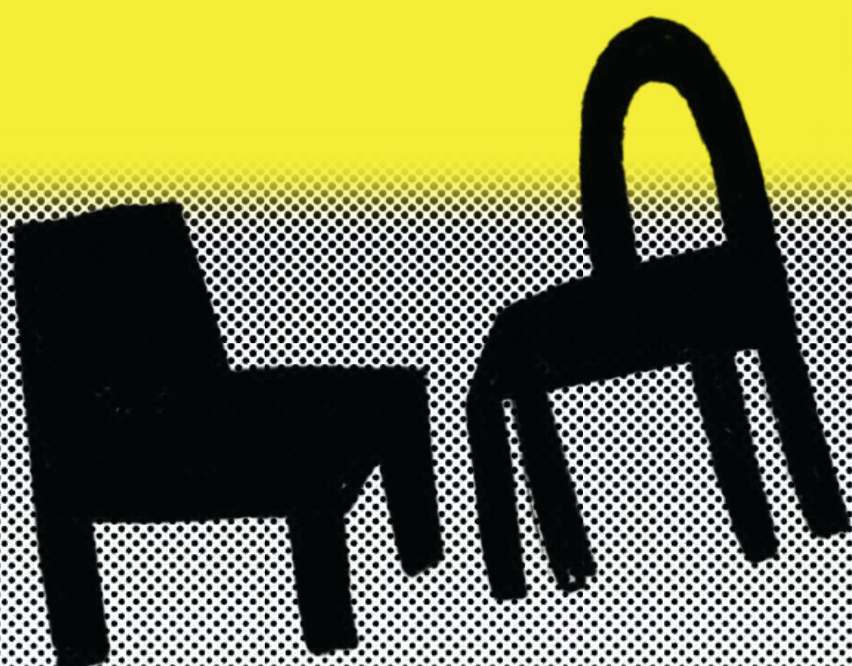


ZEG

Storytelling Festival

**Highlights
Report
2025**



Letter from the ZEG Network

A philosopher sits next to a filmmaker sits next to a refugee advocate sits next to a teenager with a bold idea. Status dissolves in workshops where strangers become collaborators, in happy hours where Nobel laureates meet our volunteers, in moments when the artificial boundaries between disciplines suddenly seem ridiculous.

This is ZEG – a festival that doesn't have a theme, though if 2025 had one, it would be resilience. Not the self-help kind, but the collective kind: how we hold each other up when familiar networks and institutions fail us.

Our speakers this year knew something about staying upright in a world that's tilting. We hosted doctors who've seen children's bodies charred by war, hu-

manitarian workers watching safety nets vanish, journalists facing trials for asking questions, filmmakers watching their industry transform, educators figuring out the future of learning. All bound by similar fears, hopes, and the belief that stories – told, acted out, played, sung, improvised – are the glue holding us together.

This year at ZEG, two friends, a well known veteran journalist and an acclaimed actor, sat on our stage for a conversation that sent the audience into laughter one second and tears the next. Midway through, one confessed: "We have known each other for ten years and this is the first time we are having this conversation." They captured the soul of ZEG – we create space for connections that matter.



“What would it take for you to come to Uganda to teach kids?” a Ugandan journalist asked popstar JP Saxe during his session this year. “It would take getting up during the ZEG Festival and asking the question,” JP replied. It’s now happening. These moments, when strangers become collaborators, when bold questions get bold answers, happen dozens of times across our three days.

After five years in Tbilisi, we’re taking ZEG beyond Georgia’s borders. The ZEG Network launched with a sold-out event in Amsterdam that proved our methodology travels well. London comes next, then beyond. Each gathering carries the DNA of our Tbilisi home while adapting to new questions, new urgencies, new communities.

ZEG – named for the Georgian word meaning “the day after tomorrow” – was born in summer 2019 from a partnership between Coda Story journalists and Impact Hub Tbilisi. What started as a local experiment has grown into a global network of storytellers refusing to let others write our collective future. This year brought together 141 speakers from 44 countries across 110 sessions, proving that when we break down silos, remarkable things happen.

We exist because today our societies are losing control of our collective narrative. Politicians write our stories. Tech companies decide what we see. Algorithms determine who we hear from. Meanwhile, real storytellers – the ones who treat communities with care and respect – struggle to cut through the noise.

The ZEG Network is our answer: spaces where we reclaim what’s ours, where the very personal becomes universal, where complex questions get the time they deserve. We’re not building more conferences; we’re creating infrastructure for the kind of dialogue that’s going extinct. The magic lies in the basics: curate unlikely connections across worlds, pose questions that demand courage to answer, and trust in the ancient power of shared stories to reveal what we have in common.

