Lapankhuri Special Operation: Possible Motivations and Blowback!

Georgia's Public Defender, Ucha Nanuashvili, has called on the Parliament to set up an ad hoc investigative commission to look into an armed clash in the Lopota Gorge in late August, 2012 and the events leading up to the Lapankhuri Special Operation, in which eleven militants and three Georgian soldiers were killed, after his own probe has revealed facts which contradict the official version of events proffered by the previous government.

There is nothing new about Georgia supporting the Chechens, as such cooperation dates back to the time of former Georgian president Eduard Shevardnaze, when the country’s Pankisi Gorge was turned into a safe haven for separatists. It remained so at least until 9/11, and the launch of America’s “war on terrorism”. The US needed Russian support in this “war”, and Georgia could no longer be implicated in providing material support for freedom fighters, albeit as a proxy for foreign interests. In an instant, yesterday’s warriors for justice “freedom fighters” were reclassified as terrorists. But in spite of this official change of policy, the Chechens continued to serve Georgia’s political interests, in both domestic policy and in relations with the Russian Federation.

Nodar Khaduri: Private Property is Untouchable

According to Nodar Khaduri, Georgia’s Finance Minister of Georgia, the new government has a unrelenting desire to make sure that Georgia becomes an attractive designation for investors.
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According to Nodar Khaduri, Georgia’s Finance Minister, the new government made an unnecessary decision for no reason. This minister is sure that there is no threat to their government and the new government will not repeat the mistakes of the pre-existing government.

The new government initially encouraged investment in Georgia, but after a short while its policies began to change. What promises is the current government making?

Yes, we have found ourselves in a situation full of failed promises. Georgia had no policy when it came to attracting business development, but everything was still made more difficult by the new government. We did not respect private property rights. The government, after Georgia, began working here and there, and we were made aware of this naturally. Naturally no serious inves- tors will come here now, and most of the business sector is in crisis. Since 2013 a serious decrease in the rate of foreign direct investment in Georgia has been observed.

The spread of corruption on private property rights is not unique. We cannot work on the grounds that such a trend is unattainable, and we will guarantee that Georgia becomes an interesting place for for- eign investors. Moreover, investment in Georgia must be secure and economically profitable. It is important that the government of Georgia and manufac- ture products here have guarantees. We want to see a situation in which they are loved to sell their products and earn, and it is not in their interest to be involved in expanding the mar- ket and being successful. Georgia is a small country both in terms of size and population, and un- fortunately it is perceived as a weak. This is why we must pro- tect the building, and we recognize that they can enter here and work for our own benefit. I mean the EU, US and so on. Our main aim is to block trade agreements entirely. It is also essential to regain the Russian market. As you know, nego- tiation this is already underway and some others such as Russia have assumed (alcoholic beverages, fruit and vegetables and so on) the uncompromising desire of our government in Georgia becomes interesting to people of the region. Naturally there is no threat to their busi- ness concern.

How are you going to continue to promote the economy and business experience in Georgia?

The best way is to let them know that the Georgian people have a strong desire for freedom and reject a violent government. They do not feel any differentiation between business and business. Of course, not much will happen in the first half a year. This is a relatively short period in which to bring about a complete change of opinion. Foreign investors, the government is not going to take such a step and the govern- ment, intervene in the market or even offer some shares to not go on repeating the mistakes of the former regime.

The best way is to allow the Private Police stay away from business.

The Private Police no longer ex- ists. It has been replaced by the Financial Police. This is a Ministry, which is not a punitive service by nature. It is a fiscal service, which will not be possible to tax and economic crimes; we are not going to manipulate this service in the way the previ- ous government did. Political or any other motive will not direct this work. This service is going to remain in a civil fashion. I hope to be a typical example of people to help entrepreneurs fulfill their Georgian views. And this means that we are going to create a strong and beautiful Georgia.

What are you going to do with projects left over from the previ- ous government?

It depends on the project. A lot of them are economic projects. The construction of strategic coastal barriers and the construction of the system of protection and sewage systems will continue, and will be incurred. In fact such projects will now be undertaken under the World Bank, with the additional funds acquired. These are the two examples of projects which will continue. However there is a problem with some of the government projects we are not going to implement while the one with which it was claimed would have a population of 50,000 and the another that it is impossible to build a city with such a small population. In this case, we have a choice between the realisation of some unrealistic projects which will not be carried out immediately. Most of these projects are related to the effectiveness of some unrealistic projects which will not be carried out immediately.

