Maia Araviashvili's Interview with Journalist Ia Merkviladze
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Interviewer: - Greetings! Today, our guest is Ms. Ia Merkviladze, formerly a journalist at the Voice of America (VOA) Georgian Service.

Ia, could you briefly tell us about yourself? Where were you born, and in what year?

Interviewee: - I was born on April 26, 1968, in the city of Kutaisi. I finished school there, as well as music college. Later, I enrolled at Tbilisi State Medical Institute, and by profession I am a child psychiatrist and psychotherapist. As for how I ended up in journalism—well, it happened during the civil war. At that time, I was in my third year of medical school, studying forensic medicine. It was exactly the period when the civil war began. In the morgue of Aramiants Hospital, they were bringing in the bodies of both Zviadists and, let's say, non-Zviadists... Society was divided by such labels, and the bodies were stacked on top of each other. I will never forget it because that was precisely when we were studying forensic medicine at the institute. It was January when all the media outlets and newspapers were shut down. The war had taken over everything. My brother and I barely managed to reach Kutaisi from Tbilisi by train for the New Year, but then we couldn't return to Tbilisi. I couldn't go back exactly when I was supposed to take my exam in forensic medicine. There was heavy snow—unimaginable circumstances that our Generation X went through… I don't even know which generation I belong to anymore, I can't remember (laughs). They labeled us, defined us, and made us seem like some mothball-covered relics of the past (laughs).

My father and I would go to Kutaisi Airport every day, but there were no flights. Then, one snowy day, I was there with just a small handbag. My father got out of the car to check if there was any chance of a flight. Suddenly, he came running back, shouting, "Quick, get out! A helicopter is flying to Tbilisi!" If my father had known what was happening inside that helicopter, he certainly wouldn't have let me board. There were ten of us inside, seven of whom, if I recall correctly, were military personnel. The so-called cabin had a small wooden bench running along its sides, while almost the entire "floor" was cut out in a large rectangular opening. In other words, the helicopter had no bottom. The whole time we were flying—about 40 minutes, I think—I could see everything happening below. Well, not that anything was really happening; I was just observing the view. I was looking at the mountains from above while it snowed lightly.

In February 1992, despite the media shutdown, the newspaper *Iberia-Spectri* was still being published. I took my very first article there. I think I filled an entire 24-page notebook. The article was about the role of the intelligentsia in the civil conflict, and its title was *"You Can Get*

More with a Kind Word and a Revolver Than with Just a Kind Word". These are Al Capone's words, and, of course, the editor, Irakli Gotsiridze—the grandson of David Kldiashvili—published it with a heavily shortened version of that title. He also warned me that it was a risky time, and I might get expelled from the institute. Still, at the end of the article, he added a note: "Student of the third group of the Pediatrics Faculty, Medical Institute" (laughs). Interestingly, later on, he offered me a job, saying, "Radio *Voice of America* is looking for a correspondent. They asked me, and I think you're the right person." I refused, saying that I was dedicated to medicine. He replied, "No one really remembers Chekhov as a doctor. Think about it." Strangely enough, years later, I ended up in radio—another American one, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*. My parents had no idea about my article in *Iberia-Spectri*. Later, my father found out anyway because someone called his workplace and told him, "Don't be afraid, but be careful—you might lose your job too," and so on. That's how my collaboration with *Iberia-Spectri* began. In any case, my first article was exactly about this topic—one that was completely unacceptable to me. The idea that a person who should be working with a pen, who should have different tools to persuade others, would be running around with an automatic rifle, threatening to kill the very people for whom they write music or create literary works—that was something I couldn't accept.

Interviewer: – So, in that helicopter, there were absolutely no safety measures?

Respondent: – No, none at all. If someone had slipped, they would have fallen straight down and crashed into a mountain—literally. I'm not saying this as a joke. I don't even know what kept me strong, but I clearly remember how tightly I was pressed against the "wall." Back then, I didn't even have a camera—who would've thought I'd end up on such a historic flight? (laughs).
My father assumed that since there were soldiers and a woman with a child on board, the helicopter must be safe. And I ended up flying for free because I insisted on not missing my forensic medicine exam. My father made sure my wish came true…

Interviewer: – So, this flight was from Kutaisi to Tbilisi?

Respondent – Yes, to Tbilisi.

Interviewer: – And you needed to fly because of the heavy snowfall and lack of transportation…

Respondent – There was no transportation. Nothing was running over Rikoti Pass, no trains, and there was a war. But I had exams to take… So, I was the only person from Kutaisi who made it to Tbilisi during that war. And of course, I honestly passed my forensic medicine exam.
Interviewer: – So, despite the civil war, university classes were still ongoing?

Respondent – Yes, it was exam season, but practically no one from the regions could make it because it was impossible. Not everyone had access to a makeshift helicopter like mine… We were warmly dressed, but I still remember that woman holding her child close, surrounded by soldiers, and there I was (laughs)—a student who made it to the capital just to take an exam. That image is still vivid in my mind. On Machabeli Street, there was the Public Defender's office. It was in an absolutely unimaginable, horrific condition—internally displaced people were living there, the building was crumbling, water was leaking through the roof), and it was frequently shot at with automatic rifles by the so-called "rebels." The *Iberia-Spectri* editorial office was on the top floor. It was broken into every third day, typewriters were always missing, and the editor, Irakli Gotsiridze, was arrested multiple times. It was the only newspaper that was being received by the U.S. Library of Congress. I have no idea how it managed to reach across the ocean during that period, but the fact remains—*Iberia-Spectri* was the only media outlet that kept closing and reopening, again and again. The newspaper's commercial editor lived in the neighboring building on the third floor, and during that time, his balcony was shot at multiple times. So, being a journalist back then was unimaginable… knowing that the moment you stepped out of the building, you could be fired upon and never make it back home.

Interviewer: – Nowadays, you are widely known as a journalist. For example, I only just learned that you have an educational background in child psychiatry. As I understand it, political and social events and changes pushed you to start writing, and that's how you established yourself in this profession, right?

Respondent – After finishing medical school, I worked in a hospital, in a special school for children with intellectual disabilities, and in a polyclinic. Then I started developing an interest in feminism and gender issues. This was around 1996–97, I believe, when I wrote my first article, which was about pornography. At that time, no one had the time to discuss pornography, and it wasn't exactly a mainstream issue, but I felt it was relevant—not necessarily for that specific period, but for the women's movement in general. Later, I wrote about human trafficking, but no one would publish it because they considered the topic to be fabricated, claiming that trafficking and modern slavery didn't exist. There was a newspaper called *Kavkazsky Aktsent* (Caucasian Accent), which translated my article into Russian and published it. I also collaborated with *Dilis Gazeti* (Morning Newspaper). Later, when international foundations appeared, I started deepening my knowledge abroad. I received a grant from the Soros Foundation—one of my projects was *Women's Oral Histories*. One of the stories I translated was about a Muslim Meskhetian woman who had been displaced three or four times in her life. I tried to stay connected to my profession while also writing about pressing issues. I worked with street children as part of a UN project, serving as both a psychologist and an educator. I wrote

about marginalized groups in Georgia—everything from sex workers standing near the circus (they were called *"circus whores"* at the time) to homelessness. I conducted interviews with sex workers and worked on *Radio Liberty's* women's program. I was also involved in gender-related projects at *Caucasian House* and published a bilingual *Short Dictionary of Gender Terms* for journalists. I have conducted various research projects on topics such as *Women and Politics* and *Women and Media Stereotypes*. I studied women's rights at Lund University's Raoul Wallenberg Institute and took courses in conflict resolution mediation in Salzburg. I even founded my own NGO, the Women's Resource Center *Satnoeba* (Dignity). We would meet at my place, organize small activities, and I was part of a group focused on *Women and Conflict* and *Women and Media*.

I traveled to Sochi under the auspices of the United Nations for a meeting with representatives of Abkhazian NGOs. It was part of a bridge-building process—we were engaging in dialogue. At *Caucasian House*, where I worked, Abkhaz and Ossetian women would frequently visit. *Caucasian House* was often targeted by hostile forces because we provided shelter to Chechens. I wrote about Chechens and visited Pankisi multiple times. I believe I might be the only non-Muslim Georgian woman who was ever allowed to be present during *namaz* inside a Muslim prayer hall. At that time, Naira Gelashvili wrote *A Civic Prayer*, a prayer for the survival of the Caucasus, which was recited simultaneously by people of different faiths across various regions of the Caucasus. I even have a photo of myself attending *namaz*. The people of Pankisi also participated in this prayer.