Our volunteers remind us why this matters. When a renowned Bangladeshi lawyer’s account of student protests moved Georgian volunteers facing their own uprising, solidarity crossed continents in real time. When contact information gets exchanged and mentorships begin, we see the future being written by the people who will live in it.

The world feels increasingly unmoored, but ZEG offers something steady: a room where your story matters, where complexity is welcomed over sound-bites, where we can sit with discomfort long enough to find wisdom. As one speaker told us, “ZEG creates spaces that enable us to be fully human.”

Thank you for believing that stories can change the world. Thank you for proving that human connection transcends algorithms. Thank you for helping us build not just a festival, but a movement for the day after tomorrow.

The ZEG Team



ZEG Factsheet

WHO:

ZEG Fest was born out of a partnership between journalists from Coda Story, a US newsroom covering the roots of global crises and Impact Hub Tbilisi, a collaborative space that brings together changemakers, entrepreneurs, and creatives to drive positive impact and innovation in Georgia, the country. After 5 years it has evolved into a global event, connecting storytellers and visionaries from around the world.

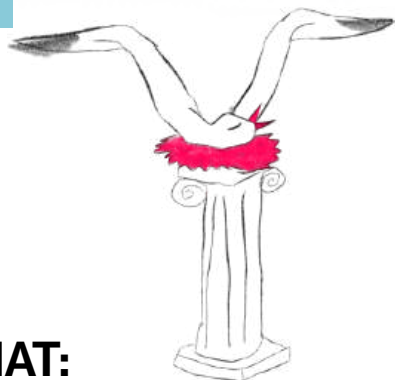
WHAT:

ZEG is a cross-disciplinary event born out of our love for storytelling and a strong belief that in our polarized world, stories hold us together. It unites storytellers from various professions, forces people out of their silos and into joint thinking about how we can collaboratively shape narratives for the future — Or, as we like to call it: narratives for ZEG—the beautiful Georgian word for the day after tomorrow.



WHY:

Because, frankly, we are so close to losing control over our collective narrative. Don't you ever sit back and wonder, who is writing our story? Politicians? Tech bros? The rich and powerful? Or people like us, who treat the communities we live in with care and respect? ZEG is an opportunity to reclaim what's ours. Once a year we put our heads together to own and tell our stories, turning the very personal into something universal. The festival is intentionally designed as a free-flowing conversation that does not shy away from difficult subjects, but aims to explain, delight and inspire.



ZEG 2025 in Numbers

Up to a **1000** participants across the board

141 speakers

44 countries represented

25 industries represented

64 students involved in ZEG volunteering program

30 ZEG Fellows

70 media representatives

110 sessions, including performances, panels, keynotes, workshops, live podcasting, film screenings

Social Media

Views / impressions – 4,767,199

Reach – 917,431

Profile visits – 52,810

Interactions – 22,601

ZEG 2025 in Quotes



"In stormy times of deep turbulence, paradigm shifts, gross inequality, etc, I am just so grateful to be in a room where there is such a powerful democratic energy and commitment to change the world outside. ZEG creates such spaces, and I wanted to point at the virtues and values above our heads. It isn't a useless space. It is the space that enables us to be fully human."

**Matthew Pye, Philosopher,
ZEG 2025 speaker**

"It's a rare thing to feel this nourished - spiritually, intellectually, emotionally. Y'all pulled off a beautiful thing. Grateful to have been a part and going home with sustenance and inspiration."

**Emma Lacey-Bordeaux,
journalist and ZEG speaker**

"The speakers and topics were incredible. I thought many times [throughout the festival,] "I wonder how we can let the whole world know about ZEG?!"

Nick Laparra, host of the Let's Give A Damn podcast and ZEG speaker

"Being part of Zeg Festival felt like taking a three-day trip around the world—all in one place. The diversity of beautiful people and stories was revitalizing and gave me a whole new perspective on how many individuals are using their voices and craft to envision a brighter tomorrow in a world that often feels chaotic. In a warm and special way, Zeg rekindles faith in humanity."

**Usama Mukwaya, film director
and ZEG speaker**

"Zeg is absolutely unique. At a fragile moment for our information ecosystem, the festival draws together threads from across the storytelling process. The result is both a joyous and hopeful celebration of human creativity, and a deeply insightful seminar on the road ahead. I found the festival gave me real insights which influenced my agency's planning and strategy."

**Phil Chetwynd, Global News Director
of Agence France-Presse and
ZEG speaker**

"I liked the place, the people, the unproduced conversations, the enchanting stories and how attendees experience ZEG vs trying to "work" ZEG"

**Anne Avis, board member of In-ternews, Montana Free Press, and
Tinworks Art and ZEG speaker**

"It really did feel like the weekend was a beacon of light amid the dark storm that surrounds us, a real privilege to be at, to meet so many interesting people, in beautiful spaces for compelling discussions."