What kind of programs will the Ministry of Finance under- take to reduce poverty?

It depends on what we call the progress of the state and who is considering the issue of progress.

For example. I think under the current government making?

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Public Defender Demands Investigation into Lopota Armed Clash

By Lika Moshashvili, CT

The previous government bears criminal responsibility over the armed clash in Lopota Gorge in late August, 2012, as stated the Public Defender’s annual report on the human rights situation in Georgia, presented on April 1. Ucha Nanaushvili demands that parliament open an investigation into the special operation carried out in Loparkuri village by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, in which eleven militants and three Georgian soldiers were killed.

The report says that in February 2012, inquiries from the Georgian Interior Ministry contacted some “veterans of the Chechen war” and members of the Chechen diaspora seeking to convince them that the Georgian authorities were ready to allow armed militants free passage into Russia’s North Caucasus via Georgian territory.

“Officials working for Mikhail Saakashvili brought Chechens living in Europe to Georgia and prepared them for ‘sending to the North Caucasus’, explains Akhmet Zakayev, a former vice chairman of the Chechen separatists who now lives in exile in Europe. Dukhovka Dushayev, a former bodyguard of Akhmet Zakayev, was among the group of 11 Caucasus fighters killed by Georgian Special Forces.

The Public Defender’s report also says that Deputy Interior Minister Giora Lortkipanidze and two other senior figures at the Ministry, Nando Mirtchinidze and Zurab Maisuradze, were in charge of handling these groups. “This affiliation is quite plausible and slandrous,” says Lortkipanidze, who calls it “the new government’s political parade and against the former government.”

Two days before the clash, units of the Georgian special task force were flown by helicopter to the Dagestani section of the Georgian-Russian border, presumably to prevent the militants from infiltrating into Russia’s North Caucasus region.

On August 28, 2012, the Ministry of Internal Affairs began a so-called anti-terrorist operation in Lopota Gorge near Loparkuri village, in the Kakheti region of eastern Georgia. The MIA said the operation was a response to the kidnaping of five young villagers by the Georgian Special Forces.

A key threat to its foreign policy, Russia is fully aware of the fact that this case would be investigated, said Tamar Margoshvili, the aunt of Aslan Margoshvili, one of the four captured. “If a trial is held, they will be killed in the Lopota clash.”

We now believe the new government will end the conflict, and our children will not become terrorists,” she added.

Mamuka Archesidze also believes it would be better if a parliamentary commission represented a conclusion on the special operation due to the high public interest in this case. Zakayev stated in an interview with First Radio that a special investigation commission has already finished investigating the incident. “What happened in Lopota Gorge in 2012 is thoroughly outlined in this document and it will be made available to the public very soon,” he concluded.

Russia’s Black Sea Mills: Military Drills; Confrontation or Deterrence?

By Dr. Vakhtang Maisaia, GT

Russian launched unexpected military drills on the Black Sea in late March involving about 7,000 servicemen, mostly infantry, 250 armored vehicles, over 20 military aircraft and about 30 warships of Russia’s 49th Army. The Russians claim that these operations are part of a mission intended to promote security and stability in the region and strengthen relationships with littoral states.

Officially, the main goal of the multilateral maneuvers through April 23 was to provide strategic defensive for the Sochi Olympics in 2014, and for the key Russian coastal regions of Novorossiysk and Gelenjik. Considering the scope and size of the drills similar to the large-scale “Caucasus-2012” exercises held in November of 2012 under the command of the 58th Army, the Kremlin is demonstrating its ability to reinforce its geostrategic presence, not only at the local level i.e. the Northern and Southern Caucasus regions, but also at the national level i.e. the Northern and Southern Black Sea region that includes the Black Sea to the Middle East zones.

The broader Black Sea geopolitical area is closely linked to Russia’s current national interests. Russia has kept a close eye on American military expansion in the region over the past decade and considers such maneuvers and presence of its former opponent, especially in Georgia as a key threat to its foreign policy interests in the Southern Caucasus region as a whole. Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia.

The drills are being performed in line with Russia’s military strategic “sea-land” and “land-airspace” conceptions. The current Russian leadership seeks to demonstrate its resolve by being able to demonstrate its military might, and its larger operational plans envisage full rearmament of the nation’s Armed Forces with at least a 60% combat readiness level by 2015. This four-year 19 billion Ruble (600 million USD) program underscores how the Kremlin is flexing its muscles in light of its new policy direction.

