minister Kobakhidze himself served as a regional coordinator for USAID's public education project from 2000 to 2001. Georgia's official parliamentary website displays the text "This website was created with USAID support" alongside the USAID logo. This irony symbolically illustrates the sharp shift in Georgian politics.

The "Georgian Dream" government deploys increasingly hostile rhetoric toward the West. Government officials claim that the United States and EU seek to draw Georgia into war with Russia and open a "second front." Party founder Bidzina Ivanishvili stated in April 2024 that Russia's invasion of both Georgia and Ukraine was orchestrated by the West's "Global War Party."

These claims bear striking similarity to Kremlin propaganda. The FPRI report analyzes this as "narratives aligned with the Kremlin becoming internalized within Georgia's ruling circles."

(5) Civil Society's Survival Crisis

The most direct impact of halting USAID support falls on civil society.

A significant portion of Georgian civil society organizations depend heavily on overseas funding. Domestic philanthropic culture remains underdeveloped. USAID, the EU, embassies, and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) were primary sources. These include the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED), investigative journalism outlets, and human rights monitoring organizations.

Following passage of the foreign agent law in 2024, more than 400 Georgian NGOs and media outlets declared "civil disobedience" by refusing to register. An open letter stated, "Russian law will not function in our country." But this resistance carries a cost.

According to RFE/RL reporting in August 2024, who would cover the fines became a critical issue. Western donors took the position that they would not pay fines. One Western diplomat stated, "We respect rule of law. Paying fines means acknowledging that law's legitimacy." Both USAID and the EU stated their grant agreements contain no provision for covering fines.

In April 2025, Georgia's parliament passed a new strengthened "Foreign Agents Registration Act." Refusal to register now carries criminal penalties. Human Rights Watch criticized this law for forcing activists and organizations into "false choices": accept the stigma of "foreign agent," go to prison, seek asylum, or cease operations entirely.

(6) Geopolitical Implications: Loss of Trust

The significance of halting USAID support extends beyond mere financial matters.

First, it signals a diplomatic warning that Georgia is no longer regarded as a "trustworthy democratic partner" of the West. The EU has already frozen defense support worth 30 million euros. Both the United States and EU are reviewing visa sanctions and asset freezes against senior Georgian officials.

Second, momentum for pro-Western forces within Georgia weakens. According to Eurobarometer surveys, Georgian public trust in the EU fell from 66% in spring 2024 to 49% in spring 2025. That is a 17 percentage point drop in one year. A sentiment that "the West will not protect us" spreads.

Third, Russia and China gain opportunity to fill the void. A February 2025 Just Security analysis notes that "previous administrations, whether Democratic or Republican, understood that supporting those fighting for freedom on the front lines was both American values and American interests." The critique continues: "In an era of democratic retreat worldwide, withdrawing and allowing friends of freedom to fall into darkness is the worst possible timing."

A traveler sipping free-spirited air in a trendy Tbilisi café may not perceive this. Behind that air runs a deep despair among young people about the door to the West, unsure when it will close.

C. The Dream of NATO Membership and Its Geopolitical Limits

(1) Aspiration Enshrined in the Constitution

Article 78 of the Georgian Constitution specifies that state institutions must "take all measures to guarantee complete integration into the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)." Constitutions rarely mandate joining specific international organizations as an obligation. This reflects how deeply NATO and EU membership touches on national survival and identity for Georgians.

Polls are consistent. More than 80% of Georgians support EU membership. Support for NATO stands at similar levels. This expresses a powerful will to secure national safety from Russian threats and to join the Western democratic camp.

Walking through Tbilisi, you easily see EU flags hung alongside the Georgian flag. Government buildings, cafés, even taxis display EU flag stickers. Georgia is not yet an EU member. It is not a NATO member. Yet the flags already wave.

(2) The Bucharest Promise and Its Limits

In April 2008, the NATO summit in Bucharest, Romania, left a historic declaration: "Georgia and Ukraine will become members of NATO." For the first time in NATO history, a pledge of future membership came before even initiating a Membership Action Plan (MAP).

NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer emphasized at the time, "There is no ambiguity that these countries will become NATO members." American strategist Zbigniew Brzezinski called it "a strategic victory for Ukraine, Georgia, and their North American and European supporters."

But "promise" and "realization" are different matters. The Bucharest declaration withheld the grant of MAP. Germany and France opposed it, fearing to provoke Russia.

Four months later, in August 2008, Russia invaded Georgia. This war confirmed to the world Russia's clear "red line": attempted NATO membership brings war.

(3) Territorial Dispute as a Structural Barrier

The greatest barrier to Georgia's NATO membership is unresolved territorial dispute.

Article 5 of the NATO treaty is a collective defense provision. It states that if one member is attacked, all members regard it as an attack on themselves and will respond. What happens if Georgia joins?

Russian forces are stationed in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. What becomes of those territories?

Theoretically, upon Georgia's admission, NATO could demand Russian forces withdraw. If Russia refuses, Article 5 could trigger full-scale war between NATO and Russia. No existing member wants this scenario.

NATO admission requires unanimous consent. If even one of 32 members objects, it fails. No member will accept a nation with territorial disputes and risk World War III.

(4) The Ruling Party's Dual Stance

Recent actions by the "Georgian Dream" government further complicate matters. While verbally respecting constitutional NATO integration obligations, it actually takes steps that worsen relations with the West.

In July 2024, Prime Minister Kobakhidze stated, "NATO currently has no agenda for expansion." The Georgian government spreads conspiracy theories that the West seeks to make Georgia a "second front" after the Ukraine war. It frames itself as a "peace guardian" and the West and opposition as "war forces."

According to a June 2025 Jamestown Foundation analysis, the "Georgian Dream" government announced it will shut down the "Information Center for NATO and the EU" effective July 1, 2025. Established by a pro-Western government in 2005, this center promoted NATO and EU values and built public awareness of membership.

Georgia's liaison office to NATO issued a brief statement reconfirming its commitment to the 2008 Bucharest summit's decision on Georgia's membership. That was all.

(5) Exclusion from the Summit

The deterioration in Georgia's relations with NATO shows in the numbers.

Then-Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili was not invited to the July 2023 NATO summit in Vilnius. This came shortly after he made remarks indirectly criticizing NATO's support for Ukraine.

At the July 2024 NATO summit in Washington, Prime Minister Kobakhidze was not invited. It was NATO's 75th anniversary summit. According to an analysis by Geopolitics, Georgia was mentioned in only a single sentence in the 2024 Washington summit declaration. There was no reference to the 2008 Bucharest decision, nor any new cooperation initiatives. This was an unprecedented silence compared with all summit declarations since 2008.

In May 2025, Georgia's parliamentary delegation had its voting rights stripped at the NATO Parliamentary Assembly meeting in Dayton. This was the first time in Georgian parliamentary history.

In June 2025, the Georgian Dream confirmed that Prime Minister Kobakhidze was not invited to the NATO summit being held in The Hague.

(6) Contrast with Finland and Sweden

After Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Finland and Sweden decided to join NATO. Both had been long-standing neutral states. Finland became a full member in April 2023, and Sweden in March 2024. The accession process was exceptionally rapid.

Georgians watched this with mixed emotions. A blend of envy and resentment. Georgia had been pursuing NATO membership far longer than Finland or Sweden. It deployed more troops to Afghanistan from any non-member nation. It paid the heaviest price. It reformed its military systems to NATO standards. Yet the door remained closed.

A sentiment has taken hold: "We have done what we needed to do." This frustration with the West's double standards is being converted by the government into NATO skepticism. According to Geopolitics' 2024 analy

sis, while NATO determined that MAP was no longer necessary for Ukraine, it continues to insist that MAP remain "an essential part of the integration process" for Georgia. This is despite Georgia already implementing identical annual national programs fifteen times.

The dream of NATO membership is being steadily pushed to the background of practical politics. The void is being filled by what is termed strategic ambiguity, a form of pragmatic diplomacy.

C. Turkey, China, and Iran: Emerging Variables

(1) The Case for Diversification

As its relationship with the West strains, Georgia is pursuing a diversification strategy that breaks from its traditional Western orientation and strengthens ties with neighboring major powers. Turkey, China, and Iran are the primary targets.

According to a Carnegie Endowment analysis from August 2024, Georgia is undertaking a long-term Eurasian pivot amid deteriorating ties with the West. This includes a shift that encompasses the possibility of stabilizing relations with Russia.

(2) Turkey: An Economic Lifeline

Turkey is Georgia's economic lifeline. It is one of Georgia's largest trading partners and a NATO member with whom Georgia shares its southwestern border.

The capital of Ajara, Batumi, is essentially within Turkey's economic sphere. Many of the high-rise hotels and casinos that fill the skyline were built with Turkish capital. Batumi, just thirty minutes from the Turkish border, swells with tourists from Turkey, where gambling is prohibited, on weekends.

Turkey is equally vital for energy and logistics. The BTC oil pipeline and the South Caucasus gas pipeline terminate in Turkey. The Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway links Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey, transporting cargo from China to Europe. Georgia comprises the critical section of this corridor.

Turkish-Georgian-Azerbaijani trilateral cooperation also serves as a regional security axis that counterbalances Russia. In 2025, Georgian President Mikheil Kavelashvili met with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and reaffirmed their strategic partnership.

For Georgia, Turkey is also a model: a NATO member charting its own course. Turkey has not fully joined Western sanctions against Russia while retaining its NATO membership. It has acted as a mediator between Russia and the West in the Ukraine war. In 2024, there were reports that Turkey had applied for BRICS membership.

(3) China: A Strategic Hub of the Belt and Road Initiative

The most significant variable is China. For China, Georgia is a strategic hub of the Belt and Road Initiative. This is because Georgia occupies the bottleneck of the corridor linking the Caspian and Black Seas.

In 2023, Georgia and China established a strategic partnership. Georgia reaffirmed the One China principle and backed Beijing's positions on Taiwan, Xinjiang, and Tibet. China stated that it does not recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and supports Georgia's territorial integrity.

In May 2024, the Georgian government selected a Chinese consortium to develop the Anaklia deep-water port. The consortium is led by China Communications Construction Company (CCCC) and includes Singapore-based Qingdao Port International and the China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC). The first-phase investment alone totals 600 million dollars.

The Anaklia deep-water port is the largest infrastructure project in Georgian history. Situated on the Black Sea coast, this port is projected to become a critical logistics hub of the corridor. The Georgian government stated it would maintain management control through a 51 percent stake.

The United States raised strong objections. CCCC is on the US Commerce Department's blacklist. It had participated in constructing artificial islands for military purposes in the South China Sea. The China Road and Bridge Corporation has a record of being sanctioned by the World Bank for misconduct on a Philippines project.

In May 2025, the US Congress approved the MEGOBARI Act. The acronym stands for Mobilizing and Enabling Georgia's Accountability, Resilience, and Independence Act, with megobari meaning friend in Georgian. This law grants the president authority to impose sanctions on Georgian government officials who obstruct Euro-Atlantic integration. The intent to counter China's development of the Anaklia port is transparent.

(4) The Spread of Chinese Capital

China's presence in Georgia does not end with the Anaklia port.

The China Road and Bridge Corporation has been operating in Georgia since 2018, participating in the construction of the Ubisa-Shorapani section of the East-West Highway. A Chinese firm is also executing Georgia's largest tunnel project, the Kvesheti-Kobi tunnel. This tunnel is a vital section of the Georgian military road that leads to the Russian border.

According to a December 2024 analysis by FPRI, China is concentrating investment in Georgia's infrastructure and strategic projects, thereby deepening this country's economic footprint. These projects align with China's broader objectives to strengthen connectivity and influence across Eurasia.

China is now one of Georgia's major trading partners. It ranks third in imports and fourth in exports. As Georgia's Western ties weaken, its economic integration with China is accelerating.

There is debate about the character of Chinese investment. Western funding typically demands governance, transparency, and norm compliance. Chinese funding concentrates on project performance and collateral structures. It is difficult to declare one approach superior to the other. Yet the impact on Georgia's institutional character differs significantly.

(5) Iran: Opportunity Within Sanctions

Iran does not share a border with Georgia. However, it has historical ties dating back to the Persian Empire, when it ruled Georgia. Recently, signs of change have appeared in bilateral relations.

According to a Carnegie Foundation analysis, Prime Minister Kobakhidze visited Tehran twice following the death of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi in a helicopter crash in May 2024. This represents a potential opening toward warmer ties than has been traditionally observable.

For Iran, Georgia is a gateway to Europe. The Western path, blocked by sanctions, can be bypassed through the Black Sea and the Caucasus. Under the rubric of the North-South Corridor, discussions are underway on creating a logistics network connecting the Persian Gulf to Georgia's Black Sea ports.

Russia, Iran, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia participate in the 3+3 Platform. In this body led by Russia and Iran, Georgia's role is expanding.

However, strengthening ties with Iran carries risks because of US sanctions on Iran. Companies or financial institutions that transact with Iran risk exclusion from US markets. If Georgia broadens its economic cooperation with Iran, it risks becoming a conduit for circumventing Western sanctions.

A December 2024 analysis by FPRI notes that Russia, Iran, and China are forming a revisionist axis cooperating to avoid the US-led sanctions regime in energy, finance, and technology. Should Georgia be drawn into this axis, its relationship with the United States could reach an irreversible point.

(6) Survival in a Multipolar Age

Ultimately, Georgia stands at the center of a multidimensional equation that transcends the binary choice between Russia and the West.

The existential threat posed by Russia, the receding umbrella of NATO and America, strategic value as an energy corridor, Turkey's economic pragmatism filling the gap, China's vast capital and infrastructure ambitions, Iran's geopolitical interests. All these variables are at work simultaneously.

A December 2025 National Interest analysis summarizes the current landscape this way: "Armenia, long considered a Russian satellite state, now resists the Kremlin and participates in military exercises with the West. Azerbaijan is viewed as a pragmatic and trustworthy actor seeking to deepen trade and energy relations with the EU and the United States. At this moment, Georgia alone remains the sole anti-Western actor in the South Caucasus, sympathetic to the influence of revisionist powers."

Whether this analysis is exaggeration or an accurate diagnosis will be answered by what unfolds next.

The Georgian government continues its precarious balancing act between these great powers, seeking to maximize national interest and secure regime stability. Whether this constitutes "strategy" or "improvisation" only time will tell. Improvisation, after all, is usually the kind of partner great powers prefer.

The subtle tension a traveler feels while raising a glass of wine in Kakheti may be the fragrance of history forged by these great powers' rivalry.

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Chapter 14: Light and Shadow in Systemic Transformation

A Journey Through Georgia's History and Culture

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Part 4: Georgia's Economy and Society

A. Economic Collapse and Corruption Following the Soviet Collapse

On December 25, 1991, the red flag of the Soviet Union came down over the Kremlin. At that moment, Georgia reclaimed independence after seventy years, but the price of freedom was harsh. What Georgia faced was not hope but the complete collapse of state functions.

During the Soviet era, Georgia was known as the 'garden of the Soviet Union.' Thanks to the temperate climate along the Black Sea coast, citrus fruits, tea, tobacco, and grapes grew abundantly, and Georgian wine and cognac filled the banquet halls of Moscow. Some called Georgia the 'Italy of the Soviet Union.' At that time, Georgians' standard of living was higher than that of other Soviet republics. However, this abundance had a shadow. A significant portion of production and distribution took place in the 'shadow economy,' invisible to official statistics, and in this dark realm, a small elite accumulated enormous wealth.

But when the Soviet Union disappeared, everything that sustained Georgia's economy collapsed. As the centrally planned economic system dissolved, supply chains broke. Raw materials and energy from Russia no longer arrived, and agricultural and industrial products sold to Russian markets had nowhere to go. State-owned enterprises lost both orders and funding simultaneously. Factories shut down, and jobs vanished.

Numbers speak to the scale of the catastrophe. Between 1990 and 1994, Georgia's gross domestic product (GDP) plummeted roughly seventy to eighty percent. According to World Bank records, GDP that reached approximately six billion dollars in 1990 shrank to less than 1.5 billion dollars by 1994. This was not a simple recession. It was the collapse of a national economy.

Currency became worth less than paper. The temporary currency called 'coupon' introduced right after independence was printed endlessly, resulting in hyperinflation beyond imagination. In 1993, annual inflation reached 7,600 percent. To buy a single loaf of bread, one had to carry a bag full of bills. People who received their monthly salary in the morning rushed to the market at lunch. By evening, the money's value had halved.

Economic hardship intertwined with political chaos. Separatist wars erupted in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The civil war created hundreds of thousands of refugees and bankrupted the national treasury. Central government control weakened rapidly, and even Tbilisi was not safe. Between 1991

and 1992, coups and upheavals followed one another, and the first president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, was overthrown and went into exile.

The most emblematic scene of suffering was the power crisis. Electricity is like the circulatory system of modern society. In 1990s Georgia, that circulatory system became blocked. Power grids were destroyed or stopped functioning, and citizens received electricity for only a few hours a day. World Bank records document that service quality plummeted to the level where consumers received electricity for only a few hours daily. Even in the winter of 2001, conditions had not improved significantly, with reports that apartments in Tbilisi received electricity for only about four hours a day.

What happens without electricity? Refrigerators stop working and food spoils. Without heating, people freeze during winter. Elevators stop, forcing high-rise apartment residents to climb stairs. Shops close, factories halt production, and surgeries are suspended in hospitals. Public safety collapses. Dark streets become breeding grounds for crime. People cut down street trees for firewood to escape the cold. The beautiful streets of Tbilisi were devastated.

Criminal organizations filled the void left by this collapse. 'Vor v Zakone,' translated into English as 'thieves of the law' or 'law thieves,' were professional crime syndicates that took control of Georgian society. The term is paradoxical. They were thieves, yet they operated according to their own 'law' and code. This criminal culture, born in Soviet gulags during the Soviet era, grew explosively after the Soviet Union's collapse.

Georgia was the cradle of this criminal network. Of the approximately seven hundred to nine hundred 'law thieves' bosses estimated worldwide, nearly half to two-thirds were reportedly from the Caucasus (Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan). They were not mere petty criminals. In collusion with politicians, officials, and businessmen, they controlled a significant portion of the national economy. As the official government failed to function, they became a de facto 'shadow government.' They mediated disputes, collected protection money, arranged employment, and even administered 'justice.'

The paramilitary organization 'Mkhedrioni' is a prime example. This armed group, whose name means 'knight,' wielded tremendous influence in 1990s Georgia. They carried guns on the streets, extorted protection money from businesses, and were implicated in political assassinations and intimidation. In a situation where the state's monopoly on violence had collapsed, those with weapons held power.

Corruption became routine. Rather, daily life was impossible without corruption. Unable to collect taxes, the government could not pay civil servant salaries on time. Officials who went unpaid turned to bribes for survival. Traffic police stopped drivers on roads everywhere and openly extorted money. Bribes were necessary for university admission, and to receive proper medical care at hospitals, money had to go into doctors' pockets. To do business, one needed permits, and to get permits required paying bribes to officials. Every point of contact with state agencies, customs, police, tax offices, courts, demanded 'tolls.'

In Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, Georgia hovered near the bottom. In a 2003 survey, Georgia ranked 124th out of 133 countries. This was not merely a matter of moral decay. In economic terms, corruption was a variable that massively inflated the state's transaction costs. Corporations had to pour resources into pleasing officials rather than improving productivity. Investors, unable to trust the rules, avoided investing. Citizens learned to circumvent laws rather than follow them. Society as a whole became optimized for 'risk avoidance' rather than 'normal economic activity.'

