2026 REPORT

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WHO, EXACTLY, ARE WE?

“Wait — you started a newspaper now?”

We heard versions of that question a lot at ZEG this year. Fair enough. From the outside, it can look like we keep adding things: a festival, live shows, dinners, a newspaper, events in new cities.

But the truth is simpler.

ZEG started as a collaboration when, in 2019, journalists from Coda Story and the team behind Impact Hub Tbilisi got together around a slightly unreasonable idea: bring people who rarely share a room to Georgia and into the same conversation and see what happens.

What happened was that one collaboration started producing others. People came back and brought new people with them. Conversations became friendships; friendships became projects, podcasts and partnerships. Things kept starting at ZEG that nobody had put on the programme.

Behind it all is a small team of journalists, producers, designers, entrepreneurs, artists and organizers who spend the year looking for people and ideas that deserve to collide. Journalism shapes that instinct: curiosity, scepticism, attention to power and a determination to look beyond the usual centers of the world. Georgian hospitality takes care of quite a lot of the rest.



What started as a festival has become a living, breathing network — one that keeps renewing and expanding itself. Every June, it comes back to Tbilisi with new people, new stories and more connections than it had the year before.

And the newspaper? Yes, that happened too. This year Coda Story, ZEG’s founding journalism studio, teamed up with our friends at The Continent and launched The Atlas, a global newspaper made to be passed from person to person rather than left to an algorithm.

Take a look — it’s like nothing else we know.
And yes, The Atlas was born at ZEG Fest too.

A NEWSPAPER BORN AT ZEG



ZEG 2026 IN NUMBERS

1,000+
people came to ZEG 2026

140+
speakers from 35 countries and 30+ industries

77 student volunteers

30 ZEG Fellows

127
sessions across three days — conversations, performances, workshops, live podcasts, films and more

60
accredited journalists

74
media appearances

BEYOND TBILISI

2.9M social views and impressions

675K people reached / viewers

35K profile visits

18.6K interactions

WHAT HAPPENED AT ZEG 2026?

We never set a theme for ZEG. We invite people and ideas we think belong in the same place, and wait to see what starts connecting.

Somehow, every year, themes emerge anyway.

In 2026, four questions kept following us from room to room.

1. WHO GETS TO TELL THE STORY?

This question surfaced everywhere: in a famous photograph whose authorship was nearly erased; in the history of Abkhazia; in Georgian literature struggling to reach the world; even in the accents journalists learn to lose in order to sound authoritative.

Different sessions, the same argument: who gets to define what happened — and who disappears from the telling?



THE STRINGER

Bao Nguyen on the contested authorship of one of the Vietnam War's most famous photographs.



EXPORTING A COUNTRY'S IMAGINATION

Georgian writers on what happens when the state controls the machinery of translation.



THE ABKHAZIA WE FORGOT

A democratic past almost erased from memory.



HIDING WHERE YOU CAME FROM

What do we lose when authority requires us to stop sounding like ourselves?

2. WHAT DOES THE BODY KNOW?

War, danger and memory appeared at ZEG this year not only as things we think about, but as things the body carries.

Artist Lotte Geeven played soldiers' heartbeats recorded across a thousand kilometers of Ukraine's frontline. Arwa Damon and somatic therapist Simon Schellevis explored what happens when danger ends but the body doesn't believe it.

Even our voice workshops treated the body as an archive — of memory, fear and experience.



ZEG 2026 KEPT ASKING US NOT SIMPLY TO UNDERSTAND THE WORLD, BUT TO FEEL IT.

3. WHAT DO WE OWE THE PEOPLE WE LOVE?

The question of what we owe the people we love keeps being handed down, year on year — in 2025 it was Ryan Broderick, on the Coda Live stage, talking about his father. At ZEG 2026, some of the most personal sessions asked what happens when someone close to us ends up on the other side of a line we didn't expect to draw.

Brent Katz made a film about watching a childhood friend go to work for OpenAI. Ukrainian philosophers Volodymyr Yermolenko and Vakhtang Kebuladze chose to stay near the front rather than retreat from it. And in one of the festival's most devastating pairings, Ghaith Abdul-Ahad and Viet Thanh Nguyen — a war correspondent and a novelist, worlds apart on paper — arrived at the same instinct: decenter your own trauma, so you don't pass it on.



