

ინტერდისციპლინარული საერთაშორისო კონფერენცია
„ავტორიტარიზმი: ნარატივები, კულტურები, განგრძობადობა, რღვევა და
ცვლილებები - წარსული და აწმყო“

INTERDISCIPLINARY INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
“Authoritarianism Reimagined: Narratives, Cultures, Continuities, Ruptures, and
Shifts, Past and Present”

15-16 October, 2026

Caucasus University
Tbilisi, Georgia



ავტორიტარიზმი: ნარატივები, კულტურები, განგრძობადობა, რღვევა და
ცვლილებები - წარსული და აწმყო

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INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

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Caucasus University
Tbilisi, Georgia

☎ [1 Paata Saakadze Str. 0102, Tbilisi, Georgia](#)

CONFERENCE SUPPORTED BY JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY AND PETER J. SCHMELZ
(USA)

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JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY (JHU), THE DEPARTMENT OF COMPARATIVE
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SOCIAL SCIENCES AT CU AND THE INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH CENTER ON
GEORGIAN STUDIES (GRC) AT CU (TBILISI GEORGIA)

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CONFERENCE PROGRAM

CONFERENCE KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

[Prof. Dr. Jessica Gienow-Hecht](#)

(Freie Universität Berlin. Germany)

[Prof. Stephen Jones](#) (Harvard University, Davis Center Associate. USA)

Daily Program & Timetable

Time	Session/title	Location/Chair
DAY 1: THURSDAY, OCTOBER 15		
08:30 - 09:00	registration and morning coffee	CU Hall
09:00–09:15	Opening Ceremony & Welcome	CU Hall
	Nana Sharikadze, CU	
	Eavan Cully, Cultural Attaché at the US Embassy in Tbilisi	
	Peter J.Schmelz, JHU	
09:15–10:15	Keynote Address I: The Uses of Autocracy and the Cycle of Resistance	CU Hall
	Stephen F. Jones Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies, Harvard University; Mount Holyoke College (USA)	
10:15–10:45	Coffee Break	CU Hall
10:45–12:15	SESSION 1 — Postcolonial Debates	CU Hall
	Chair: Kevin Karnes (Emory University)	
	1.1. Maia Sigua (Tbilisi State Conservatoire) <i>The Coloniality of Musical Space: Iconography,</i>	

Canon, and Imperial Power in the Recital Hall of the Tbilisi State Conservatoire

- 1.2. Giorgi Tskhadaia** (Caucasus School of Governance, Caucasus University)
An Ordinary Citizen or the Powerful Ruler of the Nation? Political Oligarchy in Georgia
- 1.3. Mariam Manjgaladze** (Caucasus University)
Language and Ideology: The Linguistic Dimension of Political Discourse

12:15–13:45 **Lunch** **CU cantina**

13:45–15:45 **SESSION 2 — Jazz / Folklore / Freedom** **CU Hall**

Chair: Prof. Peter J. Schmelz, Johns Hopkins University

- 2.1. Petr Ferenc** (National Museum, Prague)
Taking the Regime at Its Own Word
- 2.2. Kateryna Ielysieieva** (Institute of Art Studies, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences; National Academy of Culture and Art Management, Ukraine)
Staged Folklore as a Model of State Representation in Socialist Regimes
- 2.3. Cristina Pascu** (National Academy of Music “Gheorghe Dima”)
Performing the Piano under Authoritarianism: Educational and Concert Life in Communist Romania

15:15–15:45 **Coffee Break** **CU Hall**

15:45–17:15 **SESSION 3 — Religion and Authoritarian Identities (part I)** **CU Hall**

Chair: Prof. Phillip Ross Bullock, Oxford University

- 3.1. Rebecca Mitchell** (Middlebury College, USA)
Hagiographic Memory as National Memory:

Sacred Chant and the Politics of Saint-Making in Contemporary Georgia

3.2 Ruta Stanevičiūtė (Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre)

Revising the Uncomfortable Past: From Desovietization to Decolonial Approach

3.3. Tsotne Tchanturia (Georgian Institute of Public Affairs), **Vincenc Kopeček**, and **Lenka Kopečková** (University of Ostrava)

Georgian Television Discourse on 28 November 2024 and Georgia's EU U-turn

Time	Session/title	Location/Chair
DAY 2: FRIDAY, OCTOBER 16		
09:00–10:00	Keynote Address II: “Safe Afghanistan — Kingdom of Wonder: On the Aesthetics of Tourism in Authoritarian Regimes” Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht <i>Freie Universität Berlin (Germany)</i>	CU HALL
10:00–11:30	Session 4: Religion and Authoritarian Identities II Chair: Laura Emmery (Emory University) 4.1. Ana Mgaoblishvili (Caucasus University) <i>Religious Visual Signs: Authoritarian Legacies and Cultural Transformations in Georgia</i> 4.2. Tsypylma Darieva (Centre for East European and International Studies – ZOIS, Berlin) <i>Religious Freedom in an Authoritarian Context: Making and Unmaking Religious Diversity in Azerbaijan and Georgia</i> 4.3. Ketevan Grdzeldze (Caucasus University) <i>War, Violence, and Indifference through the Lens of Poetry</i>	CU HALL