In addition, Russia and Belarus will hold joint military exercises in the same area of the current Black Sea drills as a component of a more full-scale military strategic exercise “WEST-2013” in September, 2013. These military exercise seeks to raise the stakes at further NATO enlargement. The joint drills will be performed by special forces and will involve more than 9,000 servicemen from the Rapid Reaction Forces of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, a Moscow-backed military alliance which effectively acts as a post-Cold War counterbalance to NATO.

The various war games and drills are part of massive military planning measures aimed at reaffirming Russia’s geopolitical preeminence in the region and letting it be known that this is a critical region for its national security interests. Current exercise is but a sign of more to come, and more and larger drills can be expected in Mediterranean Sea with participation of warships from the Black Sea Fleet.

Such drills transcend simple local boundaries and aims to harmonize military readiness within a specific geopolitical strategy. Russia is fully aware of NATO’s plans and appears to be reacting to up-coming high-profile official visits of the North Atlantic Council and members of the NATO’s Military Committee of on issues of the regional security that are to be held in Tbilisi Georgia between April and June, 2013. All what is transpiring is reminiscent of the Cold War period, a time when the Soviet Union and its allies were at odds and the region was the frontline of a possible full-scale conflict.

By Dr. Vakhtang Maisaia – ex-political prisoner, USA Achesidze, an ex-political prisoner, USA Achesidze, an ex-political prisoner, USA Achesidze, an ex-political prisoner, USA Achesidze, an ex-political prisoner, USA Achesidze, an ex-political prisoner, USA Achesidze, an ex-political prisoner, USA Achesidze, an ex-political prisoner, USA Achesidze, an ex-political prisoner, USA Achesidze, an ex-political prisoner,
The Media-holding “Georgian Times” presents A National Award in the business sphere

XIV Business Rating

The traditional Business-rating to identify the Best Company and the Best Businessman of Georgia of 2013

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TOP 50 Companies in Georgia

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The order of the following is a list of participants has no significance

- LTD Heidelberg Cement Georgia
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- “Goodwil” Chain of supermarkets
- JSC Georigan Bank
- LTD Gaz-Energy
- Company GeoCell
- LTD Sokar Enery Georgia
- JSC TBC Bank
- “PSP Pharma”
- LTD “Raddisson Blue Iveria”
- LTD “Aversi Pharma”
- LTD “Rustavi’s Azot”
- JSC Wissol Petroleum Georgia
- LTD Barambo
- GIG-Georgian Industrial group
- JSC Nikora
- “T and K” restaurants MacDonalds

- San Pertroleum Georgia Gulf
- LTD Coca-Cola Bottlers Georgia
- Carrefour Chain of Markets
- JSC Bank “Kartu”
- Zestaphoni Manufacture “Fero”
- JSC Telasi
- JSC ProCredit Bank
- JSC Telavi Winery
- Rustavi Metallurgical Company
- LTD VTB Bank
- Silknet
- JSC “Davit Sarajishvili and Eniseli”
- Company Caucasus Online
- LTD Marshe
- Dairy products manufacturing company
- “Ecofood”
- GWP “Georgian Water and Power”

- LTD Georgian Sugar
- “Sante GMT Products”
- “Natural Mineral Water - Nabeghlavi”
- Georigan Bear company Natakhtari
- LTD “Lukoil Georgia”
- “Aldagi BCI” Insurance company
- GPS Pharm Company
- JSK Smart Retail
- LTD Ropertol Georgia
- LTD Elit Electronics
- Bank Republic
- JSC Bagrationi 1882
- GPI Holding
- Company Beeline
- LLC “Barvil Georgia”
- JSC Madneuli Mining
- Georgian Carriage Builders Holding
In announcing the annual business rating, with pleasure we are presenting the 14th rating of the TOP 50 Georgian businesses; it includes the TOP 25 business companies and showcases the Georgian best companies and top businesspersons for 2012.

The 14th business ratings reveal and showcases the TOP 50 Georgian businesses and the TOP 25 business companies, and highlights Georgia’s best companies and businesspersons in 2012 continues as an annual event.