4. WHAT DOES AI ACTUALLY COST?

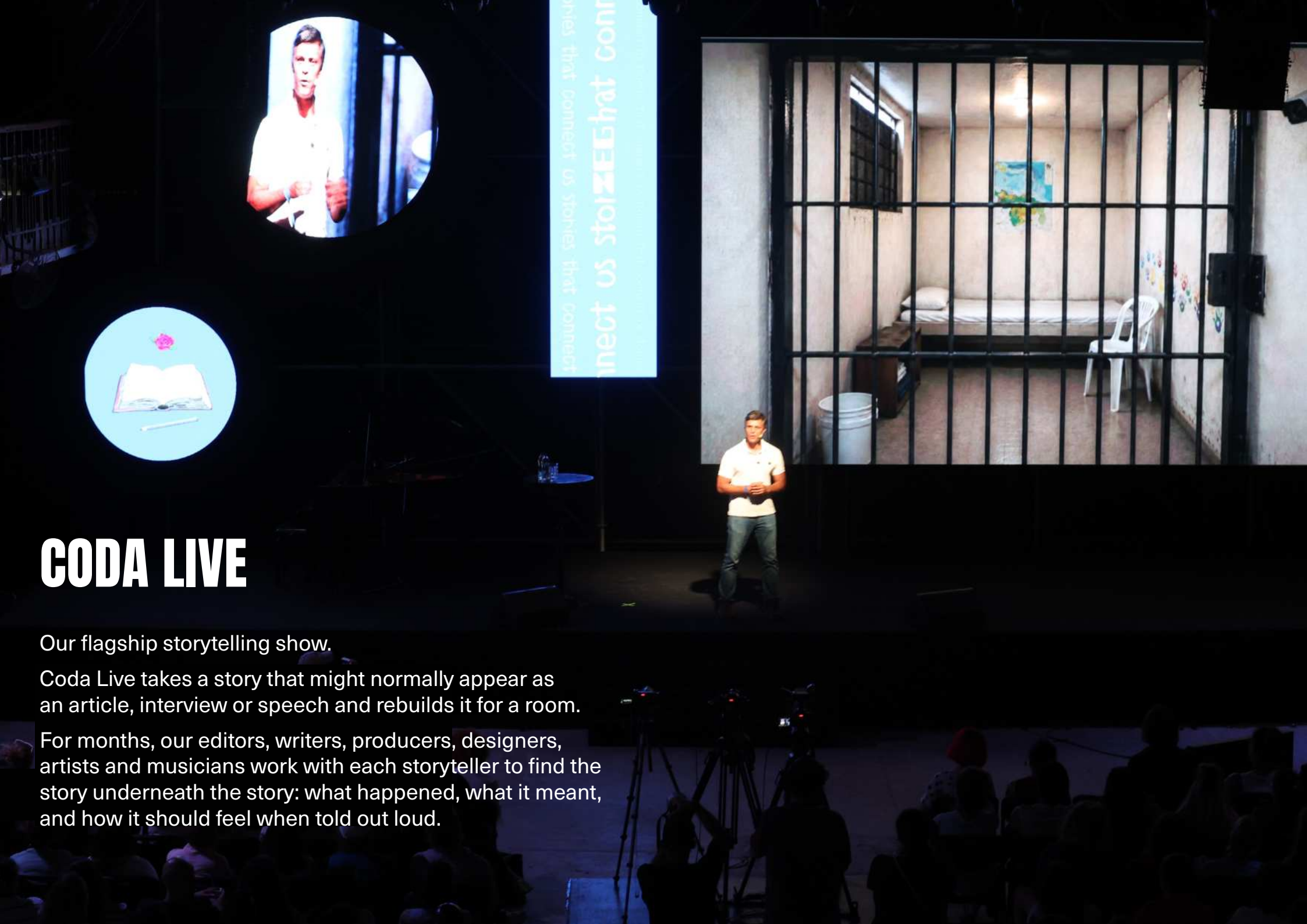
We didn't program a single AI panel this year. AI turned up anyway — inside law, inside faith, inside grief. That felt more honest than a stage of its own could have.

Karen Hao dismantled Silicon Valley's founding myth. Martha Dark and Nora Mbagathi described search engines swallowing journalism whole. A bishop, an artist and a technologist asked whether people are starting to turn to machines for what they used to ask of God.