The regime led by Eduard Shevardnadze attempted to stabilize the country amid this chaos but failed to root out corruption. Shevardnadze was a seasoned politician who had served as foreign minister during the Soviet era. He managed to contain the civil war to some extent and attracted international support. However, his regime itself coexisted with corrupt structures. Recommendations from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) were regularly ignored, and Western investors left in disappointment. Georgia was classified as a country without hope.

For Georgians who lived through this period, the 1990s remain a trauma. They survived by relying on black markets and underground economies. Neighbors bartered with each other, and they lived on remittances from relatives who had gone abroad. Young people in families left for Russia or Europe seeking employment. Georgia's population declined from approximately 5.4 million in 1989 to about 4.4 million by 2001. Economic collapse, civil war, and the absence of hope drove people away.

Paradoxically, however, this rock-bottom experience became the soil for later reform. The desperation of having nothing left to lose made radical change possible. In 2003, Georgians took to the streets. Roses were in their hands.

B. Saakashvili's Radical Reforms and the Business Environment

On November 2, 2003, parliamentary elections were held in Georgia. There was an enormous gap between exit poll results and official announcements. It was blatant electoral fraud by the Shevardnadze regime. Angry citizens poured into the streets of Tbilisi. They bought roses from flower shops, held them in their hands, and marched peacefully. On November 22, protesters occupied the parliament building. Young opposition leader Mikheil Saakashvili took the podium holding a rose. Shevardnadze resigned. Power changed without a single shot fired. History calls this the 'Rose Revolution.'

Saakashvili was a young lawyer who studied law at Columbia University and George Washington University in the United States. At age thirty-five, having become president, he declared that he would rebuild Georgia from the ground up. His reform resembled 'shock therapy.' Rather than gradual fixes, it meant destroying what was broken and building anew.

The first battlefield was the war on corruption. Immediately upon taking power, Saakashvili declared, 'As long as I am president, I will not tolerate any criminal power.' He acted on this immediately. He criminalized the status itself of being a 'law thief.' Crime syndicate leaders were arrested en masse. The lavish mansion and assets of Zakhar Kalashov, one of the era's most famous organized crime

bosses, were confiscated and transferred to the state. His thirty-million-dollar villa became a police station or public institution. Such measures carried immense symbolic weight. They sent a message to society that even wealth accumulated through crime could ultimately be seized.

Yet the most dramatic reform occurred in the police force. Saakashvili fired the entire traffic police, a breeding ground for corruption, in a single day. About thirty thousand police officers lost their jobs at once. And something remarkable happened. The government maintained a state without police for about three months while forming a new police organization. While concern arose about a security vacuum, reports indicated that crime actually declined. This was evidence that the existing police had been causing that much harm to society.

The salaries of newly recruited police officers were raised more than tenfold compared to before. In exchange, bribery was absolutely prohibited. To symbolize transparency, new police station buildings were constructed from glass. Everyone could see inside. These 'glass police stations' became icons of Saakashvili's reforms. The results were remarkable. Public trust in police soared. As bribery demands disappeared, people began to trust state institutions again.

Administrative revolution also occurred. In 2011, the Saakashvili government introduced a one-stop service center called the 'House of Justice.' It made it possible to handle almost all administrative procedures, passport issuance, property registration, company establishment, birth and marriage registration, in one location.

Work that previously required bribes and days of waiting now took only minutes, or at most a day. The building itself was constructed from transparent glass, designed so that no irregularities could be hidden. Citizens drew waiting numbers and resolved their matters while waiting their turn in a clean space. No one extended an open palm in between.

Deregulation was undertaken on a massive scale. Starting a business previously required obtaining various permits and licenses, but the Saakashvili government eliminated most of these requirements. According to U.S. State Department documents, in 2005 the Georgian government removed approximately 84 percent of licensing requirements. Some estimates suggest the number of licenses and permits was reduced from one thousand to fewer than one hundred. The time required for business registration was shortened from days to a single day, or even just hours.

Tax reform was equally radical. The complex tax structure was simplified. In the 2004-2005 reforms, the number of tax rates was reduced from twenty-one to seven, and income tax shifted from a progressive rate structure to a single flat rate of 20 percent. Tax filing was also converted to an electronic system. A paradoxical phenomenon occurred. As rates were lowered and the system was simplified, tax revenue actually increased. According to World Bank data, tax revenue as a percentage of GDP rose more than twofold, from about 12 percent in 2003 to 25 percent in 2010. As taxes shifted from an 'unwanted burden' to an 'affordable cost,' the underground economy came into the open.

The results of these efforts appeared quickly in international evaluations. In the World Bank's annually published 'Doing Business' rankings, Georgia shot straight up. Georgia, which ranked 112th in 2005, rose to 8th place globally in 2012 and 7th by 2020. Among former Soviet nations, it ranked first by far. By specific categories, Georgia ranked 2nd globally in ease of starting a business, 5th in property registration, 7th in protection of minority investors, and 12th in enforcement of contracts. The stigma of 'corrupt country' transformed into the title 'good place to do business.'

Urban landscapes also changed. The Saakashvili government undertook massive repairs of aging infrastructure and erected modern buildings. Batumi on the Black Sea coast attracted elegant hotels and casinos, earning it the nickname 'Las Vegas of the Caucasus.' Tbilisi saw the construction of glass bridges and concert halls with futuristic designs. Transparent glass buildings were symbols of the 'transparency' and 'modernization' Saakashvili pursued.

Yet where there is light, there is shadow. Saakashvili's reforms, being radical, also drew criticism. Power became concentrated in the hands of one person and his inner circle. Allegations of suppression against the opposition and the press arose, and concerns about judicial independence never ceased. Even World Bank assessment documents noted that judicial independence issues remained, separate from anti-corruption achievements. In 2007, massive anti-government protests erupted, and the government suppressed them harshly. Saakashvili faced criticism for becoming increasingly authoritarian.

In the 2012 parliamentary elections, Saakashvili's United National Movement lost to the 'Georgian Dream' coalition led by billionaire businessman Bidzina Ivanishvili. When his presidential term ended in 2013, Saakashvili left the country to avoid political prosecution. Assessments of his reform legacy are mixed. What is clear, however, is that the administrative system and anti-corruption direction he established became the backbone of modern Georgia's economy. The 'House of Justice' continues to operate, and the policy of low tax rates and regulatory reduction has largely been maintained. In the World Bank's 2024 'Business Ready' report, Georgia ranked 3rd in regulatory efficiency and 2nd in operational efficiency, maintaining a favorable business environment.

C. Low Tax Rates and the Digital Nomad Special Zone

Georgia attracts global attention today not only for beautiful landscapes or delicious food. It is because institutional design is clear. Georgia positions itself as the 'Singapore of the Caucasus,' actively attracting foreign investors, entrepreneurs, and remote workers called 'digital nomads' through low tax rates and open policies.

Georgia's tax system ranks among the simplest and lowest in the world. Currently, Georgia has only six types of taxes: personal income tax (20 percent), value-added tax (18 percent), corporate tax (15 percent), customs duties (0 percent, 5 percent, or 12 percent across three tiers), consumption tax, and property tax. To those accustomed to complex tax systems, this simplicity is remarkable.

Personal income tax is a single flat rate of 20 percent. With no progressive tax brackets, the rate is the same regardless of income level. While this alone is quite low, there are even more generous

benefits. Obtaining 'Small Business Status' dramatically lowers the tax rate. Individual business owners with annual revenue under five hundred thousand lari (approximately 180 million won) need only pay 1 percent of revenue in taxes. Instead of complex deduction rules, it is simple revenue-based low-rate taxation. Microenterprises with annual revenue under thirty thousand lari (approximately 11 million won) are exempt from taxes entirely.

Corporations also receive generous benefits. Starting in 2017, Georgia adopted an 'Estonian-style corporate tax model.' When a company reinvests profits rather than distributing them, it owes no corporate tax. There is no tax as long as profits remain within the company, and taxation occurs only when distributed as dividends. This system encourages corporate growth and reinvestment. It is highly favorable to startups and growth-stage enterprises.

The IT industry receives even more exceptional privileges. IT companies that obtain 'Virtual Zone' or 'Virtual Zone Person (VZP)' status pay no corporate tax on income from digital services or software exports provided to overseas customers. Zero percent. Write code in Georgia and sell it abroad, and there is no corporate tax. This system openly reveals Georgia's policy intention to 'import talent and code and convert them into foreign currency earnings.' It could be said that instead of attracting factories, Georgia attracts laptops.

There is also 'International Company' status. With this qualification, one can apply corporate tax and income tax at the low rate of 5 percent. The Georgian government provides a menu of diverse tax incentives, allowing businesses and individual entrepreneurs to select what suits them.

The term 'special zone' here does not refer to a physical industrial park or fence. Georgia's special zone is a 'virtual special zone' based on legal status and qualification. Instead of building factories in specific areas, different rules are applied to specific industries (IT services for overseas customers) and specific taxpayers (qualified individual business owners or corporations). This method has low administrative costs and is relatively easy to reverse if it fails. From the nation's perspective, it is a low-risk experiment.

Residency policy is also generous. Georgia permits visa-free residence for one year to nationals of more than ninety countries, including Korea. One can enter without a visa and legally stay for 364 days. This alone is exceptionally liberal, and remote work is also permitted. With no visa stress, 'let's try living here first' becomes possible.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Georgia moved even more swiftly to attract digital nomads worldwide. It operated a program called 'Remotely from Georgia,' actively attracting remote workers. While nations around the world closed their borders, Georgia opened its doors. Though health screening and quarantine measures existed, Georgia became a 'refuge' for digital nomads.

Low cost of living is also a major attraction. A decent apartment in central Tbilisi rents for \$300 to \$600 per month. There is no comparison to Seoul, New York, or London. Dining out costs little as well. At a local restaurant, you can enjoy a generous dinner with a bottle of wine for \$20 to \$30. Internet speeds are fast, and infrastructure for work, coworking spaces, cafes, and the like, is well

developed.

As these conditions converged, Tbilisi became a global hub for digital nomads. Freelance developers, designers, marketers, content creators, and online entrepreneurs converged on Georgia with only a laptop in hand. They live in Georgia while serving clients in the United States and Europe. Thanks to Georgia's low tax rate and affordable cost of living, they can save most of their income or reinvest it. For those dreaming of 'the best value European lifestyle,' Georgia is a land of opportunity.

Policy toward virtual assets and cryptocurrency is also favorable. Georgia attracted large data centers and crypto mining operations on the basis of cheap hydroelectric power. The country does not impose income tax on individuals' cryptocurrency trading profits. This open financial environment appeals to blockchain-related startups and investors.

But there are drawbacks. The influx of nomads and foreigners drives up rent and prices. When foreign demand pushes up city rental rates, the local middle class and young people are the first to be displaced. For ordinary Georgians earning an average monthly salary of 1,000 to 1,500 lari (roughly 500,000 to 700,000 won), apartments renting for \$700 per month (roughly 900,000 won) and above are unaffordable. Reports also emerged that university students, unable to find rooms, faced dropping out of their studies.

The gap between the statistic 'the country grew' and the lived experience of 'my rent became unaffordable' can fuel social discontent. For 'nomad-friendly policy' to succeed, there must be an expansion of housing supply and urban infrastructure, growth in domestic incomes, and redistribution of tax revenue alongside improved services. Otherwise, there is a risk that a 'country good for foreigners' becomes 'an expensive country for its own people.' This is a challenge the Georgian government must address.

The Two Faces of Russian Capital Inflow

In Georgia's economy, Russia stands as both the greatest threat and the most important partner, a paradoxical presence. A country that lost 20 percent of its territory to war with Russia in 2008 now depends economically on that invader's capital and labor. This is Georgia's irony.

On February 24, 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine. As the war began, an unexpected phenomenon unfolded in Georgia. Tens of thousands of Russians poured into the country. They fell into three main groups. First, young people fleeing conscription. Second, entrepreneurs and professionals whose business foundations had been shaken by Western sanctions. Third, citizens opposed to Putin's regime but unwilling to face imprisonment.

According to estimates, more than 100,000 Russians relocated to Georgia in 2022 alone. Some sources cite 120,000 or more. Reports claimed that Tbilisi's population surged temporarily to 2 million. A substantial number of them were highly educated, highly skilled workers. Many were IT developers, designers, marketers, and entrepreneurs. And they came with cash. Massive amounts of cash.

The short-term effect was striking. In 2022, Georgia's GDP growth rate reached 11 percent. It was a spillover benefit from the war. In 2023 and 2024, strong growth rates of 7 to 9 percent held steady. Russian consumption revived the service sector. Demand for housing, food, transportation, telecommunications, education, coworking, and professional services, law, accounting, translation, surged. Real estate markets in Batumi and Tbilisi boomed. Currency exchange houses and shops stayed open late into the night. Tbilisi's streets filled with Russian.

Foreign currency inflows were also massive. The remittances and capital transfers Russians brought sustained the value of Georgia's currency, the lari (GEL). The International Monetary Fund analyzed that Georgia achieved high growth rates in 2022 to 2023 through the spillover effect of Russian migration and capital inflow. Georgia's National Bank's financial stability report also acknowledges that the 2022 increase in migration significantly stimulated real estate demand.

Trade and logistics demand that circumvented Russia also flowed into Georgia. Businesses whose direct dealings with Russia became difficult due to Western sanctions used Georgia as a transit point. The transportation and logistics sector saw significant benefits. Georgia fully exploited its geopolitical advantage of lying between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea.

Business registration and human capital inflow also took place. From 2022 to 2023, new corporate registrations related to Russia increased sharply, and bank deposits grew significantly. Beyond mere consumption, employment, tax revenue, and technology remained in Georgia. Combined with the 'digital nomad policy' described earlier, Georgia built a structure to simultaneously draw in people (talent) and money (foreign currency).

But this 'positive shock' brought 'negative side effects' in its wake. First is soaring housing costs. Foreign demand drove up city rental rates. Reports showed that apartment rents in the capital, Tbilisi, more than doubled. Local Georgians, especially the middle class and young people, were the first to be displaced. For ordinary Georgians earning an average monthly salary of 500,000 to 700,000 won, apartments renting for 900,000 won or more per month are unaffordable. This is gentrification, the displacement of native residents as outsiders move in.

The IMF noted the trend where, following Russia's war, housing prices and rents surged due to migrant inflows but stabilized somewhat after mid-2023, while warning that housing market risk management is necessary. Georgia's National Bank expressed similar concerns.

Second is social conflict. Georgia lost Abkhazia and South Ossetia to Russian invasion in 2008. Twenty percent of its territory remains occupied. Yet the sight of that invading nation's citizens walking through Georgia's own capital and expanding their economic influence fills Georgians with deep frustration and anger.

Throughout Tbilisi's streets are filled with graffiti reading 'Russia is an occupier' and 'Glory to Ukraine.' You easily see the Georgian flag and the Ukrainian flag hanging side by side. Some restaurants and bars ask Russian customers to

condemn Putin', and some deny them entry if they refuse. Economic interests collide with ethnic sentiment.

Third is geopolitical risk. Large-scale inflow of Russian capital and labor can affect Georgia's foreign policy and domestic politics. Capital inflow sometimes operates as 'soft power' and lobbying. Given that Georgia holds EU and NATO membership as a long-standing aspiration, deepening economic dependence on Russia poses a strategic danger.

The international community worries that Georgia could become a haven for Russian sanctions evasion. Indeed, reports have emerged of 'shadow trade' flowing through Georgia since the war and suspected instances of sanctions evasion. The West, especially the United States and the European Union, watches these movements closely. If Georgia becomes a conduit for sanctions evasion, its relationship with the West will deteriorate. This directly contradicts Georgia's aspiration for EU membership.

Fourth is macroeconomic volatility. As the IMF has repeatedly pointed out, Russian-origin inflows have a character that can 'suddenly appear and suddenly vanish.' If geopolitical circumstances shift, sanctions intensify, or migrants move further west to Europe, inflows can reverse into outflows. Growth would then slow, real estate prices adjust, bank liquidity fluctuate, and pressure mount on exchange rates. Short-term prosperity does not automatically convert into long-term stability.

Fifth is economic structural distortion. If the inflowing money does not seep into manufacturing or technology innovation but remains only in real estate, consumption, and short-term service sectors, what remains? There may be little beyond 'the city became expensive.' This is why Georgia pursues both IT special zones and digital nomad policy in tandem. It is an attempt to convert capital inflow into productivity growth.

Realistically, Georgia finds economic separation from Russia difficult to bear. Russia remains Georgia's largest market for wine exports. The memory of when Russia banned Georgian wine imports in 2006, causing Georgia's economy to stumble, is still vivid. Revenue from Russian tourists and cargo trucks also occupies an important part of the national economy.

Georgia continues this 'uncomfortable cohabitation,' needing capital from its giant neighbor Russia while having its identity shaken and its foundations threatened. The dilemma between economic self-interest and security, the fruit of growth and the seed of inequality, the blessing of foreign currency and the trap of dependence. This is the most ironic and precarious reality Georgia faces.

Georgia has succeeded in building one of the world's most open market economy models, starting from a collapsed society and undergoing radical reform. Yet geopolitical risk and economic dependence on a particular nation remain pressing challenges Georgia must overcome to reach the ranks of developed countries. How a small nation survives among great powers, this is the lesson Georgia's history offers us.

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Chapter 15: Tourism and Wine

A Journey Through Georgia's History and Culture

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A. V-Shaped Recovery in Tourism Industry After COVID-19

(1) The Impact of the Pandemic and Economic Damage

Until 2019, Georgia's tourism industry enjoyed an unprecedented boom. That year, approximately 9 million international visitors came to this small nation, and tourism revenue exceeded 3.2 billion dollars. Tourism accounted for 27% of GDP and functioned as the economic heart of the state. Languages from around the world echoed through the narrow alleys of Tbilisi's old town, and the Kakheti vineyards saw a steady stream of wine-seeking visitors.

But in March 2020, COVID-19 swept the world and brought it all to a halt. The Georgian government closed its borders on March 18. Tourism revenue plummeted 83% year-over-year, falling to 542 million dollars. Hotels shuttered. Restaurant workers lost their jobs. Tourism sector employment declined by roughly 40%. Along Rustaveli Avenue in Tbilisi, souvenir shop owners who catered to tourists found themselves gazing at empty streets through difficult days.

In a small, open economy like Georgia, the collapse of tourism triggers a chain reaction. Airlines, hotels, restaurants, wineries, guides, and taxi drivers, countless livelihoods are tied to the tourist's wallet. In 2020, Georgia's GDP growth rate posted negative 6.8%. The entire nation reeled from the economic shock.

(2) The Beginning of Recovery and Structural Change

Signs of recovery emerged in 2021. As vaccine distribution began and countries gradually reopened their borders, Georgia moved swiftly. Through the 'Georgia Reopen Safely' program, the government prioritized promotion of hotels and restaurants that had received safety certification. It issued certification marks to businesses that followed hygiene protocols and actively publicized them to international travelers.

By 2022, an interesting phenomenon emerged. Visitor numbers reached only 60% of 2019 levels, yet tourism revenue actually exceeded pre-pandemic figures. It surpassed 3.5 billion dollars. These paradoxical numbers signaled a qualitative shift in tourism.