Nodar Khaduri, Georgian Finance Ministry, Fadi Asli of the International Chamber of Commerce, Amy Dermen, Executive Director of American Chamber of Commerce in Georgia, George Chiraqadze, leader of the Georgian Business Associate, Merab Pachulia, direct an annual business rating in showcasing the most outstanding companies and businesspersons of the year.

Golden sponsor: LTD Sokar Energy Georgia

Starting in 1995 till now, the main goal of the business-rating is: to determine the most successful spheres of business on the national level; supporting dialogues between business, government organizations and the society as a whole, thus shaping the new image of the Georgian business climate. New and up and coming companies are presented as they foster closer relations between businesses operating in Georgia and on the international level. More importantly, this continued event attracts the attention of world business community’s interest towards Georgia.

We Cordially Present to you conduct an annual business rating in showcasing the most outstanding companies and businesspersons of the year.

The professional selection jury in its appraisal of the best companies used the following criteria:

- Defence of the interests of manufacturers
- Public image
- Effective management
- Charity/patronship
- Effectiveness of advertising
- New technologies
- New jobs created
- Stability of business activities
- Growth and business potential
- International recognition
- Public relations
- Effective marketing
- Financial transparency
- Professional level of the team
- Attractiveness for potential investments

The highly-qualified jurors have announced the 2nd stage, Georgian TOP 25, and best business companies among them will be awarded the title of the “Best Company of the Year” and “Best Businessperson of the Year” and the national business award [ORDER]. Other companies and businesspersons will be awarded with different nominations.

The following are the business rating award winners since 1995:

- TBC Group - Mamuka Khazaradze;
- Coca-Cola Bottlers Georgia - Temur Chkhonia;
- Khazbegi - Gogi Topadze;
- Khazbegi castel - Gogi Topadze;
- GWS - Levan Gachechiladze;
- LTD Samgori 94- Avto Tsereteli
- LTD Tbilaviamshenli - Pantiko Tordia
- TBC Bank - Vakhtang Butskhikidze
- United Georgian Bank - Vano Chkhartishvili;
- LTD Samgori 94 - Avto Tsereteli;
- Geocell - Osman Turan
- Geocell - Osman Turan and Georgian Bank - Irakli Gilauri

The following experts took part in determining Georgia’s TOP 50 companies:

- Marika Toidze - journalist;
- Irakli Leqvinidze - Economic expert “Georgian business & Political inside”;
- Badri Beraia - expert in economic questions;
- Mikheil Jibuti - economic expert;
- Akaki Gogichaishvili - journalist;
- United Georgian Bank - Vano Chkhartishvili;
- LTD Samgori 94 - Avto Tsereteli;
Last Year’s Winners

Association of Young Business and Financial Managers
• Giorgi Gigolashvili - President of Georgian Insurance Institute;
• Maya Purtseladze – editor in chief of newspaper “New Version”;
• Tea Shvelidze – journalist TV Company Channel 9;
• Beqa Baramidze – journalist TV company Channel 9;
• Emzar Jgerenaia – economic expert.

The award ceremony of the business rating will be held in the nearest future. A wide range of companies and businessmen who win in the different categories will be recognized with awards. The best of them will be chosen by you at the event’s venue, by ballot. The winner will be awarded by the national business award, handmade exclusive composition “Georgian Cross” – which is created from precious metals: gold (31.5gr) and silver (12gr) natural leather, natural stones - brilliant (1 unit), blue sapphire (1 unit), turquoise 4 unit zircon (2 units) green pomegranate (2 units).

In attendance for the award ceremony will be clergy, members of non-parliamentarian bodies, legislative, administrative and judicial branches, representatives of foreign missions, businesspersons; representatives of the local and foreign mass media, among others.

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A round table meeting related to the Rabati castle was launched at the Georgian Ministry of Culture and Monument Protection on April 4. The discussion was held in response to the statements of Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili and Secretary General of the opposition United National Movement Vano Merabishvili, who slammed some parts of current Government’s planned deal with Turkey.

“Keeping these shortcomings will ruin the Georgian Academy of Art, a documentary film aired by TV Imedi together!” was inspired by Georgia Guram Odishar- ia, art critics, archeologists and film authors.

“We also want good relations with our neighbors, the initiators of restoration and protection of Turkish monuments on our territory, but the Georgian government’s propo- sal is completely different – this solution is not acceptable for our country, which the Georgian president will never agree on,” stated Manana Manjgaladze, the president’s spokeswoman at the press conference on April 2. The Rabati castle dates back to the 13th century and lies in the town of Akhaltsikhe, in southern Georgia. It underwent large-scale renovation in 2011- 2012, overseen by then interior minister Vano Merabishvili, and was opened to visitors in Au- gust of last year.