Interviewer: – How many years of active work experience do you have in Georgia? You studied at university and then graduated.

Respondent – I graduated from the Medical Institute in 1993. I traveled to the United States three times on academic visas. In 2005, I attended a summer school at the University of San Francisco.

Interviewer: – So, before deciding to immigrate and live in the U.S., you had already visited the country several times, right?

Respondent – Yes. I also completed a two-year course in conflict resolution and mediation-facilitation in Austria. When I returned to *Caucasian House*, in addition to working in PR and gender-related fields, I was invited to teach conflict resolution classes to displaced children in a Sunday school. These classes involved role-playing exercises and various interactive methods. The group consisted of the younger generation from families affected by the war. This was crucial because they were growing up with the image of an enemy and with persistent post-traumatic stress disorder. Naturally, when you lose a father or your home is destroyed, the enemy becomes dehumanized, and the trauma lingers for years.

On March 8, 2004, I was in Tskhinvali conducting a training session on women's issues—*Media and Gender Stereotypes*. If I'm not mistaken, out of the 30 attendees, 15 were KGB agents, and we were well aware of that. We tried to use these discussions to find a common language, a shared interest, to engage in dialogue—by prioritizing women's issues, topics that would be equally relevant to both Ossetian and Abkhazian women. But the 2008 war destroyed everything and rendered all our efforts meaningless. At least, that's how I see it. I also worked at the International Center for Conflict Resolution. Both organizations were focused on bringing "enemies" closer together. However, all of our efforts were stillborn because Putin's "preparations" were stronger than us. Any attempt at reconciliation was doomed from the start. But back then, we still had hope… It breaks my heart, especially because I personally contributed to these efforts.

I will never forget when Anna Politkovskaya came to Tbilisi. I accompanied her to the Pankisi Gorge. We were sitting in a *marshrutka* when, in the middle of our conversation, she suddenly said to me, word for word: *"У вас нет никакого шанса"* ("You have no chance at all"). Another correspondent from *Novaya Gazeta* was with us. Her words deeply upset me because I believed in what we were doing—I believed that so much time, effort, intellect, and emotional energy had been invested in these reconciliation efforts. I was constantly writing about the need for conflict resolution, empathy, the ability to forgive, and the chances of finding common ground. When *The Prayer for the Salvation of the Caucasus* was being shared, so many people responded to it, embraced it. We truly believed that this energy could somehow help us, that we could overcome this catastrophic situation. But unfortunately, that didn't happen—it *couldn't* happen. It turned out that those who wield power can only be opposed by power itself. Ukraine's example makes this painfully clear. Words alone are not enough. Sadly, *tragically*—only kindness needs a weapon to protect its ideals and itself.

Interviewer: – When you mentioned your arrival, Ia, which year was it, what kind of visit was it, and to what extent did that first visit influence your decision to eventually choose the U.S. as the country where you would settle?

Respondent – My first visit was to the *United States Institute of Peace* in Washington, which was founded by American presidents. It was a very interesting meeting. I was the only one who, so to speak, did not meet the official criteria. In fact, during two of my visits, I ended up in the U.S. in ways that were not originally intended for someone like me—especially in terms of covering hotel and travel expenses. Since I was teaching conflict studies at the time, I wrote to this organization asking whether they had any literature on the subject. I told them I would pay whatever I could afford and asked if they could send it to me because, when it came to conflict studies, there was absolutely nothing available—not even something you could search for in candlelight. I had managed to bring back some materials from Austria and found a few things online. Suddenly, they wrote back asking if I could join a Skype call at a specific time.

So, I joined the call, and if I remember correctly, there were two or three people on the other end. They asked me about ten questions and then said, "Please send us your invitation request and ticket

details to this address." And all I had done was inquire about the cost and availability of books! When I later saw the seminar's selection criteria, it was clear that it was intended only for teachers working in the U.S. Moreover, I wasn't even a teacher—I didn't have a teaching certificate. But still, they invited me. As for my most recent visit, it was a very similar situation. This was for the *University of San Francisco's* summer school/conference titled *Sexual Rights and Moral Panics.* I had only vaguely heard about "moral panics" as a social issue before, but I learned more about it in San Francisco. What was strange was that, just like before, I had only written to ask if they had any literature available. And yet, they invited me with full funding—even though their program did not anticipate hosting someone like me. At that time in Georgia, we were all witnessing *moral panics* fueled by none other than Basil Mkalavishvili's outrageous crusade (laughs). He exhausted us with his constant brandishing of the cross—one day striking someone on the back with it, another day hitting someone over the head. In reality, the target of this kind of obscurantist aggression was Basil Kobakhidze, whom *Caucasian House* had taken in. However, as the aggression escalated, Kobakhidze decided to leave *Caucasian House* himself, saying, *"I know I'm causing problems for you."*

The institution's security was always on alert. We would receive anonymous calls threatening us—*"We're coming to raid you now,"* or *"We're going to set fire to the place."* Why am I bringing this up? Because this was not a normal environment. As a psychiatrist, I have a kind of professional *deformation* (laughs). I tend to attribute many social problems to mental health issues—to psychopathy. Maybe that's a flaw of mine, I don't know. But in any case, I often think this way. I wanted to understand—how can a person who wears a cross be so aggressive, to the point of striking others with it just because someone said or wore something they found unacceptable? Even if it was unacceptable—even if it was wrong—what kind of clergyman are you if you don't approach people with patience and understanding? So, when I came across the term *moral panic*, I was naturally intrigued. That's when I reached out to the American university, asking them to recommend or send me some literature on the topic. This was the period after the Rose Revolution… No one had time for topics like these. They wrote to me, *"Do you have Skype?"* (laughs). I said, *"Yes, I do." "Can you join the call?"* I joined, and once again, there were three or four people sitting there. They interviewed me and then told me, *"We'll send you a ticket right away—come over!"* (laughs). In short, America just wouldn't leave me alone—literally! (laughs). I couldn't even utter a single word, couldn't even ask for a book without being invited over (laughs). And so, once again, I found myself in the U.S.

By that time, I already had Luka… My mother took maternity leave to help with her grandchild. She quit her job, moved to Tbilisi, and raised Luka. The situation was such that either I had to stay home, or she did. Ultimately, we decided it was better for her to leave her job. The income I had, despite my grants and the Bill Foundation project I was working on (the topic was *Media and Gender Stereotypes*), was not enough. I was working three jobs, sleeping only three hours a night, and still, the money wasn't sufficient.

For that last project, neighbors, acquaintances, and even strangers would bring me copies of magazines like *Tbiliselebi* and *Gza*—they would flood me with publications containing the most absurd content. I would flip through them, and my eyes would practically roll to the back of my head. Before that, I had never read anything like it. Even though I was writing about gender issues and masculinity, I had never encountered such sensationalist trash. After that, I watched Maia Asatiani's show two or three times and, out of frustration, wrote three blog posts about it. But then I realized I couldn't keep up with it anymore—it was just an endless cycle of vulgar stereotypes, absurdities, and outright idiocy. And not only was it being mass-produced, but it was also being normalized. A different approach was needed to counter this.

At first, I thought this kind of thing only existed in the format of TV shows. But to my dismay, when I actually delved into this so-called "literature"—which I had stacked up in towers like the books on your shelf—I experienced a full-blown *new* type of cultural shock (laughs). I realized I was living on a completely different planet, completely out of touch with the actual tastes of the society around me. By the way, one of my sharpest articles on domestic violence was published in *Iberia-Spectrum*. Back then, the Ombudsman's office asked me to accompany a representative to a court case in the regions. The case involved the family of a notoriously corrupt MP, Endzel Mkoian, who was harassing his daughter-in-law. They had taken her children away and were ruining her reputation. This case was even included in the Ombudsman's report. The level of injustice was unimaginable. This woman won in all three levels of court, but the ruling was never enforced. In the end, she lost her children, and as far as I know, she no longer lives in Georgia. This was a case of domestic violence. The editor actually made me change the names in my article because there was a serious risk of retaliation. The Mkoian family was basically an armed mafia—everyone was afraid of them, including Shevardnadze. He was a sitting MP in every parliamentary term. When we arrived in Akhaltsikhe, they were *waiting* for us. First, they blocked the road with a staged protest. We managed to get through, but then they almost set up our driver for speeding charges. From KGB-style surveillance to full-on mafia escorts, they followed us everywhere. The mayor—or maybe it was the governor—approached us and said, *"Please, don't ask any questions, don't make any unnecessary moves. Just leave exactly the way you came."* The so-called *enforcement* of the ruling was postponed. We left, followed by a convoy of cars all the way back. Even the woman's brother escorted us to Tbilisi to make sure nothing happened to us.
Moments like these are a very accurate representation of Georgia at that time. This is what the country was like. I'm not just talking about gender sensitivity or similar issues. A woman had her children taken away, and despite a court ruling in her favor, justice was never served.
When I think about Georgia, these are the memories that come to life. When you've played a role in creating a network to combat domestic violence, but then you find out that *35 women were murdered in 2014*, it's incredibly disheartening. As they say—*What was all the running around for? What was the struggle for? What did I fail to do?* (laughs).