AND THEN WE PRINTED A NEWSPAPER.

The Atlas, ZEG 2026's biggest experiment — built with The Continent — landed as 1,000 physical copies, insisting that despite the algorithms telling us otherwise, we still live in one world. At ZEG, at least, print is not dead.



CODA LIVE

Our flagship storytelling show.

Coda Live takes a story that might normally appear as an article, interview or speech and rebuilds it for a room.

For months, our editors, writers, producers, designers, artists and musicians work with each storyteller to find the story underneath the story: what happened, what it meant, and how it should feel when told out loud.

SIX STORIES. SIX COMPLETELY DIFFERENT WORLDS.

Venezuela. Palestine. Britain. The Dominican Republic. Georgia. California.

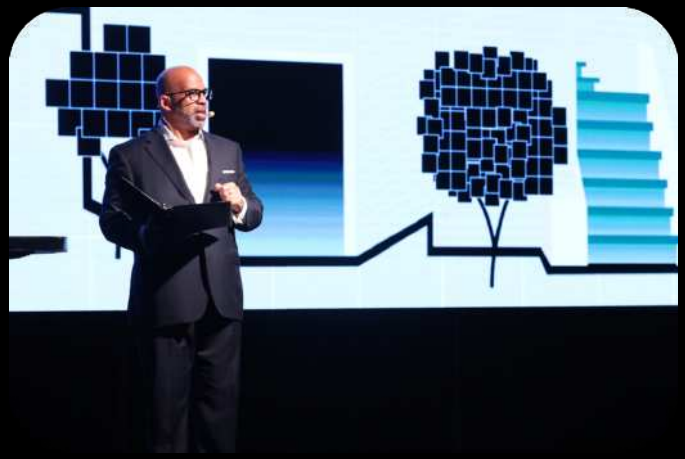
Prison cells and protest drums. Opera and hip-hop. Adoption and femicide. Whistleblowing, war, friendship and the strange things that happen when journalists finally turn the lens on themselves.

At ZEG 2026, six storytellers took the Coda Live stage.



LEOPOLDO LÓPEZ
A prison cell, a hunger strike and the decision to resist.





MARTIN REYNOLDS
Two brothers separated by adoption, reconstructing a shared history decades later.



SHAHMIR SANNI
What happens after you expose a scandal and the story becomes your life.

AÏDA DELPEUCH
A journalist and singer finding her voice in Palestine — through folk song, hymns and George Frideric Handel.



IRMA DIMITRADZE
A journalist accustomed to speaking for someone else discovers what changes when she tells her own story.



ROSMERY DE LA CRUZ SUAZO
A story about losing a mother to femicide — and learning, 33 years later, how to tell it.



AND SOMETIMES IT CHANGES THE STORYTELLER.

Irma Dimitradze had spent the year speaking publicly about imprisoned Georgian journalist Mzia Amaghlobeli. At Coda Live, for the first time, she told the story from inside her own experience.

"As journalists, we spend so much of our time telling other people's stories. Telling my own story helped me better understand the feelings and fears of the people who trust me to tell theirs."

– Irma Dimitradze



SOMETIMES THE STORY CHANGES IN THE TELLING.

Rosmery de la Cruz Suazo had carried the story of her mother's murder for 33 years. Working with Coda Live's writers, illustrators and producers, she found a way to tell it publicly for the first time — without reducing it to tragedy.

"We laughed. We cried. We found the ridiculousness and the joy that coexists with deep pain."

– Rosmery de la Cruz Suazo



THE ROOM IS PART OF THE STORY.

Coda Live is built for a live audience: music, film, illustration, sound, silence and the presence of other people all become part of the telling.

This year's show moved from a recreated prison cell to Palestinian song, from hip-hop to family archives, and ended with piano, protest drums and an audience on its feet.

CODA LIVE: JOURNALISM YOU EXPERIENCE TOGETHER.

AND SOMETIMES THE STORY IS A GAME.

Alix Dunn, founder of The Maybe, closed ZEG 2026 by taking the stage alone for a one-woman show, produced by our Coda Live team. Starting from her six-year-old daughter's first chess lessons, she compared Silicon Valley's executives to Napoleon and Genghis Khan, strategists moving pieces on a board that tinkers with life as we know it. But the story was really about what comes after losing: why the game is never only in the hands of those who think they can see ten moves ahead.



