

# Georgian journalists share political insights with *Excalibur*

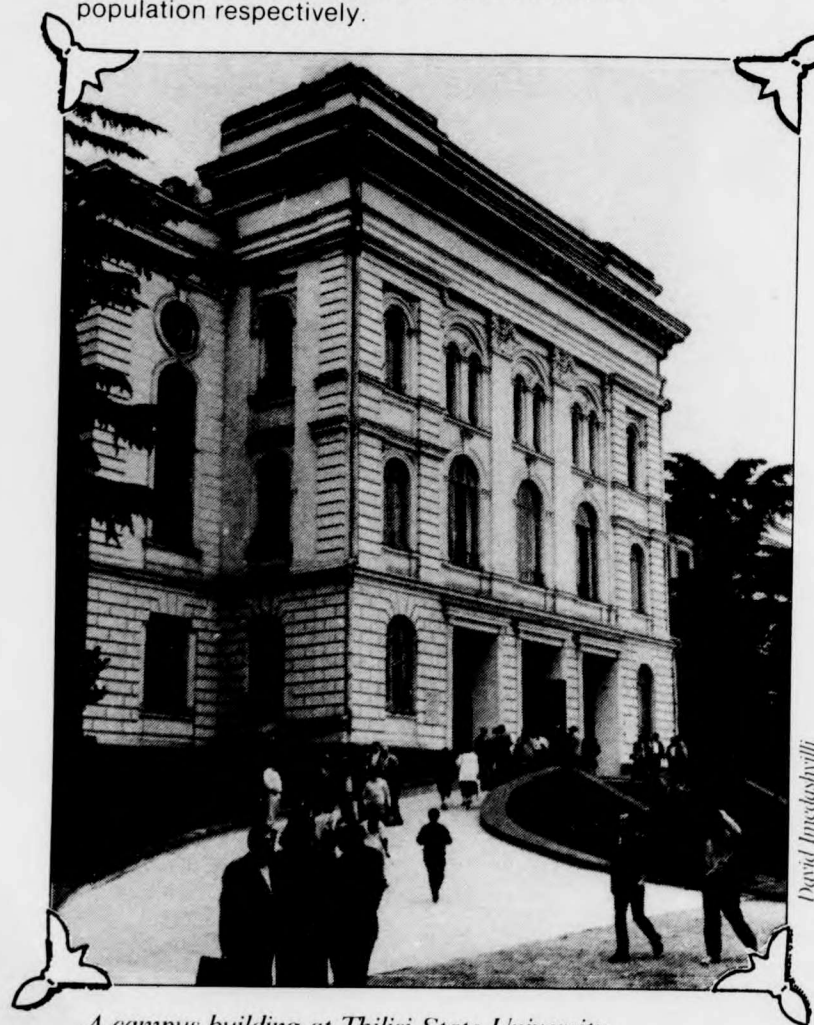
David Imedashvili, regional chief of the Novosti news bureau in Soviet Georgia, and George Sigua, editorial board member of the newspaper *Tbilissky Universitet* published at Tbilisi University, brought part of their culture with them on an editorial exchange with *Excalibur* this past month. The exchange, initiated by *Excalibur*, was sponsored by the CYSF, the provost's office, the president's office, York International, the vice-president of finance and administration's office and the Novosti Press Agency of the U.S.S.R. embassy in Ottawa. *Excalibur's* Jacob Katsman, who helped organize the exchange, reflects on the Georgians' two-week experience.

In the past five years, international newspapers have focused their attention on the Soviet Union and the new image of Mikhail Gorbachev. Despite this tremendous media blitz, many York students interested in the Soviet Union don't seem to have a basic understanding of its new constitution.

As Imedashvili explained in guest lectures to York students, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R.) is made up of 15 nominally autonomous republics: Armenia, Lithuania, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Estonia, Georgia, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Moldavia, Latvia, Tadzhikistan, Kirgizstan, Kazakhstan, Byelorussia and Russia.

Russia is the largest republic and contains most of the U.S.S.R.'s landmass and even two-thirds of its population. Despite its political and economic control of the U.S.S.R., Russia theoretically has the same constitutional rights as the other republics. "It is, therefore, wrong to refer to all Soviet citizens as Russians," said Imedashvili. There are over 100 nationalities living within the borders of the U.S.S.R.

