

## **Georgian Refugees Face Eviction**

**Author:** IWPR

The Georgian government tries to reclaim a central Tbilisi hotel from its refugee residents.

“For 12 years they forgot all about us,” said Nanuli Keidia. “Now they come and wake us up at two in the morning to register us for eviction.”

As Keidia, aged 60, spoke, she was lighting a match in the dark hallway of the Hotel Iveria in central Tbilisi, where she and hundreds of others have lived since they fled the war in Abkhazia.

Ever since the first refugees moved into the hotel in 1992, the Iveria has been a symbol of Georgia’s loss in that conflict, and of the plight of the more than 200,000 Georgians displaced by it.

The monumental 22-storey Soviet building that dominates the Georgian capital’s skyline is a pitiful sight, with broken windows patched up with cellophane, broken railings, and a gaudy miscellany of clothing hung on its balconies.

All of a sudden, the refugees who live there are facing eviction.

On August 20, a deadline expired for the hotel-dwellers to move out. They are being offered a lump sum of 7,000 dollars to resettle, but so far only one family has reportedly bought an apartment with the compensation money.

Bidzina Bregadze, head of Tbilisi’s city government, said that the majority of internally displaced persons, IDPs, in the Iveria were taking the compensation money offered them. He said, “Only 30 families have not signed the agreement. We are asking them to sign up in the near future.”

Those refusing to sign up to the deal staged a protest in front of the hotel on August 23, accusing the city government of forcing them out.

“There hasn’t been electricity in the hotel for five days,” said Guram Sichinava. “We are only getting two hours of water a day. The authorities are trying to use psychological pressure to force us to leave the hotel.”

Facing a second loss of their homes, the protestors are calling the hotel “a second Abkhazia”.

Even those who have agreed to go remain unhappy. “We were forced to sign an agreement [to move], but we can’t leave the hotel and find an apartment in such a short time,” complained Maguli Savala, from Sukhumi. “The government is forcing us out onto the street.”

Luiza Gagnidze said that her family had signed the agreement – but was considering tearing it up. “When there is no electricity in the hotel and there isn’t a single lift working, 1,200 refugees can’t leave in a week,” she said.

Over the last 12 years, the Iveria has become a world of its own. The stairways are covered in sunflower-seed husks and cigarette butts, and the dark hallways have broken doors. But there are makeshift greengrocer's outlets on every floor, filled with cucumbers, tomatoes and potatoes.

Many Tbilisi residents want to see the Iveria become a hotel again. "We cannot have a building like this in the heart of the city," said Laura Bregvadze, a Tbilisi resident. "What were the authorities thinking of when they let refugees move into one of the best hotels in Georgia?"

This view was voiced by the president himself – thus setting the process in motion. "The Iveria Hotel must be evacuated and restored to its original condition," said Mikheil Saakashvili two months ago.

"Private interests are not involved here," Tbilisi mayor Zurab Chiaberashvili told refugees. "It's the city and the country which need the Iveria restored." But he said foreign investors had shown interest in buying into the Iveria, and it was they who were offering the refugees 7,000 dollars per room if they move out. "The investors will soon transform the Iveria into a five-star hotel," Chiaberashvili said.

A Georgian company called Silk Road has taken the initiative. "We got interested in investing in the Iveria after the November revolution," said David Shengelia, who represents Silk Road.

Until recently, the company's business was oil and petrochemicals transportation, but Shengelia said Silk Road got lucky because its vision of the Iveria's future coincided with the government's own. "The Georgian government wanted to resume the Iveria's operation as a hotel, but didn't have the money to resettle the refugees, and that's where we were able to help," said Shengelia.

The special commission in charge of registering refugees from Abkhazia has recorded 320 rooms in the Iveria occupied by IDPs. This means it will cost the company upwards of two million dollars to evacuate the premises. Silk Road, which has undertaken to find an international investor, is currently negotiating with the Hyatt hotel chain. According to Shengelia, the whole project may cost up to 50 million dollars to complete.

Eter Astemirova, the Georgian minister for refugees and resettlement, insists the sums offered to the refugees are acceptable. She said, "They will receive 7,000 dollars per room to buy new housing, which will be their rightful property. Even if they eventually return to Abkhazia, they will still own these flats. No one is going to take them away."

Some of the Iveria rooms are home to just two people and for them the compensation offer is reasonable. But others say it will be a disaster for them to leave the Iveria.

"We have no work, but we cannot enjoy any rest either," said Tamar Janjgava, a refugee from Gagra, leading the way into a small white room. Inside there is a table, three beds, a television set and a wooden cabinet with no glass, where the top shelves are reserved for clothing, and the bottom ones are filled with tableware. A narrow passage leads into a second room, which is only big enough for a single bed and a baby pram.

Janjgava said the two rooms total only 12 square metres together, and will count as a single room for purposes of compensation.

"There are three families – seven people – living in this room. What kind of place can we buy with 7,000 dollars?" she said, smiling through tears.

“Fourteen thousand dollars is enough to buy a flat on the edge of the city. The government knows full well it is leaving us high and dry, making us refugees once again, this time in our own land,” said Zaur Gerzmava, 62, who lost his son and his house in the Abkhaz war 12 years ago, and now shares a room with his former neighbours from Sukhumi.

Gerzmava, like many others, says the Iveria has grown into an organic community.

“We live here like a family,” he said. “When I have no food, I can go and eat with my neighbour. Who will take care of us when we move out and we go our separate ways?”

Shorena Jamburia, a 22-year-old woman originally from the town of Gagra, said, “I lost my father and brother in the war. I’m on my own and the people at the Iveria have become my second family.

“I won’t let anyone take that away from me.”

Tea Lobzhanidze is a journalist with IWPR’s Caucasian newspaper Panorama.

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