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Saakashvili's Vision to Raise a City in a Swamp

By Paul Rimple

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On Dec. 4, Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili announced plans to build a city of half a million people on the Black Sea coast. So far the reaction has been torpid, as if the country is numb to such whimsical presidential decisions.

Located near protected wetlands, between the port of Poti and the border of Abkhazia, the future city of Lazica will include a modern trade and commercial center and port. Saakashvili said initial investment would total 1.5 billion lari ($900 million) and construction of the 10-year project would begin next year.

While the vision is admirable, the concept raises several questions, such as why does Georgia need to build a new city from scratch when there are many underdeveloped cities that need revitalizing? The nearby city of Poti still has major infrastructure issues, including reliable water distribution.

Michael Saunders, an adviser on emerging market engineering and agriculture projects, told Bloomberg from Tbilisi that these kinds of projects have been done in Brazil and Australia, so it should work here, too. "The main problem," he added, "would come down to management and marketing."

Indeed, in Georgia, management is generally an imported commodity, while marketing swampland is a hard sell anywhere. Yet, providing that hurdle is overcome, where exactly are the 500,000 people going to come from? The president's spokeswoman said the main residents would be villagers from the "existing area" and Georgian expats.

The total population of the Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti region, where Lazica is planned, is about 466,000. The "existing area" is a small fraction of this, which means that nearly half a million Georgian expats are going to have to give up their jobs in Moscow, Athens and wherever else to return to a country with a steady official unemployment rate of 15.5 percent (although unofficial numbers are much higher).

Fickle or not, the project does have some ground in reason. Lazica was the name of an ancient kingdom that encompassed much of western Georgia, including Abkhazia. Saakashvili announced that this new city is part of a larger plan to restore Abkhazia into Georgia through "permanent development and progress." When the Russian empire collapses, he said, Georgia will have room to maneuver to restore its position.

But reason is not the same as reality. Why build a city in a swamp and hope somebody will live there when you can revitalize an established city next door? Vision is great, but its material value lies in the real world.

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