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New President, New Era, New Home



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The Change Brought No Obvious Change

The long-awaited change of government hasn't made much difference to Georgians' lives. As the days pass more and more similarities to the previous rulers appear. The impassioned critics of former President Mikheil Saakashvili's personnel "rejuvenescence" are now doing the same. They are proud of having "young ministers" and have no scruples about appointing their relatives to senior posts.



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New President, New Era, New Home

By EMMA BAIRAMOVA, GT

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A 44-year-old philosopher and former university rector, Margvelashvili, who has pledged to strengthen the former Soviet republic's ties with the West and maintain its commitment to joining NATO, thus became the first president to replace his predecessor by constitutional means. Zviad Gamsakhurdia was overthrown in a coup conducted largely by criminal gangs whilst Shevardnadze was forced to resign after a series of mass demonstrations led to the storming of parliament – the so-called “Rose Revolution”. Thus ends the near



fare continued to flow as normal. According to the presidential administration this was the cheapest inauguration of a president since the country's independence, and had been designed to be because the budget for the inauguration should reflect the budget of the country.

The number of guests was limited because the courtyard of the parliament building is not designed for large crowds. In addition to Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili, delegations from 53 friendly states and international organisations attended the event, and these included the prime ministers of Azerbaijan and Austria and seven foreign ministers and government representatives.

President of Lithuania Dalia Grybauskaitė also attended, representing not only her country but the European Union, as Lithuania is the current holder of the revolving EU presidency. Lithuania has a special significance to Georgia this year – in a few days President Margvelashvili will go to Vilnius to initial an Association Agreement between the EU and Georgia, a very important step on the way to European integration.

Ordinary citizens were not allowed to attend this inaugu-

ration, in contrast to previous ones. It was however televised. The ceremony of taking the oath of allegiance on the Constitution lasted 45 minutes. The new President made a speech lasting about seven minutes and was reflective of the nature of the ceremony, being quite unlike Saakashvili's overly emotional speeches. Margvelashvili simply thanked the Georgian people for entrusting him with the presidency and stressed that he intends to further “the process of EU integration and the strategic partnership with the United States.” However he also noted that Georgia is ready to “deepen dialogue with Russia,” solving problems “on the basis of mutual trust.”

“Our country is starting to build a new democracy. I will uphold and protect the rights of everyone, regardless of their political choice. Our goal is for everyone to live in a peaceful, united, democratic and free Georgia. I will ensure, as commander in chief, the defence of the country, and the country will be ready to meet any challenges from the outside. However, the priority for Georgia will be the peaceful resolution of all conflicts,” Margvelashvili said. He also promised to ensure a dignified return of Georgian refugees to their homes and took the opportunity to urge Abkhazians and Ossetians to “work together [with him] to build a democratic state”.

There was no military parade this time. The new president did however meet representatives of different branches of the armed forces in the courtyard. The Special Representative of the NATO Secretary General in the South Caucasus and Central Asia, James Appathurai, attended the inauguration on behalf of that organisation.

No representatives of outgoing President Saakashvili's United National Movement attended, and nor did Saakashvili himself. The other living former president, Eduard Shevardnadze, was also absent. Saakashvili, who is in Brussels, had refused to attend in protest at the criminal prosecution of several of his former ministers and party members. “My presence at the inauguration is impossible. I cannot lie to you, and act as if everything is fine and everything is proceeding institutionally”, Saakashvili had written on his Facebook page.

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Prime Minister Ivanishvili has stated that Saakashvili is also likely to be questioned about events during his tenure, in particular the 2005 death of his first prime minister, Zurab Zhvania, which was officially attributed to accidental carbon monoxide poisoning caused by a faulty gas heater but is widely regarded as suspicious, Zhvania's brother, amongst others, having accused Saakashvili of hiding the truth. Saakashvili also may face questioning over the 2008 war with Russia, which ended with Russian troops taking full control of two breakaway Georgian regions. His opponents have accused him of needlessly antagonising Russia and giving Moscow a pretext to invade.

No Russian delegation was invited to the ceremony because Moscow and Tbilisi have not had diplomatic relations since 2008. The new government has however made limited progress in decreasing tensions with Russia, and some trade links have been restored in recent months.

The United States delegation to the inauguration consisted of the Director of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Rajiv Shah, Deputy Secretary of State Thomas Melia, U.S. Ambassador to Georgia Richard Norland and Paige Alexander, head of the Bureau for Europe and Eurasia at the U.S. Agency for International Development.

In a statement issued by the White House US President Barack Obama congratulated Margvelashvili and the people of Georgia on the country's first

peaceful transfer of power through democratic elections. Obama praised the roles played by both Saakashvili and Ivanishvili in strengthening Georgia's democratic institutions. "We appreciate what these two leaders have accomplished during their respective tenures and look forward to working with their successors to continue the strong and deep bonds that the United States and Georgia have enjoyed for over 20 years," he said.

It was a little surprising not to see European Union flags at

the inauguration – under former leader Saakashvili they were mandatory at any formal ceremony or speech. Only state flags and symbols were in evidence this time.

Following the 45 minute inauguration ceremony the new president laid flowers at the monument to those who died for the territorial integrity of Georgia, attended an official dinner and held bilateral meetings with the heads of foreign delegations. Later a gala concert was held at the Shota Rustaveli State Academic Theatre and the

day concluded with a reception at the Hotel Sheraton Metechi Palace.

At the October 27 presidential elections Margvelashvili secured 62.12% of the vote. However he has little political experience, and is seen as beholden to Bidzina Ivanishvili, the multibillionaire whose coalition drove Saakashvili's party from power in last year's parliamentary election. Ivanishvili has served as prime minister for the past year but is now stepping down. His chosen successor, Irakli Gharib-

ashvili, who as Interior Minister has been in charge of Georgia's police force, is expected to be approved by parliament in the coming days.

After the inauguration Ivanishvili congratulated the Georgian people on the beginning of a "new era."

"In Georgia a new era has begun. The authoritarian regime, which was based on violence and lies, has ended. After today's inauguration, true democracy has arrived in Georgia," Ivanishvili said. "We have a true democratic president and Georgia will have a truly democratic government."

Ivanishvili added that he now considers his main task accomplished and that is why he does not intend to remain Prime Minister. He said that in the near future he will become involved with "the development of civil society." However, most Georgians expect Ivanishvili to retain influence over political and economic life even after he leaves office, as the new president himself has acknowledged.

"He (Ivanishvili) is a person who has very serious public support," Margvelashvili told The Associated Press during an interview at his home last week. "He is a person whom I respect very seriously, and who has very serious influence on me because I respect him and I trust him. So any time he has some position this definitely matters to me."

George Margvelashvili first entered national politics in October 2012, when he became Minister of Education in the Ivanishvili government. A former tour guide, Margvelashvili had most recently been Rector of the Georgian Institute of Public Affairs. Though not an actual member of any political party, he was appointed Deputy Prime Minister in February and named as the Georgian

Dream's presidential candidate in May. He has refused to move into the official residence built by former President Saakashvili, saying that, as it was built with the money of the people, the people, rather than the president, should use and enjoy it.

Margvelashvili believes that Georgia needs to be more active within international organisations to that it should continue the policy of not recognising Abkhazia and South Ossetia and demanding the "de-occupation" of the country. He also wants to deepen regional cooperation with Azerbaijan and Turkey, and other Black Sea and Caspian Basin countries, in the fields of energy, transport and trade, and to expand trade and economic relations with Russia within the framework of the World Trade Organisation.

Now the new president has been inaugurated constitutional amendments which significantly limit the powers of the head of state, and increase those of the prime minister and the government, have come into effect. Under the new constitution the government is the supreme executive authority, which ensures the implementation of internal and foreign policy and is accountable to the Parliament of Georgia, and the president is the guarantor of the unity and independence of the country. However, the president -in-chief of the armed forces and head of the National Security Council, both significant roles. In the event of a dispute occurring between different branches of government the president has the authority to act as arbitrator, but he can no longer take legislative initiatives or repeal Acts of Parliament. Nor can the President be a member of any political party under the new Constitution.