11:30–12:00	Coffee Break	CU HALL
12:00–13:30	Session 5 Navigating Transitional Ambiguities Chair: Maia Sigua (Tbilisi State Conservatoire) 5.1. Kevin Karnes (Emory University) <i>Anarchy in the Tornis! Building Community on the Remains of Empire in Riga, 1989–1992</i> 5.2. Laura Emmery (Emory University) <i>Last Songs: The Magnificent Seven and Yugoslav Disintegration</i> 5.3. Ivana Miladinović Prica (University of Arts in Belgrade) <i>Music as Epistemic Agency in the Late Yugoslav Crisis</i>	CU HALL
13:30–14:30	Lunch	CU HALL
14:30–16:00	Session 6 Global Perspectives on Authoritarianism Chair: Nana Sharikadze, Caucasus University 6.1. Lesar Yurtsever (Freie Universität Berlin) <i>A Modern Authoritarian Brand: Music and U.S.–Turkish Relations in the Interwar Period</i> 6.2. Angelina Zhivova (University of Udine) <i>Authority and Dissent in Animation</i> 6.3. Medea Abulashvili and Anna Berishvili (Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University) <i>Between Repression and Exile: Greek Lives across Stalinism and Postwar Greece</i>	CU HALL
16:00–16:30	Coffee Break	CU HALL
16:30–17:30	Round Table: Authoritarianism, cultural memory, and the challenges of comparative perspectives and approaches.	CU HALL

Moderators: Peter Schmelz (Johns Hopkins University) and Nana Sharikadze (Caucasus University)

CONCERT

16 October 2026, CU HALL
17:30

GEORGIAN FOLK MUSIC

**PERFORMED BY A SPECIALLY ASSEMBLED GEORGIAN FOLK
ENSEMBLE UNDER THE DIRECTION OF GIORGI USHIKISHVILI**

Giorgi Ushikishvili is a Georgian folk-music specialist, educator, ensemble leader, and cultural administrator. He graduated from the Tbilisi State University of Culture and Arts and has been actively engaged in the study, performance, preservation, and promotion of Georgian traditional music since the early 1990s.

From 2004 to 2013, he served as Director of the State Folklore Centre of Georgia, where he contributed to the preservation and revival of historically documented Georgian folk repertoire, including the reconstruction of traditional songs from archival recordings. He has also worked in music broadcasting.

An experienced leader of a Georgian traditional folk ensemble, Ushikishvili combines practical expertise in Georgian vocal traditions with extensive experience in folklore education and cultural heritage work.

ABSTRACTS

KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

Prof. Stephen Jones

(Harvard University, Davis Center Associate, Boston, USA)

The Uses of Autocracy and the Cycle of Resistance

Georgian democracy is the victim of two powerful shifts in world politics. First, the growing dominion of authoritarian empires and second, the ascendancy of right-wing regimes and parties in neighboring Europe, a region that Georgian parties have traditionally sought to emulate or join. The destruction of democracy in Georgia reflects both of these shifts abroad. But democracy in Georgia has never been institutionalized (“consolidated”), and the domestic sources of authoritarianism have been persistent since 1991. This is why I use “creeping authoritarianism” rather than “democratic backsliding” to describe Georgia’s political direction over the last 35 years. The authoritarian system in Georgia builds on historical and cultural patterns of personalized rule, illiberalism, economic inequality, mass unemployment, unresolved social, ethnic and political cleavages, and an intelligentsia unintegrated into Georgian society.

Authoritarian regimes depend on repression and control. Yet, as Timothy Garton Ash has pointed out, there are uses to such adversity. Authoritarian systems have new methods of control but they produce multiple points of resistance. The goal of longevity is one of the greatest weaknesses they face.

Prof. Dr. Jessica Gienow-Hecht

(Freie Universität Berlin, Germany)

Safe Afghanistan — Kingdom of Wonder: On the Aesthetics of Tourism in Authoritarian Regimes

In her keynote, IR historian Jessica Gienow-Hecht asks how illiberal regimes articulate beauty and attractiveness in tourism campaigns; why some campaigns (but not all) are so successful; and how illiberal strategies compare to liberal aesthetics. Tourism branding, she believes, functions as a central aesthetic form of authoritarian power. Borrowing from Jacques Rancière’s *The Emancipated Spectator* (2008), Neil Rosendorf’s *Franco Sell’s Spain to America* (2014) and based on sources and fieldwork in the Far East, Southeast Asia, Europe and the Middle East, she explores the juxtaposition of political power, cosmopolitanism, visual orders, feudal traditions, and historical spectacle. When most successful, she argues, authoritarian states craft and project an aesthetic of ordered continuity in which the nation appears, presumably, attractive to both domestic and international audiences: unified, timeless, harmonious, hospitable, often both modern and traditional, and frequently downright “exotic.”