“We agree with the multi- cultural architecture, citadel, castle and other facilities, cov- ering a rocky hill overlooking Akhaltsikhe, also includes the 18th century Ahmadiyya Mosque, which has already been restored but is not used for reli- gious services. The agreement currently negotiated by the Georgian gov- ernment with Turkey foresees changing the color of the dome and removing stone steles with engraved crosses from within the mosque; bringing back the older lattices, modifying the drainage system around the buildings and if needed, improv- ing facaded material.

“We think that it would ac- tually amount to destroying the Rabati fortress, which repre- sents one of the major cultural and tourist destinations on this territory… We do not think that it’s a demand or an intention of the Turkish side. It is a miscon- ception, coerced by the Georgian government,” explained Manjgaladze.

According to her this docu- ment is about demolition and destruction. “It is about remov- ing Christian symbols, which require special care, like sym- bols of Islam, of course. This is not a Turkish-Georgian prob- lem, this is a continuation of a trend which we are seeing and hearing recently – leveling the ground and destroying, building things that has been built in re- cent years,” the president’s press speaker told journalists.

Deputy Minister of Cul- ture, Marine Mizanndari, dis- missed allegations that the complex or part of the castle would be destroyed as “ludi- crous.”

“Our project is very impor- tant as it is connected to our his- torical past,” said Levan Mer- abishvili, the founder of the Charitable Fund “Amaghamblia 2012”.

Rabati village will be located in the region near Tbilisi. Comprising several hectares, the land plot was donated by Tamara Chokhonelidze, the founder of “Amaghambla 2012” and the head of the project.

“The construction process of village “Imedi” has already be- gun. Construction costs for each house is about 27,000 USD and at first we are going to build two two-story houses. Families of Ferfiany Georgians have al- ready been identified to live in Imedi village. Concerning their employment, we will develop cattle-breeding and greenhouse agriculture,” Chokhonelidze stated.

This idea “Let’s build village Imedi together” came from a documentary film aired by TV Company “Imedi”. Its main character Vakhtang Toradze, a historian and the rector of the Tbilisi Georgian Academy of Arts and Sciences, teaches Ferfiany Georgians who returned to Geo- rgia and helps them find work and he expects nothing in return. During the Persian invasion of Georgia in the XVI-XVII cen- tury, 300-100 000 Ferfiany Georgians were exiled to Fer- fiana, a region in north-eastern Turkey, as well. Despite many hardships the Fer- fiany Georgians managed to maintain their Georgian lan- guage. In 2006, small groups of the Ferfiany Georgians started to return to Georgia to study based on the initiative of the Georgian Ministry of Refugees and Accommodation and many of them have remained in the country since. Toradze has been helping them settle down and has been caring for them like a fa- ther.

This project is very impor- tant as it is connected to our his- torical past and Georgian emi- grants have dreamt about com- ing back to their country for cen- turies. We manage to find at least one village for them it will mean that the wish of the emi- grants isn't futile and we have realized it in this century,” jour- nalist, a film maker and a screenwriter, author of the documentary film, said.

Large-scale flight of Geor- gians from their country started after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Many left in order to study abroad, find work and sup- port their families back home. Official statistics of the Geor- gian emigrants does not exist. There are three main catego- ries of emigrants. The first includes historical emigrants liv- ing in Ferfiana, Iran, and Sain- gilo and Kahla, Azerbaijan. They are Muslim Georgians who still maintain their Georgian language and see old Georgian words in their everyday speech. The sec- ond category encompasses those emigrants who left Georgia in the 1920s during a time of rev- olutionary upheaval. The de- scendants live mainly in France, Germany and the United King- dom. The third category relates to the present migration that started in the 1990s. At the time, the country’s borders were loose- ly controlled and the departure of most emigrants went unregis- tered. During this time, many ethnic Georgians fled the country and requested certain ‘chang- es and improvements’ for the construction of the vil- lage. However, nothing has been made yet, but the Georgian government’s planned deal with Turkey is expected to discuss the Ra- bati castle restoration with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, it was made agreed upon with Turkey on cooper- ation in the sphere of cultural heritage. The Georgian President, Mikheil Saakashvili, also attended to the related to the Geor- gian Orthodox Churches – Ish- tars and Oshki, now located in north-eastern Turkey, as well as the possible construction of a new mosque in Batumi, Geo- ria.

