

Architecture and Friendship Among Nations: The Shifting Politics of Cultural Diplomacy in Tbilisi, Georgia

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ABSTRACT

In 1938, the Soviet Georgian administration inaugurated the iconic Institute of Marx, Engels, and Lenin (IMEL) in Tbilisi under pretenses of socialist unity and friendship among Soviet nations. Three quarters of a century later, the same building—now privatised, heavily renovated, and re-branded—was re-inaugurated as the seven-star Biltmore Hotel. The hotel's grand opening included an enormous video projection on the western façade, telling the story of a new friendship among nations, this time between independent Georgia and the United Arab Emirates as the hotel's financiers. This article tracks the shifting politics of cultural diplomacy associated with this adaptive reuse project. It contributes to a growing body of scholarship on cultural diplomacy by delving deeper into the social, political, and economic implications surrounding the particular use of friendship rhetoric in such practices. In doing so, it charts the manipulation of architecture to communicate international cooperation and the power of its patrons. Drawing from archival sources, field observations, media analysis, and focus groups, the work argues that, rather than an outmoded means of public service announcement, symbolic architecture continues to be a crucial arena for state politics, one entangled with new modes of spectacle in the city.

Keywords: Architectural Heritage, International Relations, Soviet Ideology, *Druzhba Narodov*, UAE

Introduction

On 31 July 2016, the seven-star Biltmore Hotel celebrated its grand opening in Tbilisi, Georgia with a spectacular display of fireworks, lights, artistic performances, and speeches. At thirty-two storeys tall (150-meters), the building had become Tbilisi's highest and most ostentatious new skyscraper, towering well above its low-rise surroundings. The main feature of the grand opening was an eight-minute video projected at enormous scale onto the western façade of the building, broadcast to the general public. The colossal video took the form of a digital animation with collaged drawings, text, and historical photographs (for a recording see: Tevzadze 2016). Arranged by the project's owner, United Arab Emirates (UAE)-based *Dhabi Group*, the video's narrative drew from Georgian and Emirati history to frame a contemporary story of diplomatic friendship. Beneath the spectacle, the narrative suggested that Georgian citizens should not be threatened by local UAE development since it would be beneficial for society.

This was not the first time that a dramatic work of architecture had been constructed to argue the benevolence of foreign interests in Tbilisi. Indeed, it was not even the first time for this project site. Seventy-eight years earlier, in 1938, the ruling Soviet government had inaugurated a showcase four-storey neoclassical building at the precise same location under similar pretenses of friendship among nations, underscoring pan-Soviet, inter-republic cooperation and unity. Called the Institute of Marx, Engels and Lenin (IMEL), this earlier building was a research facility, library, conference centre, and headquarters for the Georgian Communist Party (Shchusev 1940). By 1972, there were seventeen such IMEL branches across the USSR (Zagoskina 1972), all working in support of Soviet ideology. For over half a century, Tbilisi's IMEL served as a headquarters for the ideological apparatus of the Soviet communist party in Georgia, centrally located on the main thoroughfare of Rustaveli Avenue. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, it had various ad-hoc uses before finally being converted into the opulent Biltmore Hotel in 2016. The original IMEL building was transformed into the hotel's lobby and conference centre, leading to a new glass tower at the back of the building constructed for guest rooms. << **Figure 1 near here** >> An architectural emblem of communism had, therefore, ironically become Tbilisi's strongest exemplar of the excesses of capitalism

Using this adaptive reuse project as a case study, this article tracks the value of architectural heritage in supporting narratives of international cooperation, offering greater insight into how the built environment performs as an arena of geopolitics. As Winter argues: 'considerable analytical work still needs to be done to disentangle the complex structures and networks of agencies, funding structures, institutional collaborations, public and private partnerships and competing notions of sovereignty, which, together, have given form to heritage and associated areas of conservation in the modern era' (Winter 2015, 998). We posit that an ideal way to do so is through a deep analysis of specific cases like the IMEL/Biltmore Hotel in Tbilisi. In addressing this topic, we bring together scholarship from the fields of architecture, international relations, and critical heritage studies. We contribute to a growing body of research on cultural and heritage diplomacy (Akagawa 2014; Ang, Isar, and Mar 2015; Winter 2015; Clarke 2018; Bennett 2020), demonstrating specifically how friendship rhetoric has made its way into architectural heritage.