**Hugh Macleod, Communications Lead
for the International Rehabilitation
Council for Torture Victims and ZEG
speaker**

"This is the first festival or place where the frame of storytelling includes all the various ways I code switch as a person or a creator."

**Khalid Abdalla, British-Egyptian actor,
activist and ZEG speaker**

Program



ZEG's program is designed and curated by the team of journalists from Coda Story, the festival's parent company. Coda is a thematic newsroom that reports on the roots of global crises. ZEG itself does not have a theme; we let topics emerge out of discussions within the newsroom and in close collaboration with our speakers, but also have a strong no-interference policy when it comes to the panelists discussing and planning their sessions. Our vision is to let both the speakers and the audience discover experiences and topics they were not familiar with. But Coda's editorial priorities are part of the festival's DNA. This is why topics like authoritarianism or advances in AI technology remain integral parts of the Festival.

This year, ZEG featured live programming around one of Coda's current themes: AI. Our popular panels, especially the one where a female bishop from Georgia talked about religion and AI with Coda's Isobel Cockerell, was inspired by our podcast collaboration with Audible, *Captured: The Secret Behind Silicon Valley's AI Takeover*. Other panels centered around AI accountability, ethics and the overall future of humans and tech were powered by Luminate and the Pulitzer Center, whose AI Accountability fellows delved into the nitty-gritty of the algorithmic world.

Another of Coda's current themes, the Playbook, was an integral part of the festival planning this year. Think of it as a

manual autocrats use to manipulate our realities. Many sessions, especially the ones focusing on colonialism, combatting autocrats and political realities of Eastern Europe and the Caucasus, echoed the language, manipulation tactics and other tools Coda's exploring in the Playbook series. The conversations about democracy, the challenges it faces and the cross-border work of European journalists and scholars were made possible through support from the European Cultural Foundation and Culture Solidarity Fund.

Journalism and storytelling lie at the heart of ZEG and the challenges faced by media professionals in communities affected by crises could not have been ignored. One of the most critical practical sessions, Defying Silence: Protecting Press Freedom in Challenging Times was made possible with support from the Rory Peck Trust & Committee to Protect Journalists. Led by global press safety experts Jon Williams and Jodie Ginsberg, it was designed for Georgian and exiled journalists and unpacked practical tools for overcoming threats media professionals face in hostile environments.

Professionals from different walks of life helped us make our dream sessions a reality. Chilean architect Alejandro Aravena, Bangladeshi lawyer Sara Hossain, Hungarian scholar Dr. Erzsébet Barát and Armenian-American educator Marie Lou Papazian were just some of the speakers featured on panels in collaboration with the Tbilisi Architecture Biennial, UN Women and TBC Bank. With the support of the International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims and

United Against Torture, ZEG's audiences witnessed an artistic reenactment of the protest wave in Columbia, giving voice to victims of police brutality.

The audience is another integral part of ZEG. Every person who comes to the festival is not a mere spectator, but an equal to the speakers. Our local partners, TBC Bank and Coca-Cola Georgia, Cellfie Mobile and Setanta Sports ensured the diversity of panels with abundant audience participation, such as the open mic stage and a discussion fully centered around the concerns, wishes and ideas of the audience. Early birds and car enthusiasts had the opportunity to test drive BMW's latest models in the early hours of the festival days, before action kicked off at the main stage.

ZEG also enables us to find new collaborators across geographies and topics. This year, we were proud to feature the Continent's Museum of Stolen History, tracing the fascinating stories of eight African artifacts stolen from their native lands and their subsequent journey home. The packed session with the Continent's Shola Lawal, Wynona Mutisi and Simon Allison serves as just the beginning of a fruitful collaboration with a purposeful, creative newsroom.

It is important for us to keep partnerships and collaborations going beyond the festival days. Many of the topics that emerged at ZEG this year will serve as the foundation for Coda's future in-depth reporting. We are also delighted that ZEG speakers will lend us their voices as we continue to follow the undercurrents shaping our societies.

Formats



PANELS AND CONVERSATIONS

Conversations and panel discussions were the beating heart of ZEG, where our speakers and audience dissected and debated urgent questions.

WORKSHOPS

Attendees had wonderful opportunities to gain hands-on experience from leading figures across industries. Workshops at ZEG 2025 covered everything from improv skills for daily life to launching a magazine on Whatsapp.

PERFORMANCES

A world-renowned pianist, a pop songwriter, a theatre troupe from Columbia and improv actors from Stanford University graced the stage among other performances this year.



OFF THE RECORD

Our beloved format where ZEG veterans sit down for candid conversations was back this year, with more behind the scenes tidbits from our speakers' illustrious careers.

CODA LIVE

Our flagship live journalism event was even bigger, rawer and should we say, swaggier this year. We can't wait to tell you more about it in the festival highlights section.

