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Crossroads: A Former Soviet's Defining Moment

Dressed in all black, with his shoulder-length hair swept back and sporting yellow-tinted glasses, Nikoloz Chkheidze looks like a postmodern rock star. But the 30-something Manhattanite is not what he appears to be. At least not completely. Weekly visits to his church in Brooklyn and other community-based activities suggest a man of significant contradictions

"Nick" immigrated to the United States from the former Soviet republic of Georgia five years ago. At the church, his familiarity with the long and elaborate religious service and his easy manner with other parishioners hint at a more traditional outlook beneath his hip appearance. Chkheidze is actually a doctor of internal medicine and community organizer. After arriving in New York in 2001, he took it upon himself to establish Tvistomi ("the inner circle"), which is the first and only Georgian community organization in America. Tvistomi helped found the Brooklyn church, which occupies two rented rooms on the third floor of St. Peter and Paul's Catholic School on a gritty block near the East River. (It's a temporary arrangement, insists Chkheidze.) The church is an important part of Tvistomi's programs, for these whitewashed plaster rooms, with their gold-trimmed icons and wooden fixtures, represent the seat of the Georgian Orthodox Church in America.

Chkheidze's deep commitment to upholding the traditions of his native country and his strong embrace of modern Western ideals have made him a walking metaphor for the challenging path facing Georgia fifteen years after the fall of the Soviet Union. Once lodged in the heart of Soviet consciousness, this small country of 4.5 million is seeking a clear and independent way forward. On the one hand is its ancient culture and centuries-old relationship with Russia. On the other is the lure of "Euro-Atlantic Integration" and possible membership in NATO.

Each path offers its own form of security, but some fear that Georgia may end up losing both. The net result is that Georgia, a historically significant crossroads between East and West, must now itself answer the difficult question of which path to pursue.

Chkheidze knows this. He started Tvistomi to ensure that Georgians in America would have something to cling to during their country's stormy journey towards definition. He understands that an important part of this process is the connection between Georgians in the U.S. and those who remain in their homeland.

"After the fall of the Soviet Union, Georgians had no knowledge about living in a capitalist society," he said. "We had no more communist system and no way ahead."

He illustrates this point by describing how Georgians at home and in the U.S. have been challenged by basic aspects of financial management. "They didn't know how to open or maintain a checking account," he adds. "They never had to do it under the Communists."

"This is why I established the group," he said. "I wanted to teach Georgians and help them do better in America."

It's a noble sentiment but, like many examples of social entrepreneurism, there is an element of self-interest in it. A strong community organization would likely attract large grants from private and public funders. Still, Chkheidze's commitment to helping Georgians in the greater New York area is palpable.

"We have provided services to about 1,500 people so far," he said, noting the medical, legal, and information assistance Tvistomi has offered its

constituents over the past three years.

Though the group's work seems focused on providing assistance at the local level, there is an international dimension to Tvistomi's programs. As Georgians in America do better in the socioeconomic arena, their counterparts back home also improve their standing. This is partly because of the important role that remittances play in the immigrant experience. Another reason is the transmission of "lessons learned" between immigrants in the U.S. and populations in their country of origin.

The reverse seems not be true. When asked why the government in the Georgian capital of Tbilisi doesn't provide support to Tvistomi, Chkheidze quickly replied, "Tbilisi can't help itself…"

But Georgia provides something just as important to Chkheidze and his fellow immigrants: an identity, an origin, an outlook.

A Stop on the Ancient Silk Road

"Not Georgia as in Atlanta," is likely a distinction Chkheidze has to make often, in spite of his thick foreign accent. Many Americans are only vaguely aware of the country, nestled in the Caucasus Mountains between Russia and Turkey. Most could not find it on a map.

Georgia's history is complex. Bound in many ways to Russia and the other nations surrounding it, Georgia has nevertheless managed to maintain an independent tradition and identity, a fact of which most Georgians are very proud.

"We have been Christian since 336," said Nick during his recent visit to the Brooklyn church. Georgian tenacity is legendary throughout Eurasia and, though mostly unspoken, the clearest incarnation of this trait was Josef Stalin, who remains the most influential Georgian in history.

Georgians vary widely in appearance. Some are fair, with blonde hair and blue eyes; others have dark features. This diversity is no doubt a result of the many civilizations that have influenced Georgia's history. The country has endured many invading armies over the centuries, from the Greeks and Romans to Persians, Arabs, Mongols, Ottomans, and, most recently, the Soviet Red Army. In his book, "Eastward to Tartary," Robert D. Kaplan notes that Tbilisi has been destroyed and rebuilt 29 times.