Considering that ‘one of the defining characteristics of the modern heritage movement has been international cooperation’ (Winter 2015, 1008), it becomes all the more relevant to scrutinize how that process has played out in different contexts, and how narratives of diplomacy have evolved over time—in our case, in the same geographic context but during different politico-economic eras. Unpacking these narratives in built form and the ways they have evolved thus demonstrates that symbolic architecture is not an outmoded means of public service announcement but continues to be a crucial arena for state politics, one deeply entangled with new modes of spectacle in the city.

Our work supports political theorist Evgeny Roshchin’s argument that ‘diplomatic rhetoric of friendship is not just lip service, leading us to castigate it as insincere, bogus and unworthy of a serious discussion, but an essential part of generating legitimacy, both domestically and internationally, for the agreed upon policies’ (Roshchin 2017, 8). We show the incredible resources that go into creating such friendship narratives and deploying them through iconic architecture. In both the Soviet and post-Soviet eras, the IMEL/Biltmore Hotel communicated the idea of friendship among nations and fostered international cooperation. To better understand this use of the built environment for diplomacy, we track the shifting symbolism associated with the building’s adaptive reuse. We discuss how narratives of friendship in architecture normalised foreign investment and diplomatic relations. The research was conducted between 2015 and 2020, covering the period before, during, and after the Biltmore Hotel’s construction. The findings draw from a mixed-methods approach using archival sources, field observations, media analysis, and six focus groups with residents¹.

After providing a broader theoretical framing in the next section, we go on to discuss the specifics of Tbilisi’s IMEL building. We then unpack the project’s adaptive reuse as the Biltmore Hotel, including newly emerging forms of cultural diplomacy. We conclude with a call for the continued tracking of cultural diplomacy in Georgia, focusing on its appearance in urban development sponsored by foreign states. With an increasing number of international entities interested in Georgian investment, the stage has been set for cultural diplomacy to evolve into a far more contested arena of competitive foreign influence. In the face of the arrival of an increasing number of foreign interests, including Turkey, Russia, and China (Gogishvili and Harris-Brandts 2019), as well as ongoing desires for Georgia to link to Europe (Harris-Brandts 2018), this small Caucasus country has the potential to become an important site for analyzing cultural diplomacy.

‘Friendship Among Nations’ and International Diplomacy

Worldwide, historians and scholars of the history of concepts have examined politicised friendship rhetoric. Evgeny Roshchin’s *Friendship among nations: History of a concept* (2017) traces the idea’s long arc from ancient Greek and Roman times to early European diplomacy and our modern international world order. He describes friendship as one of the most pervasive and popular concepts in diplomacy, international law, and politics. Roshchin’s work conceptually builds on earlier theorists like Machiavelli (1882), Hobbes (1894), Cicero (1897), and Schmitt (1995), the latter famously defining the political as the distinction between friend and enemy. Pointing to how

international relations are not always established on equal footing with one party often having superiority over the other, Roshchin argues that such relations are legitimated through the rhetoric of friendship.

In the Soviet Union, officials used the idea of ‘friendship among nations’ (Russian: *druzhiba narodov*) to foster pretenses of inter-republic cooperation. The concept supported the Marxist view that ‘the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles’ (Engels and Marx 2004, 219). It attests that all Soviet subjects were inherently friendly because of their class interests. This painted a romanticised picture of pan-Soviet unity. As Tillett (1969, 15) argues in *The Great Friendship*, ‘(t)he impression is given that neighboring peoples saw the growing Russian state only as an ally and protector; there is no hint that they might have feared its military power or have been suspicious of its motives.’ Fitzpatrick (1999), Brooks (2000), Martin (2001), and Hoffman (2011) likewise demonstrate the great political and propagandistic value of the Soviet leadership strategically framing friendship in shared cultural heritage. Pan-Soviet friendship was fostered within the Soviet Union’s fifteen republics, but also in relation to the Eastern Bloc and aligned countries. The political utility of friendship to the Soviets persevered with time in part because it was so flexible, changing framings over the decades as the Soviet leadership changed its socio-political and diplomatic positions.