In 2023, tourism revenue surged to 4.1 billion dollars, setting a record high. According to World Bank analysis, this figure was 26% higher than 2019. It was not merely 'recovery' but a 'leap.' The trend continued into 2024, reaching 4.4 billion dollars, and in the first quarter of 2025, tourism revenue

alone totaled 826 million dollars, a 2.3% increase year-over-year, rewriting the first-quarter record.

(3) Factors Driving Recovery

Multiple factors worked in combination behind this remarkable rebound.

First, geopolitical factors. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, tens of thousands migrated to Georgia from Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine. Many of them were long-term residents whose stays were longer and spending greater than ordinary tourists. As their expenditures were reflected in tourism revenue statistics, they lifted the figures. The doubling of rental rates in Tbilisi and the proliferation of cafes displaying signs in both English and Russian are snapshots of this shift.

Second, a shift toward higher-value markets. While visitor numbers remained below 2019 levels, per-capita spending increased. Tourists from Gulf states, Israel, and Europe grew in number, and they stayed longer and spent more. As of 2025, average length of stay reached 5.6 nights, a modest increase from the previous year, and repeat visitors accounted for 78.4%. This means Georgia has established itself as a destination where 'once you come, you come again.'

Third, the expansion of air connectivity. The entry of budget carriers like British Airways and easyJet dramatically improved access to European markets. A direct flight from London to Tbilisi takes four hours. It is closer than Paris or Berlin.

Fourth, digital nomad policy. Georgia allows citizens of roughly 90 countries one year of visa-free residence. The 'Remotely from Georgia' program, introduced during the pandemic, actively attracted remote workers. Tbilisi, with its low cost of living, safe security environment, and decent internet infrastructure, became a popular long-term destination for freelancers and startup founders worldwide.

(4) Reshaping the Tourism Landscape

During recovery, the composition of visitor nationalities also changed. Where it once centered on Russia and Eastern Europe, tourists now come from far more diverse countries. Chinese visitors increased 555% year-over-year in 2023 and showed 256% growth in the first half of 2024. Inflow from Saudi Arabia, India, and Israel also increased notably.

Looking at visitor composition in 2025, Russia still holds the largest share at 23.2%. Turkey and Armenia follow. That these three nations are neighbors reveals much about Georgia's tourism character. Rapidly absorbing 'nearby markets' was at the core of recovery.

Visitors from the European Union and the United Kingdom are also recording record highs. This is the fruit of market diversification. Excessive dependence on one nation means the entire tourism industry can be shaken by changes in that nation's economy or political relationships. Georgia's efforts to develop new markets and increase direct flight routes were a strategy to disperse this risk.

(5) The Sophistication of Tourism Products

Behind the V-shaped recovery lies a qualitative change in tourism offerings. Georgia's tourism board shifted its objective from simply 'how many more visitors can we attract' to 'which markets will spend how much.'

A chronic weakness of tourism is seasonality. The pattern of high numbers during summer peaks and sparse traffic in winter repeats endlessly. To overcome this, Georgia is developing year-round tourism products. These are composite offerings that combine wine tourism, wellness (hot springs and spas), MICE (meetings, incentives, conferences, and exhibitions), extended stays, and mountain ski resorts.

Between 2021 and 2022 alone, more than 50 new ecotourism routes were developed. Trekking courses through remote villages like Svaneti and Tusheti became attractive choices for modern travelers seeking raw nature and distinctive culture. Such products do not come into being through marketing alone. They are the domain of industrial policy requiring the coordinated movement of lodging, transportation, food service, and experience providers.

(6) Remaining Challenges and Risks

The faster the recovery, the greater the risks.

First, dependence on specific markets. That Russia still accounts for the largest share is a double-edged sword. If geopolitical tensions escalate, sanctions intensify, or exchange rates shift sharply, the tourism industry could rapidly cool again.

Second, the social costs of tourism. As visitors surge, rents spike and gentrification occurs in cities. Noise and traffic congestion increase, and environmental burdens grow. Tourism brings money, but it also has the power to reshape urban life to the 'pace of the tourist.' We already see local residents in Tbilisi's Old Town being pushed to the periphery as they cannot afford rising rents.

Third, the matter of sustainability. Balance is needed between using natural resources for tourism and avoiding their degradation. Places like Martvili Gorge and Okace Gorge exemplify this balance well. The experience of boating across emerald waters or walking atop cliffs generates tourism revenue while preserving ecosystems. Georgia must walk a tightrope between 'development' and 'conservation.'

In summary, Georgia's V-shaped tourism recovery was not a matter of demand returning but structural reorganization. It resulted from the combination of rapid absorption of adjacent markets, qualitative improvements centered on spending and length of stay, and the sophistication of data and products. And it has moved into a phase where market concentration and social costs must be managed in tandem.

B. The Global Leap of Qvevri Wine

(1) Land of Wine for 8,000 Years

It is impossible to describe Georgia without mentioning wine. Through archaeological evidence, the nation is recognized as the 'Cradle of Wine,' having produced wine since 6,000 BCE, 8,000 years

ago.

Yet Georgia's wine globalization cannot be explained by taste alone. Georgia's most powerful weapon is 'narrative' and 'form.' Wine is culture before it is product, and that culture becomes the blade of differentiation in international markets. At the pinnacle stands the qvevri method.

(2) The Identity of Qvevri

A qvevri is a massive, egg-shaped clay vessel. Its interior is coated with beeswax before being buried in the ground for use. Unlike European winemaking, which ferments only grape juice, the Georgian traditional method ferments grape skins, seeds, and even stems whole in the qvevri.

The steady temperature underground acts as a natural cooling mechanism. Wine ferments slowly and steadily. During this process, tannins and pigments drawn from the skins and seeds give the wine a deep amber hue even when made from white grape varieties. This is called 'Amber Wine' or orange wine.

In 2013, this distinctive winemaking method was inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. UNESCO explained that this tradition is deeply woven into the community's way of life and identity and is linked to rituals, songs, and oral traditions. This is not marketing copy. The international community formally recognized the frame that 'Georgian wine is a unique cultural product.'

In international markets, 'narrative' creates premium value. Just as France creates premium through AOC, Japan through sake culture, and Mexico through tequila origin, Georgia has secured an 'irreplaceable archetype' through qvevri.

(3) A Leap Seen Through Export Metrics

According to the Georgian National Wine Agency, wine and spirits exports in 2024 totaled 565 million dollars, a 24% increase year-over-year. Wine exports alone reached approximately 95 million liters with sales of 276.1 million dollars. Volume increased 6%, revenue 7%.

What stands out in these figures is that it was not a matter of 'selling a lot but at low prices.' Volume and revenue moved together. Growth was not driven by simple heavy discounting but accompanied by unit price maintenance and market diversification.

Within the EU market, a structure emerges in which particular nations play a 'hub' role. Poland's share stands out in Georgia's wine exports within the EU in 2024. A steady growth trend appears between 2020 and 2024. Such a structure cuts both ways. It is positive that a 'pillar market' has emerged to absorb steady volumes, but excessive dependence on a specific market can undermine pricing power and brand positioning.

In the past, most Georgian wine exports depended on the Russian market. After Russia's embargo in 2006, Georgia was determined to diversify its export markets. Through improved quality and modern marketing, it expanded its reach to China, the United States, Germany, Japan, and South Korea.

Currently, it exports more than 100 million liters of wine annually to over 53 countries worldwide.

(4) Natural Wine Boom and Its Encounter

The global attention that Qvevri wine has drawn owes much to its meeting with the natural wine trend.

Natural wine refers to wine fermented with wild yeast without chemical additives. This movement spread among Western wine enthusiasts and sommeliers beginning in the mid-2010s. The philosophy of minimizing artificial intervention and bringing out the original taste of the land and grape resonated with modern consumers' sensibilities.

Qvevri wine is the original of this trend. Since 8,000 years ago, Georgians have used a method of fermenting in clay vessels buried in the ground without chemical substances, skins included. The natural wine movement found the answer in 'the most ancient thing' while searching for 'the new.'

Michelin restaurants in New York, London, and Paris began listing Georgian amber wine on their menus. Wine critics praised its 'distinctive flavor' and 'authenticity.' Even producers in the Friuli region of Italy adopted Georgian Qvevri.

(5) Revival of Native Varieties

During the Soviet era, Georgia's wine industry was reorganized around mass production. It competed on quantity rather than quality, and diverse native varieties disappeared. The structure was primarily selling large volumes cheaply to the Russian market.

After the Soviet collapse, Georgia's wine industry started a major shift from quantity to quality. Wine producers worked to restore forgotten native varieties. Georgia has more than 525 distinct native grape varieties. This diversity is an asset unmatched by any other country in the world.

Saperavi is Georgia's representative red variety. With its deep purple color, rich tannins, and excellent aging potential. Rkatsiteli is the most widely cultivated white variety, in Qve

vri, when fermented, becomes a deep amber wine. Varieties such as Kisi, Mtsvane, and Chinuri are also earning recognition for their originality in international markets.

These native varieties are unique to Georgia and found nowhere else in the world. Cabernet Sauvignon or Chardonnay cannot compete. Those markets are already dominated by France, Italy, and the United States. However, Saperavi and Rkatsiteli are different. Georgia is the sole place of origin and the sole expert.

(6) Growth of Wine Tourism

Wine exports ultimately become stronger when connected to the 'experience' of the place of origin. If wine ends with drinking, it is just a beverage, but when coupled with the experience of visiting the production site, it becomes a brand.

The Kakheti region in eastern Georgia is the center of the 'wine route.' Over 70 percent of Georgia's wine production takes place here. Numerous wineries are located in areas such as Telavi, Signaghi, and Kvareli.

Wineries such as Shumi, Khareba, and Château Mukhrani offer integrated tourism products combining tastings, accommodation, and experiences. The Khareba winery is known for its tunnel cellars 7.7 kilometers long. Visiting the wine storage of the 11th-century Alabardi Monastery or tasting freshly drawn wine from small-scale Marani (wine cellars) operated by families is an experience possible only in Georgia.

The autumn grape harvest festival 'Rtveli' is a representative tourism product. Visitors directly pick and tread grapes, experiencing Georgian wine culture. This is not merely an event but an income source sustaining the Georgian rural economy.

As tourists increase, wine experiences increase, and as wine experiences increase, people return home purchasing bottles, creating a positive cycle where exports grow. Wine and tourism are two pillars of Georgia's economy, but they are essentially connected as one.

(7) National-Level Promotion

There exists a structure where it is difficult to break into markets through private effort alone. Georgia's wine industry is dominated by numerous small wineries. For each of them to independently open foreign markets is burdensome.

Here, national-level 'promotional infrastructure' becomes important. In 2024, Georgia's National Wine Agency invested 16 million lari in wine promotion program budgets. International exhibitions, tastings, and buyer matching effectively function as an 'export pipeline.'

The 'Wines Georgia' campaign is a project introducing Georgian wine to upscale restaurants in the United States and Europe. In Korea, hy (formerly Korean Yakult) exclusively imports premium Georgian wines such as Teliani Valley. With the advancement of the Korea-Georgia Economic Partnership Agreement, tariffs on wines and distilled spirits (chacha) are being eliminated, increasing awareness of Georgian wine in the Korean market.

(8) Shadows of the Leap

Qvevri is a powerful differentiator, but it is equally difficult to standardize. The material and fine porosity of the vessel, fermentation and skin-contact methods, sanitation management, and oxidation control differ by producer.

This diversity is attractive but also a risk. As exports grow, buyers demand 'consistency.' To a large-volume purchaser, 'this vintage is slightly different from last time' is not an attraction but a source of anxiety. Tradition, however, is originally closer to 'communal diversity' than 'consistency.'

When tradition is industrialized, tradition weakens, and when tradition is left as is, industrial scale is limited. For Georgian wine to advance to the next stage, it needs a dual structure that agrees on a

'minimum standard' of quality while preserving the individuality of regions and producers as a 'superior differentiator.'

Another challenge is competition from mass production. It cannot compete on price with major wine-producing nations such as France, Chile, and Australia. Georgia's path is the premium market. It must compete through story and quality, not volume. The next challenge is proving 'authenticity' through sustainable farming practices and digital tracing.

In summary, the global leap of Qvevri wine runs on a combination of cultural heritage verified by UNESCO, export performance with accompanying growth in volume and revenue, tourism recovery, and national-level promotion. The next challenge is not 'globalization of tradition' but 'adaptation of tradition to mass markets,' a far more exhausting task.

C. Light and Shadow of Batumi's Casino Economy

(1) Las Vegas of the Black Sea

The city of Batumi on the Black Sea coast is Georgia's other economic engine. With its bright neon lights, this city is called 'Las Vegas of the Black Sea.' It demonstrates a unique economic model combining tourism and gambling.

Batumi is the capital of the Adjara Autonomous Republic. Located in the southwest corner of Georgia, just 20 kilometers from the Turkish border. Famous as a resort since the Soviet era, its current dazzling skyline is the product of rapid development since the 2000s.

Casinos always play the same role in city economies. In the short term, money circulates quickly, external spending is drawn in, employment is created, and tax revenue increases. Simultaneously, it can enlarge risks of addiction, debt, crime, and money laundering, fix the regional image as a 'gambling city,' and eat into normal industries. Batumi's casinos exemplify this typical duality.

(2) Light: Tourism-Combined Consumption Engine

Behind Batumi's rapid growth as a casino city lies groundbreaking tax policy. The Georgian government applies a low tax rate of 10 to 15 percent on casino revenues. This is very attractive compared to rates of over 30 percent in the United States and Europe.

This benefit attracted foreign capital in large numbers. Investment from Turkey, Israel, and the Middle East poured in. Along Batumi's coastline, global hotel chains such as Sheraton, Hilton, Radisson Blu, Wyndham, and Marriott have entered. Most of these hotels operate with large casinos attached.

The main clientele of Batumi casinos comes from neighboring countries. Turkey, Iran, and Azerbaijan have gambling prohibited or strictly restricted for religious or legal reasons. Batumi is geographically close and has flexible visa policies. It becomes a perfect sanctuary for those crossing the border on weekends to enjoy entertainment and gambling.

Casinos have strength in combining with beaches, resorts, and city tourism to increase 'extended consumption.' Accommodation, dining, transportation, performances, and shopping are bundled to easily create 'packaged spending.' It operates by increasing total urban consumption, not just casino revenue itself.

There is also an effect of mitigating tourism seasonality. Coastal cities face dead commerce during off-seasons. Casinos are less shaken by weather and season and can support the nighttime economy. Large casinos such as Eclipse and Otium, linked with hotels and restaurants, attract tourists throughout the year. The recovery of hotel occupancy and profitability to 2019 levels in 2022 owed much to the role of casinos.

(3) Evolution of Regulation: Growth Within Control

Georgia did not leave the gambling industry unattended. As the industry grew and issues of addiction and youth exposure emerged, it strengthened regulation.

A representative measure raised the gambling age to 25. Foreign visitors are exceptionally allowed lower ages. This is a strategy separating 'protection of domestic citizens' from 'attraction of foreign tourists.'

In 2023, taxation on the gambling industry increased. The profit tax rose from 10% to 15%, and winnings tax from 2% to 5%. The government's approach was to move toward 'monetizing the industry within controllable limits' rather than 'eliminating it outright.'

In June 2024, a favorable tax amendment for foreign operators of online gambling passed and went into effect in December that year. Georgia shows an inclination to view gambling not only as a 'domestic social problem' but also as an 'export-oriented service that draws money from abroad.'

The Batumi Casino holds significant economic meaning at this precise juncture. It absorbs foreign tourist spending and, combined with regional hotel and resort investment, becomes a capital recovery model with 'immediate economic returns' for urban development.

(4) The Shadow: The Reality of Social Costs

The problem is that social costs are 'recorded late in statistics.'

Regulations strengthen because as the industry grows, addiction and household bankruptcy grow with it. These harms typically scatter at the individual level and surface late. As of late 2025, reports indicate that 1.57 million people are registered in the national gambling exclusion registry. Given that Georgia's total population is approximately 3.7 million, this figure is quite substantial.

Of course, it is worth questioning how accurately this number is compiled and whether policy campaign elements are included. However, it can be read as a signal that 'the problem has grown large enough that the state is deploying large-scale blocking mechanisms.'

Another risk is money laundering. The gambling industry runs the danger of linking with 'hard-to-trace' activities like money laundering. Even if a casino brings large short-term profits to city economics, if risks grow from the perspective of international financial regulation (AML), foreign investment and financial trust can face headwinds. Casinos both draw money in and can erode national credit.

(5) The City's Dual Structure

Behind the glittering casino hotels still stand poor apartment blocks and infrastructure from the Soviet era. Batumi nakedly displays the city's duality.

Real estate prices have skyrocketed, pushing local residents to the periphery. This is gentrification. An imbalance is growing between infrastructure for tourists and infrastructure for ordinary residents' daily lives.

The growth of the gambling industry collides with Georgia's conservative Orthodox Christian culture. Among Georgians who value traditional values, unease exists about Batumi's transformation. There are also voices of concern about gambling addiction and social problems.

Casino economics is extremely sensitive to the political and economic conditions of neighboring countries. When the Turkish lira weakens, Turkish tourists' spending power shrinks. When relations with Russia worsen, visits from Russians decline. This is a structural weakness exposed to external shocks.

(6) Batumi's Strategic Options

For Batumi to succeed long-term, the casino cannot become 'everything the city is.' Casinos have too strong a power to oversimplify a city's brand.

A typical city strategy usually works like this. First, position the casino as an 'auxiliary engine' for tourist consumption while expanding non-gambling content like gastronomy, culture, maritime recreation, and conventions. Second, maintain strong regulations and responsible gambling practices (age restrictions, advertising limits, access controls). Third, reinvest revenue into addiction treatment, debt counseling, and youth protection to raise social acceptance.

The Adjara Tourism Authority is working to diversify tourism products through skiing, ecotourism, and wine tours to reduce dependence on the casino. Batumi's success rests not on the casino itself, but on city planning after the casino.

To summarize, the 'light' of Batumi's casino economy is the absorption of external spending and expansion of urban consumption. The 'shadow' is addiction, debt, crime, and financial risk. The Georgian government is controlling the industry and generating revenue through methods like raising minimum age requirements and strengthening taxation. The key to balance depends on where the money earned through the casino is spent.

D. Hydroelectric Power and Renewable Energy Potential

(1) A Land of Water

Georgia can fairly be called a 'land of water.' The numerous rivers and valleys fed by melting perpetual snow from the Caucasus Mountains have given it an exceptional potential for hydroelectric power generation.

26,000 rivers flow through its territory. Of these, approximately 300 rivers can be used for energy production. Hydroelectric potential reaches an annual capacity of approximately 50 terawatt-hours (TWh), matching Norway's within Europe. Georgia is second only to Norway in per-unit-area hydroelectric generation potential among European nations.

Currently, 75 to 85 percent of Georgia's electricity production comes from hydropower. This means Georgia is among the world's countries with the most environmentally friendly energy mix. With a low fossil fuel generation share, it holds a favorable position for transitioning to a low-carbon economy.

(2) The Contradiction of the Current Structure

However, when looking at the entire energy sector, the story differs.