The problems of Georgia followed me here to America—I "brought them along." It's not easy to switch off your mind and stop living with the concerns of the country you come from.
In 2014, I participated in a competition announced by the Public Defender's Office, and my blog won second place. My mother accepted the award. The blog is called *"The Moneyless and the Roomless,"* inspired by a quote from Virginia Woolf's book. In it, I describe the reality of women who have come here. It's not the *luxury situation* that it appears to be from Georgia—it's a different reality. And to truly understand it, you need something very simple: genuine interest in these people, beyond just the money they send back home. When you look at the total sums transferred from the U.S. or Greece, you don't see the people behind those numbers. This issue—the invisibility of these individuals—troubles me deeply.

Interviewer: Before we move on to life here and the topic of Georgian emigration, let's go back a bit. How old were you when you decided to move to the U.S.? What year was that? Was this your second time coming here?

Respondent: It was in 2005. I was 37. I came with just a small bag—by that, I mean I had no intention of staying. I had plans, Luka was still little, and I kept staring at my ticket until the last minute. It was a round-trip ticket. By the way, even the first time I came, my friends here—those who stayed—told me, *"Ia, you'll have to move here eventually. Georgia isn't a place where someone like you can stand tall."* Because I wasn't in any political party. Because I had a sharp tongue—I said exactly what I thought. To do what you believe in and write what you truly think, you need financial independence. If you're dependent on a party or an organization, you end up adapting, constantly engaging in self-censorship.

Was this, in some way, a step toward gaining freedom? No, I can't say that. How can someone be free when they've left behind their two-year-old child? In fact, I flew out on Luka's birthday. From a distance, I was able to weigh the situation more objectively and decided that, for my family and my child's future, this was the necessary choice. But only God knows what it cost me—the emotional toll. This is not an easy decision. There was a period, maybe for two or three months, where I couldn't even look at children here. I avoided them—I couldn't bear to hear them laughing and playing. Luka, somehow, sensed that I was leaving, even though he hadn't seen me packing or preparing. That day, when my brother was supposed to take me to the airport, Luka was unusually restless—screaming, crying. The strangest thing happened… Our apartment's window is quite high up, but somehow, he threw one of his shoes so far that it landed two courtyards away. My family searched for it for two days but couldn't find it. Later, a neighbor discovered it and called out to my mother. That day, he was following me around, knocking on the bathroom door, crying, screaming. He had never behaved like that before. Children have instincts. When I left, he was asleep. I'll never forget how he looked—sleeping on his stomach, one cheek pressed into the mattress, his curls spread out. I was afraid to kiss him, thinking he might wake up, and then I wouldn't be able to leave. I didn't hug my mother either—if I had, I might not have been able to walk out the door. That day, I felt awful. It was impossible for our family to survive on 500 lari a month. Actually, my income was even less than that. No one in the family was working, especially Luke (smiles).

Interviewer: - How did events unfold after the visit?

Respondent - After visiting San Francisco, I first lived in Washington and thought maybe I could find something there. They told me that the State Department decides who gets into Voice of America. In short, I had no chance, so I flew to New York and through acquaintances started working as a caregiver for an elderly person, just like everyone else started.

Interviewer: - During this period, you didn't have legal status, you just came on a work visit and had to...

Respondent: - I had a student visa, I came with an academic visa. I think this visa is used by military personnel, clergy, and academics. For some time, I had an invitation from the University of San Francisco, I had offers, but all of this was related to money. Education is a luxury, so it turns out that if I had focused on studying again, I wouldn't have been able to help my family. So I made this choice - in favor of my family.

Interviewer: - Was the reason you chose New York because you had relatives here who would support you in finding a job?

Respondent - I was in Washington at my brother's friend's family, but there simply aren't such types of jobs there, and you can't find them. That's why I came to New York and lived with relatives in Old Bridge until I would start working and, obviously, rent an apartment. This is the period when, basically, you only have one person's phone number. There were these Georgian "agents" who themselves worked as caregivers for the elderly... I bought a job from a Georgian agent, two weeks' payment was required then. She told me she knew some Georgians too, so she gave me their number, then the third person gave me the fourth's number, the fourth gave me the fifth's, and that's how I basically started "networking" without leaving work. Back then, there was no Facebook or other social media. I wrote articles, interviews, published in the newspaper "New Seven Days": my first material was about the Georgian cultural center "Roots". There was a "Roots" concert, and that's when I met choreographer Shorena Barbakadze. I won't forget, I think this was, if I'm not mistaken, 6 months after my arrival in New York. I found myself in a Georgian environment, then they took me to a restaurant, and when I saw the Georgian feast there, I started crying such silent tears that people asked me what was wrong, if I was feeling unwell?... The feeling was so indescribable. Not because of seeing the food, not because I missed cornbread and sulguni cheese. But because it was associated with what I bid farewell to in the summer... Then suddenly when you

see Georgian things, hear Georgian. They brought in hot khachapuri and I started crying even more... Khachapuri as a symbol, as a symbol of that cozy environment where you have a home, where mom is, where there's New Year's hustle and bustle (ფუსფუსი) and where you know people know you, everyone loves you. New Years are painful when you're away from family and you're listening carefully, hoping someone might festively leave work and call you to work those two days of December 31-January 1. Then send money home. Basically, my first 3-4 New Years were like this, I was even "lucky," I had a rented room and lived a more or less social life, went to museums, galleries, theaters, but there are women, men (I've written about them many times) who lived like this for years, not months, years! They live in one family and that family sends money to Georgia. These women can't even go to the bank, they don't know how to deposit money into an account. This is unimaginable to me! Earlier I used to argue more, debate and perceive this more harshly - women, don't torture yourselves, how can you live like this? You're in America, near New York, how can you not go to the Metropolitan Museum? I realized that such "lectures," arguments were pointless. I got tired and then stopped talking about it. I personally know a woman who lived exactly 11 years in one family, when that grandfather died, she really went into a depression, despite losing her parents in Georgia... then she didn't experience such despair. She couldn't leave, didn't even get her papers done. This elderly person's death was such an abnormal, unimaginable tragedy in her life that she basically needed psychiatric help.

Interviewer: - Was the tragedy in the fact that she had already gotten used to it and couldn't imagine adapting to a different environment or something else?...

Respondent - I don't know. Probably she got attached, and also had to worry about the room and moving. She had to get out of that prison. Generally, the "working from home" phenomenon has its specifics, pros and cons, like everything else, but why did the world, civilization come up with an eight-hour workday? And not 24/7? For me, it's absolutely unimaginable - to live in one place for years, not go outside and only see three trees from the window, and that too being the yard of the house where you work. A person develops such a deep attachment that they can't imagine living any other way.

Interviewer: - They're actually living the life of the person they are caring for...

Respondent - Yes, they live there and they don't have their own self anymore. I know many who didn't even have a computer and, so to speak, couldn't physically see their loved ones through Skype. As soon as I had the opportunity to turn on Skype and see my family, my stress was relieved. Obviously, this can't replace being together in reality, but there are people who only had phones and recognized their children only by voice. I always wrote about this topic, and later, when social networks appeared, this topic especially prevailed in my FB pieces. Today, this topic has become relevant also due to the influx of people from Mexico. Women, men meet at borders in camps, prisons. A different story begins on American territory. With shackles on feet and hands.

This is unimaginable stress, they dream about, let's say, staying somewhere with an elderly person, "grandmother", "grandfather", for 3-4 years, 24/7, basically, this is the only way to save money here, because in these unqualified, low-paying jobs, obviously, salaries aren't high. Regarding the so-called living in America: when you work as an elderly caregiver for 7 or more years without leaving their house, you lose basic social life skills. They might not be able to get on a bus and ask questions, they don't know English, can't speak except for that minimal lexical "repertoire": "Hello, Do you want breakfast" and such elementary things. This is what endless corruption, nepotism, and economic problems in Georgia have caused. Many don't see this correlation. They tell me - this is your feminist fuss, these women like living like this and they're doing well. I don't think this is anyone's fuss. This is reality. Georgia never had time for people, for their rights, for universal human values... It doesn't matter if it's a woman, man, minority or majority... Plus, the government urges people - leave this country. From Gamsakhurdia's period until today, no one has declared - your place isn't here. But today we hear - leave, you're redundant. People are really leaving, and not because someone told them to. Because it's impossible to earn a living in such a corrupt country, to live normally, with dignity as befits homo sapiens.