In contrast to the Soviet Union’s deeply rooted practices of diplomacy, the UAE has become an international actor only recently (Khalifa 1979; Ulrichsen 2016). The UAE’s shift in diplomatic approach away from the domestic sphere toward states like Georgia comes after the 2008 global financial crisis (Ulrichsen 2016; Cochrane 2021). It reflects the Emirati government’s desires to diversify their investment portfolio and become less risk prone. As a result, the type of symbolic capital used in the UAE’s internal city building since the late 1990s is now surfacing in its foreign investments; brand Dubai is leaving an impact on other cities. The UAE’s new interest in foreign expansion extends beyond the geography of Georgia to other parts of Eurasia, including Azerbaijan, Kosovo, Serbia, and Albania (Bartlett et al. 2017). One of the primary ways UAE investors have made an impact is through dramatic urban projects, often couched in the rhetoric of friendship and diplomacy. In Serbia, for example, the UAE has invested \$3.7 billion USD in the Belgrade Waterfront Development (Grubbauer and Čamprag 2018), a project dubbed ‘Dubaiification in practice’ (Koelemaij 2020). In Albania, the Abu Dhabi Fund for Development has financed over \$115 million USD in infrastructure development, including for Tirana’s River Northern Boulevard project (Trade Arabia 2018). Albania’s second-largest airport in Kukës, constructed by the United Arab Emirates government, bears the name of former UAE ruler, Sheikh Zayed.

Prior to the UAE’s expansion into Eurasia, it focused primarily on shared heritage in the Red Sea Region, where ‘(f)or centuries, the societies of the Gulf have profoundly influenced the economic, political and sociocultural landscape of the Horn and vice versa’ (Verhoeven 2018, 338). UAE foreign diplomacy has solidified the country’s dominance in maritime trade at an increasing rate in the Horn of Africa, something aimed at establishing strategic parity with Saudi Arabia and Iran. Charitable initiatives and financial support are primary tools for such efforts, or

what Baaboud (2005) calls ‘Riyal Politik.’ As the UAE expands into Eurasian countries, its policies are likely to involve greater cultural diplomacy.

Cultural Diplomacy

The idea of cultural diplomacy can best be understood as a political practice used to garner soft power and improve foreign policy goals outside those established through militaristic means. Cummings (2003, 1) defines cultural diplomacy as:

The exchange of ideas, information, art and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding which can also be more of a one-way street than a two-way exchange, as when one nation concentrates its efforts on promoting the national language, explaining its policies and point of view, or telling its story to the rest of the world.

Cultural diplomacy is often considered a sub-category of public diplomacy or state communication and PR campaigns (Melissen 2005; Mark 2009; Goff 2013). By foregrounding cultural heritage in diplomacy, state officials strategically position the national image, increasing international visibility. They further broadcast the government’s distinct conceptions of national identity for domestic consumption. Taken cumulatively, cultural diplomacy thus provides government officials with a means to widely circulate their desired framing of the national narrative.

Winter (2015; 2016) identifies heritage diplomacy as a sub-category of cultural diplomacy, acknowledging that the two have overlaps. For Winter, the term ‘heritage diplomacy is more expansive in that it not only incorporates the export or projection of a particular cultural form, but also brings into focus bi- and multi-directional cultural flows and exchanges’ (2015b, 1007). He identifies heritage diplomacy as: ‘a set of processes whereby cultural and natural pasts shared between and across nations become subject to exchanges, collaborations and forms of cooperative governance’ (ibid.). Likewise, Akagawa (2014) shows how heritage conservation policies and practices are deeply related to politics and international engagement. Due to the ambiguity associated with ‘culture’ and ‘heritage’ as terms, their related diplomacy can encompass a wide range of activities from archaeological digs to educational exchanges, dance competitions, sporting events, and culinary festivals (Prevots 1998; Finn 2003; Luke and Kersel 2013; Ang, Isar, and Mar 2015; Eggeling 2017; Murray 2018). For the purposes of our article, the focus is on architecture and the built environment. We expand Winter’s definition to conceive heritage not exclusively as the artifacts of preservation, but also as new works of art and architecture that re-tell older heritage narratives through contemporary designs and associated media.