INDIVIDUAL PAPERS

Medea Aabulashvili and Anna Berishvili

(Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, Tbilisi, Georgia)

“Between Repression and Exile: Greek Lives across Stalinism and Postwar Greece”

This paper examines the entangled histories of repression, displacement, and political rupture experienced by Greek communities across Stalinist Georgia. Focusing on the Greek minority in Soviet Georgia, it analyzes the mechanisms of Stalinist nationality policy, particularly the waves of repression and deportation in the 1930s and especially in the 1940s, that targeted ethnic minorities as allegedly “unreliable elements.” Greek victims were subjected to arrest, exile, forced resettlement, and the dismantling of such community organizations as schools, theatres, and newspapers), revealing how authoritarian governance reimagined ethnicity as a category of political suspicion.

Special attention is given to the new wave of deportations from Georgia to Central Asia and other places that began in 1949. We argue that this campaign cannot be understood solely within the internal logic of late Stalinism. Rather, it was closely intertwined with the geopolitical aftermath of the Greek Civil War (1946-1949). The defeat of the Greek communists in 1949 reshaped Soviet perceptions of the Greek diaspora, intensifying anxieties about loyalty, cross-border affiliations, and potential political instability. In this sense, the repression of Soviet Greeks was not only an expression of domestic authoritarian control but also a response to shifting international alignments and ideological ruptures.

By placing these developments alongside the experience of Greece during World War II and the Greek Civil War, the paper highlights how authoritarian practices operated across regimes and borders, producing parallel forms of displacement and ideological polarization. Drawing on archival materials and victim records, the study explores how narratives of suffering, silence, and memory evolved from Stalinism into the Cold War period. Tracing Greek lives between repression and exile, the paper contributes to broader discussions on authoritarianism’s transnational dimensions, its capacity for adaptation, and the long-term consequences of political violence for minority communities.

Tsypylma Darieva

(Centre for East European and International Studies – ZOIS, Berlin)

“Religious Freedom in an Authoritarian Context: Making and Unmaking Religious Diversity in Azerbaijan and Georgia”

Since 1991, in post-communist Georgia and Azerbaijan, there has been both a growth of religious diversity as well as the promotion of selective authoritarian control over religious communities. The legal frameworks for religious freedom in both countries (state committees for religious affairs) recognise only a few “traditional” religions, and suppress or instrumentalise “non-traditional” denominations and religious minorities. This is evident among Muslims in Georgia and among new Protestant communities in

Azerbaijan, albeit to different degrees. In authoritarian, secular Azerbaijan, state authorities continue to monopolise religious infrastructure, including places of worship and access to religious education. By contrast, the comparatively less authoritarian Georgian state privileges a single religious denomination, the powerful Georgian Orthodox Church, while marginalising other religious communities. Based on qualitative research and ethnography, I examine the continuities in the politics, rhetoric, and interactions between state and faith in these two South Caucasian societies, discussing the ways the state regulates religious diversity in an authoritarian context. I argue that authoritarian resilience depends not only on political institutions, but also on inherited logics and the routinised practices of Soviet style administration that normalise exclusion and unequal citizenship.

Laura Emmerly
(Emory University)

“Last Songs: The Magnificent Seven and Yugoslav Disintegration “

In this presentation, I excavate complex intersections between sound, ideology, and state collapse. Josip Broz Tito’s death in 1980 marked a great political, economic, and cultural shift in Yugoslavia. The country was experiencing a rapid rise in nationalistic tendencies while simultaneously opening to Western ideals. Yugoslavia’s unique third-way position between the Eastern and Western blocs facilitated a comparatively open cultural policy. Yugoslavia’s approach, combined with the slow demise of communism across the continent, spurred critical, chaotic, and creative music output in the 1980s. The response by composers across Yugoslavia resulted in a pluralism of styles, free from any vestiges of socialist realism.

In 1988, seven young, talented, and daring students from the Faculty of Music in Belgrade made a loud splash. Embracing pop, folk, MTV, music theater, and film music, and fighting academic elitism, they brought something so new, fresh, and raw to the Yugoslav music scene: They were classical music composers with rock-star personas. The seven youngsters, who called themselves The Magnificent Seven, were considered the “new hope” of what had become a stale, academic music scene in Belgrade and Yugoslavia. Tragically, just after their formation and as they were gaining nationwide popularity, the political instability in Yugoslavia in 1990 brought everything to a sudden end, turning their dream into a nightmare. This paper documents one of the final flourishings of creative music in Yugoslavia, as the country confronted the outbreak of secessionist wars and the collapse of the political state.