When I first came back from America to Georgia, I was organizing some things and found my mother's Medal of Honor. It was given to her as a highest category teacher. I immediately took a photo and wanted to post it on Facebook. My mother saw it and said, "absolutely not, under no circumstances," because this is her shame: "I worked so hard (mother was teaching piano since she was 15), an honored teacher, highest category, by all criteria..." I'll also say that almost all of her students become her godchildren. This is who my mother is, and my mother shouldn't be ashamed that her pension is at a beggar's level. So she says she's ashamed because if she didn't have a child in America who left her own child behind, shouldn't she be able to leave the store with groceries at least three times a month? She's ashamed... She wouldn't let me take a photo at all, forbade it. To this day, she regrets it, saying it would have been better if she had gone to America and I had stayed with my child. This is a grandmother's position.

Interviewer: - The first challenges you encountered when you arrived in the process of establishing yourself - you decided to be in New York, you already found a job there, what do you remember, what was the biggest challenge, how did you handle it, your expectations, what did you expect to find when you came here and how aligned was it with the reality you found here.

Respondent - When I first went to New York, of course, I went to the Metropolitan Museum. Generally, I personally dreamed of being a ballerina. I used to choreograph dances, invite neighbors, back when we had events à la fourchette (laughs), my mother would host guests with à la fourchette (laughs)... I loved Edgar Degas' ballerinas very much, I still do. When I saw Degas' ballerinas at the Metropolitan Museum, I started crying again (laughs), passersby thought I was physically unwell and offered to call 911 (laughs). In short, I told them to wait, saying the painting reminded me of something... Because ballet was associated with my childhood. I would seat my grandfather, turn on "Moonlight Sonata." Grandfather was like both choreographer and spectator.

Sometimes grandmother would sit in the audience too, if she had time. I would wear my mother's dress, which was very puffy, like a parachute, which she wore while performing "The Queen of Spades" at school. For me, many things were connected to Degas' ballerinas. Just as I would cry at the sight of eggplant with walnuts or khachapuri (laughs), so with Degas. Chronologically, the "Degas" tears came before the khachapuri ones. Now I've gotten over these bouts of sentimentalism. Obviously, starting life from scratch was a challenge. I wasn't unprepared for American tribulations and hadn't fed on happy-ending Hollywood films, I didn't need myth deconstruction.

Once I started working as a manager in a ballet school cafeteria. NYU campus flags were waving in front. I don't remember why, but I always liked NYU. So, I joked that my American dream came true - I'm at a ballet school and next to a beautiful university. Many are disappointed, saying it looks different from afar, what this America turned out to be, etc. Here you have to work hard, struggle, give up many things, and rely only on yourself. I knew I couldn't work as a nanny because I couldn't raise my own child, and seeing children would be more traumatic for me, thus taking more energy from me. However, given my education (pediatrician), it wouldn't be difficult to find jobs quickly. When you're invisible, you're nobody, it's very easy to be oppressed, you can't defend your rights, and you know no one can help you. That's why I didn't want additional stress. You can't and don't organize "on-site" revolutions. When you don't work through an agency, you can't report rights violations to anyone. As I told you above, this is years of living as an invisible being who simply sends money home. If your perception of reality and possibilities fails you, you'll end up jobless, and your family - hungry. Since you're only relying on luck, you meet many scoundrels whom you would never encounter if not for emigration. I also experienced a so-called unpleasant incident. The lawyer told me that despite being in this field for 25 years and seeing cases from people of all nationalities, he had never encountered such an extreme case of a Georgian doing such terrible things to another Georgian...

In Georgia, as I mentioned above, I worked with all marginalized groups...I will never forget when I was working with "street children", I had a beneficiary boy named Mowgli. That child lived on the street. It was his birthday. He dreamed of having a wristwatch, so I bought one and gave it to him. We would stop at different places: behind Didube metro station, near Didube church, etc. wherever these children would gather, and I would teach them there at Didube metro. Besides conducting psychological tests, offering entertainment and thinking games, I also taught them reading and writing, so I took on the role of a teacher as well. One girl told me: "Teacher Ia, Mowgli stole your phone." So the child whose small dream I had fulfilled the day before stole from me. Was I angry? No, because I knew it wasn't his fault. How can you not forgive a child from this category? By the way, I left this job because of Mowgli. Almost in front of everyone, across the street, a homeless man caught Mowgli and was about to sexually abuse him. Despite addressing the ombudsman, talking to police officers, and writing articles, I couldn't change anything, so I left this project. A child who has experienced violence needs much more than two-hour thinking exercises. So when you meet such a category of Georgian here who would sell their soul for 30 or 300 dollars, how can you forgive them? Money is a test of human character. And especially in emigration.

Interviewer: - Why might this issue be more acute here, what causes this?

Respondent - I don't know

Interviewer: - Is it because the category of people who consider money the highest priority has emigrated, or is there another reason?

Respondent: - As they say themselves, "we have become Americans." By the way, when I wrote on Facebook a long time ago: whoever is Georgian and charges people money for finding jobs, remove me from yout friends list, I don't consider you as humans. And about job searching like these "agents", what do you think it is?... They heard somewhere in the neighborhood or followed a grandmother who needed care at the hospital, someone asked if they knew anyone who would care for their mother 24/7 like them, and that's how these jobs are found. The "agent" takes money from someone who's been unemployed or newly arrived for 4-5 months. And now, as I've learned, the "fee" has gone up to one month's salary. You see, this category of people, who always struggled to earn money for bread in their lives, suddenly they say - I started making $3000 a month here and stopped being homo sapiens. They might slit someone's throat for 5 dollars... This is unimaginable for me. So they escaped a crisis... The crisis made them find a way out, came to this country, but ended up in a worse crisis because they can't see the "red lines" anymore and have no other occupation besides counting money. Apparently, this is what gives them happiness.

My friends keep begging me to write a book, because I have so many interesting episodes for a short film that one could make - a non-comic "Imeretian Sketches." And with a thrilling plot, with criminal elements. Obviously, unfortunately. I'm not saying this mockingly, nor am I mentioning names, but it's like a small village here too. Everyone knows everything. I can list many people who, as they say, dressed someone then ended up undressing them. That's why I get tense when it comes to giving recommendations to strangers who come through Mexico's border or through legal ways. My nervous system can't handle so many disappointments.
Today in Brooklyn, "my neighborhood" has practically turned into a Georgian neighborhood. I don't feel like I'm in a foreign country. I only hear Georgian on the street. It's basically like being in Kutaisi and Tbilisi. If there are ten people squatting around a broken car and fixing it, they must be Georgians. When you go to the store, every second person is Georgian, speaking Georgian on the phone, and I have such a feeling that only my mother and my brother remained in Georgia - I'll bring them here and that will put an end to nostalgia.
Once when I came out of the metro, I got a call, I was talking on the phone, at some point I felt that some man was clearly following me. Suddenly he tells me, are you Georgian, do you have money for cigarettes and can you take me home. 2-3 years ago I would have definitely stopped,

would have started looking for an apartment for him right there, we would have exchanged phone numbers, maybe a job opportunity would have come up. But this time I decided to go the way of saving my nervous system. I told him that unfortunately, I couldn't help, he still followed me and when I got home, I didn't go in, I circled around the house and he still wouldn't leave me alone. You hear not so good news and therefore, I didn't take the risk. Then there was a warning to remove your Georgian name and surname from the mailbox, saying Georgians are stealing from Georgians. Luka removed my first and last name and left only the apartment number. I couldn't have imagined such times would come...