Architecture and Heritage in the Soviet Union

A large body of existing scholarship has demonstrated the ways foreign states impose their control and normalise their power through art, architecture, and urban design, primarily with regard to imperial, colonial, and hegemonic state projects (King 1996; Bassin 2000; Vale 2008; Winter 2015a; Therborn 2017; Stanek 2020; Telepneva 2020). The iconic city building initiatives of the Soviet Union fit into this category and can be understood as supporting state modernization,

propaganda, social engineering, and heritage campaigns (Bater 1980; Larkin 2013; González 2016; Deschepper 2019; Bekus 2020; Geering 2020; Harris-Brandts and Gogishvili 2020). While the specific ways Soviet power was communicated through built form changed over history, across all periods of Soviet rule there remained a strong message of unification and of improving life for the working proletariat. This was facilitated by urban development that quite literally built the architecture of a society of comradeship and inter-republic cooperation. Within this context, new construction operated in service of both physical state building and ideological nation building.

During Stalin's rule in the USSR, power was expressed through architecture's dramatic scale and heritage-focused ornamentation. Neoclassical friezes and sculptures told the story of all that the socialist state was accomplishing (Clark 2003). *Bas relief* carvings showing Soviet workers, soldiers, or school children being greeted by Lenin or Stalin were popular motifs. Stalin's reliance on a neoclassical design language—on what is known as Stalinist Neoclassicism or Socialist Classicism—worked to visually unify the built environment across the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc's vast geography (Kosenkova 2010). It established new associations between this style's grandeur—something formerly reserved for the elite—and the collective power of the working proletariat. Emerging from this period was Stalin's infamous guiding principle of 'national in form, socialist in content' (Bown and Taylor 1993). Like friendship among nations, it suggested the coming together of the local and extra-national. Indeed, the idea of national in form, socialist in content was often conflated with inter-republic friendship, visually communicated through figures from each republic dressed in their native attire, holding hands <<**Figure 2 near here**>>. There was a clear geopolitical strategy to this heritage iconography. As Kettering (2000, 40) points out, the focus on friendship differentiated 'Soviet cultural policy from the program of "russification" that had been directed at the national minorities during the Imperial period.' It changed the message of architectural heritage from one of Russian *dominance* to one of pan-Soviet *cooperation*.

In later Soviet decades, the idea of friendship among nations continued. It was supported architecturally by the creation of cultural heritage sites with friendship monuments, including VDNKh's Fountain of the Friendship of Peoples in Moscow, Russia (1954); The People's Friendship Monument in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan (1974); The Monument of the Bulgarian-Soviet Friendship in Varna, Bulgaria (1978); The People's Friendship Arch in Kyiv, Ukraine (1982); The Shomahmudov Friendship Monument in Tashkent, Uzbekistan (1982); The Friendship Forever Monument on Tishinskaya Square in Moscow, Russia (1983); and The Russia–Georgia Friendship Monument in Kazbegi, Georgia (1983). The friendship narrative even made its way into official building dedications. 'One of the first housing blocks built [on East Berlin's *Stalinallee*] was dedicated to the Society for German-Soviet Friendship' (Castillo 2001, 186). Such cultural heritage communicated the friendship of peoples at a wide range of scales, from stand-alone sculptures to large murals and building ornaments. The latter could be found on an equally wide range of architectural landmarks, from metro stations to pioneer summer camps. The artists and architects producing these works were at times awarded the prestigious 'Order of Friendship of Peoples' (Russian: *orden druzhby narodov*) medal acknowledging their work.