The Change Brought No Obvious Change

By LISA TONAKANYAN, GT

The long-awaited change of government hasn't made much difference to Georgians' lives. As the days pass more and more similarities to the previous rulers appear. The impassioned critics of former President Mikheil Saakashvili's personnel "rejuvenescence" are now doing the same. They are proud of having "young ministers" and have no scruples about appointing their relatives to senior posts.

The Cabinet, which was already largely youthful, has grown younger since current Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili, who will be stepping down now the new President has been inaugurated, named his replacement on November 2. Ivanishvili has chosen "very practical", "very honest" and "good manager" 31-year-old Interior Minister Irakli Gharibashvili to succeed him. But even though not yet in post, Gharibashvili has begun a purge reminiscent of previous eras.

The first to fall into disgrace was Chief Prosecutor Archil Kbilashvili, who "voluntarily" sent in his resignation. He rushed to assure everyone that there had been no confrontation between him and the PM-in-waiting, but it is known that the two men have different views on reforms and priorities in the law enforcement sphere.

Gharibashvili in his turn stated that he didn't have any disagreement with Kbilashvili and that they had "collegial relations". Analyst Kakhi Kakhashvili seemed to confirm that the resignation had a genuine basis when he told GT that Kbilashvili's resignation had been provoked by the fact that he had not conducted a single prosecution, and through failing to take the initiative had lost his authority. Nevertheless, the very next day Gharibashvili presented his replacement, 37-year-old Otar Partskhaladze, Chairman of the Investigation Service of the Ministry of Finance, who has brought actions against several Saakashvili cohorts, Tbilisi Mayor Gigi Ugulava among them. Gharibashvili emphasized that his candidate would be a "good and effective" Chief Prosecutor with a "young but experienced" team.

Gharibashvili also announced that his replacement as Interior Minister would be a young person, and he didn't lie. On November 9 Gharibashvili announced that the new minister will be Alexander Chikaidze, 28. He stated that as Chikaidze was born into a policeman's family

and has passed through all the necessary stages of career development he will succeed in his new post.

This mini-reshuffle has been met with approval by members of the ruling Georgian Dream coalition. MP Irakli Sesiashvili has expressed happiness at the fact that one of the major ministries will be led by a young man. Another deputy, Zaqaria Qutsnashvili, is also optimistic about the news. He said that despite his youth Chikaidze had great experience in working at the MIA.

"People wonder how Chikaidze could have received the rank of colonel in six years. Shota Khizanishvili, the Head of Vano Merabishvili's Administration, received the rank of colonel in one week. Merabishvili gave him a new rank every day and the Lieutenant became the Colonel in a week. As for Alexander, he has passed through all the stages from being an ordinary police officer to becoming head of the main division of the Tbilisi police, so I am not worried by this change," Qutsnashvili said.

Givi Targamadze, a United National Movement MP, accused the new government and the prospective PM of nepotism, saying that Alexander Chikaidze's father is "a big friend" of Gharibashvili's father-in-law. He added that the new government was doing exactly the same things its members didn't like the UNM doing when it was in power.

Gharibashvili has promised, though still without actually being appointed PM, that there will be no more changes in the Cabinet. All the ministers he will inherit will keep their posts, including Defense Minister Irakli Alasania, with whom he has had strained relations since Alasania accused the MIA of failing to properly investigate the spreading of video footage in Georgia on behalf of the Taliban. However, it has been rumored that Justice Minister Tea Tsulukiani will also be stepping down, one way or another. Gharibashvili has not confirmed or denied this, and coalition member Armaz Akhvlediani, when asked, didn't exclude the possibility, saying that "today the most important thing is democratic development" and all the members of the Cabinet must realize that they weren't appointed to stay in power forever. Another leading Georgian Dream figure, Eliso Chapidze, went even further, openly predicting that Tsulukiani's post could be taken by one of the Deputies of the outgoing Minister of Interior Affairs, the new Prime Minister.



Geosteel – a Georgian Company of Global Standing



GeoSteel

One of the largest steel companies in Georgia, Geosteel LLC, has joined the ranks of the world's leading steel companies. It has been granted the most important certification in the rebar sector of the steel industry, known as the UK Cares certification, which puts it on the same level as the giant enterprises of Ukraine, Russia or any other steel plant anywhere in Europe or Asia. GeoSteel LLC is one of the largest foreign direct investments in the industrial sector in Georgia. It is a joint venture by JSW Steel Netherlands BV (which is wholly owned by JSW India, part of the Jindal Group) and Georgian Steel Group Holding Ltd (GSGHL). In this interview with The Georgian Times its General Director Mr. B.Sajiv tells us how it has achieved so much.



BALA CRISHNAN SAJIV - GENERAL DIRECTOR OF GEOSTEEL

changed it substantially over a period of time, but this is not an overnight process. We have improved our market share, and thus been able to reduce steel imports to some extent, but there is more to do.

I think we need more support from the government. I will not define exactly how, but the government needs to be more involved in the promotion of quality Georgian goods. We are trying to invite more people to the factory and show them our production processes and infrastructure. We have the same infrastructure you might see in France, Germany, China, Japan or India and anyone associated with steel making would endorse our claim that unless you have the right infrastructure in place it is impossible to make quality steel. We have the most advanced technology in place coupled with the technological expertise of more than thirty years of steel making by virtue of being a joint venture project with an international group like JSW. Apart from this there are other difficulties. Georgia has free trade agreements with neighbouring countries, but in effect these are one-sided agreements from a practical point of view.

Is Geosteel more Indian than Georgian?

We are a joint venture company, the partners being Georgian Steel Group Holding Ltd and the Jindal Group which produces 14 million tonnes of steel a year. The majority of our employees are Georgians. We have about 570 employees, of whom 425 are Georgians.

What are your priorities?

Our priority right now is to increase production and at the same time control the cost of production. Last but not least, we want to further improve the quality of our production. The fact that we are certified by UK Cares is probably the biggest

endorsement of the fact that we are one of the best in the world globally as far as rebars are concerned. However continual qual-

ity improvement will be our primary focus area apart from increasing the volume

from UK Cares. (The UK Certification Authority for Reinforcing Steels (CARES) was established in 1984 to meet the need for a specialist certification authority which could provide confidence to the specifier, purchaser and user of reinforcing steels. CARES has achieved both national and international recognition, and offers both UKAS Category 1 and Category 2 certification for the steel and reinforced concrete industries based on BS EN ISO 9000 and performance criteria specified in CARES assessment schedules and associated product standards.) From an auditee's perspective this is probably one of the most difficult audits to clear in the steel industry and that is precisely the reason why very few companies globally have this certification. The Certification is a very complex process and the auditors meticulously check every single aspect of not only

sign a contract to set up a wire rod mill and it is a very big thing to start such a project in adverse market conditions, when the market is totally down. Very few people would think of putting money into such a project at this time, but we are trying our level best to become more innovative and more competitive. The wire rod mill is a full-fledged project which may cost about 15 million USD.

Can you tell us how much you contribute to Georgia's state budget?

Our contribution to the Georgian budget from 2010 until now has been around 12 million USD.

How will this figure change over the next five years?

As I told you, we are going to set up a wire rod mill – another plant, another product. Right now we offer only rebars, so when we can sell wire rod along with rebars our budget contribution will change.

people who had literally no experience in this sphere. We trained them for different jobs and in various skills of steel making. This took a lot of time and was a very painful process. Training is a continuous process and a key focus area of the management.

How active are you in charitable work and CSR?