EXHIBITIONS

SOS, presented by Window Project, featured works by 13 contemporary Georgian artists. Through photography, video, painting, sculpture, and installation, the exhibition confronted Georgia's turbulent socio-political landscape from 1989 to the present, confronting the themes of identity, protest, state power, resilience, and memory.



WALKING TOURS

Guests and speakers were invited to walk (and run!) through Tbilisi's streets and history. Walking tours included a Real Stalin tour, a political tour, a literary tour in the footsteps of Nino Haratishvili's best-selling book, *The Eighth Life* and architecture tour. Early birds enjoyed two runs through Tbilisi's scenic and urban trails.

HAPPY HOURS

This year, six of our speakers hosted informal gatherings with conversations, ideas and drinks flowing between them and ZEG guests.

OPEN MIC

Anyone was welcome to grab the mic at our informal stage and tell a story for 5-15 minutes.

FILM SCREENINGS

Screenings of poignant documentaries from the U.S., Uganda and Kenya, among other places, were followed by Q&A sessions with filmmakers. ZEG Fest was born out of a partnership between journalists from Coda Story, a US newsroom covering the roots of global crises and Impact Hub Tbilisi, a collaborative space that brings together changemakers, entrepreneurs, and creatives to drive positive impact and innovation in Georgia, the country. After 5 years it has evolved into a global event, connecting storytellers and visionaries from around the world.

Themes Discussed

GLOBAL CONFLICTS

AI

BIG TECH

COLONIALISM

ACTIVISM

JOURNALISM ON TRIAL

DISINFO

RESISTANCE

EMPATHY, ENDURANCE, RESILIENCE

HUMANITARIAN AID

CLIMATE



Highlights



SURVIVING TRUMP

In the first session of ZEG 2025, New Yorker editor Susan Morrison sat down with author Shazna Nessa to share profound and hilarious stories of satire, Donald Trump and Saturday Night Live. “In Europe satire is seen as a political tool, to make changes,” she said about the occasion when she received a letter written in gold Sharpie from the president himself. “In America it’s more of a pressure release valve – we can all laugh together at this idiot.”

THE KICKER LIVE

Three episodes of the Columbia Journalism Review’s bi-monthly podcast, the Kicker were recorded during ZEG 2025. In the first episode, The Kicker’s host, Josh Hersh sat down with the founder of the South African Daily Maverick, Branko Brkic, who called his work with fellow journalists an attempt to not only save democracy, but civilization at large. Later, Hersh spoke with Iraqi author Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, who shared his journey of becoming a reporter, lessons



learnt about his own country and how he approaches depicting the intimate lives of the people caught up in war. To top things off, former CNN journalist Arwa Damon gave a candid account of swapping mainstream media for humanitarian work with Inara, a charity that helps provide treatment to children in warzones, facing some of the most difficult health conditions.

HISTORY AS BATTLEFIELD: UNDERSTANDING OUR MOMENT

Historian Timothy Snyder effortlessly commanded a packed room despite being present online. He talked about current politics unfolding as a spectacle. “Truth is the friction, the gravity, that allows you to stand up,” he said. “When there is no truth, the best spectacle wins.” Fielding questions from the audience about rising authoritarianism, Professor Snyder highlighted the role of language in calling out today’s oligarchs for what they are. “Anything there is that people care about, be it social media or climate change, oligarchs are there to spoil it all.”



THE FUTURE OF AID: WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THE SAFETY NET VANISHES?

In an emotional panel discussion, humanitarians Seema Jilani, Shelley Thakral and Arwa Damon agreed that we need to rethink our approach to aid. Shelley Thakral, who has spent the last three years working for the WFP in the Democratic Republic of Congo, detailed the effects of recent drastic changes to the global aid landscape. “The precedents that are being set right now are absolutely terrifying,” she said. “Especially when set by the US who is meant to be upholding the system of aid.”

WHEN NOSTALGIA BECOMES A WEAPON

Haitian Times founder Garry Pierre-Pierre, Coda’s Natalia Antelava, and editor-in-chief of the South African news outlet The Daily Maverick Jillian Green explored how “older, simpler times” get weaponized for supremacist ideologies. Speaking of the shortcomings of mainstream media, Garry Pierre-Pierre said his colleagues “are using 20th-century tactics and vocabulary in the 21st century.” “We need to call things what they are,” he observed. In a lively discussion with the audience, the panelists agreed with the idea of reclaiming nostalgia as a tool for restoring pride in oppressed communities and driving hope for a better future.

LESSONS FROM TAIWAN

Ukrainian journalist Nataliya Gumenyuk and Taiwan’s Jason Liu found common ground in their fight against disinformation, with Liu explaining Taiwan’s decentralized approach: “Everyone does fact-checking, data analysis, and ranking of fact-checking systems together.”

