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Why Russia Has Lost a Generation of Georgians

By James Brooke

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In the run-up to Georgia's parliamentary elections on Monday, supporters of President Mikheil Saakashvili derided their opponent, billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, as a "Kremlin project."

Activists for Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream coalition were even chased out of a village housing refugees from the 2008 war with shouts of "Russians" ringing in their ears.

These Georgians say, "Follow the money."

Not only did Ivanishvili make his fortune of $6.4 billion in Russia during the wild years of the 1990s, but he was able to liquidate his Russian holdings last year at good prices.

In Russia, billionaires only survive if they enjoy the good graces of President Vladimir Putin. His political rival, former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky, is in jail. Mikhail Prokhorov

retreated from politics after a tepid bid for president this year, and billionaire Alexander Lebedev finds that the price for opposing Putin is that no one dares to buy his assets.

On Friday, I asked Ivanishvili if he is a Kremlin project. He laughed off the question, saying that over the past decade he gave $1.7 billion in aid to Georgia. He added jokingly, "If that means being a Kremlin agent, then the Kremlin has in me the best agent for Georgia."

At age 56, Ivanishvili is a shrewd pragmatist. My bet is that he will try to steer Georgia into a more neutral course. U.S. conservatives might label this as "Finlandization," but this policy served Finland well after fighting two wars with Moscow in the 1940s.

Ivanishvili says he wants to normalize relations with Russia. In addition to reopening embassies, this would mean restoring trade ties. Once Georgia's main trading partner, Russia now accounts for only 4 percent of Georgia's trade. With 30 times the population of Georgia, Russia is a natural source of tourists for Georgia's booming tourism industry along the Black Sea coast.

Now a member of the World Trade Organization, Russia is obligated to drop unilateral trade barriers. The WTO could provide a fig leaf for Moscow to normalize.

Looking forward to the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympics, Russia has one year to lock in peace and quiet on its southern border. It has created a buffer state, Abkhazia, directly across the border from the skiing venues. But it would further calm pre-Olympic nerves if there were a leader in Tbilisi committed to controlling rogue nationalist elements of Georgian security forces.

For Moscow, the red line is NATO membership.

In 1944, before NATO was created, U.S. diplomat George Kennan wrote, "The jealous eye of the Kremlin can distinguish, in the end, only vassals and enemies; and the neighbors of Russia, if they do not wish to be one, must reconcile themselves to being the other."

After winning the parliamentary elections, Ivanishvili repeated on Tuesday his commitment to winning NATO membership for Georgia. But in reality, Russians and Georgians may privately agree to publicly disagree on NATO while moving forward on trade and tourism.

Realpolitik analysts in Moscow, Brussels and Tbilisi know that NATO membership is not going to happen as long as 9,000 or so Russian soldiers are firmly entrenched in Georgia's two secessionist territories, Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Last summer, I stood about a kilometer south of the South Ossetia truce line where I borrowed a pair of high-powered binoculars from a Polish peacekeeper. Studying the new watchtowers and fresh concertina wire of three new Russian army outposts, it was clear to me that the truce line is about as temporary as the demilitarization zone separating North and South Korea.

Georgians know that, given the signal from Moscow, Russian troops could once again break out of South Ossetia, drive south and cut Georgia in half — all in about 45 minutes. With that knowledge, Ivanishvili shows no sign of throwing away the close relationship that Saakashvili forged with the United States. If he seeks to follow a third way, he needs Washington

to counterbalance Moscow.

Before Monday's election, Saakashvili reportedly spent $600,000 a month on lobbyists in Washington. The morning after the vote, he met in Tbilisi with two visiting United States senators who are members of the Foreign Relations Committee, James Risch and Jeanne Shaheen.

Referring to the United States, Saakashvili said, "We talked about the future, how to develop our relationship with our big friend and how to develop democracy in Georgia."

On one level, Georgia receives large amounts of foreign aid from the United States. On another level, U.S. engagement frees Georgia to pursue a regional role as a transit country for Central Asian oil and gas through pipelines that are outside of Kremlin control.

For Ivanishvili, Moscow is just one point in his mental compass. Like most successful Georgians of his generation, he has moved far beyond his Soviet upbringing to feel comfortable in the West. He holds a French passport and speaks French. He stores his $1 billion modern art collection in London. He loves to discuss with foreign architects his favorite pet project: building a world class modern art museum in Georgia to house his art.

When Russian tourists start to rediscover Georgia, they will also discover that Russia has lost a generation of Georgians.

If tourists want to speak in Russian, they had better seek out a Georgian over 35. Two decades ago, Russian language study was largely dropped from schools here. Instead, the study of English is now universal and obligatory. Russian is offered as an optional second language on par with Turkish and Farsi.

At concierge desks of new hotels in Tbilisi — the two Mariotts, the Radisson and the Holiday Inn – visitors will find any of five free local newspapers in English. Nothing in Russian.

Picking up Georgia's Financial newsweekly, visitors can study Tbilisi's international flight schedule. This x-ray of modern Georgia's world view lists direct flights to 22 foreign cities — from London to Urumqi, China — but no flights to any city in Russia. (There is a daily flight to Moscow, but since there are no diplomatic relations, it is a considered a charter.)

This deep sense of Georgian nationalism coupled with Ivanishvili's canny pragmatism point to a future policy with Russia that will be less of an embrace, and more of a detente.

At his news conference on Tuesday, Ivanishvili told reporters: "If you ask me, 'America or Russia?', I say we need to have good relations with everybody."

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