We have contributed to a lot of schools, building classrooms in Rustavi etc. Apart from this we have responded to some specific requests for help, for example, requests to help sportsmen to participate in particular events. We have also contributed for the cause of disabled children and apart from these there have also often been individual cases of helping people who have approached us for help. It



PROCESS FLOW DIAGRAM



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Mr. Sajiv, why did the management decide to set up a steel plant in Georgia?

The primary reason for coming here was the friendly investment environment. We found that Georgia had the right conditions for setting up a business enterprise. You also need to have various facilities in place - water, power, electricity, gas, and so on and these were available in this country.

What do you think about manufacturing conditions and the steel market in Georgia?

Let me begin by saying that the steel market is going through a slump all over the world. It is absolutely down globally, and Georgia being an integral part of the globe cannot be an exception. Moreover the winter months are always very difficult in terms of sales. We also have problems with scrap, which is important for making steel. Since we do not have iron ore in this country we have to depend on scrap, which is now a matter of concern for us. When we started here scrap metal was available, but now we see the signs of a supply crisis.

But our main problem is the Georgian mindset that a Georgian product is inferior compared to an imported product. When we started producing steel in Georgia we were asked by several consultants to change the name and opt for a European name for our steel plant. We have retained the name despite very strong recommendations that being seen as Georgian could harm our business. We are trying to change this mindset and we have

ity improvement will be our primary focus area apart from increasing the volume

What are your main export markets? Do the plant's products meet international quality standards?

We export to Armenia, Azerbaijan, Turkey, Iran and Sri Lanka. In terms of quality, we have received the most important certification in our sector,

the production process but also the entire working of the company. Apart from this we have certification against American, Turkish, GOST, British and Indian standards.

Which are your most important future projects?

We are about to set up a new wire rod mill. We have finished all the technical discussions and deliberations. Very shortly we will

What is your share of the local market?

Our market share is around 50%.

Do you provide training for your employees?

When we started this factory it was really difficult to find people with the right qualification and experience in steel plants especially in areas like electric arc furnaces. We had to recruit

is important for every company to undertake Corporate Social Responsibility and it is a part of the Company's values and ethos.

We are also very committed about following environmental protection rules in Georgia. We comply with Georgian national environmental standards, but want to go beyond these. Very shortly we intend to obtain certification for ISO 14001 also.

GEOSTEEL LLC



Georgia and Russia: Second Go at Normalizing Relations

By LISA TONAKANYAN, GT

Georgia and Russia will have to communicate with each other, but the change of president will not do much to change the relations between the states, experts have told The Georgian Times. The majority of Russian and Georgian political analysts, it appears, expect to see no radical improvement. They acknowledge that there has been a thaw, and that compliments have replaced mutual recriminations, but no one is turning a blind eye to the key point which still divides the countries – Georgia’s breakaway territories.

After Georgian Dream coalition candidate Giorgi Margvelashvili’s victory in the presidential election the Russian au-

analyst, spoke in support of giving Abkhazia independence in order to save the Abkhaz people from the demographic catastrophe they now face under Russian control. In 2011 this idea was seen as shocking, but a year later Bidzina Ivanishvili offered Areshidze the chance to participate in the parliamentary election of 2012 on his Georgian Dream ticket. Only when he lost was he attacked by billionaire Ivanishvili. Nevertheless, the prospect of recognizing the breakaway territories as independent is as unthinkable for the new government as it is for the vast majority of Georgians. The government promised to unite Georgia before being elected, so the restoration of diplomatic relations on any other terms would be impossible.

Nikolai Silaev, Senior Fel-



thorities who refused to negotiate with outgoing President Mikheil Saakashvili will have no more reason to avoid holding official meetings. Georgia hopes to improve the broken ties – the state has done a lot to demolish the image of “Russia the enemy” created by the previous government and president.

However the restoration of diplomatic relations is still out of the question – neither Tbilisi nor Moscow are seriously thinking about this at this stage, especially since Russian Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev’s statement on Russia Today TV that “diplomatic relations will not be resumed unless Georgia recognizes the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia”.

A few years ago Mamuka Areshidze, a Caucasus affairs

low at the Centre for Caucasian Studies of the Moscow State University of International Relations told us that there is actually no precondition on Moscow’s side for the restoration of diplomatic relations. “I think that if Tbilisi wishes this Russia will not ask for the recognition of the two republics, though it is obvious that the Georgian authorities will not resume relations while Russia recognizes Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states,” he said. Georgian Foreign Minister Maia Panjikidze confirmed this, stating that Georgia is ready to establish diplomatic relations with Russia but only if it renounces its recognition of the separatist regions.

Georgian analyst and President of the Diplomatic Acade-

my Soso Tsintsadze stated that the actual problem between Russia and Georgia was not only the Georgian president but also the occupied territories themselves and the Russian leadership. “The states can build good-neighbourly relations only after the leaders responsible for the [2008] war have been removed. We have already done this, now it is Moscow’s turn,” he declared. He added that the fact that Russia has lifted the ban on Georgian wine, mineral water and agricultural products does not in itself mean that progress has been made in relations. He expects no cardinal changes, though now “we have resources” and the politicians need to find a compromise in order to move forward.

Silaev does not believe there

will be a big breakthrough in relations either, but he summed up the events of the last few months in Georgia by saying that “the completion of the formation of the new government makes the tendency towards normalising relations with Moscow more stable. Now the parties can plan to hold dialogue, directing their attention to this not only for the foreseeable future but for a longer period of time.” He added that Moscow is “satisfied” with Saakashvili’s retirement and his party’s defeat. “New people coming into politics always creates new possibilities for bilateral relations,” he stated.

The first round of negotiations between the new Georgian government and Moscow, which began in October 2012, brought no joy to either party.

Moscow is still separating Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgia by erecting fences, and Tbilisi doesn’t want to give up the idea of integrating with NATO and EU. Georgia has invited no Russian officials to the inauguration of the new president, which will take place on November 17, 2013, and this is the first time this has happened. Invitations have only been sent to NATO, EU and Eastern Partnership countries and states which have diplomatic representation in Tbilisi. Similarly, Moscow sent no official congratulations to the winner of the presiden-

tial election, again a first, although Russian Patriarch Kiril, who has traditionally had good relations with the Georgian Orthodox Church, did so. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov made a statement, but this merely congratulated the Georgian people on holding a free and fair election, not Giorgi Margvelashvili for winning it.

Another meeting between the two countries was held in Geneva on November 5-6. Both parties were attaching great importance to it, but it is still not known whether significant progress was made.

NEWS

GHARIBASHVILI SIGNS AGREEMENT ON VISA-FREE TRAVEL WITH ISRAEL

An agreement to remove the visa requirements for travel between Georgia and Israel has been signed between the two governments at the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia.

Acting Minister of Internal Affairs Irakli Gharibashvili signed on behalf of Georgia and Deputy Interior Minister Faina Kirshenbaum on behalf of Israel. “The agreement permits Georgian citizens to enter and remain in Israel for 90 days in a 6 month period,” says the Ministry. Gharibashvili and Israeli Ambassador to Georgia Yuval Fuchs also signed an agreement on cooperation in the fight against crime.

“The document defines the terms of the cooperation between the sides in the fight against serious crime”, the Ministry says.

The above-mentioned agreements will enter into force after the sides complete all necessary national procedures.

Deloitte is Expanding its Services

As we develop our Deloitte Audit, Legal and Consulting capabilities we are very pleased to announce 5 outstanding new managers who joined our firm.



Alex Gventsadze

The ranks of our audit department have been boosted by the addition of two new managers – Alex Gventsadze and Emil Dushdurov. Alex is a returning Georgian national who gained his prior professional experience in audit in the US and the UK. He brings with him the experience of working on the audits of SEC regulated, listed companies in the US, AIM-listed companies and subsidiaries of US-listed companies in the UK.



Emil Dushdurov

Emil has over five years of professional experience in audit and over ten years in finance and accounting. His expertise and experience span a number of industries, including financial, service, consumer and power industries. He worked in Deloitte Baku and Moscow offices and has served a number of companies in Azerbaijan, Russia and Kazakhstan.