Fossil fuels account for over 75 percent of Georgia's primary energy supply. It is centered on gas and oil. Renewables make up roughly 20 percent, most of which is hydropower. Contrary to the 'renewable energy nation' image, when viewed across all energy, dependence on fossil fuel imports is quite substantial.

The key concept is 'seasonality.' Water is abundant and the drop is good, but generation capacity falls in winter. River water freezes or flow decreases. A pattern repeats where the system must rely on thermal power and imported electricity at these times.

Electricity is produced mainly by hydropower, but when winter hydropower production drops, the system depends on natural gas thermal power and imports. In summer, surplus electricity is exported to Turkey or neighboring countries, and in winter it is imported again. This is a structural vulnerability to external shocks.

(3) Major Facilities and Underdeveloped Potential

Georgia operates several major hydroelectric power stations.

The Enguri Dam is one of the world's tallest arch dams. This massive structure at 271.5 meters high plays a central role in Georgia's energy security. What is striking is that this dam shares power with the disputed region of Abkhazia. The dam sits on Georgian territory, but the power station is effectively on the Abkhazian side. They confront each other politically yet share energy in a unique situation.

The Zhinvali Reservoir is a key infrastructure supplying water and electricity to the capital, Tbilisi. Completed in 1985, this dam produces 130 megawatts of power. Its emerald lake landscape is also beloved as a tourist destination.

What is remarkable is that only 22.5 percent of Georgia's hydroelectric resources are currently developed. Just about one quarter of the theoretical potential is being used. The room for future development is enormous.

(4) Renewable Energy Goals and Institutional Changes

The Georgian government targets a renewable energy share of 27.4 percent of final energy consumption by 2030. By sector, the goals are 85 percent for electricity and 10.45 percent for transport.

The 85 percent figure for electricity may appear ambitious, but given that Georgia is already hydropower-centered, it is more accurate to read this as 'maintaining a renewables-focused electricity mix while reducing volatility and supply uncertainty.'

Institutional changes in the electricity market are also under way. The power exchange market launched in July 2024. From 2023 to 2024, auctions were held to add renewable energy capacity. Such institutions are not mere administrative changes. They are mechanisms that raise 'predictability of revenue recovery' from the perspective of external investors.

(5) The Hydropower Development Dilemma

Hydropower is Georgia's most abundant renewable resource but also its most contentious.

The World Bank's Strategic Environmental and Social Assessment document examines generation expansion scenarios to meet electricity demand through 2040. It compares multiple scenarios combining renewable projects such as hydropower, solar, and wind. The final project selection varies based on environmental and social assessment, investment attraction prospects, demand shifts, and various other factors.

'Hydropower is the answer' is not a simple conclusion. Even when hydropower is large, environmental impacts, community concerns, and investment risks must be calculated together.

In reality, hydropower projects tend to connect with local opposition. Valley ecosystem changes, resident relocation, water quality and sedimentation issues, tourism landscape damage, and distribution questions like 'whether electricity stays in the region' all become entangled.

Recurring hydroelectric conflicts in Georgia are less a technical problem than a matter of social contract. Without agreement on who benefits and who bears the cost, development stalls. Large-scale dam construction faces the challenge of ecosystem destruction and local resistance. Environmental impact assessment (EIA) strengthening and compliance with sustainable development standards (ESG) have emerged as critical issues.

(6) Wind and Solar Power: The Key to Seasonal Complementarity

In Georgia's renewable energy transition, wind and solar power are assessed as still 'immature.' Yet that very fact leaves substantial room for growth.

The International Energy Agency (IEA) estimates Georgia's wind potential at approximately 4 terawatt-hours (TWh), or roughly 1,500 megawatts (MW). Other reports mention undeveloped wind capacity of 4 gigawatts (GW) and solar potential of 4.5 GW. These figures carry a strong character of 'technical potential,' so actual developable capacity shrinks based on grid infrastructure, land availability, investment, and social acceptance.

The crux is 'seasonal complementarity.' Georgia's challenge lies when winter hydroelectric capacity weakens. Wind power can exhibit generation patterns in winter and at night that differ from hydroelectric patterns depending on location, helping stabilize the grid. Solar power has advantages during summer peaks and in distributed urban generation.

Wind and solar are not 'replacements for hydroelectricity' but 'partners that compensate for hydroelectricity's weaknesses.' Energy independence becomes possible only when we build a system where wind and sun provide help when winter water is scarce.

The Qartli Wind Farm in the Gori region is already operational, with a capacity of 20.7 megawatts. New construction projects for wind and solar facilities involving Chinese companies and others are underway.

(7) Green Energy Corridor: Ambitions Toward Europe

The centerpiece of Georgia's renewable energy strategy is the 'Green Energy Corridor' project.

It is a massive infrastructure undertaking to transmit clean electricity produced in Azerbaijan and Georgia directly to Europe, Romania, Hungary, and others, via undersea cables across the Black Sea. Should this project succeed, Georgia would transcend being a mere energy transit country and emerge as a key supplier ensuring Europe's energy security.

Europe's strategic necessity lies behind this. After the Russia-Ukraine war, Europe seeks to reduce its dependence on Russian energy. Georgia aims to solidify its position as a strategic partner in this opening. Renewable energy exports can bring not only substantial economic gain but also geopolitical value.

(8) The Real Challenge: System, Not Power Plants

Georgia's renewable energy potential is certainly substantial. Yet the next step is not building more power plants.

First, grid investment. We must expand grid absorption capacity. No matter how many power plants we build, it is useless without sufficient transmission lines to carry the electricity.

Second, market mechanisms. Investment flows only when price signals function properly. The launch of the electricity exchange in 2024 represents a first step in this direction.

Third, storage and flexible resources. We need mechanisms such as pumped hydroelectricity, batteries, and demand management. Renewable energy's output fluctuates with weather.

Fourth, management of environmental and social conflict. We need prior consultation and benefit-sharing mechanisms. Projects become sustainable only when local residents are beneficiaries of development, not victims.

This is ultimately what current sources say in common as well. The hydroelectric-centered structure and winter vulnerability, institutional reform (markets and auctions), and the importance of environmental and social assessment all appear together.

Georgia's renewable energy future hinges not on 'whether resources exist' but on 'whether we have the capacity to manage conflict while upgrading systems.' Water is abundant. The problem is agreement and technology about how to use that water.

Drawing on abundant water resources and strategic location, Georgia seeks to emerge as the 'Battery of the Caucasus' and a green energy hub for Europe. This is a powerful future growth engine supporting Georgia's economy alongside tourism and wine. Yet that path depends as much on, if not more than, power plant construction on social agreement and institutional design.

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Chapter 16: Challenges and Fractures

A Journey Through Georgia's History and Culture

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Georgia is a land that holds wine, snowy mountains, and the glory of five thousand years of civilization. Tourists relieve their fatigue in Tbilisi's sulfur hot springs, grow intoxicated with Qvevri wine from Kakheti, and marvel at the majestic Caucasus landscape. Yet behind this beautiful scenery lies a deep fracture in Georgian society. Young people leave their hometowns searching for work, fierce conflicts erupt between religion and human rights, and the ghosts of the past still wander through the present. In this chapter, we examine the inner workings of Georgian society. Together, we will look at the people behind the statistics, their voices and struggles.

A. Youth Unemployment and the Crisis of Population Outflow

(1) The Paradox of Growth Without Job Creation

Georgia's economic growth rate is not poor. In 2023 and 2024, gross domestic product grew steadily. Tourists flock to the country, foreign investment increases, and new buildings rise throughout cities. Yet something odd is happening. The economy is growing, but the lives of young people are not improving. Economists call this jobless growth.

As of 2024, Georgia's overall unemployment rate stands at 13.9 percent. Looking at this figure alone, it appears to have improved from the previous year. The real problem lies elsewhere. Among those aged 15 to 29, the proportion who are neither receiving education, nor receiving vocational training, nor working reaches 24.1 percent. These people are called NEET, Not in Education, Employment, or Training. Compared to the European Union average of 11 percent, this is more than double.

The reality that numbers reveal is harsh. One in four Georgian youth lacks even the opportunity to prepare for the future. Even after graduating from university, they work in low-wage service jobs unrelated to their major or fail to find work at all, depending on their parents. When this situation continues for a year, two years, people lose hope. Those who lose hope depart.

(2) The Disconnect Between Technology and Education

Why does the economy grow while jobs do not increase? There are many causes, but the most deep-rooted problem is skills mismatch, a disconnect between the abilities businesses want and the abilities job seekers possess.

IT companies in Tbilisi cannot find programmers and grow frustrated. Hotels in Batumi find it difficult to locate service staff skilled in foreign languages. Yet universities still rely on textbooks from dec

ades past to teach theory. There is no dialogue between industry and educational institutions. Businesses complain that there are no usable workers, and graduates lament that there are no jobs. Both statements are correct, and both miss the substance of the problem.

Starting in 2024, the Georgian government established a vocational education strategy to apply through 2030. The plan is to train technical workers and bridge the industrial field with the educational field. Yet the response from practitioners is cold. Private companies are reluctant to participate in vocational training programs. Training facilities are outdated, and educational curricula fail to keep pace with market changes. The policy sits on paper while young people remain on the streets.

(3) People Who Leave, Villages That Empty

People go where there is work. First, they leave villages for cities. More than one-third of Georgia's population has concentrated in the capital, Tbilisi. Provincial cities are declining, and villages in mountain regions stand empty. When you travel through highland areas like Svaneti and Tusheti, you easily find abandoned houses within beautiful landscapes. The young people who grew up in those houses have left for cities or beyond the borders.

Those who cannot find opportunity even in the cities leave farther away. According to data from the Georgian Statistics Office (Geostat), the number of people leaving the country in 2023 was 245,064, nearly double the previous year. Net outflow, that is

the number of people who left minus those who returned, is 71,584. Of this, the working-age population from 15 to 64 years old accounts for 62.2 percent.

There is a more alarming statistic. Net outflow among those aged 0 to 19 reaches 63,567 people. This does not mean young people are leaving individually, but rather entire families with young children are departing Georgia. An entire future generation is leaving wholesale.

(4) An Exit Toward Europe

Why do people leave? The most direct reason is money. Georgia's average monthly salary is between 800 and 900 euros. In Korean won, approximately 1.2 million. In Germany or England, you can earn three or four times as much. For the same work, compensation differs.

Davit, a twenty-six-year-old who graduated from the Department of Economics at Tbilisi State University, left for Germany in 2024. His words were these:

"In Georgia, if you pay rent from your salary, there is nothing left. I need to save money while living in my parents' house, but there is no money to save. If I work in Germany for just three years, I can buy a small apartment in Tbilisi. I did not want to leave my homeland, but there was no choice."

For young people like Davit, the European Union is not merely a political ideal. It is an exit for survival. If Georgia joins the EU, people can work anywhere in Europe without a visa. Degrees are recognized. The door to opportunity opens. That is why EU membership is not just a political debate but a desperate need of young people.

(5) The Two Faces of Remittance Economy

Money sent home by Georgians who have left for abroad, that is, international remittances, is a crucial pillar of Georgia's economy. More than one million Georgians work abroad and send money to their families. With this money, elderly parents live, younger siblings pay tuition, and families repair homes.

Yet the remittance economy has a dark side as well. When parents leave abroad to earn money, children grow up in the care of grandparents. Family structures dissolve. Families dependent on remittances sometimes lose the will to achieve economic independence themselves. The thought that "money comes from abroad" dampens the desire to start businesses or seek employment.

At the national level, deeper problems emerge. When highly educated and skilled workers leave, the innovation capacity of domestic industry suffers. When fewer people pay taxes, government finances weaken. When the working-age population shrinks, pensions and welfare systems face mounting pressure. A society where young people depart and the elderly remain loses its vitality.

(6) Young People Pushed Out by Political Instability

It is not only economic. Since 2024, as Georgia's political situation deteriorated sharply, youth emigration has accelerated further. When the ruling party Georgian Dream passed the Foreign Agents Law and announced the suspension of EU accession negotiations, the young generation that had dreamed of a European future was stunned.

"Our government has closed the door to Europe. So we have no choice but to open that door ourselves. We will get visas, we will get scholarships, and we will go to Europe one way or another."

These are the words of Mariam, a twenty-two-year-old university student. She is learning German. When she graduates, she plans to apply to German graduate schools. She has no intention of returning.

As such young people multiply, Georgia loses its future. Demographers warn that if current trends persist, Georgia's population could fall below three million by 2050. A small nation is becoming smaller.

(7) Comparison with Korea: Familiar Problems, Different Context

Korean readers will find this story familiar. Youth unemployment, concentration in the capital region, rural depopulation, low birth rates, the problems are strikingly similar to those Korea faces. The context, however, is different.

Korea's young people cluster around positions at major corporations and civil service exams. Georgia's young people cross borders. Korea's provinces lose population to Seoul. Georgia's provinces lose population to Tbilisi, and Tbilisi loses population to Europe. Korea is divided but ranks among the world's top ten economies. Georgia is a small nation struggling for survival with a fifth of its territory under Russian occupation.

Yet the fundamental question is the same. Can a nation have a future when its young people hold no hope? Korea must watch closely how Georgia answers this question.

B. The Clash Between LGBTQ+ Rights and Religious Conservatism

(1) Where Two Flags Meet

Rustaveli Avenue in central Tbilisi is where Georgian history unfolds. Soviet tanks crushed civilians there in 1989, the Rose Revolution began there in 2003, and protests against the Foreign Agents Law erupted there in 2024. On this street, two flags sometimes face each other.

On one side, rainbow flags flutter. Young activists demanding LGBTQ+ rights chant, "Love is love," "Stop discrimination." From the other side, people holding crosses and religious icons shout back, "Protect tradition," "Protect the family." Police erect barricades between the two groups. Tension runs high.

This scene reveals the sharpest fracture in modern Georgian society. The LGBTQ+ rights issue is not simply a human rights agenda. It is a fundamental conflict over where Georgia should go, what it must preserve, and what it must change.

(2) The Law Changed: 2024 'Family Values' Legislation

In September 2024, the Georgian parliament passed the 'Law on Family Values and Protection of Minors' package. Eighty-four votes in favor, zero against. Opposition members did not participate in the vote.

The law contains the following provisions.

Same-sex couples are prohibited from adopting children. Legal gender change is forbidden. Dissemination of LGBTQ+ information in schools and media is banned. Pride events, which are marches celebrating sexual minority dignity, are effectively criminalized.

The ruling party Georgian Dream argued that the bill was meant to protect Georgia's traditions and family from 'pseudo-liberal ideology.' Party chairman Bidzina Ivanishvili stated, 'The West is forcing LGBTQ+ propaganda as a condition for EU membership.' Government officials stressed that 'Georgia's identity and the Orthodox Church must be protected.'

The Venice Commission, Europe's legal advisory body, warned that the law does not meet European and international human rights standards. The EU stated that this legislation would be a serious obstacle in accession negotiations. The Georgian government ignored these criticisms and pushed the bill through.

(3) The Shadow of the Orthodox Church

To understand the LGBTQ+ issue in Georgia, one must first grasp the standing of the Georgian Orthodox Church.

Georgia was the second country in the world to adopt Christianity as its official religion. Since Saint Nino brought Christianity to Georgia in the early fourth century, for 1,700 years the Orthodox Church has been inseparable from Georgian identity. Through Mongol invasions, Persian rule, and Soviet religious persecution, the Orthodox Church remained the unifying force holding the Georgian nation together.

Today, more than 80 percent of Georgians are Orthodox Christians. Polls show that the Georgian Orthodox Church enjoys far greater trust than the president, parliament, or military. Patriarch Ilia II is called 'the father of Georgia' and commands absolute reverence.

The problem is that the Orthodox Church wields significant influence over social and political issues. The Church defines homosexuality as sinful. It treats the expansion of sexual minority rights as 'cultural invasion from the West.' The Church's position carries enormous weight with politicians. To win elections, candidates must gain Church support or at least avoid Church opposition.

(4) Memory of Violence: Tbilisi Pride

On July 5, 2021, Tbilisi was scheduled to hold a Pride event. Sexual minority rights organizations had prepared a peaceful march.

That morning, thousands of people dressed in black poured into the streets. Some wore clergy robes; others carried flags of far-right nationalist groups. Chanting 'Protect our children' and 'Stop LGBT,' they marched toward the Pride venue.

Violence erupted. People carrying rainbow flags were beaten. About fifty journalists covering the event came under attack. One cameraman was severely beaten and died days later. Police failed to provide adequate protection. The Pride event was canceled.

Similar incidents repeated in 2023. Each time an event was planned, threats of violence followed, and organizers had to scale back or cancel events because they could not guarantee participant safety.

Human Rights Watch criticized the Georgian government for failing to protect sexual minorities. Investigations and prosecutions of violent perpetrators were insufficient. High-ranking officials faced no consequences for making homophobic remarks.

(5) Young People Between Two Worlds

Georgian society views this issue differently across generations.

In older generations and rural areas, rejection of homosexuality is strong. Some polls show that 84 percent of the population opposes same-sex relationships. For them, sexual minority rights are a foreign concept, viewed as 'corruption imported from the West.'

Some young people in cities, however, think differently. Connected to the world through the internet, they value diversity and human rights. Around the university district in Tbilisi are cafes and clubs friendly to sexual minorities. The techno club Bassiani is emblematic of this. There, young people

enjoy music and dance regardless of gender or sexual orientation.

Yet these spaces are confined to parts of Tbilisi. Outside the capital, the atmosphere is entirely different. If a person is outed as gay in a rural village, they risk being abandoned by family and expelled from the community. Many sexual minorities hide their identity. Some marry people of the opposite sex under pressure.

(6) Human Rights Weaponized

The unfortunate reality is that sexual minority issues have become political tools.

The ruling party Georgian Dream actively deploys anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric to mobilize conservative voters. It secures election votes through the message 'We protect Georgia's traditions' and 'We will not yield to Western pressure.' By linking EU membership conditions to sexual minority rights, it brands pro-Western civil society as 'foreign agents' and 'destroyers of tradition.'

The opposition is not free from this problem either. Some opposition politicians are passive in defending sexual minority rights, fearing electoral losses. The calculation 'We might lose votes' takes precedence over principle.

Ultimately, the ones who suffer are sexual minority citizens actually experiencing discrimination and violence. Their lives have become raw material for political games.

(7) At Europe's Threshold

The issue of LGBTQ+ rights also affects Georgia's integration into Europe.

The EU requires human rights, democracy, and rule of law as conditions for membership. Prohibition of discrimination against sexual minorities is part of this. The 2024 anti-LGBTQ+ legislation directly conflicts with EU values. The European Commission warned that the bill would be a serious obstacle in accession talks.

The Georgian government counters by calling it a 'domestic matter.' But the EU does not excuse human rights issues on grounds of domestic sovereignty. When Poland and Hungary pursued similar legislation, the EU criticized them sharply and imposed sanctions.

Georgia stands at a crossroads. To become part of Europe, it must accept European values. If it justifies discrimination in the name of protecting tradition, Europe's door will close. The problem is that this choice requires not just government decision but society-wide consensus.

(8) Comparison with South Korea

In South Korea, too, sexual minority rights is a heated point of contention. Each year, Queer Parades are held in Seoul and other cities, alongside opposing rallies. Debate over enacting comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation has continued for years. Conservative Christian groups strongly oppose it, while human rights groups call for its passage.