WHAT HAPPENS AFTER ZEG

THE FESTIVAL ENDS. THE CONNECTIONS DON'T.

ZEG gets bigger every year. But the number we watch most closely isn't how many people came, how many sessions we programmed or how many people saw us online — it's how many people come back.

This year, more than a third of our speakers returned to ZEG, either bringing new stories with them to share on stage, or as attendees. To us, that matters because people rarely come back just for another three days of programming. They come back for the people, the conversations, and for things that have begun in the meantime.

"THERE IS ONLY ONE FESTIVAL I ATTEND CONSISTENTLY EVERY SINGLE YEAR, AND THAT'S ZEG."

"I DON'T ALWAYS KNOW MY PERSPECTIVE HAS SHIFTED UNTIL LATER. UNTIL THE STORIES SINK IN."

Aaron Rasmussen, co-founder of MasterClass

The things we care about most often become visible months — sometimes years — later. A conversation becomes a collaboration. Someone gets introduced to somebody they would never otherwise have met. A performance leads to funding. A friendship becomes a project.

HERE ARE THREE THINGS THAT BEGAN AT ZEG.

1 A CONVERSATION BECAME A PODCAST

At ZEG, Alix Dunn, founder of The Maybe, met policymaker Stefan Turkheimer. They were working on the same problem — the power of technology — from very different sides of it.

They became friends.

This summer, that relationship became an episode of Computer Says Maybe, with Stefan explaining what it actually takes to turn concerns about technology into law.

A ZEG introduction became a conversation that travelled far beyond the festival.

2 A PERFORMANCE BECAME A NETWORK

When Colombian collective MOCAO performed at ZEG, six of its members had never told their story on a stage outside their own community. A year later, the exposure they gained helped secure funding for an international conference in Bogotá, bringing together survivors of police violence from ten different countries.

That conference has since become the seed of a global grassroots network — one that our partners at the International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims say is now taking root in Bangladesh.

A single night in Tbilisi is now a network spanning continents.

3 A MEETING BECAME A TRAINING PROGRAM

At ZEG, child and family therapist Tara McDonald met Rosmery De la Cruz Suazo, an advocate for families affected by femicide. Neither had planned to work together.

But this August, Tara, Rosmery and Dr Karen O'Neill launched the first training of its kind for clinicians working with children affected by femicide — a subject Tara says has gone "largely unspoken" in her field. More than 60 therapists came from seven countries to attend.

As Tara put it afterwards: "None of it would have happened without ZEG bringing amazing people together into the same room."

ZEG VOLUNTEERS



When Irakli Chanturidze went to the airport to meet our guest Bianca Rehmer, they struck up a conversation about Georgian culture and language. Noticing her growing interest in the subject as the festival progressed, Irakli decided to give her a parting gift: an English translation of the 12th-century Georgian epic poem The Knight in the Panther's Skin, by Shota Rustaveli.

"And when I decided to pursue a master's degree in sports law, she connected me to her two colleagues working in the field," he said.

This exchange is at the core of ZEG's volunteering program: guests experience Georgia through the eyes of its young people, and volunteers build meaningful relationships with journalists, artists, researchers, data scientists and thinkers they admire. Each year, a speaker is paired with a volunteer who turns into a point of contact, a guide and often a friend for our international guests.

Irakli, a freelancer with the Georgian Football Federation, is one of the returning participants of ZEG's volunteering program. "For three years now, ZEG and I have been inseparable friends," he says.

Our volunteers are at the center of what we do. This year's volunteering program was the biggest to date; we hosted 77 volunteers who were busy walking, talking, organising and thinking with our speakers across our six stages. They are a large part of what creates the particular atmosphere at ZEG. As Irakli put it, "At ZEG, nobody is on a pedestal."

"I got to pick Shahmir Sanni's and Chris Wylie's brains about Brexit," Lana Tsaguria, a 28-year-old researcher of European politics, told us. "Those personal interactions are truly the highlight of ZEG. Not just attending sessions and making sure speakers are picked up from the airport."

Like Irakli, Lana is also a returning volunteer. And both say that ZEG's volunteers have turned into a network of its own — at the festival, they help each other out and after the festival days are done, they stay in touch, sharing news about interesting events, volunteering opportunities and youth hangouts with each other. "There is no chance that I will go to a social or a cultural event in Georgia without meeting a ZEG-friend there," Irakli reflected.

