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Tbilisi's Soft Power of Wine, Smiles and Tourism

By James Brooke

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Nervousness was in the air the other afternoon when my S7 Airbus, packed with Russian tourists, touched down at Tbilisi's international airport. The tourists walked down a sparkling glass corridor to a terminal that Russian bombs narrowly missed four years earlier during the war with Georgia. They meekly lined up in the no-visa line at passport control.

Crisply uniformed Georgian immigration officers sitting in glass booths carefully inspected each red passport, embossed in gold with the double-headed eagle. Each border control officer reached under his desk and, with a practiced move, returned every passport with an unexpected object. It was a 200-milliliter bottle of red wine, packed in a crimson gift box and stamped: "Welcome to the Land of 8,000 Vintages."

"Welcome to Georgia!" the officers repeated in Russian, offering unrehearsed, centuries-old Georgian smiles. Despite the warnings of the Kremlin nanny state, Russian tourism to Georgia is booming.

Citibank estimates that Russians will splurge and spend $50 billion on foreign trips in 2012. International travel out of Sheremyetevo Airport is up 19 percent this year. The increase is so steep that Russian airlines are debating whether to hire 1,000 foreign pilots to fly the extra Airbuses and Boeings required to meet the demand.

As Russia's flush middle class scours the world for new destinations, many think of an old favorite close to home: Georgia. In Soviet times, Georgia received 3 million tourists each year. But today, many Russians think twice before venturing south.

In Moscow and Tbilisi, police guard the long-shuttered, empty embassies of Georgia and Russia. Georgia broke off relations with Russia in August 2008, shortly after losing a five-day war with Russia. Four years later, about 7,000 Russian soldiers are garrisoned in two secessionist regions, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which occupy 20 percent of Georgia's territory. On the Georgian side, the harm inflicted by the war is still present. About 400 Georgian civilians and soldiers were killed and 1,700 were wounded, and about 15,000 new internally displaced people are still living in refugee camps.

On the Russian side, Kremlin-controlled television has fed the population a steady diet of scary stories about Georgia. In May, 41 percent of Russian respondents to a Levada poll said the biggest security threat to Russia is Georgia, a nation of only 4.5 million people.

In late February, Georgian authorities took the pragmatic step of trying to thaw the ice by waiving visa requirements for Russians. The Kremlin refused to reciprocate. Instead, Foreign Ministry spokesman Alexander Lukashevich advised Russians not to travel to Georgia.

"A large number of Russian nationals would automatically be subject to prosecution on entry into the country," Lukashevich warned in March, a time when Russians were planning their summer vacations. "Since Georgia severed diplomatic relations with Russia, we have extremely limited resources for the consular and legal defense of our fellow citizens who have found themselves in trouble in Georgia."

"This is the first year we saw Russian tourists everywhere," said Larry Sheets, an American who has lived on and off in Tbilisi for the last 20 years. "We saw groups in Tbilisi being led around by tour guides, out in the countryside. It was an amazing amount."

With Russian tourist arrivals up by 55 percent, half a million Russians are expected to visit Georgia this year. S7, which restored service last year between Moscow and Tbilisi, started direct flights in June between Moscow and the Georgian resort town of Batumi. Since there are no diplomatic relations between the two countries, these are technically charter flights. This month, the airline starts direct charter flights between Moscow and Kutaisi, Georgia's second-largest city.

This year, Russians have explored Tbilisi's medieval Old Town and gone by bus on wine-tasting tours in the countryside. This winter, they are to pack the chairlifts in Caucasus mountain resorts once used as training grounds for Soviet Olympic skiers. Kazbegi, a new Georgian casino resort built just across the border from Russia, is a big attraction for those who live under varying degrees of Shariah in the North Caucasus.

Two weeks ago, my Voice of America colleague Vadim Massalsky drove with a carload of friends from Krasnodar to Tbilisi and then on to eastern Georgia. During his 500-kilometer drive through Georgia with Russian license plates, he was never stopped by Georgian traffic police.

Most alarming, he wrote in his blog, were the constant calls from worried friends back home.

"Yes, it is just awful!" he recalled one traveling companion, Pavel Kazachenok, a Volgograd lawyer, shouting into his mobile phone. "Yesterday, they tortured us all night long with wine and barbecues. And today, Merab and Valiko have threatened us that the torture will continue."

Meanwhile, Gennady Onishchenko, Russia's chief health inspector, met Monday with Georgian winemakers to discuss ending Russia's six-year embargo on Georgian wines. The embargo violates the rules of the World Trade Organization, which Russia joined in August.

The surge of Russian tourists into Georgia poses two problems for the Kremlin. First, it shows that a large segment of Russians, generally the most affluent and most educated, increasingly ignore the Kremlin's xenophobic worldview.

Second, Russian tourists are expected to join the chorus for normalizing Russia's relations with Georgia. Last week, Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin, who oversees the defense industry, essentially lampooned soft power as sissy power.

"Smart power and soft power are fine words that make sense, but real power — power to be reckoned with — is the physical power of knowing that you can strike with an iron fist," he said.

But Georgia, once on the receiving end of that iron fist, has now set a goal of welcoming 5 million Russian tourists by 2020 — more than one Russian for every Georgian.

If Georgia succeeds in spoiling millions of Russian tourists every year with fine wines, rich meals and warm hospitality, this could do the most to defeat the Kremlin's cold war in the Southern Caucasus.

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