STORYTELLING MONEYLAND

In an insightful and lively masterclass by Oliver Bullough, he prompted the audience to wonder about ways to investigate power and corruption. His advice? Humour. “You can find out nothing and have nothing, or you can find out nothing and make that a funny story.”

OPENING CEREMONY

At the end of the already eventful first day, Georgian activist and last year’s ZEG speaker Luka Gviniashvili returned to stage to tell an emotional story of his unlawful arrest, his brief stint in solitary confinement and the privilege of escaping persecution by traveling to the United States. Did he find relief there? Well, not so much. Arriving at the cusp of Trump’s second presidency, he experienced the confusion and uncertainty that seemed all too familiar to a Georgian coming from the background of political turmoil.



FREEDOM UNDER FIRE

Luka's performance set the scene for the pivotal conversation between Nobel laureate Joseph Stiglitz and Ukrainian philosopher Volodymyr Yermolenko. Despite their insights being powerful and at times frightening, the session wrapped up on a lighter note when improv actor and teacher Dan Klein took to the stage to talk all of us, including Joseph and Volodymyr, through fun, spontaneous improv exercises.

KEYS OF DEFIANCE

A conversation between internationally acclaimed Georgian pianist Giorgi Gigashvili and creator of Vogue's 73 Questions Joe Sabia transformed into an impromptu concert when Gigashvili took to the piano to channel his frustration at the past year of political upheaval in Georgia. "I found my voice," he said. "When I play Prokofiev or Beethoven I'm thinking about the people on the streets or in prison... I'm playing for someone who fights."

ECONOMICS IN THE AGE OF DISTRUST

Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz returned to the Main Stage on day 2 with Cambridge Analytica whistleblower Christopher Wylie and Coda's Natalia Antelava. Key takeaway? "Tech bros have excessive optimism of what they're going to accomplish," Stiglitz said. "The US claims to be an innovation economy but in actuality, the pace of innovation is lower than it was in World War II."

PHOTOGRAPHING POWER

Legendary British photographer Platon has photographed many world figures, ranging from Vladimir Putin to David Beckham. On our Main Stage, he shared juicy backstories to many of his most iconic images, like how he managed to get to Russia to photograph Edward Snowden in an almost James Bond-like operation, and how he asked Putin who his favourite Beatle was. (It's Paul.)

THE ELEPHANT IN THE ALGORITHM

Satirist and writer Armando Iannucci, Christopher Wylie, producer Adam Pincus and founder of The Maybe, Alix Dunn questioned why stories around tech are so hard to tell in an age where they dictate the world. According to Pincus, tech is burdened with jargon and complicated ideas without a personal touch. Chris Wylie, meanwhile, equated AI to a religion in which people are servile to its founders, failing to question the pace at which it is being developed. Iannucci spoke about the absolute inability of 'tech bros' to be humorous and recalled how he went to a tech conference and one of the 'tech bros' said he does not find comedy funny.

JOURNALISM ON TRIAL: MZIA'S STORY

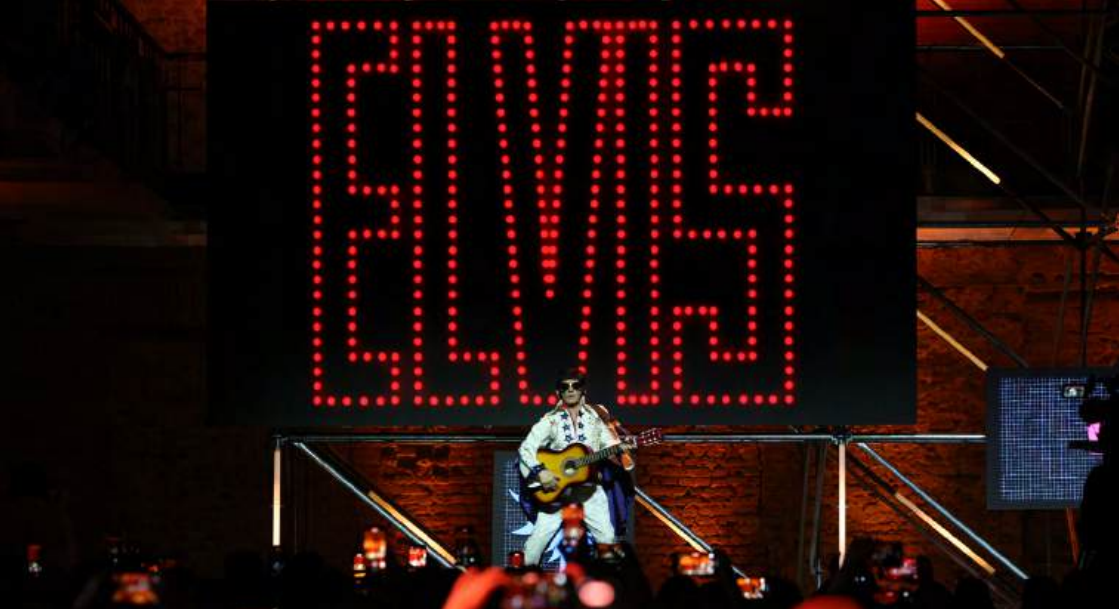
The session was dedicated to the struggle of a Georgian journalist Mzia Amaglobeli, who is currently wrongfully imprisoned with felony charges. Human rights barrister Caoilfhionn Gallagher KC, journalist and Mzia's colleague Irma

