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Saakashvili's Latest Trick: Move Capital to Kutaisi

By Paul Rimple

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Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili was bicycling with his family in Kutaisi last week, promoting the construction of a new parliament building in the country's forgotten second city. The idea is that moving the legislative body to western Georgia will somehow improve economic conditions in one of the poorest cities in the country.

The parliament, which is touted as "the most modern in the world" and resembles a huge armadillo, has its share of critics, starting from when a Soviet World War II memorial was blown up at the construction site in December 2009, killing a mother and her child.

Some wonder if the $34.7 million price tag is a wise investment. Others think that the move threatens Tbilisi's status as political capital and that the authorities are trying to reduce Tbilisi's political significance, particularly since the capital is more pro-opposition than the rest of the country. Others complain that some 700 Tbilisi parliamentary employees will lose their jobs if they choose not to relocate. What the critics have not offered is a plan to help

revitalize Kutaisi.

Kutaisi was once was the capital of the united Kingdom of Georgia, until it was moved to Tbilisi in the 12th century. While it played an important role as a regional capital in its own right, Kutaisi lost much of its glory when it became a Soviet industrial center and took a further dive with the economic collapse that followed independence in 1991. It never really recovered.

Despite Kutaisi's cultural legacy, which includes the Bagrati Cathedral, Gelati Monastery and even dinosaur footprints along the banks of the Rioni River, Kutaisi has not been able to draw the tourists or investments that the capital, Tbilisi, and resort town Batumi have. Saakashvili acknowledges that the parliament building alone cannot resolve the problems of Kutaisi and has realistically noted that something must be done to improve the "hopeless situation in Kutaisi."

Batumi and Tbilisi are success stories in the making because the Saakashvili administration improved their infrastructure and made them attractive places for the private sector to invest in. While moving the legislature a couple of hours away from the capital by car may seem outlandish at first thought, this is Georgia, where unconventional is the norm. The plan cannot hurt. At the very least, members of parliament will have to confront Kutaisi reality on their working days, while Tbilisi opposition protesters will have to find another venue for demonstrations.

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