Some republics, such as Georgia, have cultures and traditions as old, if not older than those belonging to Russia. In Georgia, 68.8 per cent of the population is Georgian while its two major ethnic minorities, Armenians and Russians, make up 9.7 per cent and 8.5 per cent of the population respectively. In Russia, the Russian majority makes up 83.5 per cent of the population while its two largest minorities, Ukrainians and Kazakhs, make up 7.11 per cent and 4.31 per cent of the population respectively.



A campus building at Tbilisi State University

David Imedashvili

According to the Soviet constitution, all constituent republics have the right to secede from the U.S.S.R., said Sigua. In keeping with more current events, Sigua could mean that, therefore, Lithuanian nationalist actions towards independence are not illegal.

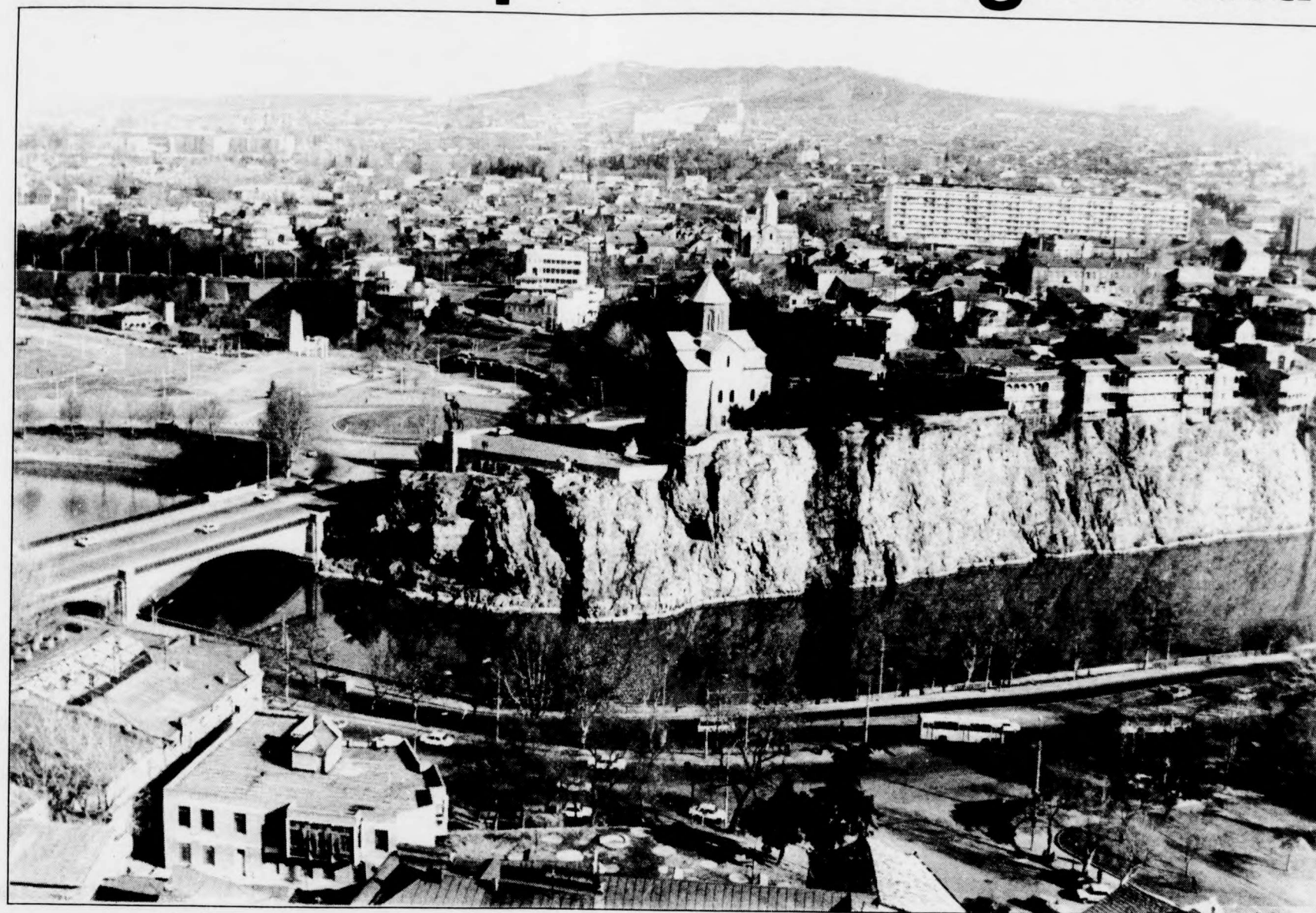
Sigua, also the vice-president of the newly formed Georgian New Democratic Party, said the Communist Party calls some of the new political organizations "informals." "This is ironic in itself, since there are no laws in the Soviet constitution regarding party formation. If any party is informal, then the first informal party was the Communist Party, which took power through an illegal revolutionary overthrow," Sigua explained.