Dimitradze, and CEO of the Committee to Protect Journalists Jodie Ginsberg unpacked the chilling message Mzia's arrest sends to the media landscape in Georgia. Joining the session as a surprise guest was Nobel Peace Prize winner Maria Ressa, who reminded us of the importance of sticking together when the world is on fire: "you aren't only protecting journalists in your country, you are protecting them around the world."

ACTING OUT HISTORY

Acclaimed actor Khalid Abdalla sat down with Iraqi war reporter Ghaith Abdul-Ahad for a conversation that moved from film sets to Baghdad, Cairo and beyond. Abdalla spoke extensively about his participation in the Tahrir Square protests 2011 and detailed the aftermath him to write "Stop Genocide" in support of Palestine on his palm at the premiere of the Crown. "Standing up, I was afraid to be destroyed and cancelled, but I found the opposite. Circles of solidarity are so much wider than I thought - I found my people and they found me."





ART OF RESISTANCE: MOCOA'S JOURNEY

In an immersive theatrical performance three survivors of eye violence at the hand of the Columbian police explained the lasting impact of their injuries. They distributed eye patches throughout the audience and re-enacted protests that left them all visually impaired. After the performance, Hugh Macleod from the Global Anti-Torture Network joined the performers to talk about what it takes to bounce back from injustice and reclaim your voice through art and therapy.

BRIDGING THE DIVIDE

Founder of The Maybe, Alix Dunn, and machine learning engineer Alexandre Amirejibi debated solutions to problems caused by social media and algorithms. "We are using tech to create a solution for a problem that tech created!" Dunn said.

CODA LIVE

Our flagship live journalism show was back bigger and more emotional this year. Journalist Ryan Broderick explored what prompted his father to become a Trump supporter, what it means for their relationship and what it teaches us about polarization. Coda's Masho Lomashvili took us through her journey of battling memory wars over contested realities of Russia's 2008 invasion of Georgia. And pediatrician and global health advocate Seema Jilani took us on a wild ride as she told the story of her own hyphenated identity as a Pakistani-American, rejecting then re-discovering her roots in Texas and how her father's love for Elvis Presley shaped her own identity.

And can we say we let the curtain fall in style? Elvis himself - or rather, Seema's father Airaj Jilani - joined us with an electrifying performance of rock'n'roll classics in the best Elvis fashion.

CAPTURED LIVE

In the live version of our latest podcast *Captured*, Coda's Isobell Cockerell sat down with Chris Wylie, who paid tribute to thousands of often invisible workers who train AI in horrifying conditions for pennies an hour. "AI is a magic thing that exists in our phones," Chris said. "What that hides, is that it is actually this very brute force."

SONGWRITING IN THE AGE OF ALGORITHMS

Who writes a better love song, ChatGPT or singer/songwriter JP Saxe? The Canadian popstar bet with Nick Laparra, that he would outdo AI in an impromptu song-writing session with a complete stranger. Aided by a volunteer who shared her story of romantic heartbreak, as well as enthusiastic tips from the audience, Saxe came up with a song that unanimously topped its AI-generated counterpart.

FAITH IN THE AGE OF AI

Can you imagine a world where AI priests take confessions? Coda's Isobell Cockerell and Bishop of the Evangelical

Baptist Church of Georgia, Rusudan Gotsiridze had an unusual conversation about faith in the new world. "Jesus did not compete with men of letters based on knowledge, just like I don't pretend I am very wise and have all the answers," Gotsiridze said about a potential competition with AI priests. "I only have this human connection, I know when I'm needed without words, when they weep, when they are happy and when you don't provide the ready answers. For them to speak and find their own way."

COLONIALISM 101

In another immersive masterclass, Ukrainian journalist Maksym Eristavi talked about Russian colonialism, the form of oppression practiced by the Russian Empire and its descendants that's often eclipsed by Western colonialism in mainstream narratives. Maksym presented stories of lesser-known Ukrainian creatives targeted by Russia. "Today, a new generation of Ukrainian creatives is exterminated - same playbook [as the Soviet regime], still no accountability," he said.