The similarity with Georgia is that religion and tradition play large roles in the debate. The difference is that violence is relatively rare in South Korea, and legal sanctions have not yet been enforced. South Korean sexual minorities experience discrimination, but the parliament has not passed explicit repressive legislation as Georgia has.

In both countries, this issue reflects generational conflict, conflict between religion and secularism, and conflict over the pace of social change. What kind of society do we want to become? The answer to this question is still unfolding.

C. Complex Views on Stalin, the Dictator from Gori

(1) Gori, the Hometown of a Dictator

An hour's drive west of Tbilisi lies the city of Gori, a town of about fifty thousand people. It is a place with a painful history, having been occupied by Russian forces during the 2008 Russian-Georgian War.

What made Gori world-famous is a figure known as either a giant or a monster in twentieth-century history: Ioseb Besarionis dze Jughashvili, more commonly known to the world as Stalin.

In downtown Gori stands the Stalin Museum, built in 1957. On display are Stalin's birthplace, personal belongings, photographs, and the private rail car he last used. Tens of thousands of tourists visit each year. Gift shops sell t-shirts, mugs, and wine labels bearing Stalin's face.

Foreign tourists are bewildered. The face of a dictator who killed tens of millions is sold as merchandise, and his birthplace is preserved like a shrine. The question naturally arises: 'How is this possible?'

(2) Hero or Mass Murderer?

For Georgians, Stalin is an object of conflicted emotion.

On one side, Stalin is a source of pride. Born the son of a poor shoemaker, he became the leader of a global superpower. In World War II, he brought down Nazi Germany. The fact that a man from the small nation of Georgia came to rule the world stirs national pride in some Georgians.

A 2023 joint survey by the Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC) and the Zinc Network found that 37 percent of respondents agreed with the statement "Every Georgian patriot should be proud of Stalin." More than one in three Georgians regard Stalin with pride.

Listening to the voices of elderly residents in the Gori region reveals where this perception comes from.

"Stalin was a son of Georgia. He did bad things, but he also did great things. He won the war, didn't he? He made the Soviet Union a superpower."

Grandfather Vachuki, eighty-two years old, sat on a bench in front of the museum and spoke these words. For him, the Stalin era is remembered as a time when the Soviet Union was strong, when there were jobs, and when there was order.

(3) Memories in Blood

On the other side, Stalin is a nightmare.

During Stalin's rule, millions were killed or sent to the gulags, forced labor camps. Between 1936 and 1938, during the Great Purge, terror reached its height. Georgia was no exception. Georgian intellectuals, artists, and nationalists were branded as "enemies of the people" and either executed or dragged off to Siberia.

Stalin did not hesitate to suppress fellow Georgians. Some analysts argue that he treated them even more harshly in order to avoid suspicion. In the 1920s, when the Georgian Democratic Republic was forcibly incorporated into the Soviet Union, Stalin played an active role. The person who crushed Georgia's independence was none other than a Georgian himself.

For the younger generation and intellectuals, Stalin is a symbol of this history. Nino, a historian of thirty-one, speaks in this way.

"Proud of Stalin? Don't they know what he did to our ancestors? Our great-grandfather never came back from Siberia. I feel sick when I see the Stalin Museum."

(4) The War Over the Statues

The war over memory manifests physically around statues.

During the Soviet era, Stalin statues were erected throughout Georgia. After the Soviet Union's collapse, most were torn down. Yet a massive Stalin statue remained in the central square of Gori. In 2010, the Saakashvili government removed this statue. It was a symbolic act of desovietization. The removal took place secretly in the dead of night, and Gori residents discovered an empty pedestal the next morning.

Reactions among local residents were mixed. Some welcomed it, others were angry. There was also resistance, with people saying "outsiders are meddling carelessly with our history."

After the change of government in 2012, Stalin statues began to be erected again in some rural villages. Pro-Russian sentiment was lifting its head. In January 2024, the Polish ambassador called for the closure of the Stalin Museum in Gori, sparking controversy. Pushback that "a foreign country is interfering in our history" collided with criticism that "glorifying a dictator is shameful."

(5) Stalin and the Digital Generation

The war over memory is not confined to museums. It exists on social media as well.

According to analysis by the Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab), content mythologizing Stalin is spreading on TikTok in Georgia. Videos portraying Stalin as a pious, cultured, and powerful leader are shared among young users.

Why are twenty-first-century young people drawn to a twentieth-century dictator? Analysts point to several factors.

First is present-day anxiety. When the economy is unstable and politics chaotic, people feel nostalgia for a "strong leader." The fantasy that "there was order in Stalin's time" takes hold.

Second is the absence of historical education. Schools in Georgia do not adequately teach the crimes of the Stalin era. Many young people know little about the Great Purge or the gulags.

Third is Russian influence. The Russian government encourages positive narratives about Stalin. It emphasizes victory in World War II and highlights Stalin as "the commanding general of victory." These narratives penetrate Georgia as well.

(6) The Museum's Dilemma

The Stalin Museum in Gori reflects Georgia's historical dilemma in condensed form.

The museum lists Stalin's accomplishments in the same manner as the Soviet era. His achievements are emphasized, while his crimes are minimized or omitted. The display honoring victims is minimal. Critics call this a distortion of history.

Shortly after the 2008 Russia-Georgia war, the then Minister of Culture announced plans to transform this museum into a "Museum of Russian Invasion." The goal was to create a space that would expose Stalin's crimes and warn of the Russian threat. A banner alerting visitors to Stalin's crimes was installed at the entrance.

However, the plan stalled. Local opposition, concern about tourism revenue, and changes in government all converged. By 2017, even the banner was removed. The museum remains in an ambiguous state.

(7) Between Past and Future

The Stalin question is not simply about how to remember history. It is about what kind of nation Georgia wants to become.

Remembering Stalin as a hero connects to a shared past with Russia, the legacy of the Soviet Union, and longing for a strong state. Remembering Stalin as a criminal connects to a break with Russia, the value of independence, and the importance of democracy and human rights.

Georgian society today is divided between these two directions. The ruling party does not explicitly defend Stalin, but neither does it move to close the museum or pursue a comprehensive reform of history education. Stalin is preserved in a glass case, and his ghost haunts Georgian society.

(8) Comparison with Korea

Korea too wrestles with the ghosts of history. Settling accounts with pro-Japanese collaborators, memories of dictatorship, the legacy of division. Korean society also contends over how to remember and judge the past.

However, even if assessments of figures like Park Chung-hee and Syngman Rhee are divided in Korea, official museums do not glorify their crimes. Democratic movements and human rights violations are addressed in history textbooks. There is certainly debate about whether this is sufficient, but at least in public discourse, the criminality of dictatorship is acknowledged.

In Georgia's case, even official judgment on Stalin remains ambiguous. This shows that Georgian society is in a more difficult position regarding the reckoning with the past than Korea.

C. Education Reform Controversies and University Resistance

(1) High Literacy, Low Employment

Georgians place great value on education. The literacy rate exceeds 99 percent. Parents are dedicated to their children's education. The college enrollment rate is high. Yet this educational fervor does not lead to good outcomes.

Graduates cannot find jobs. When jobs exist, they bear no relation to their field of study. An economics major works in a cafe, and an engineering student drives a taxi. Cynicism spreads: "What good is a college diploma?"

The root of the problem lies in the quality and direction of education. Georgia's education system has not yet escaped the legacy of the Soviet era. Classes focus on memorization, training in critical thinking is lacking, and the curriculum is disconnected from industry. The world has changed, but education remains the same.

(2) Politicized Education

More serious is the problem that education has become politicized.

According to reports, Georgia's education system is subordinated to the ruling party's interests rather than society's. The government intervenes in the appointment of school principals, university rectors, and kindergarten directors. Educational institutions lose their autonomy. There are also observations that during election seasons, teachers are used as tools to mobilize votes for the ruling party.

In December 2025, the Georgian parliament passed amendments to the higher education law through expedited procedure. On the surface, it contains the appealing content of 'full state support for public university tuition.' However, what universities opposed was the price attached to it.

According to the new bill, the government sets annual enrollment caps and departmental quotas for public universities. It demands autonomy in exchange for financial support. With control over

enrollment numbers, the government can decide which departments to expand and which to shrink. It can exert influence over personnel decisions. It can push out critical faculty and install compliant figures.

(3) The Anger of University Students

From late 2025 to early 2026, massive protests erupted centered at Tbilisi State University (TSU) and Georgia Institute of Technology (GTU). Students and faculty abandoned their classrooms and poured into the streets.

"Do not sell 104 years of history!"

This slogan references the history of Tbilisi State University, founded in 1918. Students condemned the government's reforms as destroying university autonomy and attempting to purge critical intellectuals.

The protests extended to the front of parliament on Rustaveli Avenue. They merged with the ongoing encampment against the Foreign Agents Law, the so-called 'Gavot Revolution.' University issues and democratic issues became intertwined.

Giorgi, a twenty-one-year-old law student, said this:

"The government is trying to tame us. They punish those who criticize and reward those who obey with scholarships. That's how they kill the university. If the university becomes the servant of power, this country has no future."

(4) The Bologna Process and European Standards

Georgia's higher education participates in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), also known as the Bologna Process. The Bologna Process is an agreement that ensures mutual recognition of university degrees among European countries and facilitates the movement of students and faculty. It provides the foundation for Georgian students to study in Europe and for European students to study in Georgia.

However, if the new education reform is read as strengthening state control, this signals a collision with the European path. The Bologna Process places university autonomy at its core. Direct state control of universities contradicts this principle.

In January 2026, the German Association for Eastern European Studies (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Osteuropakunde) expressed concern in an open letter, warning that Georgia's higher education reforms aim to place universities under state control and isolate them from the European higher education system. European partners are worried about the future of Georgia's education.

(5) Generation Z, the Resistance Generation

The protests against the Foreign Agents Law in 2024 were led by young people aged 18 to 34. So-called Generation Z. University students were at the core.

They grew up with the internet. They watch European films, read news in English, and study abroad at European universities through the Erasmus+ program. They are connected to the world. Unlike their parents' generation, they do not remember the Soviet Union. They harbor no nostalgia for Russia.

For them, European integration is not an abstract ideology. It is a concrete opportunity. The possibility to study, work, and live in Europe. When the government suspends EU negotiations and pursues pro-Russia policies, their future is blocked. That is why they take to the streets.

The university is the gathering place of this generation. On campus, they debate, organize, and act. When the government tries to control universities, it is read as an attempt to neutralize Generation Z's base of resistance.

(6) A Linguist's Testimony

At a Constitutional Court hearing regarding the Foreign Agents Law in 2024, linguist Marina Beridze took the witness stand. She said this:

"This law evokes the repressive practices of the Soviet era. Back then, if you were labeled 'enemy of the people,' it was over. Now the label 'foreign agent' plays the same role. Criticize and you are stigmatized; your activities become impossible."

Marina Beridze's testimony represents the voice of Georgia's intellectual community. Scholars feel that academic freedom is under threat. They worry that international scholarly exchange will become difficult. Restrictions may emerge for attending foreign conferences, conducting collaborative research, and publishing papers.

(7) Efforts at Internationalization

It is not all grim news. Georgian universities are seeking to find a way forward through internationalization.

Georgia's medical schools attract international students from India, Pakistan, and the Middle East, highlighting affordable tuition and English-language instruction. Tbilisi State Medical University (TSMU) has thousands of foreign students. Korean students are among them. It is part of the medical school study abroad boom.

Exchange with European universities through the Erasmus+ program is also active. Georgian students spend a semester in Germany, France, and Poland. European students come to Tbilisi to study the Georgian language.

Young faculty dream of change. They abandon Soviet-style lectures and experiment with classes that emphasize discussion and critical thinking. They use online materials and teach with

English-language texts. Small changes are accumulating.

(8) Comparison with South Korea

South Korean universities also face multiple challenges. Issues with tuition, declining employment rates, and university restructuring due to declining student populations. There is also conflict between government and universities.

However, South Korean universities enjoy relatively guaranteed institutional autonomy. If the government tries to directly control university enrollment, strong resistance emerges. Government intervention in the selection of university presidents is illegal. Academic freedom is recognized as a constitutional value.

In Georgia, university autonomy is institutionally weak and exposed to political interference. This is tied directly to the maturity of democracy. If universities cannot play the role of critic of power, the self-correcting capacity of society as a whole weakens.

Georgia's young people understand this fact. That is why they fight to protect universities. Their struggle is not simply a dispute over education policy. It is a fight staking Georgia's future and the future of democracy.

Conclusion

The cracks in Georgian society run deep. Young people leave, values clash, ghosts of the past linger, and the foundations of learning are shaken. Beneath all these problems lies one question. What kind of nation does Georgia wish to become?

Will it become part of Europe or remain in Russia's orbit? Will it preserve tradition or accept change? Will it beautify the past or face it squarely? Will it comply with power or defend freedom?

Georgians confront this question every day. In the streets, on campuses, in churches, in homes. The answer has not yet been determined. History is still unfolding.

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Chapter 17: Points of Contact with Korea

A Journey Through Georgia's History and Culture

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A. Opportunities of the Korea-Georgia Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA)

(1) Historical Context of the Agreement's Conclusion

On November 27, 2024, trade officials from two nations shook hands in a meeting room in Seoul. It was the moment when the Republic of Korea and Georgia officially announced the conclusion of negotiations on the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA). This agreement is Korea's twenty-sixth free trade agreement and the first commercial treaty concluded with a nation in the Caucasus region.

Exactly one year elapsed from the start of negotiations to their conclusion. After the two countries agreed to begin negotiations in November 2023, working-level officials from both sides held intensive discussions on a broad range of issues, including tariffs, rules of origin, service market opening, digital trade, and supply chain cooperation. Considering that commercial agreements often take anywhere from several years to a decade, this was an exceptionally fast pace.

Why the rush? The answer lies on a map. Georgia sits at the eastern end of the Black Sea, in a narrow corridor where Europe and Asia meet. After the Russia-Ukraine war, an alternative route became urgent, one that could transport cargo from China to Europe without passing through Russian territory. That alternative is the "Middle Corridor," which crosses the Caspian Sea and leads to Georgia's Black Sea ports. The Korean government and businesses sought first-mover advantage in this new logistics landscape, while Georgia wanted to secure institutional ties with Asia's economic powerhouse.

The inclusion of "economic partnership" in the official name also deserves attention. While traditional free trade agreements (FTAs) focus on tariff elimination, an EPA aims toward a comprehensive partnership relationship that encompasses investment, services, technological cooperation, and people-to-people exchange. The name reflects a commitment to building a structure for mutual growth, not merely buying and selling goods.

(2) The Structure of Tariff Elimination and Its Ripple Effects

The core of the agreement is the removal of tariff barriers. According to announcements made at the conclusion, Korea agreed to eliminate tariffs on 93.3 percent of all product categories within ten years, while Georgia agreed to do so on 91.6 percent. While the numbers suggest both sides are opening their markets at comparable levels, the actual impact varies significantly by product category.

Automobiles, Korea's flagship export product, are a prime example. Georgia agreed to eliminate tariffs on Korean new cars, used cars, and eco-friendly vehicles immediately upon the agreement's entry into force. Georgia's automobile tariff system is distinctive. It imposes taxes based on engine displacement and year of manufacture, with older vehicles subject to higher rates. Given that used cars account for over 65 percent of Korean automobile exports to Georgia, the effect of this tariff elimination is substantial.

Walking the streets of Tbilisi, one readily spots vehicles bearing the Hyundai and Kia logos. In a market where trust in Korean automobiles is already established, what happens when those vehicles gain price competitiveness? The possibility emerges of gaining an edge over Japanese and German brands. When one car is sold, a service ecosystem follows: maintenance, spare parts, insurance, and installment financing. Tariff elimination is not merely a price reduction; it opens the door to an entire industrial chain.

K-food and K-beauty products are also among the beneficiary categories. Tariffs on instant noodles, seasoned seaweed, various sauces, and cosmetics disappear immediately. Supermarkets in central Tbilisi already have dedicated "Korean Beauty" sections, and awareness of Korean skincare products is high among young Georgian women. When tariff barriers lower, importers have reason to try, and when they do, more products survive.

The reverse direction also requires examination. Korea immediately eliminates tariffs on Georgian wine, the traditional spirit chacha, and natural carbonated water. A path opens for Georgian wine, with its eight-thousand-year history, to appear more frequently on Korean consumers' tables. If people can enjoy the amber wine made in qvevri clay vessels at reasonable prices, that alone would make the significance of bilateral relations tangible.

(3) Service Market Opening and Logistics Hub Development

Possibilities greater than merchandise trade lie in the services sector. Through this agreement, Georgia has broadly opened transportation, logistics, shipping, and warehousing. The institutional foundation has been laid for Korean companies to use Georgia as a Eurasian logistics hub.

Georgia's Black Sea ports of Poti and Batumi are the western terminus of the Middle Corridor. Cargo departing from China passes through Kazakhstan, crosses the Caspian Sea, and arrives in Georgia via Azerbaijan. From there, cargo is loaded onto ships and crosses the Black Sea to reach ports in Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey. This route, connecting Asia and Europe without passing through Russia, grows more valuable as geopolitical tensions rise.

If Korean companies establish warehouses or assembly facilities in Georgia, they can simultaneously target Central Asian and Eastern European markets. Within the bounds allowed by rules of origin, minor processing or packaging followed by re-export to neighboring countries becomes possible. In B2B transactions supplying machinery, components, electrical and electronic products, and construction equipment on a project basis, Georgia can serve as an advanced base.

The opening of markets for music recordings, audiovisual materials, publishing, and educational services also deserves attention. K-pop music and Korean drama content can spread throughout the Caucasus through Georgia. Georgia's young generation is already familiar with Korean content through Netflix and YouTube. When institutional barriers lower, official distribution channels expand, and the resulting added value returns to Korea.

(4) Digital Trade and Supply Chain Cooperation

Provisions beyond traditional tariff agreements are also included. In the digital trade chapter, both countries agreed to make duty-free treatment of electronic transmissions permanent. This means digital content such as software, games, music, and e-books can be traded across borders without tariff burden.

A provision against requiring the localization of computing facilities is also included. Some countries require companies providing services domestically to keep servers locally. Thanks to this clause, Korean IT companies and game firms can operate services without placing servers in Georgia. Regulatory barriers lower when digital nomads work with Korean clients from Georgia or when Korean startups enter the Georgian market.

In the supply chain cooperation clause, both parties committed to establishing a mutual support system in times of crisis. It is a promise to keep channels open for information exchange and exploring alternatives when global supply chains are shaken by pandemics or geopolitical shocks. Joint research and investment in energy and resource sectors are also specified in the agreement. A meeting point can emerge where Georgia's hydropower potential meets Korea's renewable energy technology.

(5) Remaining Tasks Ahead

When news of an agreement's conclusion is announced, people often assume it is finished. Reality, however, is different. Conclusion is only a beginning; several stages remain, including signing, parliamentary ratification, and entry into force. As of the end of 2025, the Korean government has publicly released a draft agreement and is conducting public consultation. After legal review and translation are completed, formal signing will take place, and the agreement will take effect only after ratification by both countries' parliaments.

A zero tariff does not mean all barriers disappear. Non-tariff barriers such as rules of origin, quarantine and certification requirements, and labeling regulations determine the success or failure of actual trade. The operational battlefield consists of details: how much added value must be created in Korea for a product to be recognized as "Made in Korea," what ingredient labeling and safety certifications food and cosmetics must have to enter the Georgian market.