The very existence of a distinct language is another example of the Georgians' commitment to preserving their cultural identity. Its written form is one of the world's 14 official alphabets.

The main reason for all this interest in the country is its strategic location. Georgia lies in the heart of Eurasia and represents not only a bridge between two continents, but a link between the two main bodies of water in this corner of the world, the Black and Caspian Seas. This position made Tbilisi an important stop on the ancient Silk Road.

In contemporary terms, it makes Georgia a vital component of the Energy Corridor stretching westward from the Caspian's rich deposits of oil and natural gas. The Baku-Tblisi-Ceyhan Pipeline began transporting oil from Azerbaijan to Turkey in May 2006, bypassing Russian territory and providing an outlet for Azerbaijani oil to the Mediterranean and beyond.

"Our main problem is political stability," offered Nino Dzotsendize, a former Georgian government official now pursuing a masters degree in international studies at The New School in New York. Dzotsendize spent a decade working on higher education reform in Georgia. She has distinct views on the country's current challenges.

"We need to regulate our relationship with Russia. This issue makes a mess in the country. All our priorities are determined by it," she said.

Georgia's strained exchanges with Russia resemble bitter spats between former lovers. Regional experts note the history of Russian paternalism and, by turns, Georgian dependence and resistance in the relationship.

Georgia fell under the sway of Russia in the 19th century. That relationship was voluntarily undertaken as a way of resisting encroachment by the Turks and Persians. It was pursued in order to preserve Georgia's Christian identity and links to Europe. During the Russian Revolution, the country re-established its independence for two years before being absorbed into the Soviet Union in 1920. Georgia didn't see independence again until 1991.

Russia's handling of its relationship with Georgia seems to reflect a pattern that, according to Columbia University Professor Robert Legvold, "can be traced back to Ivan III in the fifteenth century." Legvold offers that, in the current environment, "Russians have coveted what they regard as the natural writ of Russia – territories at some point under its sway."

This notion goes a long way toward explaining part of the tension between the two countries.

By 1993, Georgia was facing a complex set of problems. Severe economic hardship and two wars over the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia shook the country to its foundations. The territorial struggles remain unresolved "frozen conflicts" which many view as fronts in the ongoing dispute with Russia, which openly supports the separatist communities.

In addition, a crisis of confidence in former Georgian president Eduard Shevardnadze led to a bloodless 2003 coup known as the Rose Revolution in which Western-leaning opposition leader Mikheil Saakashvili was elected president. (Shevardnadze had served as Soviet foreign minister under Gorbachev and was called back to his native Georgia during the territorial wars.)

Chkheidze says the biggest problems facing Georgia are the ongoing struggles with economic and political development. He sees major challenges with Georgia's investment climate, tax policies, and agricultural production and distribution.

There is also a long-standing problem with corruption and organized crime.

Though he didn't offer as much, one gets the sense that Nick immigrated to America to transcend these limitations. Upon doing so, however, he became immediately aware of the problems facing his fellow immigrants.

The Land of Opportunity

According to Chkheidze, there are approximately 100,000 Georgians living in the United States, 80% of which live in the New York tri-state area (New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut).

Eka Andriashvili, Chkheidze's girlfriend and head of Tvistomi's legal services division, explained that there have been three "flows" of immigration from Georgia to the America. Large movements in the 1920s and 1960s were reactions to political turmoil in the Caucasus. The current wave, by far the largest, began in 1999. In contrast to the previous influxes, it has been more a function of economic hardship in Georgia and the country's increasingly stronger ties to the West.

In this fact lies the crux of Georgia's challenges with self-definition. Whereas before Georgians looked to Russia for opportunity, support, and identity, there is now a greater tendency to identify with the West, especially America, among young Georgians.

This interest is presumably mutual. The U.S. provides substantial financial support to Georgia ($102 million during fiscal year 2004 alone) and has funded and staffed a large military assistance program over the past several years. The Georgia Train and Equip Program was established in 2002 and provides training and military equipment to the country's rapidly growing armed forces. (In turn, the U.S. seems to expect Georgian support for current missions in Afghanistan, Kosovo, and Iraq, which the country willingly obliges.)