Meet the Team

NATALIA ANTELAVA

Building ZEG's program is like editing a magazine, except your readers are in the room with you, and you get to watch their faces change in real time. People think they're coming for the big-name speaker or the panel on their favorite topic, but that's never what gets them. It's the unexpected collision between the climate scientist and the hip-hop artist, the moment when the war photographer tells a story that has never been told before, the conversation that happens because we put two people on stage who had no business being together. I've been a journalist all my life, but ZEG taught me that the best stories are often the one that surprises everyone—including yourself. When you watch someone discover a new way of thinking about their own work because of something completely unrelated, that's when you know the program worked. It's messy, it's unpredictable, and it's exactly what the world needs more of.



ELENE JVANIA

I love ZEG because it surprises me every single year. The audience keeps growing and getting more diverse, sessions



are packed, and there's this incredible curiosity spreading in directions we never even anticipated - not just from our team or speakers, but from everyone who shows up. The topics we dive into, the connections we make between seemingly unrelated things - I honestly don't think this kind of authentic, deep conversation happens anywhere else. What I love most is that ZEG isn't just another festival. It's become this safe space where you can be with the right people, hear wildly different perspectives, but still feel grounded in shared values. There's something rare about that combination.

KETEVAN EBANOIDZE

What I love most in ZEG is the adrenaline that comes with building it - the months of preparation, the last-minute chaos, and then those three unforgettable days filled with energy, creativity, and emotion. It's intense, inspiring, and deeply personal. ZEG brings together people from all walks of life, and somehow, in just a few days, we create a space where stories truly matter and connections run deep. For me, it's not just a festival, it's a living, breathing experience that I'm proud to help shape every year.



SOPHIKO VASADZE

Every year, ZEG surprises us not just with who shows up on stage, but with the conversations that happen in between, the strange magic that comes from putting storytellers, scientists,



artists, and activists in the same room. It's not always perfect — sometimes it rains, sometimes someone loses their voice, and sometimes we forget to eat. But every year, we see people leaving with new ideas, new hope, and new fire. At ZEG, we work like crazy, sleep very little and still we can't wait for the next one. That's love. That's why we keep doing it. That's why I love ZEG.



NADIA BEARD

How to find yourself confronted by ideas and conversations you never knew you never knew? That's what ZEG is for me, a place where my mind is expanded through encounters which surprise and delight. The possibilities of

bringing people together from across disciplines and regions is always so exciting.

KRISTINA SKUPIEN

What makes ZEG so special for me is how much I get to learn every single time. It's a place where I discover new ideas, meet incredible people, and get inspired in ways I never expect. Working

with such a wonderful team to build something this exceptional is both challenging and deeply rewarding. ZEG isn't just an event, it's a reminder of why stories, people, and connections matter, and I feel very lucky to be part of it.



IRINA MATCHAVARIANI

I came to my first ZEG as an audience member back in 2019, when I was just starting my journalism career. Wonderful conversations and brushing shoulders with the industry's greats made me certain that I wanted to pursue this profession. I even built my cover letter for the Fulbright Scholarship around the encounter with the British writer Kerry Hudson. Guess what, her workshop helped me land at the oldest journalism school in the U.S.! Now I'm so glad to be back as a team member for ZEG 2025

— the atmosphere, the accessibility to speakers and a unique quality to break down profound topics makes it a very special experience.



TINA GAGUA

What I love most about ZEG is that no matter who our speakers are — YouTube stars, world-renowned filmmakers, or acclaimed novelists — they all share something rare: a deep generosity and a willingness to go beyond the surface.

Spending time with our guests, speakers, and volunteers is a constant source of learning and inspiration. Every conversation feels meaningful — it's the kind of energy that fuels me for the year ahead.



ZEG Volunteering Programme



For each festival, we recruit dozens of young volunteers, most of them students, to assist our speakers during their stay in Tbilisi and also help audience members navigate the ever-growing festival space. This year, we hosted 64 volunteers across 6 parallel stages.

We thoughtfully match each volunteer's tasks with their interests and assign them as main points of contact for international participants. That creates a unique exchange system — our guests get the unusual opportunity to experience Georgian culture through the eyes of its youth, while our volunteers find friends and mentors among the speakers.

This year's ZEG did indeed spark unexpected friendships: Renowned lawyer Sara Hossain's defiant account

of student protests in her native Bangladesh moved many volunteers so much that they flocked around her after the session, seeking advice and reassurance for their own protests unfolding in Tbilisi. Words of solidarity were exchanged, along with email addresses and contact cards, with Sara going as far as suggesting to one young volunteer to seek internships under her guidance.

We are especially proud and moved when volunteers choose to return to ZEG — and let's say it's not a rare occurrence. In the words of Dzerassa Sana-koeva, who's been volunteering with us for 3 years, the festival has "that energy that stays with you - I always leave feeling recharged, and almost every year it pushes me to start something new, either in work or personally."