Leonti Janashia

Our consulting department has also seen an addition of two talented professionals – Leonti (Levan) Janashia and Giorgi Kekelidze. Leonti's educational background and extensive experience position him to deliver high quality IT, Technology Integration and Information Security consulting services and solutions to our clients.



Giorgi Kekelidze

At the same time, Giorgi brings with him vast experience in Banking, along with prior experience in audit and consulting. He specializes in business valuations, asset valuation, due diligence and financial statements analysis.



George Svanadze

George Svanadze has also joined our firm recently and now leads Deloitte Georgia's Legal practice. He advises clients on general corporate issues, structuring of cross-border transactions of local and foreign companies, legal due diligence procedures, contract drafting, conflict of laws, commercial arbitration, licensing regulations, oil and gaz. He acquired his practical experience as a Lawyer in Georgia and Germany and has been a practicing lawyer

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Two Weeks To Go Ukraine's Future Still Undecided

By STEVEN G. TRAYLOR, EU Journalist

Political intrigue is coming to a head in Kiev, Ukraine, as the largest country in the Eastern Partnership teeters on the brink of either becoming a full EU membership aspirant or remaining a subordinate of big neighbour Russia as part of the Customs Union.

The next two weeks could tip Ukraine one way or the other, and have long term economic and political consequences on both its eastern and western borders.

On the 28th and 29th of this month in Vilnius, Lithuania, the 28-member EU will meet to consider whether it should leave Eastern Europe to be part of Russia's sphere of influence or embrace it as part of a united Europe. Ukraine is one of the six countries which is expected to sign an Association Agreement, which will give it trading privileges with the EU and is being seen as a step towards ultimate full membership.

But what will this actually mean?

What is Ukraine doing?
All EU candidate countries

member to await the final decision of the Ukrainian Verkhovna Rada (Parliament) on her release. The issue is a long and complicated one, and is gathering all the attention of local and foreign media. But things have reached a stage where Ukraine's future revolves around the fate of one individual - a prison inmate.

The ruling political party, the Party of the Regions led by Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich, has left it up to Parliament to address the Tymoshenko issue. Opposition Members of Parliament regard this stance as a delaying tactic designed to force the EU to accept the initialling of the Association Agreement without any final decision being made on Tymoshenko, and enable Yanukovich to evade political responsibility for freeing an opponent of his, which he himself, as president, can legally do for "medical reasons".

Health Minister Viktor Chumak, from the ruling party, has said that, "What we have today is probably the biggest geopolitical challenge since WWII and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Just think about it: the choice



principles right now".

The Russian Bear is not in Hibernation

Of course Russia is also a player in Ukraine-EU relations. President Putin has told the Ukrainian leader that nothing will ever be the same if he initials the As-

Said President Putin, "That's why we warn in advance, we talk, we listen, we understand everything. This is your choice, make it. But keep in mind that we have to somehow protect our own market, to introduce protective mechanisms." Putin has told Ukraine, as quoted by Russia's

the minds of Russian leaders when they deal with former Soviet satellite states, and today Ukraine is THE case in point.

Russia has come to the conclusion that any and all political and economic means can be exercised to keep Ukraine as one of its own. Three months ago

warranted unloading and reloading of consignments of goods to Russia has been observed at numerous border checkpoints.

Lithuania has also suffered economic losses due to Russian discontent with its policies, imports of dairy products into Russia having been stopped over "technical issues". Lithuania is holder of the revolving EU presidency.

Thus, two weeks away from the event, Ukraine is in 'EU Summit limbo', with all political factions voicing concern over which way Yanukovich will swing. Will he show up at Vilnius or succumb to Russian pressure and forget the whole idea?

On the horizon for Ukraine

Come December, no matter what happens in Vilnius, the Ukrainian government will have to find some \$4.5 billion to pay Gazprom, the Russian gas monopoly, for the winter and spring supply of gas. If it signs the Association Agreement, Ukraine will in effect poke the Russian bear in the eye, and it is bound to suffer "consequences" both political and economic.

The Irish Times has quoted Ukraine's Deputy Foreign Minister Andriy Olefirov as saying, "we understand there would be possible negative effects of signing the agreement with the EU. But we are equals (of Russia), and having the support of the EU will help us on many issues, like getting a fair price for the gas" Ukraine buys from Russia. However, Ukraine may ultimately have to turn to other suppliers, as the Russian bear is not going to be happy if part of its "sphere of influence" is lost after hundreds of years of common history.

European Union and the Customs Union

Following the Second World War Berlin became the divide between 'east' and 'west'. Today, the border between Ukraine and Russia may become the 'New Divide' between Europe and Putin's Customs Union.

The European Union is founded on the concept of shared sovereignty. Russia is promoting access to the Customs Union to former members of the Soviet Union who are now members of bodies which are not under the control of Moscow.

Russia is trying to promote itself as a world leader, and since the loss of the Soviet Union it cannot do so through military might. Therefore it is trying to establish a trading bloc which will challenge the EU. The Customs Union, consisting of Russia and a number of former satellites, largely in Central Asia, will become an ever more Eastern-looking body if Ukraine eventually sides with the West, as the very pressure from Russia demonstrates it wishes to do.

The decision made by Ukraine will have lasting consequences for Eastern and Central Europe and will make Ukraine the new geopolitical focal point of the 21st century, as it will be the country most affected by, and most influential on, EU and Russia dealings for the foreseeable future.



have to make a number of legislative and administrative reforms to bring them into line with European standards. Political issues are also critical, and Ukraine is currently being put under pressure in this respect.

The issue is Yulia Tymoshenko, the former Prime Minister of Ukraine. Imprisoned since 2011 for "abuse of power" and "embezzlement", the EU has made her release a precondition for future EU membership consideration. The EU regards her imprisonment as "selective justice", and thus political in nature, and Brussels wants her released prior to the signing of the Association Agreement in Vilnius. But time is running out - some critics say it would already be too late even if she were released now.

The Tymoshenko issue is so important that the European Parliament Monitoring Mission to Ukraine, headed by ex-President of the European Parliament Pat Cox and ex-President of Poland Alexander Kwasniewski, is ensconced in Kiev until 18 No-

we make (to release Tymoshenko or not) could change all the balances of power in the world". Arseniy Yatseniuk, an MP from the opposition Batkivshchyna Party, maintains "Europe sticks to its principles, and this is about

sociation Agreement in Vilnius. The Russian bear is used to getting its own way within its sphere of influence, and Ukraine is the biggest country, and the one closest to Europe, with which Russia has a common border.

Interfax news service. President Putin is best known for this famous quote, "the collapse of the Soviet Union is the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century." This notion is still at the forefront of

Russia made its presence felt. Ukraine's Federation of Employers said, "Russia is blocking Ukrainian exports, a de facto action which could incur for us losses of up to \$2.5bn in the second half of this year." The un-



Lapankuri Operation Working Group – A Path to the Truth

By DR. VAKHTANG MAISAIA, GT

On October 23, 2013 the first meeting of the Public Council which will study alleged human rights violations during the 'Lapankuri Operation' in Lopota Gorge was held at the Office of the Public Defender of Georgia. The members of the council stated that its purpose is to gather information and document the facts about what happened during the special operation in that village in August 2012. These findings will ultimately be included in a report and sent to investigative bodies.

The council members are mainly leading experts on Caucasus politics, human right activists, members of the public from Lopota Gorge and NGO

leaders. The list is as follows:

1. Soso Tsiskarishvili
2. Lia Mukhashavria
3. Umar Idigov
4. Zaur Gumashvili
5. Khaso Khangoshvili
6. Murad Kavtarashvili
7. Vakhtang Maisaia
8. Kakha Kakhishvili
9. Mamuka Areshidze
10. Tamar Gabisonia
11. Gela Nikolaishvili
12. Ucha Nanuashvili – Chairman

The Lapankuri Operation is now subject to an official investigation, hence the need for this council. It is to be underlined that the council is not an alternate investigation structure, but on the contrary is making all efforts to promote and assist the investigation and ensure that it is conducted in a transparent and efficient manner. To this end, the members



have also agreed a particular methodology and work schedule, which will include onsite fact-finding expeditions.