Petr Ferenc
(National Museum, Prague)

“Taking the Regime at Its Own Word”

Eastern Bloc countries shared the experience of a state-controlled cultural monopoly, in which the regime functioned as the sole publisher, client, manager, ideologue, and censor of the entire cultural field. Artists and other creative practitioners who wished to work on a professional or semi-professional basis—and to earn a living from their work—were required to conform to official rules and ideological expectations. Spontaneous, independent, do-it-yourself, and underground cultural activities were regarded as inherently suspicious and were persecuted to varying degrees depending on the political climate.

While a minority of artists chose complete independence and accepted the associated social, economic, and legal risks, other groups of artists, promoters, and organisers adopted a different strategy. They sought to “take the regime at its own word” by operating within the legal framework and actively invoking the

creative freedoms formally guaranteed by the state constitution as well as by international commitments, most notably the Helsinki Accords. These individuals and collectives deliberately positioned themselves on the edge of legality, balancing between official recognition and the constant threat of criminal prosecution, while aiming to reach the widest possible audience through sanctioned channels.

One of the most significant examples of this approach was the Jazz Section, an organisation founded within the Czechoslovak Union of Musicians that existed approximately from 1972 to 1988. During this period, it organised large-scale festivals—crucial not only for jazz but also for alternative and experimental rock—numerous concerts, and an extensive publishing program that included both magazines and books. The Jazz Section was banned in the mid-1980s, and several members of its board were imprisoned. Nevertheless, its activities continued through successor organisations that remain active to this day.

Since around 2020, the National Museum in Prague—specifically the Czech Museum of Music and its Documentation Centre for Popular Music and New Media—has been systematically studying the archives of the Jazz Section. This paper introduces both the history of the Jazz Section and the museum’s ongoing research, arguing that the organisation’s strategies of negotiating, exploiting, and challenging state authority retain both analytical value and contemporary relevance.

Ketevan Grdzeldze
(Caucasus University)

“War, Violence, and Indifference through the Lens of Poetry”

This paper examines a number of poems by Ezra Pound (Cantos LXXII and LXXIII) and W. B. Yeats (“The Second Coming,” “Meditations in Times of Civil War”) to explore how modernist poetry, even when born from resistance to old conventions and a desire for intellectual liberation, may become entangled with authoritarian narratives. In both Pound and Yeats, though in varying degrees and forms, the experience of war, historical crisis, and perceived injustice produces visions of destruction and renewal that can lend – and, in Pound’s case, did lend – aesthetic force to violence, tyranny, or the emotional detachment of a passive onlooker, casting “a cold eye on life and death.” From the famous collaboration at the stone cottage, to Yeats’s tower and Pound’s changing residences in Italy, the dream of apocalypse and rebirth gave rise to radicalism, reinforcing a belief that art had to be a requiem for the old barren world and an annunciation of a new one.

The paper also draws a few parallels to similar events in Georgia, as symbolist poets welcomed the Bolshevik invasion until the regime launched the Great Purges. This enduring yet strikingly paradoxical relationship between art, freedom, and authoritarian rule remains acutely relevant today, as we are currently re-experiencing large-scale wars, rapidly changing political and cultural landscapes, dehumanization, indifference, and an intensifying polarization of thought. These conditions leave abundant space for authoritarian regimes to manipulate and exploit noble dreams for the propagation of hatred and violent ideology.

Kateryna Ielysieieva
(Institute of Art Studies, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences; National Academy of Culture and Art Management, Ukraine)

“Staged Folklore as a Model of State Representation in Socialist Regimes”

This article examines the institutionalization of staged musical folklore during the socialist period, with a focus on the creation and development of state folklore ensembles. After World War II, socialist regimes across Eastern Europe adopted the Soviet model of professional folklore performance: large state-funded ensembles, artistic councils, standardized repertoires, and choreographic productions. Folklore became a key cultural instrument for the formation of socialist cultural identity, visually and musically representing national unity, collectivity, and folk culture.

In the postwar years in Yugoslavia and Bulgaria, this process intersected with the Macedonian question. The creation of ensembles in the Macedonian cultural region reflected political debates about identity and territoriality. The State Folk Song and Dance Ensemble Pirin, founded in 1954 in the South Western Province of Bulgaria, became one of such institutions, created to represent regional culture on the national stage. Its initial artistic direction was linked to the discourse on Macedonian cultural identity. Yet with the changing political climate, the ensemble soon became a representative of a broader national style of Bulgarian folklore, incorporating musical and dance material from other regions of the country. Ultimately, with numerous international tours, the ensemble became a cultural ambassador for the entire country. It was according to the change of the ideological trend from the Yugoslav slogan “many nations – one people” to the Bulgarian and Soviet emphasis on “one nation – one people,” revealing different approaches to national identity within socialism. This paradox – local specificity within a single national model – became a characteristic feature of socialist folklore ensembles.