Obviously, existential problems are compounded by the problem of self-realization, and you immediately feel more dissatisfied that you can't do what you did in Georgia, I mean professionally and in public life. Clearly, you think Georgia needs you more than America does. If I hadn't come to America, this country wouldn't have missed me much. I believe that our generation is a lost generation, I even said this on behalf of Georgian artist Angelina Damenia at an evening organized by one of the American art magazines. I took her prize, appeared on TV and improvised a speech, made the audience cry and tear up (laughs). I said exactly this, that we are a lost generation that went through April 9, civil war, I consider both Chechen wars as my wars... August war... All kinds of misfortunes, emigration, endless problems.
We are like fertilizer for the next generation in a good sense - my child doesn't have to worry about everyday problems. Luka got a green card three years ago - passed TOEFL, served in the army here, works, studies at a technological college. 18-20 years ago, especially those who came alone didn't have such opportunities, because they had to solve basic everyday problems both here and across the ocean... Many people think that since you're in America, oh man, life must be so easy for you... But when you live in America, you live a normal life, you pay rent - I wouldn't even pay rent in Georgia. You need money for internet, food and drinks... For some reason in Georgia there's this feeling that since you're in America, you only feed on air. There are unimaginable stereotypes about life here.

Interviewer: - You still maintain your profession, writing so many articles one way or another.

Respondent - This is not my profession (laughs). The frequency of writing depends only on me, I haven't received any honorarium for this in 18 years. Very often, especially when I had just arrived and people found out I was a doctor, residents from New York, Connecticut, and New Jersey states would call me, I was everything - a gynecologist, dentist, pulmonologist, nephrologist. Then I would think, maybe I should change my phone number (laughs). I tell them I'm a psychiatrist, but still, over the phone - complete strangers - my back hurts, my heart hurts, my muscle hurts, I have so many funny stories to remember about all this (laughs). Once, in the middle of the night, a friend calls me, please help me, a Georgian acquaintance is in far Connecticut, their grandmother is in hospice and is on morphine drip. And she herself has eye pain and... she mixed up the drops, she accidentally dropped morphine in her eye instead of eye drops, she's going blind, somehow she managed to call me, screaming at the top of her lungs, help me,

do you know any Georgian doctor who could help, I'm going blind. I told my friend, give me the phone number, I'll call her, I'll get the address and call an ambulance. No, please, she doesn't want an ambulance, she says she could have called that herself, she has no documents, she's afraid the ambulance might notify the police, and besides, there would be a huge bill to pay. I said, they won't report anything in any case, tell her not to be afraid, they will definitely help. And I'm thinking, this woman is losing her eyesight and worrying about not being able to pay, please save me and talk to her, well, I called this woman myself, she's screaming help me! I know you're a doctor, I tell her ma'am I'm a psychiatrist, give me your address, I can call an ambulance from New York, don't worry, I guarantee you won't have any problems with immigration, but, you see, your family will definitely have problems because the caregiver went blind while on duty (I'm lying, hoping to convince her). No, help me! She's screaming and during this conversation I suddenly thought of a rescue method - do you have any recently deceased relatives, can you remember them and cry well? I can't cry, I can't feel anything, she says. Alright, I said, maybe you can find an onion, peel it, cut it and rub your eyes with it (smiles), whether someone died or not, remember everyone, start crying, I said... At first she didn't understand what I suggested, but then she believed me, exactly 1 hour later my friend calls, whatever you prayed for this girl, she says, saved me, my vision returned, but why did you lie at first that you're a psychiatrist, you must be an eye doctor. (laughs). Who can count how many episodes like this there have been.

When you're in a desperate situation, somehow you mobilize yourself to find a solution from the minimal resources at hand. For instance, you won't start Googling and making calls back and forth when there's a time crunch; you start thinking at cosmic speed about how you can help someone, where to place them. There have been many cases when a caregiver was kicked out at night by an elderly person with or without Alzheimer's, and they had to spend the night in New Jersey woods because they couldn't answer their phone in time. In New York, at least you can go down to the entrance hall or an acquaintance will let you stay overnight... Of course, if they're home at that time. Imagine February's bitter cold, it's freezing, forest all around, and a bear might emerge from somewhere... So, imagine such a person calls you, saying an elderly person kicked them out, nowhere to go, no rental apartment, no room, not even a space in a room. Where should they go, they don't even have taxi fare because the day before, they sent everything they earned to Georgia. Kept nothing, hoping they'd have a salary in a week. So what do you do at this point? Let's say it's 3 AM, you wake everyone up, start searching for where they could stay, if there's any acquaintance nearby, if anyone has a car who could take them to this place. Someone willing to help might not even find the address. I'm telling you about something from long ago, when there were no GPS devices and Google Maps. Living "in the woods," as we would say, far from "regional centers," the problem for working women is that they basically live alone with the patient, while the elderly person's family member might live in America, but six hours flight away from their parent. They might come for Thanksgiving or New Year's, and maybe not even then. This is the real picture of loneliness. A family member whose husband or parent has Alzheimer's monitors the caregiver by phone or video camera. Clearly, living like this has its consequences. People often become

antisocial, depressed, lose their communication and conflict resolution skills. They lose what they knew in Georgia. You might lose what society gives you. Family, work, social environment, colleagues, institute, spouse's family - you're cut off from all this and live alone like a hermit or secluded monk, it all wears down the nervous system. Men especially struggle. Here comes the drug issue too. This isn't a one-month test of the nervous system, as I mentioned above, it could last 11 years. This is essentially a change in consciousness and brain functions, deterioration of your ability to analyze and synthesize, problems with logical thinking, I've often noticed such "lapses" in reasoning, they struggle to draw meaning from what they read or hear, and it's not their fault, nor their IQ's fault, it's the fault of that uncivilized, non-homo sapiens, non-creative environment, but they've already "chosen" their path, family welfare is the priority, each child and then grandchildren getting a "shiny" apartment and honeymoon trips to Bali. I know one woman, as soon as she went overseas to earn money, all three of her sons got married within three months. To this day, none of them work, only one daughter-in-law is employed. Now the grandchildren are getting married. So it's become a rule, everyone waits for this woman's remittances, and she's been sending and sending for 27 years now. She used to "pride herself" when talking to me about walking in her grandmother's shoes. And so she walks between "grandparents'" houses and lives without ever having paid rent. Her conversation topics are limited to her patient's health and bowel movement schedule. Before that, she worked in Greece briefly. She didn't get her papers in order, now she's 65 and says, I'll stay another 5 years, need to buy a summer house for my youngest, don't want him to feel deprived without one.

Interviewer: - So they can't go to Georgia either.

Respondent: - No, no... how can they go? Because there's a grandchild there, then there was a house that needed renovation, then a child needed to be taken to a very good private school, then they had twins, then water came down from the ceiling and the bathroom tiles need to be replaced, and this "renovation affairs market" never ends and will never end. And the children don't tell them either, come back, it's time, enough! Generally, everyday problems are such things that truly never end. There will always be a faucet to replace and there will always be broken tiles. I'll never forget, 17 years ago, an acquaintance called me (she didn't have internet or a computer. The family didn't have internet) and asked me (I used to respond more often before, now - I don't have the desire): what do you think, my folks decided to buy a very good bedroom set and is $20,000 a normal price? How much? - I was surprised. 20,000, she said. I went crazy. That's almost your annual income - I said... Give me the brand name, let me Google it, I said. She couldn't remember. What $20,000, Aunt Lia, you could buy a one-room apartment in Dighomi for this price. No, she said, this is what they want. I doubt why they chose exactly this one? You can't even go to the dentist - I said. We even had a small argument, I said - how long are you going to wear the deceased's shoes over the summer and winter? Oh my, she said, as long as this one lives, as long as I have this one well, I can do everything. Obviously, she was talking about the grandmother who needed care...

Interviewer: - Would ashe have had a secure life.

Respondent - Yes. My friend has been working here like a donkey for 25 years, one of his relatives came from Georgia and lived with him for a long time until he found a "high-paying job." And he was surprised asking "why do you have IKEA furniture?"

Interviewer: - Life here still appears different, they still think it's the American lifestyle...

Respondent - Life here is not synonymous with glamorous living and a showroom of Beverly Hills house designs from Hollywood movies. Yet Georgians working 24/7 often "make up" or say for others to hear - I live the American life. Which doesn't mean a one-time photo taken at Times Square and posted on Facebook. American life is when you leave your work problems at work, regardless of whether it's low-skilled or high-skilled, you come home, spend time with your family, go to some interesting evening event or birthday party from home, choose a book or movie with friends, have a social life and occasionally check the possibilities of buying a house and your child studying at West Point. That's American life and it's not much different from Swedish life.

Interviewer: - If you compare it to Georgian reality, especially since you still visit Georgia, what are the differences, what are the similarities and what are the differences if we compare daily life.