Paradoxically, the period before entry into force is the best window of opportunity. This time should be used to secure distribution networks and local partners, test logistics routes, and learn the regulatory environment. Entering after implementation means competing against rivals who have already secured positions.

(6) Three Maps Opening to Korean Companies

The points where this agreement becomes meaningful in reality can be organized into three maps.

The first is the "Caucasus-Central Asia Sourcing Map." It is a B2B network based in Georgia extending to Armenia, Azerbaijan, and further to Central Asia beyond the Caspian Sea. When construction, energy, and infrastructure projects are underway, Korean companies can manage delivery schedules and inventory locally through subsidiaries or warehouses in Georgia.

The second is the "Black Sea Coastal Consumer Goods Map." Georgia has a structure where tourists and foreign residents drive consumption. It is a market where K-food and K-beauty can graduate from trends to regular distribution channels. Given that Georgian food culture shares similarities with Korean side-dish culture in its enjoyment of fermented foods, resistance to Korean cuisine is also low.

The third is the "Regulation and Digital Cooperation Map." It covers areas for building soft infrastructure such as electronic customs clearance, digitalization of rules of origin certification, joint exhibitions for small and medium enterprises, and human resources and education cooperation. When Georgia's administrative efficiency created to attract foreign investment meets Korea's technological capabilities, it can become an experimental ground benefiting both countries.

Some may ask what significance an agreement with a small nation of 3.7 million people holds. Georgia's domestic consumer market is not large. However, the story changes when one considers Georgia's geographic position, its FTA network with 46 countries, and its institutional connectivity with the European Union and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). The Korea-Georgia EPA is not market entry into Georgia; it is a connection to Eurasian corridors.

B. The Reality of Georgia's Medical School Study Abroad Boom

(1) Why Georgia, of All Places?

In recent years, medical school study abroad in Georgia has emerged as a new option among some Korean students and parents. While Eastern European countries such as Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Poland were already well-known paths, Georgia was a relatively unfamiliar name. But why Georgia, suddenly?

The first and most prominent reason is cost. Annual tuition at Georgian medical schools ranges from approximately 4,000 to 8,000 dollars. In Korean currency, that is around 5 to 10 million won. Compared to American medical schools charging over 60,000 dollars annually or Hungarian schools costing 15,000 to 20,000 dollars, Georgian schools charge less than half. They are also cheaper than Korean private medical school tuition.

Living costs are also reasonable. Monthly living expenses in Tbilisi, including housing, are manageable at 1 to 1.5 million won. Studying medicine in Western Europe or North America often requires monthly living expenses exceeding 3 million won. Over the entire six-year medical education program, the total cost difference runs to hundreds of millions of won.

The second reason is the relative mitigation of language barriers. Georgia's major medical schools operate English-track programs for international students. It is possible to enroll and graduate without knowing Russian or Georgian. Of course, basic Georgian or Russian is needed to communicate with local patients during clinical practice, but the coursework itself is conducted in English.

The third is the admissions threshold. Entering medical school in Korea requires top-tier scores on the national college entrance exam. Even after retaking the exam twice or three times, success is not guaranteed in such competitive circumstances. By contrast, Georgian medical schools accept applications from those with a high school diploma, basic science coursework, and English proficiency. Some universities select students based on documents and interviews alone, without separate entrance exams. Demand to bypass Korea's intense admissions competition is directed toward Georgia.

The fourth is the spillover effect of the Russia-Ukraine war. Students who previously went to medical school in Russia or Ukraine found themselves needing a safer alternative after the war began. Georgia, being geographically close while maintaining stable security, absorbed a significant portion of this redirected demand.

(2) The Reality of Obtaining a Korean Medical License

Can one automatically become a doctor in Korea upon graduating from medical school in Georgia? The answer is no. Foreign medical school graduates must go through complex procedures to obtain a medical license in Korea.

The first hurdle is recognition of foreign universities by the Ministry of Health and Welfare. To take the Korean Medical Licensing Examination, one must, in principle, graduate from a foreign medical school recognized by the Minister of Health and Welfare. Which universities

Whether a medical school qualifies for recognition can be verified through public data maintained by the Korean Medical Licensing Examination Board. Not all medical schools in Georgia are automatically recognized; recognition status is determined on a school-by-school basis after review.

Graduating from a university that has not completed recognition review can block the entire pathway to obtaining a Korean medical license. Therefore, students considering medical study in Georgia should first verify whether their target university currently appears on the Ministry of Health and Welfare recognition list or whether it is eligible to apply for recognition review. Recognition status takes priority over school prestige.

The second hurdle is the preliminary examination. Foreign medical school graduates sometimes must take this preliminary examination before the national licensing exam. The preliminary exam assesses fundamental medical knowledge and has a notably low pass rate. Only after passing the preliminary examination do international graduates become eligible to take the same national board exam as Korean medical students.

The third hurdle is the national board exam itself. Since the exam is administered in Korean, the language transition becomes an additional challenge for students who spent six years studying medicine in English. They must become familiar with the terminology and context of Korean medical practice.

Even after obtaining a license through all these steps, graduates must compete again during internship and residency programs. To be evaluated equally with domestic medical school graduates in the hospital training matching process requires effort in both clinical competence and professional networks.

(3) Variables in the American and European Pathways

If you plan to practice medicine in the United States or Europe rather than Korea, additional variables come into play. To receive training in the United States, foreign medical school graduates must obtain ECFMG (Educational Commission for Foreign Medical Graduates) certification. As of 2024, ECFMG requires that graduates come from medical schools certified by institutions recognized by the World Federation for Medical Education (WFME).

You must verify whether Georgian medical schools meet WFME certification standards and whether individual universities are properly listed in the World Directory of Medical Schools. This system is not static and continually evolves. A university recognized today may fail to meet requirements tomorrow, and the reverse is equally possible.

The simple narrative that graduating from medical school in Georgia opens doors worldwide is dangerous. International pathways involve a complex web of directory listings, whether certifying bodies are recognized by WFME, and licensing eligibility requirements that vary by country. A single misalignment of conditions can block the entire pathway.

(4) Information Asymmetry in the Study Abroad Market

Intermediary agencies are actively operating in Georgia's medical school study abroad market. Study abroad consultancies and consulting firms offer packages ranging from admission counseling to local settlement support. The problem is information asymmetry.

Advertisements emphasize benefits. 'Study in English, pay low tuition, graduate as a doctor.' It is a concise and appealing message. But difficult topics such as Ministry of Health and Welfare recognition procedures, preliminary exam pass rates, quality of clinical training, and post-graduation career paths are either footnoted or omitted entirely. Human nature draws people toward easy messages and away from hard ones.

Variation between schools is significant. Georgia as a country cannot be evaluated as a single unit. Faculty expertise, affiliated hospital facilities, clinical training opportunities, examination and grading standards, and transparency of academic administration vary drastically from university to university. Some universities actively recruit international students while maintaining educational quality, while others may focus solely on tuition revenue. The unit of risk is not 'country' but 'school.'

We cannot overlook the difficulty that comes after graduation. Admission is only the beginning. Completing six years of study and graduating, navigating recognition procedures upon return, passing the preliminary and national exams, securing a residency match, and demonstrating competence in actual clinical practice, the back half is actually steeper.

(5) Realistic Assessment and Advice

Medical study in Georgia is not an inherently wrong choice for everyone. For some, it can be a viable pathway. But that depends not on Georgia's medical schools themselves but on whether your target country's licensing requirements align with your chosen university's certification status.

If obtaining a Korean medical license is your goal, verify at least these four points: First, whether the university appears on the Ministry of Health and Welfare recognition list or has an open pathway to recognition. Second, your eligibility for the preliminary exam and how you will prepare. Third, how you will develop clinical competence after graduation (language, practical training, letters of recommendation). Fourth, if considering international pathways, how you will monitor changes in ECFMG and WFME standards.

The real nature of the boom lies in increased demand from people who enter without fully grasping this complex system, seeing only the ease of admission. Behind the sweet entrance awaits a harsh exit. You must honestly ask yourself whether you are prepared to pass through it.

A Korean medical student I met at a cafe near Tbilisi State Medical University put it this way: 'Getting here is easy. The problem is getting out. To become a doctor in Korea, you have to study far more than what you learned here.' His words carried the weight of lived experience.

C. One-Month Stay and Settlement Guide

(1) The Significance of 365-Day Visa-Free Stay

South Korean passport holders may enter Georgia without a visa and stay for one year. The Georgian government explicitly lists the Republic of Korea on its visa-exemption list and has an official regulation allowing its nationals 365 days of visa-free stay.

This single regulation opens all possibilities for an extended stay. No separate visa application, no complicated paperwork, no fees required. You need only your passport to board a plane. After answering brief questions at immigration and receiving a stamp, you can live anywhere in Georgia for the next year.

What happens after one year? If you briefly leave for a neighboring country like Armenia or Turkey and then re-enter Georgia, your stay period renews. Theoretically, repeating this process allows indefinite stay. Of course, if such a pattern persists, immigration officers may ask more questions, so it is wise to prepare a clear explanation of your purpose.

For a one-month stay, you need only secure accommodation without visa concerns. For three to six months, tourist status is sufficient. Longer stays with economic activity or tax implications require

other considerations, but that comes later.

(2) The Technique of Choosing a City

Eighty percent of the success or failure of a one-month stay depends on choosing the right city.

Tbilisi is Georgia's capital and the center of everything. Government, education, healthcare, culture, and transportation are concentrated here. The foreign community is largest, with restaurants, cafes, and coworking spaces where English is spoken. If you are new to Georgia, Tbilisi is a safe choice that lowers failure risk. Winding streets of the Old Town coexist with a modern new district, and you can move across the entire city cheaply by metro and bus.

Batumi is a coastal resort city on the Black Sea. Its seaside location offers beautiful scenery and milder winters than Tbilisi. Recent years have brought rapid construction of high-rise apartments and hotels, creating a more modern atmosphere. A developed casino industry makes for an active nightlife. However, seasonality is pronounced. Summer peaks bring tourist crowds that drive up accommodation and living costs, while many businesses close during low season. It suits a leisure-focused one-month stay, but if you want a stable living base year-round, caution is warranted.

Kutaisi is Georgia's second-largest city. An ancient capital with three thousand years of history, it is smaller and quieter than Tbilisi today. Living costs are relatively low and the pace of life is slow.

Tourist infrastructure is limited, but for those seeking a simple lifestyle of focused work and evening walks, this becomes an advantage. Budget airlines such as Wizz Air link Kutaisi International Airport to multiple European cities, making it a viable hub for travel to Europe.

Regardless of which city you choose, spend your first week in short-term accommodation (Airbnb or hotel) while exploring the neighborhood. Photos seen online may differ from the actual atmosphere. It is never too late to decide on long-term housing after walking the streets yourself, checking supermarkets and markets, and assessing noise and sunlight levels.

(3) The Realistic Structure of Living Costs

You often hear that Georgia has low living costs. This is generally true, but there is considerable variation depending on individual lifestyles.

The biggest variable is housing. A clean, renovated one-bedroom apartment in central Tbilisi runs roughly 350 to 600 dollars per month. Moving to the periphery or choosing an older building makes 200 dollars possible. In Batumi, prices fluctuate by more than double depending on season. In winter, heating costs must be considered. Monthly utilities vary greatly depending on whether you have gas heating, electric heating, or central heating.

Food costs are relatively light. A meal at a local restaurant, say khachapuri (cheese bread) or khinkali (dumplings), costs 5 to 10 dollars. Fresh vegetables and fruits at the market come to 20 to 40 dollars per week of groceries. Wine available at supermarkets ranges from 3 to 10 dollars per bottle of good quality. However, imported foods and Korean ingredients are expensive. Buying Korean instant

noodles or kimchi locally requires preparing to pay two to three times the domestic price.

Public transportation is inexpensive. Tbilisi's metro and buses are accessed with a single transport card (MetroMoney), costing around 1 lari (about 500 won) per trip. Transfers within 90 minutes are free, so with minimal planning you can keep daily transport costs under 1,000 won. Using taxi apps like Bolt or Yandex, most in-city trips cost under 5,000 won.

Telecommunications are reasonably priced. Purchasing a local SIM card lets you access plans near unlimited data for around 15 to 25 dollars per month. WiFi quality at accommodations and cafes is generally good.

Adding it all up, living frugally costs 1 to 1.3 million won per month; living comfortably requires 2 million won. Maintaining a comparable lifestyle in Seoul demands far more.

(4) Environment for Digital Nomads

Georgia's popularity among digital nomads has good reason. Beyond year-long visa-free stay and low living costs, it offers infrastructure for remote work.

Tbilisi has multiple coworking spaces. Renting a single desk at places like Impact Hub or Terminal runs about 50 to 100 dollars per month. High-speed WiFi, meeting rooms, printers, and coffee machines are provided, and you gain opportunities to network with fellow freelancers and startup founders.

Cafe culture is also well developed. Many places do not give you sideways glances even if you open a laptop and work for several hours. Since a cup of coffee costs between two and four dollars, it is also a reasonable choice to work at a cafe instead of paying office rent.

Tax benefits are also attractive. The Georgian government applies remarkably low tax rates to small business operators in the IT and international services sectors. Sole proprietors with annual revenue of 500,000 lari or less (approximately 250 million won) need only pay one percent of their revenue as tax. The business registration process is also simplified, allowing you to complete business registration in a single day at the Public Service Hall.

However, care is needed in determining tax residency. Georgian tax law considers anyone staying more than 183 days in any continuous twelve-month period to be a tax resident. Once you cross this threshold, you may become obligated to report your worldwide income to Georgia. You should also consider the double taxation issue with Korea. Rather than simply believing the saying "taxes are cheap" and jumping in, you should consult with an accountant or tax specialist to design a structure that fits your situation.

(5) Daily Convenience and Points to Note

Georgia's daily living conveniences exceed expectations. Although 24-hour convenience stores are not common, you can find daily necessities without difficulty at large supermarkets (Carrefour, Orbi, Smart). There are pharmacies scattered throughout the city, and basic medications can be purchased

without a prescription.

Taxi apps work well. If you download the Bolt or Yandex app, you can enter your destination and call a car without any language barrier. The fare is displayed in advance, so there is no worry about overcharging. There are also vehicles operating late at night, making late-night returns home convenient.

Security is generally good. You can walk through Tbilisi's old town late at night without feeling danger. Of course, as in any country, you should be cautious as appropriate. You should avoid sparsely populated alleyways and be attentive to managing your belongings with basic precaution.

Language can be a barrier. Young people speak English relatively well, but among older generations and government office staff, English is often not understood. Russian is understood in some places. Learning a few basic Georgian greetings will make locals much more favorable toward you. "Gamarjoba (Gamarjoba, hello), "Madloba" (Madloba, thank you) alone can change the atmosphere.

Starting January 1, 2026, all foreign nationals entering Georgia are required to obtain health and injury insurance. Customs inspection may ask for a paper insurance certificate, so long-term residents should be prepared for this. You can purchase an overseas travel insurance policy in Korea, research local insurance company products, or use international digital nomad insurance.

(6) One-Month Stay Checklist

Things to prepare before entry: verify passport validity period (at least six months remaining is safe), have two cards capable of overseas transactions (primary and backup), purchase travel insurance, book the first week of accommodation, save copies of passport and photo files to cloud storage.

One to three days after arrival: activate a local SIM card, purchase a transportation card, walk around the neighborhood to identify the locations of supermarkets, pharmacies, hospitals, and laundromats, spread out currency exchange (do not exchange large amounts at once).

Week 1: start looking for long-term accommodation, visit in person to check heating methods, natural light, noise, and internet speed, clarify management fees and deposit conditions before signing a lease.

Week 2: test your daily rhythm, experience public transportation congestion during commute hours, explore cafes and coworking spaces you will visit frequently, establish a routine for acquiring groceries.

Weeks 3 through 4: comprehensively evaluate your one-month experience, examine not only costs but also stressors (language, administration, loneliness, food), find an honest answer to "could I live here longer".

The true purpose of a one-month stay is not to form impressions of whether "Georgia is good or bad." It is to verify whether your life system can be maintained there. Impressions can be gained sufficiently

from a one-week trip. A month is a lens for looking into reality.

D. Lessons for Korea: The Survival Strategy of a Small Nation

(1) Why Should We Look at Georgia

Georgia is a small nation with a population of 3.7 million. Its population is similar to that of South Korea's Gyeongnam Province. Its land area is about two-thirds that of South Korea. In terms of GDP, it does not even reach one percent of Korea's. Could there be something Korea can learn from such a country?

There is. The techniques developed by a small nation to survive between great powers can be useful even in large countries. Georgia shares borders with Russia to the north, Turkey and Iran to the south, and Azerbaijan to the east. It fought a war with Russia in 2008, and even now about twenty percent of its territory is effectively under Russian control. To survive in such an environment, ordinary methods will not suffice.

Korea is also surrounded by great powers. China, Japan, Russia, and North Korea are unique neighbors. The geopolitical pressure of the Korean peninsula shares similarities with the Caucasus. Although the scale differs, there may be commonalities in the grammar of survival.

(2) Making Connectivity a Weapon

The core of Georgia's survival strategy is "connectivity." It has positioned itself as a gateway connecting Europe and Asia. It plans to become a logistics hub connecting the two continents by using the land corridor between the Black Sea port and the Caspian Sea.

After the Russia-Ukraine War, the value of this strategy skyrocketed. As cargo from China to Europe finds it difficult to transit through Russia, a middle corridor connecting Kazakhstan, the Caspian Sea, Georgia, and the Black Sea has emerged as an alternative. Georgia is the western terminus of this corridor. As geopolitical tensions increase, Georgia's location becomes not a curse but a blessing.

Korea can engage in similar thinking. How should it use its position as a crossroads in Northeast Asia, an intersection of the Pacific and the Eurasian continent? Will it remain only an export manufacturing base, or will it evolve into a hub for logistics, finance, and data? Just as Georgia seeks to become a gateway of a great corridor despite its small body, Korea can also create connection value that exceeds its scale.

(3) Bold Openness Guarantees Survival

Georgia has a small domestic market. Even with 3.7 million people consuming at maximum, the economy is difficult to sustain. That is why it has opened its doors wide to the outside.

Currently, Georgia has concluded free trade agreements with more than forty-six countries. It has established a deep and comprehensive free trade area (DCFTA) with the European Union, and has signed free trade agreements with Turkey, China, and Commonwealth of Independent States

countries.

and other nations. When you add Korea's EPA, products produced in Georgia or transiting through Georgia can access a consumer market of 2.3 billion people worldwide at zero or low tariff rates.

Georgia's openness toward foreign nationals is also exceptional. It permits one-year visa-free residence and work rights to nationals of ninety-eight countries. It ranks in the upper tier in the World Bank's "Ease of Doing Business" index, demonstrating how simple its business registration and investment procedures are. One percent tax on small business operators, corporation establishment completed in a single day, real estate registration processed in fifteen minutes. All of this conveys the message: "Come to our country, work, live, and invest."

For a small nation to survive, the answer is openness, not insularity. Georgia is practicing this with its entire body. Though Korea is larger in scale, its population is declining, and it needs new growth drivers. In Georgia's experiment with open policies to attract foreign talent and capital, there is much worth noting.