By examining the development of the Pirin Ensemble, this article shows how a socialist cultural institution could simultaneously reflect political agendas and create sustainable models of cultural representation. The case of Pirin demonstrates how socialist cultural policy transformed folklore into a coherent, visually appealing artistic national performance tradition.

Kevin Karnes

(Emory University)

“Anarchy in the Tornis! Building Community on the Remains of Empire in Riga, 1989–1992”

Drawing on private archives and oral histories, this paper sketches the origins of the Tornis (*Tower*) collective of musicians in Riga at the turn of the 1990s. Initiated by teenage members of the band *Ir Bijuši Mati un Izbijuši* (*There was hair and it fell out*), the collective’s work entailed, in its first year of existence: founding a zine to connect with other young musicians; outfitting a recording studio in a municipal water tower (the namesake *tornis*); cultivating a network for distributing their recordings; engaging in musical and print collaborations with a community of punks some 150 km away; recruiting numerous other bands and acts to join the collective; producing nearly thirty tape albums; and arranging performances by Tornis artists at concerts and festivals across the city. As I will suggest, these histories reveal the radical creativity with which artists navigated both the vestiges of centralized state authority and the social and economic lacunae that defined daily life in the so-called *juku laiki*—times of madness—of post-Soviet Latvian transition. I will recount Tornis members’ negotiations of a lingering tariffication system and monopolies on public performance spaces maintained by state institutions, as well as their efforts to monetize their artworks and develop unregulated ecosystems for making connections and sharing information. In short, I suggest, the early history of the collective offers glimpses of a largely forgotten world, revealing how projects were seeded and sustained in the radically uncertain liminal spaces opened by the end of empire.

Mariam Manjgaladze

(Caucasus University)

“Language and Ideology: The Linguistic Dimension of Political Discourse “

This paper examines language as a pivotal instrument of political power and ideological control. It is well established that language is not merely a means of communication; it also serves as a mechanism for constructing social reality. Examples from Georgia’s historical and contemporary experience demonstrate how paradigms of language policy shift in tandem with changes in ruling ideology.

The paper analyzes three primary stages of Georgia’s language policy:

- The efforts of the leaders of the First Democratic Republic (1918–1921) to establish language as the foundation of national identity;
- The Soviet totalitarian era, during which the Georgian language endured constant pressure from ideological “stamping” and Russification;
- The post-Soviet and contemporary period, where, on one hand, the adoption of the Organic Law on the State Language became a guarantor for protecting linguistic sovereignty, while on the other hand, the political discourse of government officials has shifted such that they frequently violate the state language law themselves and fail to properly implement the tasks it outlined.

Particular attention will be given to contemporary Georgian political rhetoric. Public speeches by politicians today will be analyzed through the lens of lexical, stylistic, and ethical norms. Furthermore, the paper will highlight examples of the manipulative use of language in the modern political arena. I contend that “hate speech” and aggressive metaphors are displacing rational debate, which directly impacts the formation of public opinion and cultivates social polarization.

Based on this research, I conclude that language policy in Georgia is heavily influenced by what might be termed the political conjuncture. Consequently, it is essential to establish standards for academic and ethical speech in public spaces, as this is a fundamental prerequisite for enhancing the prestige of the state language and developing a healthy political culture.

Ana Mgaoblishvili
(Caucasus University)

“Religious Visual Signs: Authoritarian Legacies and Cultural Transformations in Georgia”

Authoritarianism is not only a political system but also a cultural force, a narrative, and a lived experience. This paper explores how religious visual signs have shaped, legitimized, and transformed authoritarian power within Georgia’s cultural narratives, from the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union to the present day. These visual signs function not merely as expressions of faith but as instruments of power, collective memory, and identity politics.

Historically, Christianity has been central to the Georgian national consciousness, cultural resilience, and its various forms of resistance. However, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Russian imperial and Soviet anti-religious policies subjected ecclesiastical spaces and religious visual signs to control, repression, and ideological reprogramming. This produced complex and often contradictory relationships between religion and state authority.

This paper examines various forms of religious visual signs—including architecture, sculpture, and painting—as sites where political and spiritual spaces intersect. These signs reflect Georgia’s “dual inscription”: the coexistence of historical memory and contemporary state narratives.

Within this framework, the paper investigates the messages conveyed by religious visual signs, their role in shaping everyday life in contemporary Georgia, and the ways they reflect, legitimize, and transform narratives rooted in past authoritarian experiences. By analyzing these signs with an interdisciplinary approach, this study highlights their significance in the construction of memory and identity across both historical and contemporary cultural contexts.