According to Tamara Zurabishvili, a Georgia-based sociologist who conducted ethnographic field research in New York City in 2005, remittances by the Georgian international diaspora account for 20% of the Georgian Gross Domestic Product. Given this fact, international influences, especially from the U.S., are unlikely to dissipate anytime soon.

Zurabishvili's work with Georgian immigrants in New York paints a portrait of hard work and longing for home. An excerpt from one of her studies describes some of the conditions.

"As a rule, they are paid less compared with the native labor force, and work longer hours. Their housing conditions vary greatly – some of them live in boarding houses with up to 10 people living in (a) one bedroom apartment…but probably the most important thing associated with life in New York is nostalgia that Georgian labor migrants feel toward their homeland and their families."

Perhaps a logical – if unconscious – extension of this uneasiness is the trepidation that Georgians feel about leaving the Russian-Soviet context.

But the outlook is far from bleak for Georgian immigrants. Many Georgians have succeeded in the United States. Andriashvili, Tvistomi's head of legal services, described many immigrants starting in the domestic services industry and moving from there to successful careers in real estate.

And there have been notable Georgian role models in America. The most prominent Georgian in the United States has been U.S. Army General John Shalikashvili, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who was born in Poland to Georgian parents and immigrated to the United States as a teenager.

The Way Ahead

Though the future remains unclear for Georgia, most policy experts are optimistic about the country's eventual acceptance in NATO and the European Union. Membership will fundamentally alter the country's ongoing struggles with Russia, which has fueled opposition by those who fear this integration could lead to a new Cold War.

Recent flare-ups between Georgia and Russia include a ban on Georgian wine, proposed price increases on Russian natural gas used in heating Georgian homes, and the arrest of four Russian military officers accused of spying at the Russian Embassy in Tbilisi. This last event led to a rupture of ties between the two countries. Many Georgians living in Russia were targeted for deportation as a result.

The view of Georgian-Russian relations as a strategic tinderbox is justified, but the U.S. seems committed to helping the small country. A summer 2006 joint White House press conference by Presidents Bush and Saakashvili did much to assuage the concerns of those who doubt U.S. intentions in the region.

Regardless of what happens, many expect that Georgian immigration to the U.S. will continue. Though visas to enter the U.S. are hard to come by, sociologist Zurabishvili contends that many Georgians will likely continue the journey westward. She expects that many Georgians will enter the U.S. through illegal border crossings, now that a viable Georgian community is emerging in America.

"Labor migration from Georgia should be considered a survival strategy of (the) Georgian population. We can expect an increase in the number of Georgian migrants coming to the U.S.," wrote Zurabishvili in a recent study.

Many Georgians point out that an unexpected consequence of the United States' restrictive immigration policies is that more Georgians will make their way to America. Because Georgians can't easily travel back and forth, many who reach U.S. shores, whether legally or illegally, will likely stay and send for their families when they save enough money to do so. This is due to their unwillingness to sacrifice the earnings potential they enjoy in America.

It's a pattern that has been repeated by many immigrant communities in America. Back in Brooklyn, it has been a good morning for Tvistomi. Chkheidze helped welcome the Georgian ambassador to the United Nations to the small church on the third floor of St. Peter and Paul's. Departing the service with just a hint of swagger, Chkheidze expressed his optimism over the strong ties between Georgia and the U.S. He expects much from the relationship.

"The U.S. helps all nations find a home," he said, climbing into a stylish black sedan.

This statement could apply both to Georgian immigrants in America and to the status of their homeland in the international community.

Chkheidze is not naive. His struggles and successes in Georgia and the U.S. have established him as a natural leader in the Georgian community. His attitudes and beliefs seem well calculated.

In many ways, the future of his fellow immigrants and the families they left behind depend on how well he's placed his hopes.

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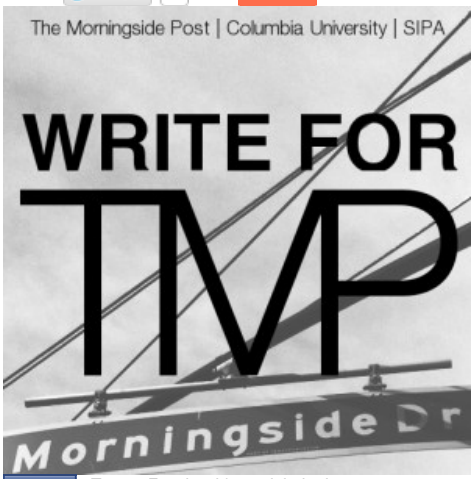

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