Both Sigua and Imedashvili agreed that with the openness of *glasnost*, Soviet journalists have finally been given the freedom to write critically. "When the first exposure of Stalin's crimes appeared in the press, the public could not believe their eyes," said Imedashvili. "But after reading day after day about Stalin, one journalist wrote, 'Enough writing about those who are dead, let's write about those who are still alive,' and so we did."

With their newly acquired freedoms, the Soviet media exposed government corruption and environmental hazards that were kept quiet for years. With these changes, according to Imedashvili, the position of ideology censor in newspapers became vacant and, in Georgia, the editor of *Molodezhe Gruzii* (Georgian Youth) deleted the 70-year-old slogan "proletariat of the world unite" from the front cover of his newspaper.

As proof of this openness, Imedashvili brought Georgian and Russian newspapers. Pointing to a centrefold photo feature in *Molodezhe Gruzii* depicting casualties of the ethnic confrontation between Azerbaijanis and Armenians, Imedashvili exclaimed before Professor Bernie Frolie's Soviet politics graduate class, "You see, here is the proof, articles and photos like this were freely published all over the country."

Imedashvili and Sigua were the first Soviet journalists to be hosted by a Canadian university. Both



A bird's eye view of Georgia's capital city — Tbilisi

David Imedashvili

visitors hoped this exchange would be as a first step to wider co-operation and collaboration with York University.

During their two-week stay, Sigua and Imedashvili met with York students, president Harry Arthurs, vice-president (finance and administration) Bill Farr, Osgoode's director of the Centre for Public Law and Policy Marc Gold and other York officials. Some of the meetings resulted in letters of intent to co-operate and establish closer ties between the two universities.

Both Sigua and Imedashvili were very interested in the Canadian secondary and post-secondary educational system. Imedashvili hoped to learn how to deal with problems of academic dishonesty back in Georgia from the "honest Canadian educational system." He noted that throughout the Soviet Union there is a big problem of parents buying their children high school gold medals and university degrees. Some of the problems have been corrected, but there is still much to be done, said Imedashvili. University entrance exams no longer have the applicant's family name on the cover of the exam paper, but people are still finding ways to slip money under the table with their son's or daughter's application to medical school or other competitive faculties.

Imedashvili added that many courses dealing with Soviet history and the ideology of Marxism-Leninism have been cancelled. Final exams for these previously mandatory courses have also been done away with and classes titled Sociology of Marxism, Philosophy of Communism or Sociology of Atheism were renamed as, simply, Sociology or Philosophy.

"The teachers who were instructing these courses, however, are forced to revise their teaching approach to various issues. For some, this is a very difficult task," he added.

Sigua said there are plans to build an International Free University in Tbilisi. It will be mostly concerned with the regional priorities of the Caucasus (a southern region of the Soviet Union) and the Near East. It will have pragmatically oriented departments like agriculture, applied biology and biotechnologies, ecology, civil engineering, infor-

mation, medicine, political science and law. The departments will also be of interest to Western students, as courses in Caucasian studies, Russian studies, arts and cinema, Soviet structure and economics will be offered. The formation of this university is dependent on international support from other world universities, funds, firms and private corporations.