Ivana Miladinović Prica

(University of Arts in Belgrade)

“Music as Epistemic Agency in the Late Yugoslav Crisis”

In Yugoslavia, the late 1980s were marked by a complex transition in which the gradual erosion of the socialist order allowed nationalism to dominate both political and cultural discourse. Composed on the eve of tectonic shifts in Yugoslav society, *Pasija svetoga kneza Lazara* (*The Saint Prince Lazarus Passion*) by Serbian composer Rajko Maksimović premiered in 1989 in Belgrade during the commemoration of the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo, transforming a cultural jubilee into a potent political platform. Maksimović’s *Passion* became an “audio emblem” for national emancipation through its prominent role in the jubilee ceremony: Following its premiere for the state’s and Orthodox Church’s highest officials, it was played two days later at the mass rally at the Gazimestan Monument—a memorial site and monument commemorating the Battle of Kosovo—now the site of Slobodan Milošević’s infamous speech that gathered one million attendees. Thus, Maksimović’s *Passion*, performed at this event and broadcast nationally, transformed his composition into a symbol of a movement that, at that moment, carried clear hegemonic ambitions, even though the composer himself did not share them. This study focuses on the epistemological function of the *Passion*, investigating ideological congruence between the work’s medievalist imagery and the nationalist programme of Serbian political elites, situating it within broader discourses on music’s epistemic agency, the performative dimensions of political ritual, and the ethical implication of artistic engagement in authoritarian mobilization.

Rebecca Mitchell

(Middlebury College, USA)

“Hagiographic Memory as National Memory: Sacred Chant and the Politics of Saint-Making in Contemporary Georgia”

In July 2011, the Georgian Orthodox Church canonized the five Karbelashvili brothers (Pilimon, Andria, Polievktos, Petre and Vasil) for their efforts to preserve Georgian national culture against both imperial Russian and Soviet repression. Their work to record Georgian history, architecture and, most importantly, Georgian sacred chant, was “associated with the battle for justice, Georgia’s freedom and independence, and with the preservation of Georgian culture, identity and originality” (State Folklore Centre of Georgia). This hagiographic narrative equates the struggle for national culture with religious transcendence, even while it obfuscates a more complicated reality in which the brothers negotiated the complexities, first of the imperial Russian and, later, the Soviet regime. In this paper, I analyse this “hagiographic memory” constructed for the brothers in contrast to the nuance and intricacy of their lives. What vision did the

Karbelashvili brothers themselves have for the future of Georgian Orthodoxy, and how did these hopes play out against the realities of revolution (1917), independence (1918-21), and the establishment and exercise of Soviet power (1922-91)? How and why did post-Soviet hagiographic memory simultaneously sanctify and erase portions of their lives? And how do government efforts to institutionalize Georgian sacred chant in recent years relate to current imaginings of Georgian national identity?

Cristina Pascu

(National Academy of Music “Gheorghe Dima”)

“Performing the Piano under Authoritarianism: Educational and Concert Life in Communist Romania”

The history of music is shaped not only by composers and texts, but also by performers, whose interpretative practices bring works to life and reveal their social, artistical, political contexts. Ninuca Oșanu Pop was one of the most important pianists in Romania and a central figure of Cluj’s musical life in the second half of the twentieth century. Trained at the Conservatory in Cluj (1949–1962), she pursued a teaching career spanning nearly five decades (1962–2011), while also holding major academic leadership positions, including dean and rector during the 1980s. As a performer, Ninuca Oșanu Pop was at the forefront of promoting contemporary music. She gave numerous first performances of works by Romanian composers, as well as Western compositions that were difficult to access in the context of communist Romania. Her activity as a member of the Romanian “Ars Nova” ensemble - specializing in contemporary music - included international tours, offering a firsthand perspective on cultural mobility, the control of circulation, and the experience of “leaving the country” under authoritarian conditions.

This paper considers the performer’s experience as a cultural agent in an authoritarian system, focusing on professional and institutional challenges, the reception of contemporary music, mechanisms of legitimising new repertoire, relationships with composers, and the concrete conditions of access to scores and musical information.

Drawing on the notion of microhistory, as defined by Carlo Ginzburg, this presentation reconstructs the life of a performer within a totalitarian system, by moving from the small scale to the larger one. Primary sources, such as interviews and documents from her personal archive, published by the author in the volume *Ninuca Oșanu Pop. Life, a multisonorous mosaic. Memories in dialogue*, constitute an epistemic crucible from which the historical, cultural, institutional, and contextual dimensions of Romanian musical life under communism can be distilled.

Maia Sigua

(Tbilisi State Conservatoire)

“The Coloniality of Musical Space: Iconography, Canon, and Imperial Power in the Recital Hall of the Tbilisi State Conservatoire”

This paper analyzes the interior of the Recital Hall of the Tbilisi State Conservatoire as a material manifestation of Russian imperial cultural policy in the process of institutionalizing academic music education in Georgia. The Recital Hall, one of the city’s earliest professional concert venues, occupies a central position in Tbilisi’s musical history, functioning as both a performance space and a site of symbolic cultural authority.