The population representatives from the Lopota Gorge are

members of its Elder Council, the most respected leaders of the Kistin/Wainakh community of Georgian origin and some who are not affiliated to any kind of political movement or civic or-

ganisation. It is clear that the council will enjoy the loyalty and trust of Georgian society, as the representatives of the NGO, mass media, public organisation and academic sectors



are well known and respected. The council is to be chaired and coordinated by Georgian Public Defender Ucha Nanuashvili.

The council's very important mission is to provide public oversight of the law enforcement agencies' investigation and to conduct additional fact-finding, making concrete analytical conclusions of its own which will make it possible to describe in full detail what really went on during this now-notorious operation. This is a matter of national honour, and key to the national security of Georgia.

Ramzan Kadirov and Middle Eastern Links: The "Syrian" Factor

By DR. VAKHTANG MAISAIA, GT

It is interesting to trace the connections between the Assad regime in Syria and that in The Kremlin. These have a very long history, going back to the Cold War period. The Syrian involvement in Caucasus regional geopolitics seems very strange and inappropriate from one point of view, but in other ways the linkage between official Moscow and Damascus is quite logical, though not always transparent.

After his election as President of Chechnya in 2004 Akhmad Kadyrov appointed Ziadda Sabsabi as head of his presidential staff. On appointment, Sabsabi announced: "We are the part of Kadyrov's team and are obliged to do everything we can in order to make the work of the president more efficient and effective". Sabsabi is a native of Syria who migrated to the USSR in 1985, graduating from the State University of Leningrad, as an international relations journalist, and later the University of Damascus as a journalist. He is fluent in the Russian and Chechen languages. He lived in the Chechen Republic from 1989-1994 and took Russian Federation citizenship in 1991. He worked as head of international economic relations at the Representation of the Chechen Republic in Moscow and later as an advisor to Kadyrov on foreign affairs, mainly those concerning the international Muslim community.

The appointment of Sabsabi was designed to achieve two main goals:

1) Kadyrov was trying to optimise his relations with the Islamic world, whose reactions to the situation in Chechnya had been very negative. Sabsabi belongs by origin to the family of Curashaidov, to whom also belonged Muhammad himself. He is very respected within the Muslim community. Hence, Kadyrov was seeking to restore his reputation with the leaders of the Islamic states;

2) It was an attempt by the Kadyrov clan to launch some kind of communication between his regime and those of Islamic states (mostly those of an anti-Wahhabian orientation, i.e. Syria, Iran, Lebanon, Jordan, etc.);

The appointment of Sabsabi was also a prolongation of the so-called 'Primakov Doctrine', which aimed to use the "Syrian" factor in the North Caucasus, in the most dangerous period for the then Kremlin administration in 1994-1998, in order to cement the Caucasus peoples into the pro-Moscow geopolitical orbit. Under this the Circassian-Chechen diaspora, with Syrian regime assistance, was used as leverage to oppose the Wahhabist ideology which threatened not only Russia but Syria's own geopolitical rivals, such as Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Qatar. This policy transformed the North Caucasus into a zone of geopolitical competition between Arab states equal to the Middle East. It should also not be forgotten that the first Foreign Affairs Minister of the



Chechen-Ichkeria Republic, led by Dzhokhar Dudaev, was Shamil Beno, a Syrian citizen of Wainakh origin who had been invited to the Republic to conduct a special mission. Later he moved to Moscow, and he still resides in Russia.

It is interesting that the appointment of Sabsabi was made while President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin was coming back from Malaysia, where he had attended the Summit of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC). At that time Kadyrov senior, as President of Chechnya, was making all efforts to forge effective interactions with the Muslim states to legitimise his regime in the eyes of the Muslim community. Akhmad Kadyrov, and later on his predecessor Ramzan Kadyrov, despite his pro-Moscow orientation, were treated positively in the Arab states because they were religious leaders and former Muftis. This enabled Akhmad Kadirov to find a common language with the leaders of the Islamic states. Kadyrov was chosen by the Kremlin to balance the Chechen separatists' efforts

to persuade Arab states to resist the Federal forces. He managed to establish good and stable relations with some Arab states, namely Syria and Egypt, and persuade them to support his regime. The support provided to the separatist forces from the Arab states is still significant.

Sabsabi remains, as an advisor to Kadyrov junior, the liaison officer between Kadyrov and the Arab states not only in political matters but in military-intelligence affairs. Hence, the Kremlin's gambles on some Middle Eastern states (more concretely on Syria) have some recent historic background.

In November 1990 the Chechen Diaspora in Syria took part in the "Chechen All Peoples Congress" at which a pro-Russian oriented (or rather pro-Yeltsinist, i.e. ex-President Boris Yeltsin's supporters) 'national' government was established. Syria's Chechen Diaspora is very influenced by the Sufi-originated Nakshbandi and Kadiri religious trends, and the Diaspora's impact on the Alavit minority

leadership in Syria is immense. This factor was used by Russian special services in 1997-98 to destabilise Chechnya.

The Kremlin also successfully used the "Syrian factor" against Georgia during the war in Abkhazia, in which the participation of Chechen volunteers was organised thanks to Syrian-Russian special services. Diaspora members took a very active part in the combat and "Syrian emissaries" began to pay frequent visits to Chechnya at this time. During the 1992-93 war members of the Syrian military intelligence special destination unit fought on the Abkhaz side. For instance, a very active Syrian military intelligence captain known as "Al-Bashir" (an operational codename) fought with the Grey Cardinal battalion.

The strategic cooperation between Syrian and Russian special services began during the Cold War, when the Soviet Union was one of the world's superpowers. In April 1982 the Soviet Military Intelligence Service, the GRU, and the Syrian Military Intelligence Service Shubat Al-

Mukhbarat Al-Askiria signed a secret memorandum on strategic partnership which would involve exchanges of intelligence information, increasing training capabilities and countering the US and Israeli intelligence communities. With both actions backed by this memorandum, Syrian military forces entered Lebanon in June-July 1982 and seized the Bekaa Valley, thus confirming Syria as a geostrategic centre of influence. The Soviet GRU's most secret operative-tactical group, GROM, coordinated the efforts pro-Syrian forces against American and NATO ones and entered Lebanon from Syrian territory. These efforts culminated in the withdrawal of national peacekeepers from Lebanon in 1984. However, the Syrian conflict has not only Middle Eastern but also North Caucasian implications.

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We Love Georgia Too

By DANARA KURMANOVA, a journalist from Kazakhstan, GT

Everyone who arrives at Tbilisi International Airport knows that the Georgian capital is “The City That Loves You”. But nobody tells you about the mutuality of this feeling. The Georgian Times has decided to redeem this mistake by asking 10 foreigners to compose an explanatory dictionary by explaining what they love about Tbilisi.

BRIGHTNESS

I love Tbilisi for its spectrum of colours. There is a veritable rampage of hues, but a very smart, well thought out and, consequently, beautiful one. I have been to many cities, but only Tbilisi expresses the flow of its spirit through its architecture. Its unswerving optimism is seen everywhere – in neat, light buildings with white balconies, decorated with carvings, in the funny small trees which Georgians call “gnomes” and in the tight, fragrant pink and cream flowers that grow near churches and create an atmosphere of lively, but at the same time cosy and conciliating, majesty.

All these tones surely influence the style of Tbilisi – life here is also bright and diverse. The people absolutely correspond to the place: sellers with armfuls of violets, ethnic artefacts strewn on the ground, crazy roads, artists, buskers, homeless people who are sure that their sacred duty is to molest everybody... I could list all of this to infinity. But the point lies in the fact that even in these small details my narrative seems charming. The unified composition is a shiny, almost fairy-like picture. After seeing this, it is just impossible not to love Tbilisi!