Respondent - When I first went back to Georgia, I was struck by the number of eyewear stores - optics, optics, everywhere, I would encounter an eyewear store at every step. Later, I would joke that even this many glasses per capita wouldn't help us adequately perceive reality - and I wondered what kind of glasses these "ophthalmologists" would need to invent for us to regain or improve our ability to see reality... I don't know anymore. On the first day of arrival, what I noticed was that my street was empty. My mother had been entrusted with keys to several houses. Back then, during the football championship, you could hear from every window... Goal! Come on, boy! And now everything was dark. Then I wanted to catch the words of random passersby on the street. It was mainly: Lari, Lari, money, money, dollar, dollar... money, money, Lari, Lari, rarely - Euro. From small children to adults, and I really lost it. My childhood wasn't associated with endless talks about rubles and kopeks. Not just every other word, but the word "money" wasn't in my vocabulary at all.

When I arrived, Tbilisi seemed "not bad," but Kutaisi was absolutely apathetic, a sleeping, dead city, and suddenly, almost in the center, an unimaginably grandiose casino "Prague"... in place of the fish store "Oceane." This casino was such an inadequate formation for Kutaisi, I was both outraged and saddened. As for Tbilisi, friends would come who are more or less employed and have their own source of income. However, almost every family has someone abroad. Less than half of my group works as doctors. The city is overloaded with concrete, which neither looks like Dubai and... I don't know what it looks like...

These buildings, with only 3mm spacing between them, are being built with money from people who went to America, because they don't see any other investment opportunities besides real estate. When you work in New Jersey for 20 years, and the only place you go to is a Georgian restaurant, you buy and renovate 6 apartments, and you're still thinking about the seventh one... So some Georgians didn't become real estate fans, they simply don't know what else to invest in. Investment in Georgia's education, manufacturing, business - wine or vineyard development - becomes unimaginable. The horizon of choices has narrowed so much that people can't see any perspective other than building concrete blocks and leaving them to their descendants. Yes, a caregiver, figuratively speaking, won't be able to buy a masterpiece at Sotheby's auction to leave to their grandchild. Private construction companies count on emigrants, people who move to the next phase after providing vital medicines and food for their relatives. They've given up on their professional growth because you need a local diploma to work in your profession. Besides, the environment is so stressful, and if your English is limited, you can't work with American colleagues even if you're lucky enough to rise slightly above the low-skilled level. Because it's a different communication field, and that's why they prefer that elderly person who doesn't talk much and who worked so hard to secure their old age and be able to afford a private caregiver. Americans don't go into 24/7 jobs. An American has a family, a career, and their own business, and wants to attend their children's and grandchildren's growth, progress, school-college-university graduation ceremonies, visit them, and travel across the ocean at least once a year, or take a cheap vacation in Mexico, from where Mexicans are running away.

What is the American Dream? A nice house, paying bank loans on time, a good car, prestigious colleges for children. At least for the middle class, these are the priorities. Obviously, human rights must be protected. If they're not protected, a public defender will defend you in court. But it's better to have the means to hire a good lawyer and defend yourself. Since childhood, I naively thought that the American Dream was about equality, fighting to fix legislative gaps, and less materialism (laughs). America isn't Janis Joplin's songs. How unfamiliar must you be with American life to not think this way (laughs); to not know its specifics and therefore have idealistic views. America isn't just a New School auditorium. There are absolutely different values here. It's one thing when you come abroad to study and another when you live in the local routine. I've experienced this luxury firsthand. In Sweden, I received one of the best and most necessary experiences at the Wallenberg Institute - I didn't pay anything, there was a grant and I only had to study. This is a gift... and it's different when the so-called non-academic process, dealing with various matters takes up a lot of energy. Last year, we were looking for a one-room apartment for a Georgian family of five - they have three young children. They sold everything they and their ancestors owned in Georgia and came here with that money. We couldn't find an apartment (because they have no credit history). We barely found a broker who charged three months' rent for his services (while the norm is one month's fee). Want to know how much deposit the landlord took? Ten months' deposit. Although typically, the deposit is only one month's rent. Yes, it's against the law, but you can't speak up. There's such high demand for living in New York, such density, physically there's no more space. By the way, there was once an article in the New York Times about how pedestrians can't fit on the sidewalks. Not just comfort standards, but sanitary standards can't be met either.

I participated in the general census but it doesn't show the 100-120,000 Georgians who came from Mexico last year, as they say. Setting aside the country's unprotected southern border, the conditions in which newcomers live are not easy to describe, and as a rule, they rely on the kindness of strangers.

Interviewer: - Are there any mechanisms to help newcomers?

Respondent - There is no mechanism, the only thing that exists is that they should be able to come with money. Otherwise, there are shelters here, where I wouldn't recommend anyone to live.

Interviewer: - Does a diaspora center or any organization function institutionally

Respondent - No. Accommodation is related to money. Mostly the city hall provides accommodation and it's temporary since there are no places available. Here, basically, you rely on kind people and acquaintances. I warn everyone not to come without having a reliable acquaintance's or friend's address where they can spend the night. Last year, Georgians were sleeping at Brighton Beach and Brooklyn square parks all summer. I even have a photo. How a Georgian is sleeping in a subway car while wearing "I love (heart symbol) New York." I knew by appearance that they were Georgian. I always recognize when someone is Georgian. No matter how far they are from me - by their walk, clothing, facial expression, even by the way they squat. Earlier, I bought silver foil blankets, you know, the ones they give to detained people at the Mexican border in camps and prisons. I always carry them with me. I bought ten, two are left. So, I'm sitting in the car, the phone rang, they woke up and answered in Georgian. I approached, handed this "blanket," saying cover yourself, winter is coming. They said thanks but asked if I could give them money instead. I didn't have any "cash."
I'm not really soothing my conscience, but I thought I should help at least at this level. But how many people can one help? And how? There was a boy who slept on his backpack on the street, near the laundromat. It was summer, he had a Georgian flag on his T-shirt. He looked at me, thanked me, saying we had spoken in Georgian several times near the metro station, that he remembered me... So, whoever can, helps however they can. The primary problem is accommodation, then job offers. It's difficult for men to find jobs. Families prefer women as caregivers than men. This problem is compounded by a terrible wave of drug addiction and the "Coney Island" hospital morgue, it was especially catastrophic last summer. These drug addicts don't have the means to buy pure heroin. They basically buy so-called Afghan or some other cursed stuff from killer-dealers. I think almost a tenth of a gram costs $30? I'm not sure exactly. And it contains 80% "rat poison". I don't know how they can be helped? The police haven't investigated any drug-related deaths. They haven't even checked the deceased's mobile phones. Men are in a very difficult situation, though I've heard about drug-addicted women too. The care industry is traditionally associated with women, and it's relatively easy for them to find work. A woman stays with a relative or a relative's friend, they're very cramped in one room, and that's why the ost tries very hard to find them work.

Then they move to work and live with elderly people, and when they can feed their families in Georgia with the money earned, they can then rent a room/apartment with their savings.
Gender distribution in this field is still mainly stereotypical. Men are generally associated with danger, alcoholism, drugs, marijuana, cigarette use, etc. This reality needs to be considered.
Dog walkers are predominantly male. Women become more flexible depending on the situation. A woman is not as much of a threat to the employer's family, or even to the recommender, as a man is. But when you talk about these circumstances on Facebook, you sometimes become a target of aggression. You're in America, right? And don't you want me to be there too? Because I'm in America, I'm explaining and sharing my experience with you so that your period of cultural or other shocks won't be prolonged.

For example, at my friend's place, Georgians who came from Italy stayed several times, then two more. Their apartment is kind of a station-hotel. Then begins the explanation of American life's social norms, finding Italian or Greek-speaking families due to lack of English knowledge, etc.
One of my challenges was that over the last few months, I accompanied several people to lawyers and... got a headache. Hearing the same topic over and over again, going through this with newcomers isn't easy. Many don't even know Russian, so I have to translate from Russian too. Due to lack of language skills and being uninformed, they might get into some trouble... Last year, in one interview, Kutaisi Radio "Old City" recorded an interview with me about Georgian artists' exhibition (in which I participated). They asked me what newcomers to America should consider, and I answered - local social norms. I gave an example - a young man from Mexico who worked moving furniture delivered some furniture to a family. A child came out, 4 or 5 years old, and this man simply patted the child's head, and within three hours, he was arrested on charges of indecent behavior. I'm not telling this to scare anyone. More than English language, you need to know local social norms here. When I used to walk Luka from Rustaveli to Mtatsminda, strangers would pinch and kiss both his cheeks, and obviously, I didn't like it much, I expressed it several times, and my disapproval was taken as rudeness and ingratitude. Twenty years ago, I really didn't think this was criminal... In New York, you can't even pet a tiny dog without the owner's permission. Let alone dare to kiss or pat an unknown child's back. That Georgian first went into shock, then developed such mental problems that hospitalization became necessary.
You shouldn't form your impression of America based on Hollywood's happy-ending movies. Simply be careful, staring, sexist compliments, from patting a child's head to offering chocolate, can become grounds for legal dispute here. Here, a kindergarten teacher, a 65-year-old Georgian female educator, was sued by a girl's parent. Because they saw how she put the girl on her lap, fixed her hair, and kissed her. This woman was arrested. It's an old story... I'm not even talking about psychological trauma, such cases destroy a person's financial resources.
We need to know the rules of behavior in foreign countries and the so-called social distancing laws/norms, and this will prevent us from many misunderstandings.