(4) Attracting Through Simplified Rules

Korea has a sophisticated regulatory system. Dense laws, detailed implementation ordinances, complex administrative procedures. It is true that such sophistication contributes to maintaining order and preventing wrongdoing. However, in an era when new industries are emerging, new talent is flowing in, and new capital is moving, speed is everything. Complex rules work against speed.

Georgia created competitiveness by simplifying rules. When tax reporting is simple, the gray economy (tax evasion, informal transactions) decreases. When procedures are simple, it becomes easier for foreigners to enter. Startups' initial costs are lowered, and administrative burdens are reduced.

As Korea responds to an era of growing freelance economies, one-person businesses, and cross-border service transactions, it should consider simplifying the tax system, social insurance, and reporting frameworks. Just as capable as controlling through complex rules is the ability to attract through simple rules.

(5) Converting Geopolitics Into Economics

Georgia is skilled at converting geopolitical vulnerabilities into economic opportunities. Even amid its conflict with Russia, it maintains solidarity with the Western world while simultaneously accepting investment from China, Turkey, and Gulf nations. It does not bet everything on one side but keeps doors open in multiple directions.

The middle corridor is a prime example. When a logistics route avoiding Russia became necessary, Georgia's geographical position became an asset. It turned crisis into opportunity. It is also pursuing a project to export electricity to Europe through undersea cables in the Black Sea. It intends to become an energy exporting nation by utilizing its potential for hydroelectric power.

Korea is also amid geopolitical tension. US-China competition, North Korea's nuclear threat, Korea-Japan relations, Korea-China relations. What can Korea do within this complex equation? Rather than lamenting its geopolitical position, it must find a role possible only from that position. A critical link in semiconductor supply chains, an export base for the defense industry, a content hub connecting Asia and the world. Just as Georgia becomes a gateway of a corridor, Korea can become a gateway of technology and culture.

(6) Turning Hospitality Into Soft Power

Georgians say, "A guest is a gift sent by God." In the supra, a banquet culture, guests receive the finest hospitality. The toasts led by the tamada, the toastmaster, continue endlessly, and food and wine are abundant. Even a stranger in that gathering becomes a friend.

This tradition of hospitality was once a survival strategy. You had to turn enemies into friends to stay alive. Today it has become a powerful tourism asset and soft power. Visitors to Georgia are captivated by their warm welcome and become voluntary ambassadors.

Korea too has soft power in 'K-culture.' K-pop, K-dramas, K-beauty, and K-food have spread across the world. But what about the welcome that foreign visitors actually experience in Korea? Language barriers, complicated procedures, sometimes exclusionary attitudes. If there is a gap between the appeal of content and the experience on the ground, the sustainability of soft power weakens. There is something Korea can learn from Georgia's culture of hospitality.

(7) Lessons from a Small Nation, Applied by a Large One

The moment we call Georgia a 'small nation,' many people think, 'This has nothing to do with us.' But small nations, out of necessity for survival, experiment with policy, simplify rules, attract outside capital and talent, and develop the skill of turning geography into economics ahead of larger nations. Large nations can observe the results of these experiments and apply them to their own circumstances.

The Korea-Georgia EPA is not simply an agreement to open one more small market. It is an event in which two nations positioned at opposite ends of the Eurasian continent acknowledged each other's strategic value and created institutional connections. The wisdom of survival that Georgia demonstrates poses questions for Korea, a nation facing declining population, slowing growth, and rising geopolitical pressure.

When you simplify rules, what moves? When you open the door, who enters? How can you turn the vulnerability of location into an asset? How does hospitality become strength? It is time to look at the reflection of Korea seen in Georgia's small mirror.

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Appendix 1: Georgia History Timeline

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Appendix

A. Prehistory and Antiquity: The Dawn of Human Civilization and the Land of the Golden Fleece

Human footprints first appeared on Georgian soil 1.8 million years ago. A skull fossil discovered in the village of Dmanisi, approximately 85 kilometers southwest of Tbilisi, confirms this finding. Among the oldest traces of early humans who departed Africa and walked into Eurasia, scholars named this fossil's subject 'Homo erectus georgicus.' This passage reveals that Georgia was not simply a travel destination but a crossroads of human migration.

Around 6000 BCE, traces of the world's earliest wine-making were discovered in the Kvemo Kartli region of southern Georgia. Archaeologists detected grape seeds and tartaric acid in pottery shards, earning Georgia the title 'Cradle of Wine.' Eight thousand years ago, when farmers in this land crushed grapes and sealed them in clay vessels, they could not have known what gift they were bestowing upon human civilization.

Around the 13th century BCE, the kingdom of Colchis took root in western Georgia along the Black Sea coast. In Greek mythology, this was the destination where the hero Jason and the Argonauts sailed in search of the Golden Fleece. Myth reflects historical fact. The Colchians of that time possessed the technology to soak fleece in river water and filter out gold dust, and this is believed to be the origin of the Golden Fleece legend. It is said that the royal palace of Colchis contained a fountain that spouted wine, which suggests the depth of this land's connection with the grape.

In eastern Georgia, the kingdom of Iberia flourished around the 4th century BCE. Though it shares a name with Spain's Iberian Peninsula, it was an entirely different region. In 302 BCE, when Pharnavaz I ascended to the throne, the Pharnavazid dynasty began, and according to tradition, the Georgian script was created at this time. The legacies of these two kingdoms, Colchis to the west and Iberia to the east, would later become the roots of a unified Georgian kingdom.

In 65 BCE, Rome's Pompey launched an expedition to the Caucasus. Iberia became subordinate to Rome, and Colchis was incorporated as the Roman province of Lazicum. For the following centuries, Georgia served as a buffer zone between Rome and the Persian Empire. Thus began the fate of having to survive wedged between great powers.

B. The Adoption of Christianity and the Medieval Golden Age: Identity Forged by Faith

In 337 CE (or thereabouts), a decisive turning point arrived in Georgian history. A woman named Nino from Cappadocia brought Christianity to the Iberian kingdom. When King Mirian III was baptized and proclaimed Christianity the state religion, Georgia became the second nation in the world to adopt Christianity, after Armenia. Saint Nino is said to have carried two grapevine branches woven in the shape of a cross, a symbol perfectly fitting for one who brought Christianity to the land of wine.

In the 5th century, King Vakhtang Gorgasali discovered hot springs while hunting pheasants. He decided to build a new capital there, and named it Tbilisi, taking the name from 'Tbili,' which means 'warm' in Georgian. Even today, hot waters rise in the sulfur springs district of Old Tbilisi, the same waters into which the king's pheasant is said to have fallen.

The 11th through early 13th centuries marked Georgia's golden age. David IV (r. 1089-1125) earned the epithet 'the Builder.' He freed Georgia from Seljuk Turkish rule, achieved a great victory at the Battle of Didgori in 1121, and reunified the realm. He founded the Gelati Academy to encourage learning, and at the Ikalto Academy, even wine-making was taught.

Queen Tamar, great-granddaughter of David IV (r. 1184-1213), presided over the apex of Georgian history. During her reign, the territory of the Georgian kingdom stretched from the Black Sea to the Caspian Sea, and literature and art flourished. It was during this period that the great poet Shota Rustaveli wrote 'The Knight in the Panther's Skin.' The cave city of Vardzia was also built during Queen Tamar's reign. That Georgians today call Tamar 'Queen' rather than 'King' is an expression of respect acknowledging that her rule was second to no male monarch while preserving her identity as a woman.

C. The Dark Ages and Division: A Procession of Invaders

In the 1220s, Mongol cavalry crossed the Caucasus. When Tbilisi fell in 1226, it is said that 100,000 Christians were martyred. The golden age came to an end, and Georgia became a tributary state of the Mongol Empire.

In the late 14th century, Tamerlane's army invaded Georgia seven times. His destruction was more thorough than the Mongols'. As the 15th century began, the Georgian kingdom fragmented into several smaller kingdoms and principalities. After the unified kingdom formally dissolved in 1490, the west and east fell under the influence of the Ottoman and Persian empires, respectively.

From the 16th to 18th centuries, Georgia walked a tightrope between two Islamic superpowers. The western region, under Ottoman influence, saw some nobles convert to Islam, while the east labored under Persian pressure. Yet most Georgians did not abandon the Orthodox faith. They fled to mountain regions or built churches like fortresses and endured. Today, the towers of Svaneti stand as a legacy of that era.

D. The Shadow of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Era

In 1783, King Erekle II of eastern Georgia signed the Treaty of Georgiyevsk with the Russian Empire. It was a choice made to gain protection from the Ottomans and Persians. But in 1801, Russia violated

the treaty and forcibly annexed Georgia. The Bagrationi dynasty was deposed, and the Georgian Orthodox Church lost its autonomy.

Under Russian rule in the 19th century, Georgia experienced both the light and shadow of modernization. Roads and railways were built, and Tbilisi grew into an administrative center on the empire's frontier. European-style buildings rose, and theaters and opera houses opened. Yet Russian language use was imposed, and Georgian culture faced suppression. In response, intellectuals like Ilia Chavchavadze led a movement to recover national identity.

In 1918, amid the chaos of the Russian Revolution, Georgia briefly reclaimed independence. The Georgian Democratic Republic was declared, and a progressive constitution guaranteeing women's suffrage was enacted. But the dream lasted only three years. In 1921, the Red Army invaded, and Georgia was forcibly incorporated into the Soviet Union.

The Soviet era (1921-1991) left a complex legacy. On one hand, literacy campaigns, industrialization, and educational expansion took place. On the other hand, there were Stalinist purges, religious persecution, and restrictions on Georgian language use. Ironically, Stalin himself was from Gori, Georgia. This is why Georgians today harbor complicated feelings toward the dictator.

E. Independence and the Modern Era: From the Rose Revolution to Today

On April 9, 1991, with the Soviet collapse, Georgia declared independence once again. But the path after independence proved difficult. Separatist civil wars erupted in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and the economy teetered on collapse. In the 1990s, Tbilisi had electricity only a few hours each day.

In November 2003, citizens protesting electoral fraud occupied parliament while holding roses. This event, in which power changed hands without a drop of blood being shed, is called the Rose Revolution. The new government implemented sweeping anti-corruption reforms and restructured the police force entirely. The reason Georgia is now perceived by travelers as a safe country stems from these changes.

In August 2008, a five-day war with Russia erupted. In this conflict over the South Ossetia issue, Georgia lost control of approximately 20% of its territory. Russian troops remain stationed in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and the occupation line continues to shift in a 'creeping border' phenomenon.

In 2024, Georgia acquired the status of a European Union candidate country. Yet controversy surrounding the passage of a 'foreign agent law' and large-scale protests continue. Between aspiration toward Europe and the shadow of Russia, Georgia's choice remains in progress. The story of this small nation, which throughout 5,000 years of history has always sought survival between great powers, continues to be written even today.

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Appendix 2: Winery Map

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A. Kakheti: Walking Through the Heart of Wine

Kakheti is unquestionably the starting point of any Georgian wine journey. Some 100 kilometers east of Tbilisi, nestled between the Caucasus Mountains and the Alazani Valley, this region produces over 70 percent of Georgia's entire wine output. Vineyards alone span 45,000 hectares. Come autumn, the entire Alazani Valley is saturated with the scent of grapes.

The two cities that serve as bases for exploring Kakheti are Telavi and Signaghi. Telavi, the administrative center of Kakheti, is home to large-scale wineries. Signaghi, known as the "City of Love," is a small walled town where boutique wineries and guesthouses hide in every alley. Moving between these two cities and visiting three to four wineries per day makes for the most practical itinerary.

Tsinandali Estate is an indispensable stop on any Kakheti wine tour. Georgia's first European-style bottled wine was born here, once the estate of Alexander Chavchavadze, a 19th-century nobleman and poet. As you wander through the beautiful gardens, a staircase appears leading down to a 19th-century wine cellar. In the cool underground vault lie thousands of bottles from a vintage collection, including wines from 1814. After tasting, you can explore the mansion's museum to glimpse the refinements of Georgian aristocratic culture.

Winery Khareba offers something quite different. Near the village of Kvareli, a tunnel carved for military purposes during the Soviet era has been converted into a wine cellar. This tunnel, known as Gvirabi, stretches 7.7 kilometers in length. Temperatures remain constant at 12 to 14 degrees Celsius year-round, providing ideal conditions for wine aging. The experience of walking through endless dark tunnels while tasting wine is possible nowhere else in Kakheti.

Alaverdi Monastery Winery is recommended for those seeking a spiritual wine journey. Next to an 11th-century cathedral, the winemaking tradition that monks have carried forward for nearly a thousand years remains alive. Wine here is not produced in bulk for commercial purposes. It is made for the monastic community and as an offering to God. A single glass of Saperavi drunk beneath a 50-meter-high cathedral carries meaning beyond mere tasting.

Family-run small wineries are also part of Kakheti's charm. Twins Wine Cellar, in the village of Napareuli, is operated by a family in their third generation of winemaking. A small museum allows you to see inside the qvevri, and the owners personally guide the tastings. They serve homemade

churchkhela, walnuts coated in grape must, alongside the wine, a gesture of Georgian hospitality.

B. Kartli: Hidden Gems on the Outskirts of Tbilisi

For travelers short on time, the Kartli region is the best choice. Wineries of distinction are situated 30 minutes to an hour's drive from Tbilisi. You can taste wines of varied styles while minimizing travel time.

Château Mukhrani, a royal winery near Mtskheta, was built by Prince Ivane of the Bagrationi dynasty in the 19th century, inspired by Bordeaux. The restored palatial building, French gardens, and underground cellar together create the feeling of visiting a European château. Premium packages combining horseback tours with fine dining are also offered. Its wines are distinguished by a contemporary European interpretation of Georgian native grape varieties.

Iago's Winery stands in stark contrast to Château Mukhrani. A small-scale operation run by a farmer named Iago Bitarishvili in the village of Chardakhi on the outskirts of Mtskheta, it adheres exclusively to traditional qvevri methods without chemical fertilizers or additives. His Chinuri wines have achieved legendary status among natural wine devotees worldwide. Production is so limited that you must visit in person to taste them. Iago himself leads tours through the vineyards, sharing his winemaking philosophy.

The signature grape varieties of Kartli are Chinuri and Goruli Mtsvane. Unlike Kakheti's weighty Saperavi, these wines are light and crisp. Well-suited to sparkling wine production, the region has recently drawn attention for demonstrating the potential of Georgian sparkling wines.

C. Imereti and Racha-Lechkhumi: Hidden Treasures of the West

Western Georgian wines, centered on Kutaisi, have a distinct character quite different from Kakheti. Wines from the Imereti region are lighter, with vivid acidity and floral aromas. While Kakheti qvevri wines ferment for six months or more with skins, Imereti shortens the skin-contact period considerably. Thus, even with the same qvevri method, the resulting color and flavor are completely different.

Baia's Wine stands as a flagship for Imereti natural wines. Led by a young winemaker named Baia Abelian, this winery has gained international renown while showing new possibilities for Georgian wine. Wines made from Imereti native varieties like Tsolikouri and Tsitska challenge the preconception that qvevri wines must always be heavy and powerful.

Though modest in output, the Racha-Lechkhumi region is known for remarkable wines. Khvanchkara is a naturally semi-sweet red wine reportedly favored by Stalin. It is made without added sugar, relying solely on the grapes' natural sweetness. The unique microclimate of the mountainous terrain elevates the sugar content of the grapes, while cool temperatures slow fermentation, allowing natural sweetness to remain. A glass of Khvanchkara drunk before a fireplace in a mountain village on a winter's evening might be called the pinnacle of a Georgian wine journey.

D. Practical Guide to Wine Travel: The Art of Selection and Focus

The most common mistake when planning winery tours is trying to visit too many places in a single day. After visiting five locations, every wine blurs into a memory of tasting "it was all delicious." Human taste is simpler than we think. It is better to visit two to three wineries per day, and no more than four at most.

Recommended itineraries depend on your schedule. With only one day, choose Signaghi or Telavi in Kakheti. Both are reachable as day trips from Tbilisi and offer the most options. With two days, visit large-scale Kakheti wineries (Khareba, Tsinandali) on the first day and family-run small operations and monastery wineries on the second. With four or more days, you can travel to Kutaisi to experience Imereti's natural wines, or venture to Racha to taste Khvanchkara.

It is best to make reservations in advance. Confirm whether English tours are available, whether tastings are included, and what dining options exist. Large-scale wineries accept same-day visits, but small operations may have absent owners. Should you visit during the autumn harvest season, from late September to early October, you may have the fortune to participate in Rtveli, the grape harvest festival. The experience of picking grapes alongside villagers, treading them by foot, and drinking wine with freshly baked bread and barbecue is something you will never forget.

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Appendix 3: Emergency Contact Information

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A. Emergency Response: Remember 112

In an emergency in Georgia, dial 112, a unified emergency number that connects you with police, fire, and ambulance services. The line is available 24 hours and offers English support. When connected, communicate three essential details: what happened (What), your location (Where), and your name (Name).

Providing your location is the most difficult part. If you don't know the Georgian address, capture your location pin from a map app. Using your smartphone's translation feature, enter "Tell me my location as a Georgian address," and the app will provide the local coordinates. This way, you can relay precise information without panic during an emergency. You can also send text messages to 112 or use video calls.

Save the contact information for the Embassy of the Republic of Korea to Georgia.

Address: 64b Chavchavadze Avenue, 15th Floor, Tbilisi

Main phone: +995-32-297-0318 / +995-32-297-0320

Emergency contact (24 hours): +995-599-096-791

Email: georgia@mofa.go.kr

Consular assistance is available for passport loss, accidents or crimes, and emergency repatriation. Even when the embassy is closed at night or on weekends, calling the emergency number will connect you with an on-duty officer.

Keep in mind the Consular Call Center of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea as well. The toll-free number from overseas is +800-2100-0404, available 24 hours throughout the year. You can receive answers to various consular questions and guidance on emergency situations.

B. Entry and Visa: A Korean Privilege

Korean passport holders can enter Georgia without a visa and stay for up to one year (365 days). This is an exceptionally rare benefit worldwide. Most countries allow visa-free entry for only 90 days, and few extend it to 180 days, so Georgia's welcome to foreign visitors is genuinely generous.

Immigration procedures are straightforward. Your passport must have at least six months of validity remaining, and requests for return tickets or accommodation confirmation are uncommon. However, new regulations begin on January 1, 2026: all foreign tourists must carry mandatory health and accident insurance. You may need to present an English-language insurance certificate at immigration, so purchase travel insurance before departure and print the documentation.

At Tbilisi International Airport (TBS), you will clear immigration and collect your luggage. The airport is not large, so navigation is simple. Upon exiting arrivals, you will see currency exchange offices, SIM card vendors, and taxi app information desks immediately.

C. Currency and Payment: The World of Lari

Georgia's official currency is the Lari (GEL). One lari is worth roughly 500 won, but exchange rates fluctuate regularly, so check the current rate before you travel. The lari divides into 100 tetri. Coins come in denominations of 1, 2, 5, 10, 20, and 50 tetri, as well as 1 and 2 lari. Banknotes include 5, 10, 20, 50, 100, and 200 lari.

The best approach is to bring US dollars or euros from Korea and exchange them locally for lari. Exchange offices are scattered throughout Tbilisi, and competition keeps rates favorable. Airport exchange counters offer poor rates, so change only what you immediately need upon arrival and exchange additional funds downtown.

