The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Georgian Parliament Agrees to Get Rid of Soviet Symbols

May 31, 2011



People crossing a bridge decorated with Soviet-era symbols in Tbilisi. **David Mdzinarishvili**

TBILISI, Georgia — Georgia will destroy Soviet-era monuments and change any street names that refer to its Communist past, lawmakers decided Tuesday, passing legislation aimed at distancing the country from Russia.

"Our people have been waiting for this bill to be passed for 20 years, and I'm proud that it has been passed by this parliament," said Gia Tortladze, an opposition lawmaker who proposed the law.

The so-called Freedom Charter will set up a commission led by the Interior Ministry to identify symbols, monuments, inscriptions, street and park names "that may reflect or contain elements of Soviet or fascist ideology" and consider their removal.

The legislation will also prevent former KGB agents and senior Communist Party officials from occupying high-ranking positions in government.

The move could annoy Moscow, which accused Georgia of "trying to erase the historical memory of its people" after the authorities blew up a Soviet World War II memorial in the country's second largest city, Kutaisi, in 2009.

"Soviet symbols did nothing bad to people. It was the fault of the Communist authorities," said lawmaker Jondi Bagaturia.

Civil society expert David Gogishvili said it was important that Georgians understand their Soviet past and "if we decide to get rid of all material leftovers of the Soviet system, we may face a situation in which half of Tbilisi will be destroyed."

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