Serge Yazep, Lithuania

DYNAMICS

I like everything in Tbilisi. But my first association with this city was the dancing from the video “Georgia. Unforgettable Energy of Freedom”. I was positively shocked when I saw it the first time; now I watch it again and again. Sparks fly from crossed swords, men perform dizzy summersaults and land on their knees – all these elements are worthy of admiration. These guys, dancing so vigorously, truly seem to be fearless warriors. The graceful and unflappable girls help create an ideal contrast in the choreography, and their diverse dresses only enhance my impressions.

But in my opinion the most important thing in this video is how synchronically all the dancers move, how selflessly they give themselves to the process. How was it possible for them to have done this on the small – for such a performance - Bridge of Peace? The mind boggles! In any case, after this video Tbilisi has meant dynamics for me.

Sophie Maytesyan, Armenia

ELEGANCE

I haven't seen the video mentioned above, but what about the Bridge of Peace – I walk across it without whenever I come to Tbilisi. This is my favourite place here. I have a Georgian boyfriend, and in the second year of our relationship he decided to show me the city of his childhood. The first sight he showed me was the Bridge of Peace.

To say that I was amazed to see it tells you nothing. I am a designer, and like such futuristic objects. Truly, I never would have thought that such a structure could blend with the view of ancient Tbilisi so successfully. It not only connects two parts of the city very smoothly but also adds some airiness. The bridge seems crystal, fragile, and this effect only deepens when it is reflected in the water. And how wonderfully it is illuminated at night!

Generally, it is the perfect place for a proposal. Two weeks ago David asked me to become his wife exactly there. After all my doubts (will he take the chance to marry me, an eastern girl from Tashkent?) I felt almost like Cinderella. So now the words “Georgia” and “Tbilisi” are associated in my mind with something elegant and tender.

Zarina Mustafina, Uzbekistan

FEMININITY

Only in Georgia do you begin to understand how cool it is to be a girl. I have worked for five years in China, where a compliment, pronounced without any emotion, can be considered the greatest display of passion. Or maybe I just cannot meet romantic guys in Beijing, but this is a different question.

Now, in Tbilisi, I like to get about by Shanks' pony. Perhaps the secret lies in my oth-

erness, exotic for Georgia (my father is a Jew, my mother is Tatar), but when I go to the market all the sellers try to show something to me! I only ever hear phrases containing the word “lamazo”, and every passerby smiles... and by the way, what about the smile – in Georgia it is the main weapon of a woman! A sincere smile is the pledge that the person will certainly help you, dance on the road or invite you for a date (it is not necessarily to accept, but how pleasant the invitation itself is!). One day a taxi driver even took me to the Tbilisi Shopping Mall for free: “You are beautiful” – he explained. So I love Tbilisi because here I always feel a real woman.

Rita Georgievskaya, China

FOOD

Georgian cuisine does not need my pitiful comments, it deserves a whole article! To be serious, it really is more than delicious, because everything is natural, spicy, fresh. You have no power to reject Georgian dishes even if you are full and it seems that if you take one more piece you will burst! Hot lobiani, khinkali where the juice threatens to spill over you, a huge khachapuri looking like a boat, the hard, salty cheese... tell me, please, how is one to refuse all of that? Especially when it is complemented with the glass of good Georgian wine? Even speech and look change when confronted with this idea, so startling it is!

I left Tbilisi 3 months ago, and I am still missing the food. Last Saturday I ate khinkali in a Georgian restaurant in Warsaw and you know, it was not as good as that in Tbilisi! So I am going to spend my next summer holiday in Georgia!

Kuba Radzewicz, Poland



HOSPITALITY

I honestly never thought I would go to Tbilisi one day. In fact, my family and friends were surprised to hear my decision to fly to a country that they could not even point out on the map. Fortunately, my worries disappeared at my first contact with Georgian people. They are probably the most welcoming, easy going and fun-loving people I have ever met.

Their energy and good sense of humour are a blast. Within less than five days I found myself getting very close to many of them. Also, coming from a Moslem country, I was dazzled by the religious aspect. The reception I received in the churches and cathedrals was very warm, regardless of my religion and the absence of a scarf on my head.

To cut a long story short, these five days were enough for me to fall in love with Tbilisi. The people alone are a big reason to visit Georgia, and I am definitely going back for more.

Soukaina Mrini, Morocco

LOVE

I know: it sounds strange coming from a citizen of Paris, now we are a couple. But the most interesting detail in this story is this: we could have met before, as I had often visited his native Brussels and he had repeatedly been in France. However, we found each other in Tbilisi! Next year will be lustrium of our marriage, and where do you think we are going to celebrate it? Of course, we dream of doing it in Georgia!

Melanie Eloi, France

MIXING

Tbilisi has stolen my heart thanks to its diversity. Strict churches are harmoniously situated near old houses, wallowing in their grapevines. The officialness and golden gloss of Freedom Square watches over the motley, noisy Shardeni Street, clogged with restaurants. Ancient architecture unobtrusively mixes with new styles, like the ingredients in a cocktail. Tbilisi can be different but remain itself – and it is for this individuality that I love it so strongly.

Dinara Garaeva, Russia

SOUND

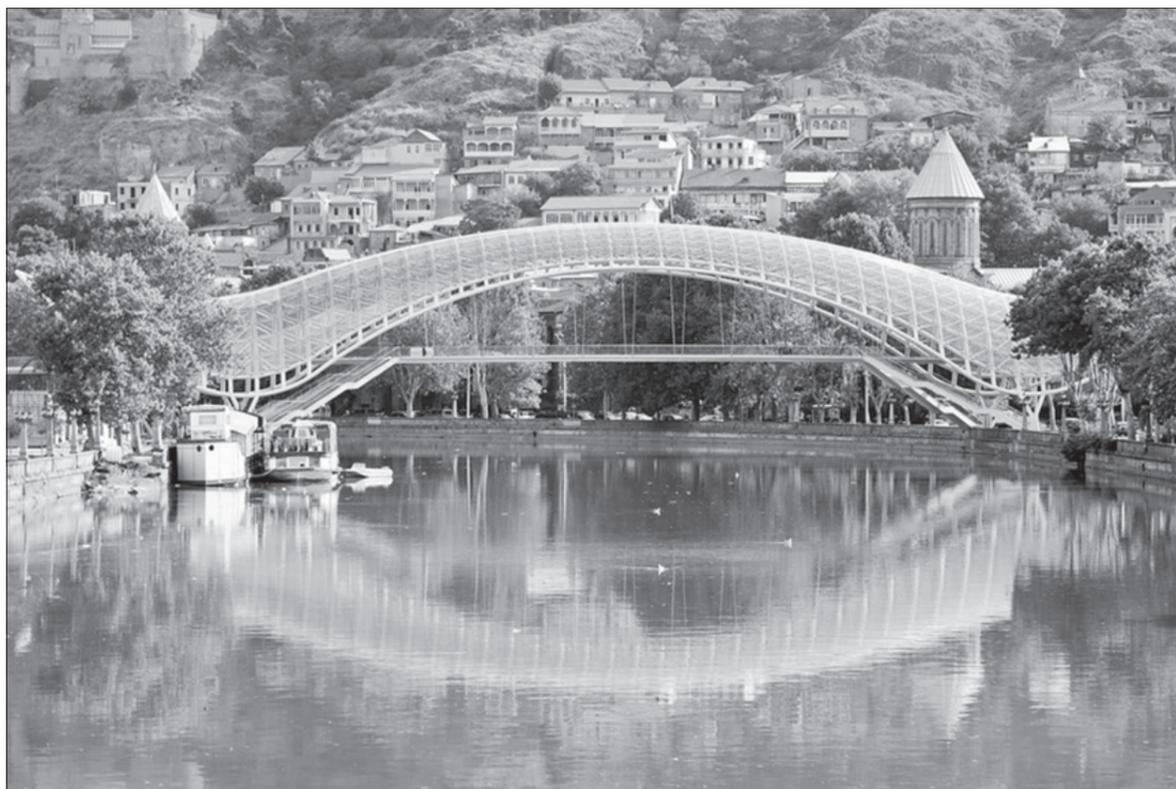
They say the Americans have sent Georgian folk music to UFOs – as one of the symbols of human achievement. If this is true, I would not be surprised. I love Tbilisi for its concerts – Georgian polyphony is so deep and profound, the voices are strong, ensnaring. One note – and when you feel the unusual ardour, another one – and the melody is tearing your heart. Georgians know what the force of sound is.