“I believe that all of us with our joint forces will be able to build the village where emigrants will live. This Imedi village will be considered as a village of the future,” Mire Tahkide, support- er of the project, said.

As the Minister for Diaspora Issues Konstantine Sargaladze explained, after Georgia’s 2012 parliamentary elections, many of these emigrants are in- terested in investing in Georgia. Under the previous government the Turkish side had been pre- sented as the purported security and safety of the country’s business environment turned out to be misleading.

According to the head of the Imedi project Tamara Choma- khishvili the project is not lim- ited to building only one village: “We are going to continue the project on government support and people’s donations, and the future emigrants will come back to their homeland. We will continue to promote our project and inform them about the real opportunity to return to Geor- gia.”

Village of Hope for Returning Georgian Emigrants

There is a now a very real reason for Georgian emigrants to return to their homeland. Two houses in village “Imedi” (born by the initiative of Charitable Fund “Amaghamblia 2012”).

Imedi village will be located in the region near Tbilisi. Comprising several hectares, the land plot was donated by Tamara Chokhonelidze, the founder of “Amaghambla 2012” and the head of the project.

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The Georgian Times

Dexus offers Relief to Georgia’s Fledgling Real Estate Market

By Emma Radaimova, GT

Dexus is a business group focused on distressed asset management, development, construction and property management. One of the company’s major projects was the turnaround of Center Point, the largest residential property developer in Georgia before the 2008 crisis. Center Point was one of its projects and termination of the contract will not affect its long-term goals.

GT interviews Irakli Kilauridze, Managing Partner and Co-Founder of Dexus. It now clear that your management contract with Center Point is terminated. What are your next projects?

Dexus is a real estate business group with four main businesses: distressed asset management, development, construction and property management. One of the distressed asset management projects was the turnaround of the Center Point. Aside from this project, we have similar projects in our distressed asset management portfolio, for instance Isis Savane. We also continue to undertake new turnaround projects in Georgia. For the Center Point, we were determined to complete the turnaround as per agreement but apparently owners of the Center Point felt that they would be able to handle the rest of the recovery on their own. I can say that today Center Point is in much better shape than it was when we started rehabilitation. Having worked on the recovery for 20 months, we managed to complete apartments for around 4,000 customers, that is circa 2/3 of total Center Point customers. Additionally, we created approximately 20 million USD worth of finished property that can be sold, 10 million USD of contracted receivables, 10 million USD of receivables to be contracted and 10 million USD in land bank, so total of circa 50 million USD of current projects, which is more than enough to complete all the pending projects. Since Center Point has managed correctly, we understand that Dexus works in fours of property business lines. You can tell us more about these business lines?

The main business for today is distressed asset management; we also have a development company, which manages development projects, we also have construction company and finally property management business which differentiates us from other players in the local market. As part of development business, we are currently undertaking development of two end railway stations in Tbilisi, East Station in Dubde and West Station in Naluta, part of so-called Tbilisi Bypass Project. Unfortunately this project is currently on hold due to change of management and supervision in Georgian Railway Company, but we hope that after transition period, development will recommence.

Another very important initiative of Dexus is the creation of a special fund in which Dexus, along with its foreign partner, will invest in the Georgian real estate sector. This initiative will create investment vehicle for investors to participate in highly profitable real estate projects in Georgia and on the other hand will play vital role in developing real estate sector in Georgia. Through the fund we also plan to work with other local developers to finance their projects as well if proposed projects will suffice with fund’s investment requirements. The fund will focus on investing in the property business in Tbilisi, Batumi and Batumiani, we might also look into projects in Kutaisi.

When do you plan to set up the fund?

In May we will officially announce our plans to set up the fund. Today the largest problem in Georgia is a lack of equity in the real estate sector. Complex approach to property business gives certain advantages to our company and differentiates us from other players in the local market.

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Tourism was a claimed priority of the previous Georgian government, perhaps for the sake of bringing in tourism revenues or milking development banks and international development organizations for projects. The new government has different priorities: agriculture, healthcare and education. However, the importance of tourism development is still recognized as essential for the overall economic well-being of Georgia.

