



Youth Declaration of South Caucasian Pastoralists for IYRP 2026 Madrid, Spain

On behalf of the youth of the South Caucasus, I am thrilled and honored to present the Youth Declaration of South Caucasian (Georgian, Armenian and Azerbaijanian) Pastoralists for the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists (IYRP) 2026 in Madrid, Spain. We, the young people of the South Caucasus, recognize our profound heritage as pastoralist communities and express our sincere gratitude to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) for acknowledging the significance of IYRP 2026. This year presents an exceptional opportunity to honor the legacy of pastoralism and to actively engage youth both in Spain and globally.

We present our unified voice and commit to fostering collaboration, developing the skills and capacities of young pastoralists, bridging gaps, and strengthening cooperation between regions and countries. We understand well the importance of Nature-Based Solutions integration in Digital Technologies to address overgrazed pastures, restore ecosystems, preserve agrobiodiversity, and enhance the resilience of Food Systems through Agroecology and Habitat Restoration.

Pastoralism is deeply rooted in millennia of adaptation, innovation, and landscape stewardship. From the highlands and plateaus of historical Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, our ancestors developed pastoral practices, improved agricultural techniques, and cultivated cultural systems that continue to inspire sustainable practices today. Our cultural diversity, grounded in the Kura-Araxes civilization, pastoralism national traditions, Art and cultural exchange, emerged from these foundations. This heritage forms a basis for dialogue, exchange, and ethno-cultural diversity among the countries of the South Caucasus.

As pastoralist communities, we advocate for collaboration and the sharing of traditions, including folk music, architecture, cottages, textiles, mobile food stations, and seasonal pasture management strategies. The dissemination of high-quality seeds, plant varieties, and rotational grazing practices, such as those in Tusheti and Shirak-Eldar steppe pastures, exemplifies the sustainable collaboration ethos of our ancestors. The South Caucasus embodies rich mythology, biodiversity, and cultural heritage, exemplified in the legend of the Golden Fleece of Colchis. This symbol illustrates the historical role of the South Caucasus as a center of cultural and technological exchange, with mountain rivers serving as routes for gold collection.

Our region is a biodiversity hotspot, home to endemic species, domestic and wild animals, birds, plants, and unique flora and fauna. Our forebear pastoralists revered this diversity, which shaped agriculture, cuisine, and cultural practices. This reverence enabled the organization of capacity-building programs and professional education for young pastoralists. Astrology and the observation of the stars guided pastoralists in cultural communication and exchange between peoples and tribes. Culinary techniques, food preservation methods, and recipes demonstrate the transmission of knowledge across generations. Pastoralism has long inspired poetry, prose, and music. Historically, as communities migrated, pastoralists carried stories, songs, and instruments that enriched local literary and musical traditions.

Representatives of South Caucasian youth are proud to celebrate IYRP 2026 in Madrid, Spain, where our Pastoral history will be presented, including the pastoral heritage and our readiness to become stewards of cultural and natural heritage expressed, represented by our delegate, Levan Misheladze. We collectively support sustainable pastoralism, agroecology, permaculture, the scientific understanding of healthy soils through Soils Living Labs, and the integration of renewable energy mobile systems into youth pastoral practices as part of the global dialogue at IYRP 2026.



The landscapes, microclimates, and diverse soil types of the South Caucasus highlands make them highly visible on the global pastoral map, with meadows and alpine zones shaped by human activity since the Neolithic period. We are prepared to conduct further detailed research and establish genetic banks for domestic animals, exploring genetic resources, pasture restoration methods, seasonal pastoral practices, transhumance routes, and community adaptation under changing environmental and social conditions. We understand the critical importance of combining ancestral knowledge with modern science, technology, and youth innovation. Our objectives include ecosystem restoration, strengthening agrobiodiversity, ensuring the resilience of pastoral communities for future generations, and establishing a South Caucasian Youth Pastoral Network grounded in this declaration.

My Family roots are coming from the most beautiful region of Georgia from the village of Gomareti, situated on the Gomareti Plateau at an altitude of 1,380 meters above sea level, within the historical municipality of Dmanisi. This is the site where 1.8 million-year-old human skulls were discovered, later named *Homo georgicus* by archaeologists, and given Georgian names Zezva for the male and Mzia for the female. Following these discoveries, European scientists agreed that Dmanisi, and thus Georgia, is one of the oldest cradles of European civilization.

My family manages a flock of approximately 800 sheep farming, maintained entirely on open pastures rather than barn systems. Shepherding in Georgia has always been considered a prestigious and honorable profession, attracting foreign tourists, researchers, and ethnographers. Georgia, located between Europe and Asia in the South Caucasus, features diverse landscapes -high mountains, valleys, forests, rivers, and the Black Sea coast. The northern region stretches along the Caucasus ridge with alpine zones, while western Georgia hosts subtropical climates, creating multiple microclimates that promote biodiversity.

The South Caucasus, encompassing Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, is abundant with mountains, rivers, forests, and fertile plains, enabling both agricultural development and nature preservation. Georgia's capital, Tbilisi, serves as the primary political, economic, and cultural hub, with a population of approximately 3.7 million. While there is no official state religion, the majority of the population adheres to Orthodox Christianity, which plays a significant cultural and social role.

Agriculture of Georgia

Agriculture in Georgia is diverse, including vineyards, orchards, vegetables, corn, and other crops. Pastoralism, an ancient tradition involving seasonal livestock movement to highlands in summer and lowlands in winter, contributes to mountain ecosystem conservation and local economic support. Georgia boasts rich wild flora and fauna, diverse agrobiodiversity with multiple crop varieties, abundant freshwater resources, and significant potential for renewable energy, especially hydro, wind, and solar.