The hall’s stylistic hybridity, combining Baroque, Neoclassicism, and Art Nouveau elements, is interpreted not as a simple adoption of European models, but as a product of imperial mediation. Drawing

on Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and "Third Space," the interior is read as a liminal zone in which European aesthetic norms were translated and reframed through a Russian imperial cultural filter. This hybrid spatial language reflects broader mechanisms by which imperial power operated in cultural peripheries.

Attention is given to the decorative details, including allegorical figures and busts of canonical composers. Using tools from music iconography, these elements are analyzed as a spatial archive of musical canon formation. Within Edward Said's framework of cultural imperialism, the selection and arrangement of busts serve as visual naturalizations of hierarchical value systems imposed by the imperial center, situating Tbilisi as a site for European art mediated through Russian authority.

Despite historiographical narratives emphasizing the European-type institutional character of the conservatoire and its predecessor, the building's construction history, marked by Anton Rubinstein's symbolic contribution alongside Georgian patrons' decisive support, exposes tensions within imperial cultural discourse. From a decolonial perspective, the Recital Hall emerges as a space where the establishment of academic music education coincided with cultural subordination and epistemic inequality. The research for this paper draws on archival materials, anniversary publications of the Tbilisi State Conservatoire, and selected scholarly works. It seeks to revise the historical narrative of academic music education in Georgia through a critical interpretation of interior space, demonstrating how imperial power and cultural mediation were materially inscribed in the Recital Hall.

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"Revising the Uncomfortable Past: From Desovietization to Decolonial Approach"

Over the recent decades, historical musicologists in the USSR and the communist bloc countries have been critically revising the established approaches to the coexistence and interaction of the official doctrine and alternative discourses in the Cold War years. In the research of late Soviet art, binary oppositions such as official/unofficial and conformist/nonconformist have long been abandoned as a model formed by the totalitarian conception of the state. Such a critical view is based on the notion that the totalitarian regime is only one of many versions of the USSR's interpretation, more appropriate for examining the early historical periods of the state or for discussing the ideological origins of communist regimes. The postcolonial approach, which began to gain popularity at the turn of the twenty-first century in the works of Lithuanian scholars, was met with a critical reaction from those scholars whose research was based on the concept of Soviet occupation. It was the confrontation between these two different interpretations of the Soviet past that slowed down the analysis of Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union as empires. Yet the war in Ukraine has undoubtedly triggered the need for such a broader view. And it is culture that the decolonization of its phenomena has brought a new generation of Lithuanian scholars to analyze more closely. At the same time, far from monolithic, decolonial theory is a heterogeneous approach full of internal disagreements, yielding widely divergent political visions (Ciccariello-Maher, 2020) which seems very challenging for post-Soviet societies. In this paper, I examine how the change in interpretative approach has affected the musical repertoire and the reception of the Soviet past in Lithuania after 1990.

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"Georgian Television Discourse on 28 November 2024 and Georgia's EU U-turn"

This paper examines how the Georgian government's suspension of EU accession talks on 28 November 2024 was legitimised in Georgian digital news and how the European Union was represented in this critical moment of Georgia's European trajectory. Drawing on a corpus of more than 100 highly read articles published on that day by Imedi, Rustavi 2, and TV Pirveli, comprising 22,766 words translated into English, the study combines framing and agenda-setting approaches with critical discourse analysis of lexical choices, attributed voices, and verbal reactions. We identify an interconnected ideological ecosystem organised around frames of peace, dignity, sovereignty, blackmail, performance, state strength, traditional versus liberal Europe, foreign interference, strategic patience, and continued formal commitment to European integration. The analysis shows that these narratives are reproduced through fragmentation and repetition in short news items, selective access to voice, positive self-presentation of Georgian Dream as pragmatic and protective, and the systematic othering of opposition actors and civil society. At the same time, the EU is represented through strategic ambiguity: It remains a declared foreign-policy priority while also being framed as a potential threat to sovereignty, economic freedom, traditional values, peace, and national dignity. We argue that this ambiguity enables government-aligned discourse to address competing audiences and legitimise a major political U-turn without explicitly abandoning the European aspiration. The paper contributes to research on political framing, narrative reproduction, and media-mediated legitimization in contexts of democratic backsliding and geopolitical contestation.