There is also the question of what the government should be doing in developing tourism in the first place, other than making it easier for tourists to arrive and ensure their safety. Tourism development is something that is left to the private sector in a normal country and not subject to centralized planning as was the case during the period of the Soviet Union. Much has been written and rosy claims made about tourism, even the actual numbers are confusing - and this may not be accidental, but rather a way to justify spending so much of the national budget on pet projects. Nonetheless, Georgia cannot put all its eggs in one basket. Tourism is suffering on an international level and must be viewed as a sustainable development and a tourism policy that is more substance and less PR for outside consumption.

Consequently a smaller portion of the 2013 state budget is devoted to tourism development: 11.370 million GEL were allocated last year, compared to 6.4 million GEL this year. The government has been severely criticised by President Saakashvili’s United National Movement for reducing the tourism budget. The president has been telling journalists that fewer tourists are visiting, saying that the small number of tourists to winter resorts is the result of the erroneous policies of the current government. He failed, however, to mention the reduced snowfall as a contributing factor.

“I brought us 5 times more tourists. We built Mestia, and I have taken my residence but no tourists are visiting, saying that the small number of tourists to winter resorts is the result of the erroneous policies of the current government.”

As with many figures generated by the former government, the UNM allegations about reductions in tourist numbers are not confirmed by the Information-Analysis Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The Ministry says that in February and March 2013 Georgia saw 17% more tourists than in the same months of the previous year. The National Tourist Agency also maintains that there has in fact been an increase in the number of tourists since last year. It states that tourism remains one of Georgia’s priorities and there has been no decline in the number of visitors.

“The total number of tourists to Georgia in the first three months of 2013 was 928,898, a much higher number than we saw in the corresponding period of last year. In January a reduction in the pace of tourism growth was apparent, but this was expected and might be repeated in other years. Tourism is still one of the priorities of the government and country officials have said this many times,” says Giorgi Bregadze, Coordinator of the Research-Analytic Centre of the Tourism National Agency of Georgia.

Experts say that exact tourist numbers have never been identified in Georgia, as the MIA figures are not specific enough for those entering the country for tourism purposes but all foreign passport holders crossing the Georgian border, which includes truck drivers and workers transiting to Turkey. It is naive to think that citizens of a foreign country who merely travel through Georgia in transit should be counted as tourists, as was the practice of the previous government. However, First Deputy Economy and Sustainable Development Minister Dimitri Kumsishvili is quoted in the Georgian media saying that the new government worked out the methodology for quantifying actual tourist numbers some months ago, and in the future, Georgia will know exactly who is a tourist and who not.

The main problem facing tourism development is the lack of flexibility in the Tax System, Pastor Sheshelidze told The Georgian Times, “It is important for the government to develop the tourism sector in a different way: businesses and local authorities should take care of this. Local officials should be able to make decisions on how to develop their own areas. If we want to contribute to the development of this sphere, we should consider fiscal decentralisation and tax competition. It is essential to set different tax rates for big and small business.”

More is needed, however, in terms of price and quality. Georgians like to be served but not served and the level of service in Georgia is very low. One only needs to go to Turkey to see the difference and many of the foreign tourists arriving only provide a replacement for those Georgians who take their vacations in Turkey, where they get better deals – value for the money. It is clear that instead of counting tourists in a questionable manner that the former government should have placed an emphasis on the hospitality industry, and that means more than just waiting on tables with a smile.

Ensuring the safety of tourists is one of the main challenges for the government, as what happens if someone gets sick or faces a criminal situation. The Information-Analysis Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs has made public a report covering January-September 2012 which states that 528 tourists incurred losses from crime during this period. This represents 181 more such cases than in the same period of 2011.

Some analysts say that it is in fact unjustifiable to make tourism a priority sector, as there are several more important sectors the government must address to strengthen the Georgian economy. Although tourism was the number one priority of the outgoing government, Georgia does not have the relevant infrastructure in place to achieve the numbers it desires. It does not have qualified service staff and is still not a safe place for tourists. The state had been mostly interested in attracting foreign hotel chains to Georgia, and consequently it’s become expensive to stay here. Analysts say that it is essential to help small businesses to develop the tourism sector, and building 3-5 star hotels will make holidays cheaper.

