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Georgian Film World Hopeful for Revival

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Georgian moviemakers are banking on European partners, international stars such as Mexico's Gael Garcia Bernal and their rich landscape to rebuild a film industry that was devastated by the Soviet collapse.

"The Loneliest Planet," an independently financed thriller focusing on a young couple's trek through the wilderness, stars Bernal and Israeli actress Hani Furstenberg and was entirely shot in Georgia last summer.

Directed by Russian-American director Julia Loktev, the German-U.S. production will come out later this year.

"It will be seen all over the world because of Bernal, and the beautiful Georgian mountains will grab people's attention too," the film's first assistant director Zaza Rusadze said.

"This is part of the Georgian film industry's strategy. We are looking at the West, and we need new markets and collaborations," said Rusadze, who founded the Georgian film production

and distribution company Zazarfilm in 2007.

Rusadze said Georgia's film industry died after the collapse of the Soviet Union 20 years ago, when it lost Moscow's funding and skills deteriorated.

For what was left of Georgian film, its large Russian audience then disappeared after the neighbors' brief 2008 war over Georgian breakaway region South Ossetia, leaving an uneasy peace between the two.

But Rusadze said change is afoot.

Georgia's National Film Center, part of the culture ministry, applied a year ago to join the 35-member European Cinema Support Fund, which operates under the Council of Europe and finances European films and helps distribute them.

With the National Film Center's budget totaling 4.3 million lari ($2.5 million) last year, it has managed to partly finance a collaboration — this time with Spain — for the first time.

"Chaika," directed by Spaniard Miguel Angel Jimenez, tracks a sailor's return home to the steppes of Kazakhstan and will come out later this year. Rusadze said Georgia gave 120,000 euros ($167,600) toward the film.

Georgian film workers are also optimistic that a budding movie industry will boost tourism in the country of 4.5 million, whose pro-Western politics have irked Russia but have started to attract visitors from Europe.

"Our nature is fresh and uninhibited. I hope the film will encourage more people to visit," said Bidzina Gudjabidze, 51, a professional mountain guide who steers Bernal and Furstenberg through Georgia's Caucasus mountains in "The Loneliest Planet."

"Maybe more films will be made in our mountains, making them famous," Gudjabidze said.

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