Interviewer: - Let's touch upon the matter of maintaining connection with Georgian culture, Georgia, some roots, how is it, what are the practices: culture, language, traditions, and if there are differences between generations, what practices do you have yourself.

Respondent - There are organizations here: "Dancing Cranes", "Roots", "Irina's Dance Company", Sh. Rustaveli Georgian Cultural Center, "Elva" and so on. Children who were born here and have problems communicating in Georgian can go there, meet their compatriots... both those born in America and in Georgia. There are dance, singing, theater, chess clubs and also Georgian language classes. The problem is that a large portion of children born here can't speak Georgian fluently. Sending them to grandparents in summer, obviously, has a good effect on their speaking repertoire, but it's not enough. When the social environment, school or institution is English-speaking, and Georgian is only heard at home, obviously English becomes dominant. As for Georgian culture, whether it's an exhibition or an event, we notify each other, share on Facebook, if someone missed it, I'll even deserve criticism later (laughs). Though I'm not an organizer. So I've already got people used to me sending "press releases" (laughs).

Interviewer: - How do you maintain communication with Georgia, you mentioned that you visited, friends came to see you…

Respondent - Yes, I'm in Facebook groups with classmates and university group mates, we definitely keep in touch with each other, we even arrange small online celebrations..

Interviewer: - Mainly through social networks?

Respondent - Yes, mainly through Messenger conference calls. Once they wished me happy birthday from Kutaisi, they wrote "Ia" on balloons and released them, filmed it, and sent it to me. I was so happy, I almost cried. If someone needs someone's phone number, they haven't invented a more efficient method yet. This is what makes social networks unique, that immediacy is its biggest benefit. I'm very happy about Georgians' success, besides, I also write about New York, about New York's cultural life. If only so that modern American culture isn't associated only with Andy Warhol or the Oscar ceremony. New York is special, it's not like any other country, city or state, New York is an artificial satellite of the planet, it's a completely different phenomenon, this city has a different modus and it never gets boring. One day your photo might even end up in the New York Times.

Interviewer: - Yes, because of a Teddy Bear... (Photo of her, holding a Teddy Bear was published on the New York Times cover).

Respondent - The city offers such surprises sometimes. But for this, you need to go out, look around; you need to feel the pulse of this city and let this rhythm overtake your loneliness. A 24/7 job deprives you of these luxuries.

Plus, time goes by, we're not getting any younger... You want to see more, learn more, travel... You think - I've passed some stage, let's say my family is no longer hungry, rain isn't dripping on their heads, and it's time to think not about buying the eighth black chassis, but rather... It's time to broaden my horizons, care for mental and emotional health, and unfortunately, they don't understand this. Yet, it's time. For example, in America, one fine day people change professions regardless of age. Once I was at a consultation for one of the New York Film Academy's courses - it was about photo media. I was interested in what and how they taught. There was a 73-year-old woman who came with her son. The teacher, addressing the younger one, says: "How nice that you came with a family member." He responds - I'm accompanying my mother, she doesn't speak the language well, I'm translating for her, and she wants to learn photography. She says, I'm retired and want to become a professional photographer... and maybe we'll start a family business. This episode is an example that here age isn't a barrier. Everything is done not only for beneficial "recruitment" for everyone but for motivation and creating a generally healthy motivational environment. I came out a completely different person, but when I later looked at how much it cost (laughs), I gave up. Yes, but I received very good energy. A person bought a good camera and I'm interested in taking photography courses, that's why I came (laughs). This is a different reality, a person has healthy interest and enthusiasm. But when you live with an elderly person for 12 and 15 years (don't think I'm picking on "the elderly," it's just reality), you live their life and then, I think, like in Marquez's "One Hundred Years of Solitude," you become like the one you're caring for, unless... you either don't have your own life or you didn't even notice how you gave up on yourself. Most likely, you'll never find motivation, just like that 73-year-old woman. See? Even a simple or perhaps a trivial gift became a motivation for her to go to "school." Obviously, when you have limited financial resources, when Georgia pulls you, meaning you're not fully here or there, you have concerns in both places and need to "stretch" resources, this complicates choices and decision-making; whereas a Swede living in America probably doesn't care much whether their cousin in Stockholm can afford a good dentist; whether their mother will have enough pension to call a taxi when tired, whether they'll perform their appendix surgery in sterile conditions, and won't plan how to smuggle their poorly treated brother (after being caught on the fifth attempt) across the Mexican border to save him from death and unemployment, getting themselves into debt in the process.

Interviewer: - From this perspective, would you make the same decision to come to America, to live here, and do you plan to return to Georgia, have you ever thought about returning to Georgia after some period?

Respondent – I can't make long-term plans because everything I've planned and declared so far has turned out completely different (laughs). Because of Luka's education, I'll be in America for at least the next six years. That Hamlet-like dilemma was relevant for me years ago. I always thought that I probably wouldn't have left… When the March 2023 events happened in Georgia, many of my friends from Kutaisi and Tbilisi wrote to me: "Ia, you should be here, why haven't

you come back? We need you." The fact is, the people who could have changed a lot, those who wanted reforms, were sacrificed to these economic and corruption problems—giving Caesar what is Caesar's, especially when you don't have a "patron."

I still have my ideas, I haven't changed, I hold the same stance—yes, Georgians deserve much better. In my opinion, and not just mine, I did everything I could to ensure that people would take pride in more than just Rustaveli Avenue, that we would become a fully developed civil society. But responsibility is different when you have a family, and age also plays a role. My parents won the Green Card lottery. My father couldn't bear the nostalgia and ran back after a year. My mother, due to a strange decision by the U.S. Embassy, couldn't come… It was during the war, August 2008. For as long as I can remember, I've never slept more than three hours a night… I was always running somewhere—protests, conferences, writing, participating in radio and TV programs. "Ideas were troubling me" (laughs). Dealing with economic problems drained so much energy, time, and resources. When you're at your most productive age, when your brain is at its sharpest, and starting from scratch in a new place takes up all that ability, I probably wouldn't have left… But there's another side to the coin. If you are not financially independent, how do you "buy back" your freedom in a corrupt, nepotistic world? How do you solve daily problems? Even the Good Samaritan is someone who gives money to help the suffering. If you are not financially stable, you become dependent on so many things and people, and the forces that take hold of you will be so strong that you will "get lost in translation." Not everyone can be Spider-Man, and Newton's law will work as usual.

From this perspective, you can't ask someone whose father was killed by Russians in Abkhazia, who went ten days without food, who is starving, whose child has no medicine, to engage in deep discussions about left-wing and right-wing economic policies. This is a dead-end. Not everything ends with a Hollywood happy ending. There are situations where there is simply no way out. I've written about this many times on Facebook when debating whether emigration is a free choice. It is not a choice. A choice is when you enter a store and decide between apples, pears, and cherries, or buy all three, or think, "Since I already have two apples, this time I'll get more pears." That's a choice. But when your family's survival depends on you—when there are bills to pay, food to buy, and even your neighbors and relatives look to you, hoping you'll lend them money indefinitely—you don't have a real choice. Meanwhile, you work at the "Caucasian House," sometimes appear on TV, and people assume, "She must be doing fine, she must have a lot of money" (laughs). This is not a free-will decision.

People say, "No one is forcing them toward Mexico." But when someone's mother has cancer, they themselves have a tumor on their spine, they have a disabled, unemployed brother, young nieces and nephews, and they've been eating nothing but pasta for three months—telling them, "You chose to cross the Mexican border, to fall into swamps three times, to have your clothes taken away in prison and be given ill-fitting detention uniforms, to have shackles on your hands and feet—this was your choice" is, at the very least, mocking their suffering.

