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Why Georgia Has Friends and Russia Doesn't

By Alexei Pankin

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It is difficult to imagine a greater joy than visiting Georgia.

Amazingly, the blood spilled in the Russia-Georgia war three years ago has not cooled the warm feelings that Georgians feel toward Russians, and that is the result of several centuries of living together in one nation. And because few Russians now visit the country — made worse by the fact that there are only three overpriced flights per week between Moscow and Tbilisi — those who do come are treated to an outpouring of the great love that Georgians feel for all Russians.

In Senaki, a town in western Georgia that saw fighting in August 2008, total strangers invited me to their home for dinner. They offered many toasts, sang songs in honor of the eternal friendship between our two countries and vowed not to let politics spoil that relationship.

A clerk at a small store off the beaten tourist path remarked: “You are the second Russian

customer I've had today. That's a good sign." And it was the same way everywhere I traveled across Georgia.

It is not easy for a Russian to be a patriot in Georgia. Everyone in Georgia likes to blame Russia for the loss of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. It is useless to offer the counterargument that the situation became irreversible in 1989-91 because nationalist leader Zviad Gamsakhurdia made serious efforts to deprive the Abkhaz and South Ossetians of autonomy.

The second problem is Russia's visa policy, which is a huge irritation for Georgians. Many Georgians, especially the more elderly, studied, worked or have friends or relatives in Russia. And almost every one of them with whom I spoke had a horror story about being refused a Russian visa or the mountains of paperwork they had to complete to ultimately get an invitation and visa. In contrast, Russians visiting Georgia can obtain a visa in two or three minutes at the Tbilisi airport.

The main factor unifying Georgia and Russia today is their common past. This is a strong and deep relationship, but it can only be stretched so far.

Moreover, Georgia has essentially taken an official anti-Soviet stance. A Georgian presidential adviser on relations with the former Soviet republics told our group of Russian journalists that "life was hell for Georgians during the Soviet era." This is utter nonsense for anyone who remembers the period from the 1960s to the early 1980s. But the target audience for that type of hyperbole is today's Georgian youth, who have no recollection of the warm relations between Georgians and Russians during the Soviet period.

But Tbilisi's anti-Russian propaganda aimed at the youth seems to be working. Some of the young Georgians I met held a contemptuous attitude toward Russia. Their position was: "We Georgians have created an honest police force and an effective government. We have largely eradicated crime and corruption. But you still can't get your house in order." Unfortunately, I couldn't object.

Tbilisi's pro-Western policy as well as Georgians' traditional hospitality and creativity will no doubt win new friends to their cause. But it seems to me that Russia is not trying very hard to even maintain old friendships, much less build new ones.

Alexei Pankin is editor of WAN-IFRA-GIPP Magazine for publishing business professionals.

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