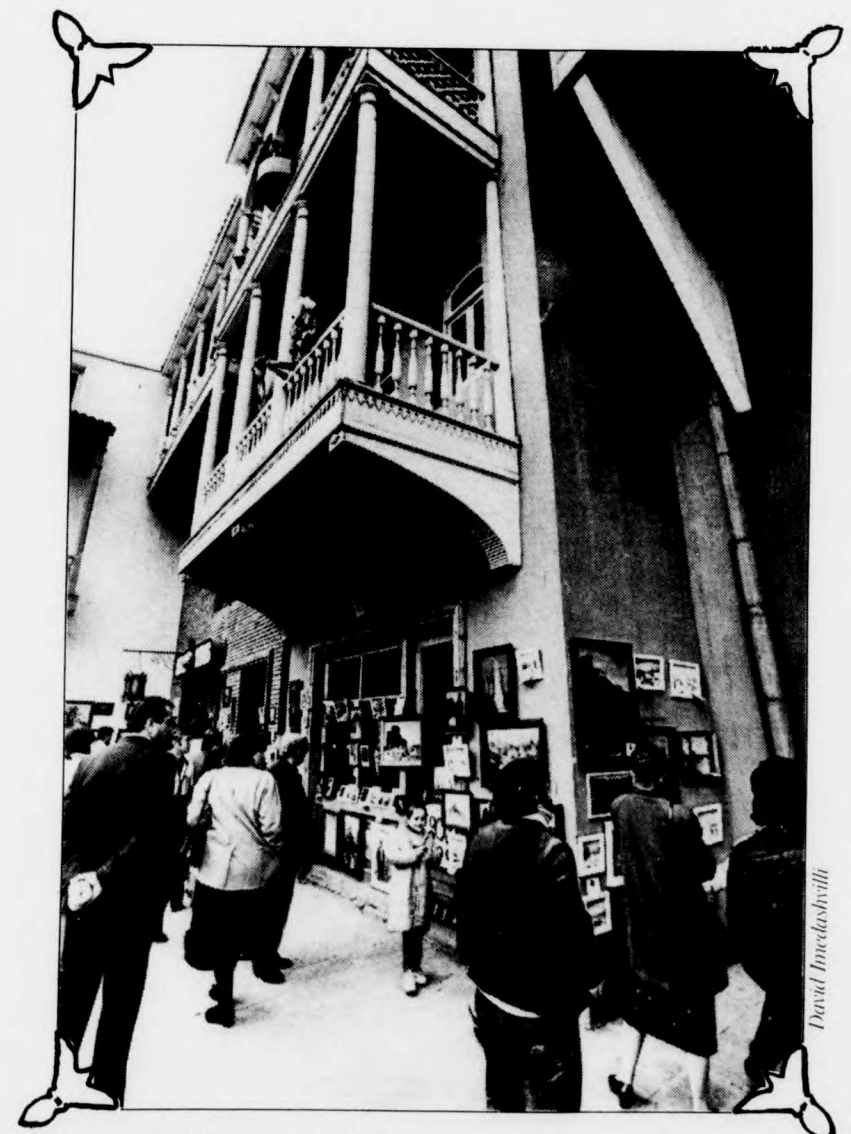
Today, post-secondary education in the Soviet Union is free, if you don't count *vzytky*, (money paid under the table which makes entrance exams so much easier). "But this is soon to change," said Imedashvili.

"We are currently trying the system of paid education in some parts of the country," he added. "With the general trend to democratization of our economy, specialized education may soon come under the control of co-operatives. Moves are already being made in this direction."

As for student movements and organizations, both Sigua and Imedashvili agreed that Soviet youth are now largely disorganized. "The central communist youth organization, *Komsomol*, has lost its authority and respect," said Sigua. Students are now in the process of forming new organizations. There is a growing concern about the environment and the Green Party is strongly supported by students.

*Excalibur* will meet with Tbilisi university students, faculty, newspaper editors and political leaders at the end of April 1990 to conclude the editorial exchange. *Excalibur* will also visit students in Moscow, Leningrad and Kishenev.

York students will be able to learn more about Soviet university life in September 1990 when *Excalibur* will publish diaries of the trip. For more information about the exchange contact Jacob Katsman at *Excalibur* 111 Central Square, 736-5239.



In the streets of Tbilisi

David Imedashvili