The question is – can Georgia declare tourism a priority while the above-mentioned problems remain, and can it compete with neighbouring states such as Greece and Turkey, where the tourist industry is well-developed? There is also the issue of domestic tourism that is not addressed, and to develop tourism for Georgians so they will not have to travel outside the country for a normal vacation at a reasonable price with good service.
Mtkvari River still brings Trash to the Capital

By: LIKA MOSHEASHVILI, GT

A large quantity of trash, mostly in the form of plastic bottles and uprooted trees, has been floating down the River Mtkvari in Tbilisi, the country’s main artery, over the last few weeks. According to ecologists, the spill incorrectly set up landfill sites and porous drainage systems are primarily responsible. “If this alarming situation continues the fish and other living organisms in the Mtkvari basin will die in the near future,” she claims.

The snow on the mountains melts in spring, swelling the river, while the trash thrown into it by people in Samtredia-Javakheti, a region in southern Georgia, accumulates and flows into the capital. Tourists are thus treated to beautiful views of Old Tbilisi on the one hand and the polluted Mtkvari River on the other.

“The public services do not function properly in Georgian villages and therefore usually throw garbage into the river, rather than leave it to be collected. This is a problem not only for Tbilisi but the whole country,” says Nana Dvali, a resident of Gori, the capital of the Shida Kartli region in eastern Georgia.

Mariana Makarova, Head of Water Resource Management at the Ministry of Environment Protection, says that one of the reasons for the water pollution is that sewer pipes are directly connected to the river basin in Tbilisi.

“Pollution control facilities are not working properly in the capital,” Makarova told The Georgian Times. “Georgian Water and Power (GWP), the company which supplies water to the population of Tbilisi and its neighborhood, is responsible for cleaning the Mtkvari and also ensuring that drainage water flows into the pollution control facility. It is important for this flow to continue into the river basin,” she maintains.

The Mtkvari is the longest river in the Caucasus. Rising in northeastern Turkey, it flows through Turkey and Georgia to Azerbaijan, where it receives its tributaries as Araz and empties into the Caspian Sea. It is 1,515 kilometers long.

Makarova says that Azerbaijan has the same problem, as after passing through the Mingachevir reservoir the Mtkvari is polluted even more.

“At the end of this year Old Azerbaijan and Georgia will sign a cooperation agreement on water resource management. Within the framework of this agreement the two countries will develop a common rivers management policy and we hope this improvement will be a success,” she concludes.

New Georgian Labor Code to Maintain Preferential Trade Terms with U.S.

By: TAMAR TCHOKHONELIDZE, GT

American labor unions have filed an administrative lawsuit against the Republic of Georgia demanding that the country be removed of its status as a beneficiary of the U.S. Generalized System of Preferences due to its blatant failure to defend the workers’ rights stipulated in its labor code.

In response, Georgia hopes by modifying its labor code while at the same time making further efforts to improve trade with its traditional partner, Russia.

Labor Unions of the U.S. first filed their lawsuit against Georgia on September 18, 2010. They believe that the Georgian labor code doesn’t correspond with international standards and that the Georgian legal system is unable to defend the fundamental rights of employees.

Georgia’s current labor code allows an employer to fire employees without having or giving any reasonable cause, thus breaching workers’ rights. Although Georgia still enjoys a large advantage of the preferential conditions provided by the existing trade partnership.

“Our most compelling argument was the new labor code, which sets a higher standard for the defence of the rights of employees. This has turned out to be crucial for the resolution of this issue at the US Trade Representation,” Barlamidze said.

The Parliament of Georgia is discussing amendments to the labor code with the Labour Unions of Georgia. The lawmakers seek to balance the rights of employers and employees in the new code, i.e. to give employees more obligations to fulfill when recruiting and dismissing staff.

Georgia has also been a full-fledged member of the World Trade Organisation since 2008. Georgia’s trade relations with member countries of the WTO are based on its Most Favoured Nation (MFN) status, under which goods imported from Georgia won’t be treated under less favourable terms than goods from many other WTO member countries. Among other advantages this status gives, member countries reduce import tariffs on MFN countries’ products.

While efforts to boost trade with the U.S. have been successful, as the sides reached an agreement to allow Georgian products to enter the Russian market. A delegation of specialists from Russia’s Sanitary Inspection Service is now studying sanitary-hygience conditions in Georgian wine and mineral water production facilities. According to the National Wine Agency the Russian experts are collecting information for Russia’s Chief Sanitarian Gennady Onishchenko, who is expected to deliver his report on this inspection in the near future.
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Amazing SOCAR-McDonalds on the black sea coast in Batumi