This is not a choice. It's not about wanting to change a lifestyle. Yes, freedom of movement is a human right. But when despair forces you out of your country, when you have children—whether two, five, or more—and you find yourself deciding, "I should feed the younger one because the older one can endure hunger better" or "The older one ate yesterday, so today it's the younger one's turn"… What can I say? Of course, this is not William Styron's *Sophie's Choice*, but it is equally clear that no person—whether in Europe or Africa—should have to face such a decision. And it is the state's responsibility to prevent this. That's what a state exists for—what else justifies its existence? Not for us to admire the Prime Minister's luxury watch collection, but to protect the vulnerable.

I've often thought about what truly differentiates Georgia in the past ten years from the West. The fact that it sold itself for the promise of free money, without realizing that it was an incredibly cheap trick. I think it was Sweden that held a plebiscite, where people voted on whether they wanted the government to give them 2,000 euros for free each month or year. Technically, this would also come from the state budget. But the response was, "No, we don't want it because we don't see a legitimate reason why we should receive this money as a gift." The West is not just about beautiful houses and clean hallways. It's also about a rational approach to work and compensation, about both rights and responsibilities.

This dilemma isn't just about poverty versus wealth, or the hungry versus the well-fed. It's about principles. People should be able to recognize a trap when they see one.

When I was in Tbilisi, one day I noticed construction work on the roof of a neighboring building. Aside from the fact that adding an extra floor was illegal, I saw a 14- or 15-year-old boy helping adults dismantle the roof. Despite raising the alarm, the city hall didn't respond. We even took the case to court, and the "businessman" was ordered to demolish the additional floor. I took photos and videos of the boy and posted them on Facebook, sent them to various people, but no one cared. There were no safety measures in place. I called out to him, "Why are you up there, kid?" He replied, "I'm helping my dad." It's clear that the state doesn't care. But does the parent also not care? What work ethics, what safety regulations, what sense of responsibility?! That's why EU membership is essential—so that we adopt Western standards of life, safety, rules, and habits. Maybe, somehow, we will transition from quantity to quality. Because from Russia, we have inherited every kind of marginalization and obscurantism. It's time for that to be replaced by civilization.

Maybe these standards will rub off on us—work ethics, not parking on sidewalks, keeping stairwells clean, and a million other things that make a country civilized. Simply put, these norms are more compatible with sustainability, prosperity, and safety. Otherwise, is the West really just an aimless dream?

Interviewer: – When we talked about returning, you said you don't see it happening for at least another 5-6 years. But since you still consider it as a possibility, what would be the main reason for your return to Georgia?

Respondent – Probably memory. It's hard to talk about Georgia with a child or with someone who was born here. Because my entire conscious life, my most socially active period, was spent in Georgia. And maybe, in some way, the country bears the mark of my actions (laughs). America will continue to exist without me.

Interviewer: - So, would you say that your main achievements are still tied to Georgia as a space?

Respondent - Of course, because where your language is, that's your organic environment. Even though I studied in an English-language school in Kutaisi, what was then called the Third School, and I never had any language difficulties, it goes without saying—without any pathos—that I was of more use to Georgia (laughs). Once, I attended the *Forbes* Women's Conference. There were many fascinating women there, from astronauts to Ivanka Trump. I handed out cards from the Women's Information Center in Tbilisi about the female parliamentarians of Georgia's First Republic to people on my right and left. I gave those cards to everyone—from Mario Vargas Llosa and Chick Corea to Gloria Steinem and Jane Birkin (laughs). And it turned out to be Georgia's most telling business card. Everyone was surprised—"You had women in parliament 100 years ago?" In a half-joking way, my activism hasn't extended much beyond this sphere for now (laughs).

One of my motivations for writing about Georgians in America is, among other things, to show my fellow countrymen that Georgians here are not just elderly caregivers or unskilled laborers. In America, it is common to ask, *What do you do to make a living?* They always ask because they know that painting, photography, and writing won't necessarily support you here—unless, of course, you're Jasper Johns. In any case, I found my niche here, too. Everyone knows me, and whether it's a protest or an event, so many strangers greet and hug me that I sometimes feel awkward saying, *Sorry, I don't recognize you* (smiles).

At the end of the day, I am doing something useful here, too, but if we weigh things, of course, I could do much more in my homeland. I feel like the people who left—hardworking, sharp, educated—will be forgotten by history, and that's why they feel so heartbroken. They brought their children here, their parents too, and their grandchildren will be born here.

After the March protests, the term *Gen Z* emerged—people were saying, *What amazing young people, how smart they are!* And yes, it's true. But I'm sure that every second or third one of them has a mother or family member in emigration. Because a sense of protest also comes with education, and Georgia has become such an expensive country that an average citizen could not afford gadgets with their grandmother's pension or travel to Spain.

Take Luka, for example—he studied at a private school in Tbilisi. There was no way I could have covered that tuition with my salary in Georgia. We have a great Generation Z, and I also know that, just as I brought Luka here, their mothers will bring them, too... It's never an open topic in institutions—when students pay tuition, where are their parents? The reason they are so free, independent, and fluent in English is precisely because of those daily struggles that their mothers, and of course, their fathers too, have endured.

Our children who study and work here—I highly doubt they will return to Georgia. I've never heard of anyone finishing university here, being brought back by their parents, and heading to Tbilisi or Ozurgeti. Luka, for example, is an enlisted member of the Army National Guard and is studying programming at the New York College of Technology. I don't know—who in Georgia is supposed to benefit from his experience? Will he even find a job? At this stage, I don't see a perspective for the country's success—not even its survival.

The military in Georgia is in a dire state; will digital sciences be a priority, the most in-demand field? Or will we continue living by the priorities of the *Russkiy Mir*? I was so stressed by Gavrilov's Night and then July 5th that I have almost *come to terms* with the passage of the "foreign agents" law because I knew this was coming. How can we still be going in circles around the same issues in Georgia for almost 35 years? How limitless is our patience? But even patience should have its limits, right? It's unimaginable—one step forward and then 15 steps back, and then the same thing again and again. This pseudo-evolution affects generations' mentalities. And in my opinion, even this new generation, whose creative protests we witnessed, does not see their future in Georgia... unless something changes.
I know it sounds clichéd, but ignoring that 12-point plan will cripple Georgia. Life is paradoxical (laughs). Before, we were the ones begging Europe to take us in. Now, they are the ones begging us: *Please, try to survive somehow. Help us help you.*

Interviewer: - So, this generation was in the streets precisely because they don't want to be forced to leave their homeland? Because they see their future in Georgia, that's why they protested.

Respondent - I actually have more of a Generation X experience. I, too, was running around at protests, writing, speaking out, advocating for women's rights until I was blue in the face. I didn't want to leave, but I was still forced to. I want us to break out of this vicious cycle, but Georgia's relationship with Russia has become so karmic that I no longer know what kind of effort—what means—could possibly free us. We're not even talking about liberation or the existence of free energy; we're talking about somehow, in some way, just managing to break free.
It's like some toxic substance that grips you from all sides, and you're not even fighting back like Merab Dvalishvili did against the Russian (laughs). No, it's more like a small trick—something sneaky—maybe hoping they'll slip on a banana peel, fall, and not be able to get up, while you take the chance to run, to escape just in time. This isn't a direct confrontation; this is another way… Right now, we're hoping that maybe Ukraine will save us. If that doesn't happen, I don't know… My brain refuses to play out the worst-case scenario. I know we've been given a deadline, and maybe… This issue really weighs on me. I have no idea what will happen at the Mexican border if we don't receive candidate status. At one point, I even told myself that if I had to be an emigrant, I should have at least gone to Europe. And yet, I had so many chances to stay there. Simply because of the geographical proximity—you can hop on a bus for the weekend, visit your family, see your friends, and take the bus back. You're there for weddings or funerals, close by. But America is far, and

you can't just fly back and forth all the time… I know many people who returned without a green card and are now stuck at the Mexican border. Almost 50% of the Georgians crossing the Mexican border came from Poland and Italy. Interestingly, one of them cited the war in Ukraine as a reason for leaving. He had been working in a chicken packaging factory in Poland with his family. One day, the employer, in support of Ukrainians, fired the Georgians and replaced them with Ukrainians. It's understandable… This crisis has led to a situation where many Georgians who moved to Poland ten years ago are now heading toward the Mexican border. There are a lot of Georgians who hold residency permits in Poland, Italy, and Spain. But the money they earned wasn't enough to support their families back in Georgia.
Unfortunately, today's reality is another tragic page in Georgia's history.

Interviewer: - Thank you so much, Ia. This was a truly fascinating interview.