Ludwig van Graan, South Africa

WALKING

I loved Tbilisi for its nature. Walks in the hills, around Narikhala and Turtle Lake, impressed me so much that I left America and moved to Tbilisi. This is the second year I have been living here. I like my new life. That is all. When you are happy, there is no need for words.

Daan Harmsen, the USA



Moving Parliament Back To Tbilisi – Good Idea?

By TATIA KAKIASHVILI, GT

The decision of the parliamentary majority to return the Georgian Parliament to Tbilisi has proved controversial. The MPs have a strong argument: it is difficult to attend sessions every day when you have to travel 2-3 hours from Tbilisi to Kutaisi, and this travel costs a lot too.

It was former President Saakashvili who decided to make Kutaisi the second capital of Georgia, and the first step in this process was transferring the legislature from the capital to the "second capital". Some Georgians, including Kutaisi residents, were enthusiastic about this and are now opposed to returning parliament to the capital.

In July 2009 then-president Mikhail Saakashvili announced that Kutaisi was "the second capital" of the country, a move welcomed by Kutaisi residents. He began to move parliament there, noting however that "nobody can move the parliament building from Tbilisi fully". On 25 June 2011 he said that parliament's transfer to Kutaisi was a "historic reform", part of the decentralisation of Georgia, and would go ahead regardless of the political wind.

However, on 31 October 2013 the new Georgian government presented a bill which

would move the Georgian Parliament back to Tbilisi. The bill passed a first reading by the Committee on Legal Issues. But in order to effect this change the Constitution must be amended, as a clause was inserted by the previous government which stated that Kutaisi must be the location of parliament. Any constitutional change would require the support of 100 MPs, but the ruling Georgian Dream coalition has only 97 seats in parliament, meaning it has to rely on other parties to push this measure through.

The United National Movement, which moved parliament to Kutaisi to begin with, strongly disagrees with this initiative. "The election for this Parliament did not give the Georgian Dream a sufficient majority to change the Constitution. They now want to obtain such a majority artificially, which I think is problematic. Therefore this bill will not have any support from our side. Parliament being in Kutaisi is not merely important for the preservation, the creation and development of the city but for the whole Imereti region," said Pavle Kublashvili, member of the UNM.

During an interview with Imedi TV Davit Saganelidze, the leader of the parliamentary majority group, tried to explain the decision to return Parliament to Tbilisi:

"It is difficult when the legislature is in one city and the rest



of the government structure, the presidential administration and the diplomatic corps are in another, 250 kilometres away. This needs no further explanation. If we want to develop Kutaisi, there are many other projects we can undertake. The presence of a single building doesn't mean that the city is being developed."

This argument does not satisfy the greater part of the residents of Kutaisi, who are protesting against the bill. They held a rally near the parliament building on October 30, at which they claimed that the city's economic development would be harmed if the legislature was moved and left Kutaisi serving no purpose.

"If this decision is made, it will be very difficult for Kutaisi. It would leave the city without function, without any perspective. Can anyone give us one reason why an investor would put money into this city if parliament is not here? This will only lead to migration and unemployment. The government is pursuing the wrong policy, and I feel sorry when I see how our city is dying," said Irakli Chogovadze, a local artist.

Some voices in Tbilisi are also opposed to the move. "Parliament must remain in Kutaisi! Those who don't want this don't understand that Western Georgia should be developed and its economy must be strengthened. Not only should it be the home of parliament but the proposed port complex in Anaklia should be built, whether they call it Anaklia or Lazika. This will be the way to get Abkhazia back and stop future Russian aggression. I cannot accept any reason for moving parliament, because this would damage national unity. The complaints by MPs and officials – hired by people's money – that Kutaisi is not convenient for them are unacceptable. Leaving parliament in Kutaisi is necessary for Georgia!" says Mariam Gersamia, a Tbilisi State University professor.

However not everyone in

Kutaisi is against parliament returning to the capital. 20-year old student George Kharshiladze says, "I support this move. First of all, a lot of time is wasted in traveling from Tbilisi to Kutaisi. Secondly, the parliament building has brought nothing positive to Kutaisi, only overloaded the city. It would be better to give the building to the students of Tsereteli State University."

The parliamentary majority believes that the legislative and executive branches of the government would function better if the legislature were returned to the capital. Its members maintain that the Constitution does not need to specify where parliament should sit, as this merely needs to be specified in the Rules of Parliament.

Manana Kobakhidze, Vice Chairman of the Parliament of Georgia, says:

"Georgia isn't such a rich country that it can pay the expensive cost of transporting government officials and parliamentarians between Tbilisi and Kutaisi. Recently we had a case in which Maia Panjikidze, the Foreign Minister, was asked by the minority to go to Kutaisi. I am sure that if the parliament had been in Tbilisi, Panjikidze could have managed to set aside time and attend, but it is difficult for a minister to spend an hour on the road just going to a meeting. The government does not have that kind of luxury. In order for the present system to function the government would have to move to Kutaisi too, all the ministries. As the political centre of the country is the capital, Tbilisi, and all the ministries are in the capital, it's very difficult to work effectively over such long distances".

Congratulations

The Georgian Times congratulates The President of Wissol Group, Soso Pkhakadze, on the birth of his fourth child and first boy, Vasilii.

The Georgian Times wishes little Vasilii a healthy and happy future.

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PUBLICITY



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Alexander Bagrationi: Photography was not Considered a 'Masculine' Activity

By TAKOAGARASHVILI, GT

Anyone who is even somewhat into Georgia's quality night life and art life will have seen Alexander Bagrationi; either with his "magic" camera or participating, attending and having fun at an event. This is the face which for me personally is the quality mark of a party or exhibition. As Georgians are opinionated people it's rare to see one particular person loved by so many.

It's easy to spot the blue eyed, warmly smiling Bagrationi at events. His honest and sweet personality puts forth a great positive vibe and attracts a lot of positive attention. It's even a bit funny to watch the very tall Alexander say hello, and therefore bend to give a greeting kiss, to so many people.

When it comes to his talent there is nothing but professional respect and appreciation. I personally have seen a lot of his work and love it. He works on film, unless he's doing a commercial project. He thinks a digital camera doesn't really give you the depth, character, sense and vibe that film does. Film scenes tell you a story, he says, you don't just see but feel through them.

Originally born in Vladikavkaz, Alexander got into basketball and majored in journalism; now he owns over 40 cameras and is a multimedia artist. He lives in different places, travelling with his family. He has changed his abode but never his passion for photography. He recalls this with a deep and honest smile.

When did you start taking pictures?

My grandmother gave me an old Zenit camera when I was 8, I have been doing it ever since.

Did you go public then?

No, I kept my photography a secret. Back in the day this was not considered a 'masculine' or 'Georgian' activity, especially as I was in the basketball team. So nobody really knew about my photography.

How did you finally overcome that mentality?

Once I accidentally found myself at an event being held by the Anabechdi (the leading cultural 'union' in Georgia at the time). It had a big impact; I would actually call it a push. I was working for Wind Force (an advertising agency) and as



a scriptwriter. An arts environment usually has a powerful and very positive influence on people, and that's exactly what happened to me.