Credit cards (Visa, Mastercard) are widely accepted at restaurants, supermarkets, and hotels in large cities like Tbilisi and Batumi. However, rural guesthouses, traditional markets, and small eateries typically accept cash only. Minibus fares are also paid in cash. Carry plenty of small bills (5-20 lari). Many shops struggle to give change for a 100 lari note.

D. Transportation: The Art of Getting Around

In Tbilisi, the metro, buses, and minibuses (marshrutka) are the primary transit options. Two metro lines operate, each costing 1 lari (about 500 won). Buy a metro card and load credit to use both metro and bus. Cards are available at station counters and vending machines.

Always use a taxi app. Bolt and Yandex Go are the most popular. App-based fares are calculated in advance, protecting you from overcharging. A ride across the city center typically costs 5-15 lari (2,500-7,500 won). Street hails require fare negotiation, and tourists are often overcharged, so it is better to avoid them.

Several options exist for inter-city travel. The Tbilisi-Batumi route operates modern high-speed trains taking about 5 hours. Seating is spacious and comfortable, with a dining car on board. Online booking allows seat selection. Reserve through the Georgian Railways official website (railway.ge).

Marshrutka, a minibus, is how locals travel between towns. Fares are cheap and routes are numerous, but departures are irregular and vehicles leave only when full. Destinations appear in Georgian only, making navigation difficult for foreigners. Photograph signs with your smartphone's translation app to

confirm your destination. Many vehicles lack air conditioning in summer, so prepare accordingly.

Car rental offers freedom but demands caution. Georgian driving culture is aggressive, and livestock can appear suddenly on roads. Mountain routes have unpaved stretches requiring four-wheel drive vehicles. Winter snow can close roads, so build schedule flexibility into your plans.

E. Communication and Internet: Your Connection Lifeline

Internet access is essential in Georgia for maps, translation, and taxi apps. Telecom vendors including Magti, Silknet, and Geocell operate shops in the airport arrival hall. Show your passport and purchase a prepaid tourist SIM immediately. Packages for 5-10 lari (2,500-5,000 won) include adequate data.

In mountain regions, Magti typically has the strongest signal. If you plan to visit remote areas like Kazbegi or Svaneti, remember this. For eSIM-compatible phones, buying Georgian eSIM before departure and activating it in advance is also an option.

Most hotels, guesthouses, and cafes offer free Wi-Fi. Speeds are sufficient for everyday use.

F. Health and Safety: Useful Things to Know

Tap water in major cities like Tbilisi is generally safe. However, older buildings may have aged plumbing, and travelers' stomachs can be sensitive, so buying bottled water is the safer choice. Georgia is renowned for mineral water. Borjomi sparkling water has a salty taste, while Nabeghlavi is milder. Both are readily available at supermarkets, find what suits you.

Pharmacy chains like Aversi and PSP dot the city, with some open around the clock. Basic cold medicine, pain relief, and digestive aids are sold without prescription. Pharmacists often speak limited English, so writing down medication ingredient names (acetaminophen, ibuprofen, etc.) simplifies communication.

Stray dogs roam the streets everywhere. Most wear yellow ear tags indicating they have been vaccinated and neutered. They are generally gentle, though packs can seem threatening. Avoid provoking them and pass quietly.

G. Cultural Etiquette: The Language of Respect

When visiting Georgian Orthodox churches and monasteries, dress appropriately. Men should wear long pants; women need a headscarf and a skirt or pants extending below the knee. Tank tops and short shorts may be refused entry. Some locations provide communal scarves and wrap-around skirts at the entrance, but bringing your own is preferable.

If invited to a supra, you have been asked to join a Georgian banquet, congratulations. A supra is led by a tamada, or master of ceremonies. When the tamada raises a toast, all guests raise their glasses in response. It is customary to empty your glass after each toast. If you cannot drink wine, request permission respectfully in advance. Georgians view continuous offers of food and drink as hospitality,

and most will accept your explanation.

Tipping at restaurants is not required but giving 10 percent for good service is standard. Some upscale restaurants include a service charge in the bill, so ask to confirm.

H. Safety Rules: Places You Must Avoid

Two regions demand absolute avoidance: Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Both are under Russian military occupation and beyond Georgian government control. Entering these territories without permission violates Georgian law and offers no safety guarantees.

A "creeping border" phenomenon exists near the occupation line. Russian-established boundaries gradually shift into Georgian territory. When traveling toward Gori from Tbilisi, do not approach the South Ossetia occupation line. Follow local residents' and guides' advice for your safety.

Outside these areas, Georgia is exceptionally safe for travelers. Follow basic travel sense: avoid empty areas alone after dark, keep valuables distributed, and don't haggle after drinking. Travelers move freely through Tbilisi's attractions and busy districts even late at night.

Finally, save emergency contacts and the embassy address in your phone and keep a paper copy with your passport. Should the internet fail and your battery die, paper becomes your most dependable backup. A prepared traveler survives anywhere. Gamarjoba, and wishing you a safe journey through Georgia.

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Appendix 4: AI, a Trusted Travel Companion

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Walking through narrow alleys in Tbilisi's old town, you suddenly encounter unfamiliar characters carved on the walls. These letters, with their round curves that seem to wind like grapevines, are Georgian script, known as Mkhedruli. As one of only fourteen unique writing systems in the world, this alphabet is inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, yet it remains an enigma to travelers.

You open a restaurant menu. You cannot distinguish between khinkali and khachapuri. You stare at a bus schedule. Only numbers catch your eye. You bought aspirin at a pharmacy but don't know how to take it. Just five years ago, travelers in such situations had to rely on gestures and the clumsy mechanical sounds of translation apps.

Artificial intelligence in the 2020s is different. You take a photo with your smartphone camera and upload it, and AI chatbots like ChatGPT, Claude, and Gemini read Georgian, translate it, grasp the context, and even add the advice you need. It is not a simple translator. A travel advisor who thinks things through and makes judgments with you in the field now fits in your pocket.

Setting up AI as a travel companion before departure

To use AI effectively during your Georgia trip, some preparation is necessary. First, it's good to choose one or two main AI apps. ChatGPT, Claude, and Gemini are all excellent, but there is no room during travel to switch between apps and experiment. Human battery and focus are finite resources.

Next, preparing a "Georgia-specific prompt" in advance can save time on the ground. Instead of typing complex sentences each time, the approach is to save frequently useful question formats in a notepad and copy and use them.

For menu translation, sentences like these are useful: "Describe the Georgian traditional dishes from this menu and recommend vegetarian options." For transportation schedule interpretation, you can request, "From this schedule, organize options for getting downtown Tbilisi after 3 p.m. today in order of departure time, fare, and cautions." For medicine instructions, a prompt like "Summarize the efficacy, dosage, and side effects of this drug in Korean" works well.

Internet connection is a prerequisite for using AI. When you arrive at the Georgia airport, you can purchase a SIM card from a local telecom like Magti or Geocell. At Shota Rustaveli International Airport in Tbilisi, there are telecom booths where 5 to 10 lari (roughly 2,000 to 4,000 won) is enough

to secure sufficient data.

Nowadays, eSIM is more convenient. Install it via QR code before departure from Korea, and activate it upon arrival in Georgia to save time waiting in line at the airport. iPhone XS and later models and Samsung Galaxy S23 and later models support eSIM. If EID information appears when you enter #06# on the dial screen, it can be used.

There is one thing to keep in mind. In deep mountain areas like Svaneti's Ushguli or Kazbegi's Juta Valley, data connection can be unstable. It is wise to download offline language packs (English-Korean, English-Georgian) from the Google Translate app in advance and save screenshots of important conversations with AI. AI becomes a genius with the internet, but without it, it is just an inert app.

At restaurants: From decoding the menu to strategy

Georgian food is delicious. Khachapuri Acharuli with cheese flowing over the edges, khinkali dumplings the size of your fist, badrijani topped with walnut sauce. The problem is that menus have no obligation to be friendly to travelers.

You take a photo of the menu and upload it to AI with this request: "Translate this menu and recommend a combination from Georgian signature dishes that might suit Korean tastes. Estimate the quantity for one person." AI does not stop at simply changing letters into Korean. It tells you which dishes are cheese explosions, which have strong spices, and which pair well with Georgian wine.

For travelers with allergies or dietary restrictions, AI is even more useful. Georgian cuisine commonly includes dairy products, nuts, and wheat flour. When you request, "I have a dairy allergy. Pick dishes from this menu that don't contain cheese or butter," AI filters out the safe options for you.

Going one step further, you can ask AI, "Change the sentence above naturally into Georgian," creating a sentence you can show local staff. You can communicate your needs precisely without gestures.

You can also get help from AI in choosing wine. Georgia is the birthplace of wine with an 8,000-year wine history. In a supermarket or winery, take a photo of a wine with a complex label and ask, "Tell me about the variety and sweetness of this wine and what appetizers pair with it." You get information as good as from an expert. Saperavi is Georgia's representative red grape variety, with strong tannins that pair well with meat. Rkatsiteli is a white grape variety that becomes an amber wine when made in qvevri fermentation. AI explains all this background knowledge as well.

Transportation: Organizing complicated schedules and signs

Movement is key to your Georgia trip. From Tbilisi to Kazbegi, from Kutaisi to Batumi, from Telavi to Signagi. These routes are connected by minibuses called marshrutka and trains, which are the main means of transportation.

When you arrive at the Didube bus terminal, a schedule written in Georgian and Russian is posted on the wall. You can read numbers, but you cannot identify destination names. At this point, you take a photo of the schedule and upload it to AI, requesting, "Organize the departure times, fares, travel duration, and whether seat reservations are needed for marshrutkas to Kazbegi departing after 9 a.m. tomorrow in a table."

If you bought a train ticket, you can say, "Extract the seat number, car number, departure platform, and departure time from this ticket. Tell me in order what actions I need to take right now." What travelers need is not information itself but the action to be taken next.

For moving around downtown Tbilisi, ride-hailing apps like Bolt and Yandex are convenient. If you purchase a Metromoney card, you can use the metro and buses for 0.50 lari (roughly 200 won). Bus 37, which runs between the airport and downtown, operates 24 hours and offers great value. When you ask AI, "Compare the three most reasonable ways to get from Tbilisi airport to Freedom Square by cost, travel time, and convenience," the options are organized clearly.

AI can also help when you need to haggle with a taxi. Ask AI to convert this sentence into Georgian or Russian: "I'm going to Freedom Square. Please turn on the meter. If there's no meter, I'll only go by the app rate." You can show it to the driver. When asked respectfully but firmly, AI reflects even the right tone.

At tourist sites: Making AI your local guide

You stand before Narikala Fortress in Tbilisi. This stronghold, first built in the 4th century and surviving attacks from Persia, Arabia, Mongolia, and the Ottomans, embodies the history of Tbilisi itself. However, the plaques on site are written only in Georgian, and without hiring a guide, it may look like just a pile of old bricks.

Take a photo of the building and upload it to AI, requesting, "Describe what this place is. Tell me only five key points from the perspective of Georgian history and Orthodox Christian culture. Also tell me the etiquette or taboos for photography." AI will organize the fortress's construction period, reconstruction history, its relationship to the Church of St. Nicholas, and cable car tips.

Many churches in Georgia have dress codes. Women must cover their heads, and shorts or sleeveless clothing should be avoided. Photography may be restricted at Gergeti Trinity Church or Lamaria Church in Svaneti. Asking AI in advance helps you avoid unintentional rudeness.

At the Georgian National Museum, if explanation panels next to artifacts are only in the local language, take a photo and request a translation. Rather than stopping at simple translation, asking "Summarize the elements to note when viewing this artifact and its historical context in five lines" changes the depth of appreciation.

Shopping and daily life: Interpreting ingredient lists and control buttons

Deserter Bazaar is a traditional market in Tbilisi. Spices, dried fruits, and Georgian traditional snacks spill out everywhere. You discover churchkhela, a confection made by stringing walnuts and drying them in grape juice. It looks like a sausage on the outside but is a sweet energy bar.

Take a photo of an unfamiliar ingredient or sweet and ask, "What is this, how should I store it, and how do I check the expiration date?" You can interpret ingredient lists from local cosmetics or household products the same way.

When the control panel of a washing machine or boiler in your lodging is written only in Georgian, do not panic. Upload a photo of the control panel and say, "Estimate the function of each button and explain it in Korean. Recommend the standard settings for safely running laundry." The same goes for air conditioning or heating control, request, "Tell me step-by-step how to switch between heating and cooling on this remote and how to set the temperature."

Pharmacies and medical situations: Safety comes first

During your trip, light headaches or indigestion may lead you to search for a pharmacy (□□□□□□□, Aptiaki). Take a photo of the instructions for medicine you bought at a Georgian pharmacy and request, "Summarize this drug's efficacy, dosage, precautions, and common side effects. Tell me if there are dangers when used together with other drugs."

There is one principle you must remember. AI is a reference tool, not a medical professional. No matter how confidently AI answers, that is AI's strength alone, and it does not take responsibility. It is safer to always confirm with a local pharmacist and, based on the information AI provides, request, "Make me a list of questions to confirm whether this information is correct."

If you have received hospital treatment, you can take a photo of your diagnosis or prescription and request, "Translate this document into Korean and organize the diagnosis name, prescribed medicine, dosage, and return visit conditions by item." However, the final judgment always rests with medical professionals.

In emergencies and administrative documents

Though rare, you may receive documents at a police station or government office. Upload a document photo and request, "Extract the core obligations, whether a signature is needed, the submission deadline, any fines, and the next place to visit. Mark only the sentences I would get into serious trouble for missing."

As of March 2025, the U.S. State Department is issuing a Level 1 Travel Advisory (Exercise Normal Precautions) for Georgia. Most regions are safe, but you should avoid entering South Ossetia and Abkhazia, regions occupied by Russia. Political demonstrations are frequent around Rustaveli Avenue and Heroes' Square in Tbilisi, so it is good to avoid areas where large crowds gather.

Registering with the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP) allows you to receive emergency information from the U.S. Embassy. The South Korean Foreign Ministry's Overseas Safety Travel app

is also useful.

Photo quality determines AI accuracy

The reason AI fails to read correctly 80 percent of the time is not "AI is stupid" but "the photo was taken poorly." Georgian script has many round curves, and if focus is blurry, misrecognition rates increase.

Focus precisely on the letters, and if shadows appear, change the angle and shoot again. Shooting at an angle reduces recognition rates, so shoot from the front with level alignment. For long documents, take multiple photos and mark the sequence as "1/3, 2/3, 3/3." For small text, shoot close up, without shake, and with zoom if possible.

Be mindful of protecting personal information

Menus and schedules are fine, but photographs showing your passport, boarding pass, reservation number, address, or card information require careful handling. Before uploading to AI, cover or crop sensitive information.

You can also ask the AI to "show me the personal information with some parts masked rather than fully exposed." QR codes contain surprisingly much information, so double-check before uploading.

AI is not a translator but a field advisor

Georgia is an unfamiliar country. That is why it is more interesting. Yet unfamiliarity increases the chance of mistakes. You might board the wrong bus, eat food that triggers allergies, or take medication without knowing how to use it.

AI reduces those mistakes. With a single photo, you can choose from a menu, organize transportation, read signs, grasp historical context, and understand documents. It transforms travel from something to "endure" to something to "enjoy."

Of course, AI has limits. It is powerless without an internet connection, cannot substitute for medical or legal judgment, and sometimes states incorrect information with confidence. Yet if you recognize those limits and use AI appropriately, it becomes the most reliable companion for your Georgia trip.

When you relieve fatigue in the sulfur springs of Tbilisi, taste Qvevri wine at a winery in Kakheti, and gaze upon the eternal snows of Mount Kazbek before the Church of Gergeti, the AI in your smartphone will be quietly preparing your next journey.

Gamarjos (□□□□□□□□)! It is a Georgian toast. I hope your travels with AI become a joyful experience.

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Epilogue: A Night Spent in a Hotel Inside an Amphora

A Journey Through Georgia's History and Culture

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At a winery in Kakheti, I spent one night in a room shaped like a kvevri.

It was a lodging modeled after a giant wine amphora. The curved ceiling was tinted wine-colored, and beyond the windows stretched endless vineyards. Eight thousand years ago, when someone on this land crushed grapes and put them in an amphora, humanity's first wine was born. I lay on the extension of that moment in time.

As the night deepened, Caucasian stars poured down. In this place without city lights, the Milky Way literally flowed like a river. I sat on the terrace with a glass of wine in my hand. A cool breeze blew in. During the day the temperature exceeded 30 degrees Celsius, but at night it dropped to 15 degrees. This temperature swing gifts sweetness to the grapes. This is how nature crafts wine.

Georgia is a small country. It is not even one-third the size of the Korean Peninsula.

Yet within this narrow land, twelve climate zones coexist. In Batumi on the Black Sea coast, subtropical moisture clings to the skin; in the highlands of Kazbegi, perpetual snow gleams. In the dry plains of Kakheti, grapes ripen; in the deep valleys of Svaneti, mist envelops villages. All four seasons fit within an hour's flight.

This abundance was both blessing and curse.

Rich soil, mild climate, a crossroads between east and west. Conditions coveted by all. Persia came, Mongolia came, the Ottoman Empire came, Russia came. Georgians fought. They lost, stood up, and fought again. At the supra feast, the toasts always include a moment honoring those who gave their lives for the homeland. Thousands of years of resistance seep through the fingertips that empty the glass.

On my last morning leaving Tbilisi, I walked through the sulfur spring district one final time.

The sulfur smell pouring from the domed bathhouses of Abanots'ubani. People who have soaked in these waters since before the Common Era. The Russian poet Pushkin loved these springs, and so did the French novelist Dumas, it is said. In the hot water, I retraced my two weeks of travel.

Palm trees and casino lights in Batumi. The dizzying cliffs of the military road and churches above the clouds. The vineyards of the Alazani Valley seen from Signagi's hilltop. The complex feelings in front of Stalin's birthplace in Gori. The lingering echo of polyphonic chanting from the narrow streets of Tbilisi's Old Town.

And the people I met everywhere.

The winery owner who poured wine while saying, 'Welcome to Georgia.' The taxi driver who honestly said, 'I dislike Russia, but Russian is convenient.' The university student who showed me protest photos saying, 'I want to go to Europe.' Their faces come to mind.

Georgians regard guests as gifts sent by God.

'Stumari Godvistgan Aris' (სტუმარი ღმერთისგან არის). The guest comes from God. I heard this saying throughout my journey. People who opened their homes to a stranger, set the table, and filled glasses. The weight of that hospitality stayed with me.

On the flight back, I looked out the window.

The Caucasus Mountains were disappearing below the clouds. Snow-covered peaks, the military road running between them, and somewhere beyond, people who must be making wine. I murmured to myself that I would return.

Some destinations remain as photographs; some remain in the heart.

Georgia was the latter. Eight thousand years of wine's fragrance, the curves of thirty-three alphabets, the harmony of polyphonic music, the toasts of the supra feast, and people who live with dignity among great powers. All of this mingled into a single emotion. It seems it should be called longing.

That night spent inside the amphora, looking up at the stars, I thought.

Wine is a vessel that holds time. Inside the kvevri, grapes slowly ferment, and only after years pass do they become wine. Georgia is the same. Five thousand years of history have aged beneath the earth and continue to slowly ripen even now.

Someday I want to return to that amphora room.

Beneath the stars of the Caucasus, with a glass of wine.

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