Impact



For us, ZEG is more than just a festival spanning several days. We see ZEG as an ever growing community of thinkers and work hard to keep it tight-knit.

It is often difficult to trace and measure the festival impact in numbers. The very heart and soul of ZEG lies in human connection after all. But there are signs, tangible and measurable, that show why we are doing what we're doing.

SHIFTING THE LIMELIGHT

ZEG takes place in Tbilisi, Georgia and is a wonderful opportunity to push local stories from a region of geopolitical importance. This year, panels featuring Georgians in resistance—journalists, artists and ordinary citizens affected by state violence—ended up being some

of the most emotional and meaningful conversations of the festival. The story of Mzia Amaglobeli rang loud and clear for the international community, thanks to the contributions of Maria Ressa, Caoilfhionn Gallagher KC and Georgian journalist and Mzia's colleague, Irma Dimitradze. Their conversation served as a foundation for more international reporting on Amaglobeli's case. In early July, Voxeurop published an article by Dimitradze, highlighting the importance of the ZEG conversation and specifically the appearance of Maria Ressa. In the words of Caoilfhionn Gallagher KC, international solidarity has real impact on legal decisions: "Knowing that the world is watching and that support is out there undoubtedly impacts decision-makers. We saw that in Maria Ressa's case."

Amaglobeli's case struck a cord with Jodie Ginsberg, Chief Executive Officer of the Committee to Protect Journalists. In her illuminating piece, she drew a chilling parallel between the arrest of Amaglobeli and that of Mario Guevara, a Spanish-language reporter in Atlanta, Georgia, who was arrested when Ginsberg was at ZEG in Tbilisi. "Two Georgias. Thousands of miles apart, yet proximate in so many terrifying ways," Ginsberg wrote. "But those parallels also offer us a path forward. What's happening in Georgia or the United States is not new, nor is it irreversible. We have seen this playbook before. Just us we spoke up and out against the threats to press freedom in Georgia, so too will we in the United States."

Families of current "Prisoners of Conscience," arrested during the protests in winter, also got the platform to share their stories to the international audience. The session, *We Did not Think it Could Happen to US (Again)*, ended at an emotional, yet defiant note when the brother of the political prisoner read a letter written in a prison cell specifically for the ZEG audience.

Conversations with prisoners' families extended beyond ZEG panels. Renowned Ukrainian journalist and ZEG 2025 speaker, Nataliya Gumenyuk took the opportunity during her visit in Tbilisi to talk to one of the prisoner's mothers, Lika Guntsadze, in a podcast detailing her son's arrest and trials. International coverage is crucial for Georgians, as our news cycle is often limited by the barrier of the Georgian language.

UNEXPECTED COLLABORATION

In a Q&A session following JP Saxe's songwriting panel, Ugandan journalist Abaas Mpindi asked him what it would take to make a collab in Uganda. "It would be enough to get up during the ZEG festival and ask that question," the singer replied, prompting an applause. In the follow-up conversation, JP and Abaas agreed to teach music to children in Uganda. This kind of collaborations is what makes ZEG special for us and the speakers.

ZEG speakers stay in touch beyond the festival - online chat groups that we create during ZEG help them maintain relationships, share ideas and flesh them out together. We are beyond excited when we see ZEG community groups active and thriving days and months after the festival concludes.

NETWORKING OPPORTUNITIES

We have already talked about the special relationship some of our speakers build with their volunteers. But the relaxed, free-flowing nature of ZEG allows the same connection between speakers and the audience. This year, we experimented with the Happy Hour format, enabling audience members to meet speakers in an informal setting and go beyond their panel themes. In conversations like these, audience members get a chance to not only meet speakers as persons, but also flesh out their ideas, exchange contacts and stay in touch with the speakers. The fact that so many of our audience members choose to return to ZEG year in year out, shows how conversations and panels inspire them beyond the few days of the festival.

Partners

ZEG 2025 was rich in local and international collaboration. As highlighted in the Program section of this report, many of our partners helped us shape ZEG's unforgettable panels. But the magic of ZEG goes way beyond the stage - the festival would not be possible without the behind the scenes work with visionaries, mission-driven organizations, technical staff and the various media organizations covering the event.

We hope that the festival's merchandise, designed around the capsule collection by the Georgian brand Reckless, will serve as a fond token of the three days well-spent. We would also like to extend our gratitude to Windfor's, a leading marketing agency in Georgia that helped us refresh our visual identity, and Irakli Ramishvili, visual artist who made ZEG look unforgettable this year.

Special thanks extends to the embassies and missions to Georgia, for their commitment to bringing some of their countries' most brilliant minds to our festival.

We would like to extend our gratitude to each of them, for making the festival a real feat for the senses and the mind. And we can not wait to meet them - and you! - again next time.



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