That's how your secret passion became known?

Exactly, I worked for Anabechdi Magazine for a few years after that.

What was your first official commission?

It was from Bazis Bank.

How 'underground' was photography back then?

Frankly, the photo clubs Graf.ge and Boke.ge played the major part in developing this field in Georgia. These clubs planted an interest in photography in our generation. As a result we had plenty of people who knew how to take pictures. I am proud to have worked for both of these clubs.

But you didn't study to become a photographer?

No, I never took any classes. I always had friends who could give me useful, valuable and good direction, people like Guram Tsibakhashvili, David Meskhi and Levan Kherkheulidze.

What is your professional range?

I have worked for Russian magazines, news magazines and agencies; I have orders from Al Jazeera, etc. I do both news photography and my art on my film camera. The highlight of my current career is my work for the company Red Bull. I do photography for them in Transcaucasia. I love it. It's a bit of photography, reportage and art. This company has advanced me a lot.

What do you capture with your camera?

My story: my life, my development, my environment, the people around me... it's what I do for me, what I enjoy doing but get paid for doing.

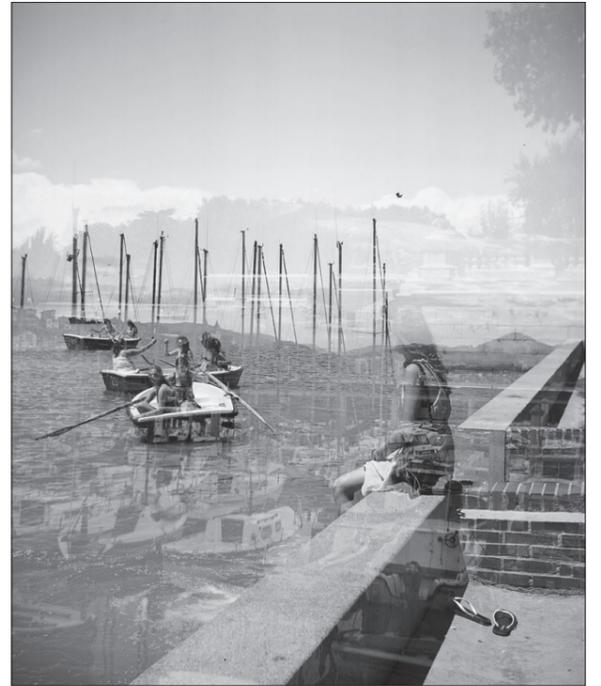
What was the biggest boost for your career?

My dream came true when the Georgian Spring project took off (in 2008, through the Magnum agency, at the request of the Ministry of Culture). My friend Alana Gagloeva I used to ski a lot in Gudauri and she introduced me to a German guy named Thomas. It was on just another Gudauri

skiing trip with Thomas that I discovered the Nikon D700 camera in his car. This is the camera everyone wants, and for a reason. He told me he was a photographer. Only after that did I ask Alana about his work. It turned out he was Thomas Dworzak – the god of war photography. It was a shock to find myself skiing with him without knowing that he was THE Thomas Dworzak.

Thomas hired me as an assistant for the book Kavkaz. He introduced me to people I couldn't even have dreamt about meeting: Martine Franck, Martin Parr (the god of irony, the only person in Magnum that acts on the basis of his sense of humour, he just has fun), Antoine D'Agata (the fetishist), Jonas Bendiksen (he has won almost all the National Geographic contests, a person who can express emotions with naturalistic photography), Alex Majoli and others. The project lasted a month, but it was the experience of a lifetime.

I remember you telling me that you have to feel what you



capture, is that the way to go?

It's true that there is no standard for free photography. You have to feel what you capture and make someone else feel it. You have to interpret the thing your way and let other people interpret it their way. At the end of the day, everybody has their own perception.

Whose photography do you 'feel' today?

I very much love David Meskhi's work. Nata Sopromadze is just great. I consider Tsibakhashvili a genius of

photography. I would also name Mariam Sitchinava, Beso Uznadze and a few more.

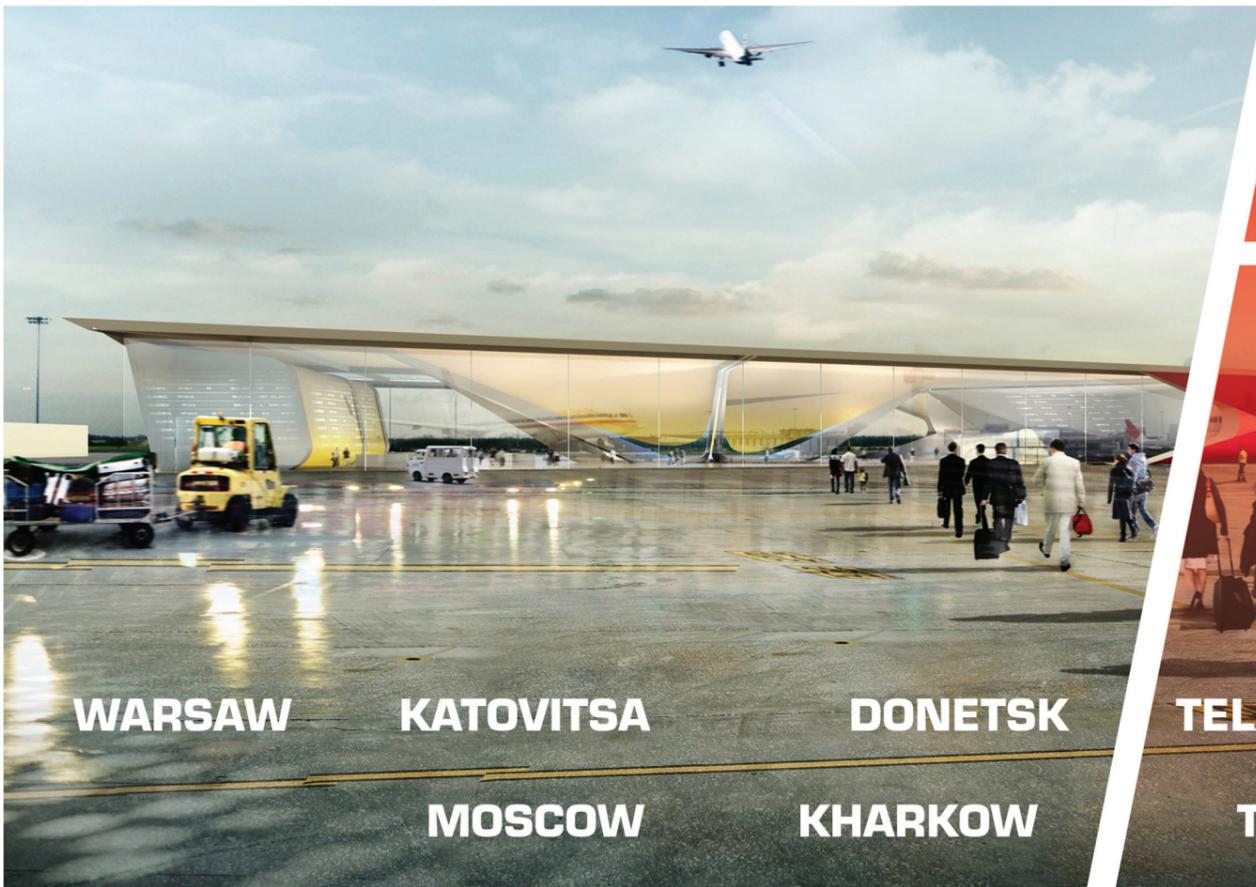
Where do you want to end up as a professional?

I want to be a photojournalist. I want to work for ID magazine and American Apparel.

Are you close to your goal?

Time and experience have shown me that it's hard to the point of impossible to achieve this living in Georgia. I have to get out. You can't blossom as an artist here. I have to leave this place.

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