Giorgi Tskhadaia

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"The Ambivalent Oligarchy in Georgia"

Georgia's political regime has been often described as "oligarchic" and being an instance of the so-called "state capture" (Falkowski, 2016; Lebanidze & Kakachia, 2017; Kukhianidze, 2021; Loftus, 2024). In this sense, it is juxtaposed with the oligarchic rule in other post-Soviet countries – most notably, Ukraine and Moldova (Konończuk et al., 2016; Nakhashidze, 2024). The similar type of regime also existed in Russia, before Vladimir Putin consolidated and centralized power (Graham, 1999; Åslund, 2005). However, I argue that, despite these similarities, the Georgian oligarchy is paradigmatically different from its post-Soviet counterparts. Not only is the Georgian Dream's regime essentially a one-man rule, but also, the powerful oligarch-in-charge, Bidzina Ivanishvili, enjoys direct political legitimacy among his supporters. In the past, Ivanishvili also occasionally occupied top political offices, such as those of the prime minister and the chairman of the ruling party.

I contend that an oligarchic ruler that also enjoys direct political legitimacy creates a type of regime that is an authoritarian innovation. I call Ivanishvili's regime an "ambivalent oligarchy" and argue that it offers several advantages to its leader. First, Ivanishvili can pose as an ordinary businessman or the de facto leader of the country depending on what a concrete political context requires, deflecting blame and appropriating the ruling party's achievements selectively. Second, this duality of nature also allows him to act as the government in charge and his own opposition at the same time, creating expectations that the Georgian Dream can correct its own mistakes or chart a radically new course without the need of the real opposition. And last but not least, the political nature of Ivanishvili's oligarchy ensures that he is a formidable opponent for both ordinary

oligarchs without substantial political legitimacy and professional politicians who lack their own financial capital that may act as a boost or even a substitute for personal charisma.

Lesar Yurtseva

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“A Modern Authoritarian Brand: Music and U.S.–Turkish Relations in the Interwar Period”

This paper examines how and why Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s government used European classical music to project a modern authoritarian brand of Turkey to United States audiences. In the 1920s and 1930s, Atatürk and his Republican elite promoted classical music as the emblem of progress and civilization in Turkey. This music, they hoped, would recast the presumed “primitive” Ottoman past into a modern, Western-oriented Turkish identity. The government cast newly trained musicians as agents of the nation and expected them to compose symphonies and operas that fused Western harmony with Anatolian folk melody. Many scholars have stressed the musical reforms’ authoritarian, top-down character: The state prohibited local practices, such as Turkish classical music, sidelined minority voices, Kurds and Armenians among them, and decreed which sounds counted as legitimately Turkish. This paper turns the lens outward. Drawing on Turkish and U.S. newspapers, diplomats’ diaries, and archival documents, it argues that the government staged these musical reforms for foreign observers, U.S. diplomats among them, as a modern authoritarian brand: an image of a disciplined, homogenized, and hierarchical Western nation. The brand certified Turkey’s modernity through the West’s own highest cultural credential at the time, the symphony, and openly displayed state authority as the force behind the achievement. Ankara wagered that this image would displace the “Terrible Turk,” the hook-nosed barbarian of U.S. caricatures, and win Turkey better terms in trade, diplomacy, and equal standing. U.S. Ambassador Joseph Grew, a devoted concertgoer, observed, criticized, and often admired what he heard in the concert halls of Istanbul and Ankara. His dispatches carried that admiration into U.S. diplomatic channels, where it fed the narrative the young republic sought to establish: Under Atatürk, a modern Turkey was in the making.

Angelina Zhivova

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“Authority and Dissent in Animation”

This paper proposes an analysis of animation as a privileged cultural space for articulating dissent under authoritarian regimes, focusing on three animated films by Jiří Trnka and Andrei Khrzhanovsky: *The Hand* (1965), *The Glass Harmonica* (1968), and *The Nose or Conspiracy of Mavericks* (2020). Across different national and historical contexts of authoritarian rule, these works construct a sustained critique of authoritarian power and its relationship with artistic autonomy through dense allegorical narratives and symbolic imagery.

Both *The Hand* and *The Glass Harmonica* represent rare and extreme cases of censorship in animation history. Khrzhanovsky’s *The Glass Harmonica* (scored by Alfred Schnittke) was banned and shelved in the Soviet Union due to its explicit allegory of state control over artistic creation, while Trnka’s *The Hand*, with music by Václav Trojan, was prohibited in the aftermath of the Prague Spring and shortly after the director’s death. Through close visual and musical analysis, this paper will demonstrate how these films exemplify animation’s capacity to encode political resistance via cultural references, visual metaphors, and

intertextual allusions to painting, music, and literary traditions, requiring from the viewer a historically and culturally informed interpretive effort.

By extending the analysis to *The Nose or Conspiracy of Mavericks*, this contribution explores the continuity and transformation of Khrzhanovsky's artistic statement over more than five decades. Framing animation as a cultural site where authoritarian power is negotiated, contested, and symbolically reimagined, the contribution asks whether "slow" animation, deeply rooted in historical memory and symbolic codes, remains an effective mode of resistance today. It concludes by contrasting this tradition with contemporary forms of rapid, direct dissent, such as street art, performance, and digital animation, suggesting a shift in the temporal and aesthetic strategies of anti-authoritarian expression.

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