Participation in this conference is profoundly important to me and my country, as the history of pastoralism is deeply connected to family traditions, indigenous knowledge, and customs passed down through generations. Many of these traditions may qualify for UNESCO's intangible cultural heritage list. For example, traditional transhumance routes have remained nearly unchanged over decades and centuries. Georgia's shepherding history is also rich with ethno - products, such as the unique Tusheti Guda cheese, made from raw sheep, cow, or mixed milk aged in specially treated sheep skins. This method is genuinely unique and deserves recognition as cultural heritage, producing exceptionally flavorful and aromatic cheese.



Our country is rich in myths, legends, prose, poetry, and musical instruments associated with shepherding, which facilitated communication among pastoralists. The South Caucasus is home to ancient civilizations, including Colchis, Kura-Araxes, Dmanisi, and Trialeti. Western Georgia, or Colchis, is linked to the myth of the Golden Fleece and the Argonauts' quest, which involved gold collection from mountain rivers using sheep skins. Georgia, like the entire South Caucasus, is distinguished by agrobiodiversity. Local sheep breeds, adapted to pasture vegetation and climatic zones, often migrate over 3,000 kilometers on foot a key characteristic of local breeds and traditional nomadic pastoralism. Almost all livestock and poultry in Georgia belong to local breeds developed over centuries through selective breeding. Approximately 70% of wool produced in Georgia was for export, serving as a vital resource for traditional textiles and combating soil erosion and desertification.

Georgia's history is rich with individuals connected to pastoral culture. I particularly recall the Georgian writer Alexander Kazbegi (Chopikashvili), who, despite noble origins, became a shepherd and produced significant literary works. An interesting episode recounts French visitors coming to purchase wool in the mountains; Kazbegi humorously remarked in French that all Georgian shepherds spoke French, astonishing the guests. Additionally, the Catholicos-Patriarch of Georgia, Ilia II, hailed from this region and served for 49 years, providing spiritual leadership to his grateful congregation.

Today, as in many countries, climate change poses significant challenges pasture erosion, reduction in vegetation cover, overgrazing, biodiversity decline, and habitat and ecosystem degradation. Addressing these challenges requires integrating nature-based solutions with modern digital technologies, ensuring sustainable development and restoration of pastures for the future of nomadic pastoralism. I would like to express special gratitude to the National Agency for Sustainable Land Management and Land Use Monitoring of Georgia, which actively implements policies for pasture management and restoration in accordance with current legislation and agency strategies. Currently, 171,292 hectares of state-owned pastures are registered nationwide, with 108,607 hectares under municipal ownership. The State Program for Access to State-Owned Pastures, established by the Georgian government under Decree N497 (6 October 2021), allows the leasing of state-owned agricultural land categorized as pastures. The program is aimed at individuals or legal entities, including agricultural cooperatives, who own livestock (cattle and/or small ruminants).

Applicants must submit proof of livestock ownership, certified by the National Food Agency, to participate. Pasture allocation is based on the number of livestock, with 1–1.5 hectares per cattle and 0.2–0.5 hectares per small ruminant. Leases are granted for 3 years. The selection of pastures is done in coordination with various agencies. If only one applicant is chosen, the lease is granted directly. If there are multiple applicants, an auction is held with a starting price of 15 GEL per hectare per year. Compliance with the lease terms is monitored by the Agency. Repeated violations or early termination can result in disqualification from the program for up to 2 years. Since the program began, 18,678 hectares of pastureland have been leased.

Additionally, we prioritize youth engagement, especially those actively involved in the sector. Together with my colleagues, we have developed pilot projects focused on pasture restoration and sustainable management. One such project involves restoring vegetation using the "Seed Ball" method, allowing plant growth alongside sheep movement, mitigating the negative effects of overgrazing. Another initiative seeks to establish a South Caucasus Youth Pastoral Network to share experience, implement rotational pasture systems, and use modern mapping methods to determine optimal vegetation periods and livestock movement times. We also envision professional training and field schools for young and novice shepherds, facilitating knowledge transfer and integrating traditional knowledge into practical applications.

I am confident that our conference in Madrid will lay a foundation for continued collaboration and partnerships. We are ready to present our projects and ideas aimed at the development of pastoralism under global challenges and improving



the livelihoods of shepherds. Georgia, particularly its eastern region historically known as Iberia, is ready to contribute alongside Spain—Iberia—in international cooperation and joint projects on sustainable pastoral education and best practices. Coordinated collaboration between pastoralism, eco-tourism, and agro-tourism is essential. Alpine, subalpine, and nomadic pastoralism knowledge must be effectively utilized and digitized, providing a prerequisite for the ecological, social, and economic development of young pastoralists.

Our planned Activities:

- **I wish to present the idea to host the next international conference in Georgia, specifically in Dmanisi, historically and geographically a vital cultural crossroads.**
- **We also plan to implement and utilize digital technologies for herders in the form of a new mobile application, which will assist them with mapping and navigation across pastures.**
- **The application will provide information about pasture locations, ownership, boundaries, vegetation, and plant frequency. It will also include alert functionalities for various natural risks and disasters, as well as for the spread of infectious diseases from neighboring countries, and veterinary safety and reliability. Additionally, herders will receive timely notifications regarding potential avalanches, floods, erosion, and hailstorms.**
- **We also aim to introduce insurance practices for nomadic livestock, drawing from European experiences, to strengthen their resilience. Furthermore, for sustainable pasture management and development, we plan to implement carbon sequestration technologies and apply them within our region.**
- **We intend to acquire and deploy mobile solar-powered charging photovoltaic batteries for herders, which are critically needed to support their daily pastoral activities.**

We extend our sincere gratitude for your attention, support, and collaboration.

Levan Misheladze

