
Changing the Feel and Look on Tbilisi Streets

By Matthew Collin
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I was standing on a pile of rubble halfway down Pushkin Ulitsa, looking for somewhere to buy some credit for my cell phone and feeling somewhat confused.

I'd been away from Tbilisi for a couple of weeks, and in that time my neighborhood had been transformed. A whirlwind of change has been whipping through the Georgian capital, and it had just hit my home territory.

The pile of rubble was all that was left of my nearest newspaper kiosk. It had been pulled down and the genial elderly couple who worked there were gone.

The nearby kiosk had been demolished too. On the corner, the scruffy woman who used to hawk beer and cigarettes from a grimy shopping cart late into the night was no longer there either.

My local square is known for its flower market, where romantics can buy extravagant bouquets for their sweethearts at any hour. The flower sellers were still trading, but the fruit and vegetable vendors who used to cluster around them had vanished.

In the square stands an aging Soviet block which once housed a warren of rundown stalls: cobblers, seamstresses, key cutters and the like. They had disappeared too, and the building had been gutted. Only one hole-in-the-wall cigarette vendor remained, and her mood became more dour and depressed as the days passed until, eventually, she was also gone.

This is all happening in the name of progress. The idea is to smarten up the city center, make it more like a European capital, taking Tbilisi out of post-Soviet chaos and into a brighter, more prosperous future. The authorities are constructing elegant new squares and laying down attractive flower beds.

The signs outside some of the many building sites give an indication of what's on its way: Hilton, Hyatt, Kempinski, Inter-Continental, Radisson. Within a year or so, Tbilisi will have new five-star hotels catering to the business elite.

But what has happened to those people who used to scratch out a living selling potatoes or mending shoes? How will they survive? And what is their role in Tbilisi's shiny European future? Critics say that the authorities are building a "society without people," and that anyone who doesn't fit into the grand modernization project -- the impoverished, elderly and powerless -- is being banished. They claim this will be a duller place without its anarchic jumble of sidewalk entrepreneurs.

Of course, there are winners and losers in any society charting its course through the turbulence of economic transition. The challenge for the authorities, in Georgia as elsewhere, is to ensure those who are dispossessed by the pitiless forces of the market do not fall into destitution and discontent.

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