The volunteer network is growing — often, through word of mouth. Eva Burduli came to ZEG 2026 as a first-time volunteer after hearing her friend talk about her experience last year. She didn't know much about ZEG and had never volunteered anywhere before. "My fear dissipated quickly," she says. "I made friends with so many wonderful people my age who were also navigating the festival space for the first time." Even on a stressful occasion — when volunteers returned to the festival venue on day two to find furniture drenched after a heavy rainstorm the night before — Eva remembers how teamwork from everyone, including speakers, made the preparations effortless.

Eva plans to come back for ZEG 2027 and bring her friends along as fellow volunteers. "Next year, I want to try and be paired with a speaker," she adds, "that will be a big responsibility."

The return rate of our volunteers tells us there is something we are doing right. And the feedback from our speakers proves our point: "It was so well designed," Heather Chaplin from Columbia Journalism Review told us about her volunteer's approach to ensuring she got the most of her stay in Tbilisi. "I know how much work goes into making something feel effortless for attendees. Thank you for taking the time to craft such an experience for us."

ZEG 2026 IN QUOTES

"Thanks to the amazing ZEG team, led by Natalia Antelava, for putting together an outstanding festival of ideas, art, provocation, and terrific Georgian meals. It's worth your time to attend if you're in the region next summer."

VIET THANH NGUYEN,
PULITZER-PRIZE WINNING WRITER AND ZEG 2026 SPEAKER

"Another kaleidoscope of storytelling in all its forms - from music and poetry, to investigative journalism and film making; food to politics via philosophy and social policy; fact and fiction, truly global yet all brought together through the magic of Tbilisi. As inspiring as ever, not least with always thinking about what's next — "the day after tomorrow" — and a real focus on people, human interaction and creativity which felt so essential after the last few years of talking about AI."

RACHEL CORP,
JOURNALIST AND FORMER CEO OF ITN NEWS AND ZEG 2026 SPEAKER

"What a privilege it was to be part of this wonderful, magical thing you have created. It was amazing in every way, stimulating, so much fun and expertly organised. I feel like I made dozens of new friends and have learned of work by people I'd not heard of before."

GEOFF DYER,
WRITER AND ZEG 2026 SPEAKER

"ZEG Festival is this cistern of creativity and imagination — all these wonderful minds with different areas of expertise just coming together in this beautiful melting pot."

CARRIE GOLDBERG,
VICTIMS' RIGHTS ATTORNEY AND ZEG 2026 SPEAKER

"I already want to come back. It's been, I can say without doubt, probably the best festival that I've come to because of the diversity of speakers; the broadness of subjects. I don't think I've ever been to a festival which has had so many fascinating discussions. And the most important thing is that the audience is included, because that's actually where all the best stuff happens."

ZELDA PERKINS,
THE FIRST PERSON TO PUBLICLY BREAK AN NDA WITH HARVEY WEINSTEIN AND ZEG 2026 SPEAKER

"ZEG is not just an event; it is a universe where the currency is curiosity, vulnerability and bravery. Led by a fierce Georgian and international female force, this festival is a testament to what happens when women lead. They have crafted a culture where immense generosity flows like wine, and where tables stretch forever with food that feeds both belly and soul."

ROSMERY DE LA CRUZ SUAZO,
INTERNATIONAL ADVOCATE FOR FAMILIES AFFECTED BY FEMICIDE AND ZEG 2026 SPEAKER

"I had no idea what extraordinary meant until I walked down Constitution Street, Tbilisi, Georgia. Every single story I heard was necessary, exciting and unbelievably impactful and the greatest part was that my conversations with attendees were as fabulous and interesting. You have brought together an incredible community of humans."

TARA MCDONALD,
CHILD & FAMILY THERAPIST AND ZEG 2026 SPEAKER

"ZEG was my first time in the region and overall a positive experience. I co-organise an African sex and sexualities festival and left with lots of inspiration for my own organising."

NANA DARKOA SEKYIAMAH,
FEMINIST WRITER AND ZEG 2026 SPEAKER

ZEG ATTENDEE FEEDBACK

"I'm going to need a few more days to fully digest everything I experienced at the ZEG Storytelling Festival, reviewing my notes from all the thought-provoking sessions and reflecting on the insights shared through powerful dialogue and performances. I couldn't believe how I got to be so up close and personal with award-winning journalists, filmmakers, activists, writers, and others changing the world. You really just have to attend ZEG to get what it's all about."

