

Moscow's Georgians Opt for Discreet Silence

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Members of the diaspora community either back the Russian position or hold their own counsel. The large Georgian community in Moscow has been watching the latest conflict in the Caucasus with horror, but members say that they have been spared the kind of persecution they experienced two years ago, when many of their ethnic kinsmen were deported.

Tbilisi and Moscow have cut diplomatic ties and are recalling their ambassadors. Transport links between the two countries, which were restored only a few months ago, have been severed again.

Gia Janashia (not his real name) is a Georgian with Russian citizenship who has lived in Moscow for the last 26 years. Last month's conflict caught him and his family in western Georgia visiting relatives.

"I hadn't seen my parents for three years," he said. "There hadn't been a direct flight from Moscow for ages and they'd only just restored it, so I decided to go with my children.

"My wife is Russian and in the first hours of the war [overnight on August 7-8] she started phoning and begging us to come back. On August 9, we travelled to Tbilisi and when we passed Gori, it was a terrible sight - apartment blocks were burning. I covered my children's eyes with my hands so they wouldn't see it."

After a nightmarish four-day trip, Janashia and his children travelled to the Armenian capital Yerevan, where they managed to get on a flight to Moscow.

Now back in the Russian capital, Janashia insists he is not being made to suffer because of his ethnicity.

"My Georgian friends and I are not having any problems at all," he. "I was expecting a repeat of the nightmare we went through in 2006, but no, everything's been fine. The main thing is not to forget to curse [Georgian president Mikheil] Saakashvili as roundly as you can. Everyone here likes that, from policemen to shop assistants."

In 2006, in the worst confrontation between Moscow and Tbilisi prior to the war that broke out this August, hundreds of Georgians were deported from Russia in retaliation for the expulsion of four Russian officers accused of espionage.

Russia cut all communications and banned imports of wine and mineral water from Georgia.

The ban on Georgian wine, a favourite among Russians for many decades, came as a blow to wine merchants like Mikheil Poladishvili, who has lived in Moscow for more than 30 years and owns a shop selling alcohol in the city centre.

He recalled the regular inspections that followed, saying, "It wasn't because I'm Georgian; it was just that we weren't allowed to sell Georgian wine, which we don't."

In the wake of the recent conflict, he said, "everything has got much harder. It's heartbreaking that... Georgia has launched a war against Russia. But we carry on living and working, and just try not to watch the news on TV. People are treating us the same as normal."

As was the case during previous crises, people from the Caucasus visiting Moscow have complained of police harassment.

Samed Shahinov, a student from Azerbaijan, told IWPR how police stopped him and his friends in Moscow's Pushkin Square and searched them in a rough manner, simply because they had foreign passports.

The official line has been to urge police to show restraint. A senior official in the Moscow city administration told IWPR that the security agencies had received instructions from above that "in the current situation, any action against Georgians will do us more harm than the Saakashvili regime can".

The official, who did not want to be named, explained, "They don't want to repeat the mistakes of autumn 2006, when they naively thought that the Georgians in Russia were unhappy with the situation and would [work to] get rid of Saakashvili quickly."

President Dmitry Medvedev has publicly ordered Interior Minister Rashid Nurgaliev to ensure that "all foreigners who are legally resident in Russia do not experience any harassment".

Another difference from the situation two years ago is that prominent Georgian individuals and organisations in Russia have spoken out against the Saakashvili government, blaming it for the conflict with Moscow.

"A lot of people actually feel that way," said Janashia. "There's nothing surprising about that - we watch the Russian Federation TV channels."

He added, however, that Georgians in Russia were not in a position to voice disagreement even if that is how they felt.

"If anyone thinks differently, they can't say so aloud," he said. "Lots of Georgians here have families and jobs - their whole life is here - so they have no other option, or else they will face the same as Kikabidze."

Vakhtang Kikabidze is a popular Georgian singer living in Moscow who gained star status in a famous Soviet film, "Mimino". After coming out in support of the Georgian government over the conflict and handing back a Russian Order of Friendship awarded him by Medvedev, he was publicly berated as a "traitor to Russia".

Another popular Georgian singer, Nani Bregvadze, has cancelled concerts in St Petersburg.

These dissident voices are, however, the exception, and the majority of leading Georgian diaspora figures have lined up to back the Kremlin.

Vladimir Khomeriki, who heads the Russian-Georgian Peoples' Unity Fund, welcomed Moscow's decision to recognise Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states.

Janashia dismisses many of the Moscow-based diaspora groups as "front organisations" backed by city mayor Yury Luzhkov. With that in mind, he said, "no one expected anything more from them. Representatives of these organisations remained silent when Georgians were being loaded up and deported like cattle in 2006."

While they insist their community is not being targeted, Georgians in Russia have felt increasingly uncomfortable because of the often lurid media coverage of the crisis, in which Saakashvili is denounced and the Georgian state portrayed as entirely hostile.

That sense of unease is strengthened by accusations that Georgian spies and subversives are operating within Russia. Alexander Bortnikov, the head of the Russian intelligence service, the FSB, announced recently that nine Georgian secret-service agents had been arrested for spying on military installations and making plans for terrorist attacks.

Bortnikov's warning that in addition to the alleged spies, a "group of 12 foreign fighters" had been captured led to Russian TV showing footage of the detained men purportedly confessing to their crimes.

This kind of hostile reporting has prompted many Georgians to consider returning home.

Natia Katashvili has been working for almost a year with a large IT company in Moscow. Now she is counting the days until her contract expires in October and she can go back to Georgia.

"Every day since the war began, I've been talking to my family and friends in Georgia for hours on end," she said. "They don't understand how I can live in an enemy country. They tell me what is actually happening. And that picture has nothing in common with what the Russian media are saying.

"I'm sure a lot of Georgians will leave here after our own country has been wrecked in this manner."

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