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Going Caucasian: Tbilisi Wooing White Africans

By Paul Rimple

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White South African farmers may become Georgia's newest ethnic minority. In an effort to boost its agricultural potential, Georgia is wooing Boers dissatisfied with South Africa's land reform policies to come till fertile Georgian land at next-to-nothing prices. Their expertise, it is believed, can turn around a feeble agricultural sector.

Of course, not everybody agrees.

Georgia's reactionary opposition accuse the first lady, Sandra Roelofs, of lobbying on behalf of the Boer's Dutch origins, while Georgian farmers wonder why the government is offering help to foreigners instead of locals. Mariam Jorjadze, from the agricultural organization Elkana, told the BBC that although a small number of farmers could bring investment opportunities, a large influx would create tensions with local farmers.

The South African Transvaal Agricultural Union is trying to sell the idea to disgruntled Boers

and thinks that as many as 1,000 South Africans could end up in Georgia. Last October, one group was given a whirlwind tour, which included grape harvesting, wine tasting, a rugby match between the farmers and Georgian officials, and a tour of the Georgian motor vehicle department in Rustavi. Interior Minister Vano Merabishvili presented each member of the delegation a personalized license plate and a Georgian international driving license, processed in a mere 10 minutes.

The news has caught the attention of white supremacist web sites like the Council for Conservative Citizens and Stormfront.org, which see this as a white South African exodus in the making, only forum commentators can't agree on whether Georgia is a white enough destination. Some note it is "Caucasian," while Russian supremacists warn of Georgia's racial and religious differences.

The ethnic differences are not lost on Georgians. Even though Georgia prides itself on its multi-ethnic makeup, an evident chauvinistic streak does exist. When Labor Party secretary Giorgi Gugava says he fears an ensuing ethnic imbalance at the possible arrival of Boers, he reflects a paranoia that is shared across party lines.

Georgia is still dragging its heels over the repartition of Meskhetian Turks, who were deported en masse in 1944. Since 1999, when Georgia agreed to repatriate its former citizens, only 1,000 have returned. Some 9,000 more have been waiting several years for their applications to be reviewed.

Nevertheless, Georgia is pinning its hopes on the Boers. Whether the Boers will come through remains to be seen because none of the 90 Afrikaners who have visited Georgia have committed themselves yet.

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