ASSAMI WRIGHT, ZEG 2026 ATTENDEE

It was my first time attending ZEG Festival and it was such an amazing journey. I loved every bit of it. And I was so impressed with the dynamic, the people, the diversity. There were so many interesting topics, I did not want it to ever come to an end."

NINO JAPIASHVILI, ZEG 2026 ATTENDEE

"A really friendly, informative and inspiring event. It made me think about the connections between different issues and different places, and encouraged me to become more active in campaigns."

TIM COWEN, ZEG 2026 ATTENDEE

Half way through this amazing festival of ideas, talks and stories I realized: ZEG is not a conference. It's a rave.

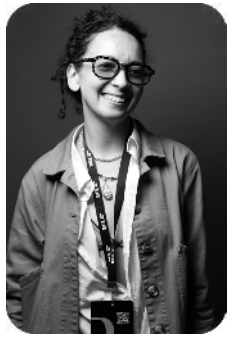
ANONYMOUS, ZEG 2026 ATTENDEE FROM THE UK

MEET THE TEAM



NATALIA ANTELAVA

The moment I know ZEG is working is when I look around and realise the room no longer needs us. People are deep in conversations we didn't arrange, introducing one another, plotting things, cooking up projects, making plans we know nothing about. At that point, ZEG has become theirs, which is exactly what we want.



NADIA BEARD

For me, ZEG is like rehearsing a play and then eventually seeing it performed on stage. Until the last minute you can't imagine how exactly it will come together, but it always does, and it reveals itself to be much more than the sum of its parts. This year, it was what I consider to be the journalistic version of magic: connection, surprise, delight.



KETI EBANOIDZE

I still sometimes struggle to explain exactly what ZEG is. A bit of storytelling, a bit of fun, a bit of serious conversation, a place to explore, express, connect. This year, one of our attendees described it perfectly: "ZEG is not a conference. It's a rave." I couldn't agree more. It's a place where people listen, question, laugh, cry, dance, drink and, most importantly, feel free to be themselves.



SOPHIKO VASADZE

I love ZEG because you never really know what's going to happen. You come for the stories, stay for the people, and leave with new ideas, new friends, and usually a few unexpected plans. For me, that's the magic of ZEG — it's not just about what happens on stage, but everything that happens around it.



ELENE JVANIA

ZEG 2026 felt bigger than we'd ever known it — every stage full, and the stories so varied that choosing between them felt almost unfair. But this year carried something else too: hosting it at all, at a moment when the world, and Georgia especially, is under so much pressure, felt like an act of defiance. Everyone who showed up — speakers, the audience itself — made that act together.



KRISTINA SKUPIEN

This year felt more structured than ever before, everything seemed to happen in the right place at the right time. But it still surprises me every year how it all comes together. That, I think, is the superpower of ZEG and the team behind it.



IRINA MATCHAVARIANI

This year, I facilitated my first-ever ZEG workshops. It's one thing to brainstorm and plan sessions, and something completely different to be part of them once they come to life. Seeing our attendees open up to speakers and take home not only inspiration but also practical knowledge is an experience I will always cherish. I already can't wait to see what next year brings!

"ZEG IS NOT A CONFERENCE. IT'S A RAVE."

PARTNERS

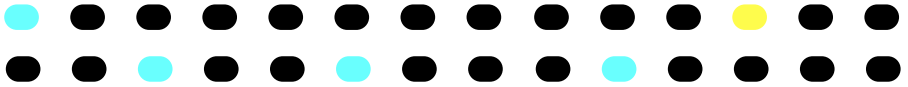
ZEG IS BUILT THROUGH COLLABORATION.

We're deeply grateful to the partners and supporters whose trust, ideas and generosity make the festival possible.

We also want to thank the technical teams, producers, musicians, caterers and crews who do the enormous work behind the scenes to make ZEG feel effortless.

And special thanks to the media organisations, both Georgian and international, that help tell the story of ZEG to audiences across the country and the world.





concept

UN WOMEN FOR ALL WOMEN AND GIRLS

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Funded by the European Union

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OK!

WHAT ABOUT GEORGIA