Soviet monuments to the Great Patriotic War (WWII) emerging after 1940 similarly relied on the idea of shared heritage and friendship across the republics (Tumarkin 1994; Forest and Johnson 2002; Diener and Hagen 2016). Denison (2009) breaks down these symbolisms as they appeared in the Great War Memorial Complex in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan. He describes how, more broadly ‘within the Soviet space, the dominant theme of many monuments remained the “Eternal Friendship of the Peoples,” most commonly expressed in the counterpoint of a transaction or relationship between a local and Russian figure’ (1169). Pointing toward Soviet power relations in the Eastern Bloc, Fowkes (2016) discusses the geo-political reasons for erecting early Soviet war memorials in the frontier territories of the USSR’s control in Europe, reasons which included demarcating the areas of Europe liberated by the Soviets and thus representing their continued realm of diplomatic influence.

The architecture of Soviet Georgia was very much a reflection of such friendship narratives (Kvirkveliya and Mgaloblishvili 1986; Chincharauli 2010). Janberidze’s (1971) summary of local architecture—particularly from the 1930s to 1950s—demonstrates that Soviet narratives of state power and friendship were well developed within the Georgian SSR. During this period, messages of communist state pride and superiority, technological advancement, and ruling benevolence were popular choices, alongside the concept of friendship. The use of the latter was further grounded geographically in Russia and Georgia being territorial neighbors. In line with all the above, the Institute of Marx, Engels, and Lenin (IMEL) in Tbilisi was a quintessential example of architecture reflecting cultural diplomacy.

Cultural Diplomacy in Tbilisi’s IMEL Building

The first Soviet Institute of Marx, Engels, and Lenin (IMEL) was established in Moscow in 1931, following the amalgamation of the Lenin Institute (founded in 1923) and the Institute of Marx and Engels (founded in 1921) (Zagoskina 1972; Mukhamedzhanov 2018). Initially, Moscow’s IMEL served as a library and archive. In 1924, the Thirteenth Congress of the Russian Communist Party expanded its mission to include ‘the study and dissemination of Leninism among the broad masses within and outside the party’ (Zagoskina 1972, 293). By the 1930s, the Moscow IMEL had reached an impressive collection of 400,000 books and journals, as well as over 55,000 documents belonging to Marx and Engels (*ibid.*). Over the years, its mandate expanded to include research and publishing under the jurisdiction of the Central Committee, which was the highest body of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU).

With the Moscow branch as precedent, in the 1930s Soviet authorities decided that various other Soviet Socialist Republics (SSR) and Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics (ASSR) should have their own IMELs. In some instances, such as in Ukraineⁱⁱ and Georgia, the establishment of local IMEL branches involved similar processes of amalgamating or replacing existing republic-level institutions with centrally controlled ones, ensuring greater content uniformity. By the 1950s, more than a dozen IMELs were established across the Soviet Union’s vast territory. They had the primary tasks of gathering archival materials, translating classical

works by Marx, Engels, and Lenin into local languages, and later, writing the local histories of the Communist Party in individual Republics (K'omunist'i 1935).

Tbilisi's IMEL is remarkable in that it further conveyed the ideals of communism directly through its architectural features. Its façade detailing and sculptural embellishments were highly symbolic, making the building a means of public service announcement from the outside while housing the great works of communism within <<Figure 3 near here>>. Originally commissioned as the Stalin Institute by Georgian Bolshevik leader Lavrentiy Beria in 1933, during its construction the project changed names instead becoming the local Transcaucasian branch of IMEL. The design was the result of a closed architectural competition between seven practicing architects and architectural scholars from Tbilisi and Moscow. It was itself a process that fostered inter-republic diplomacy (Janberidze 1971). The Moscow-based Russian architect Alexey Shchusev was selected as the winner (Shchusev 1940).

The main design symbolism in the building was the sculptural reliefs on the front façade facing Rustaveli Avenue. A four-meter-high frieze features five bas-relief panels created by Georgian sculptor Tamara Abakelia. The panels depict nationally focused moments of revolutionary heritage and highlight the role of Joseph Stalin in the Marxist revolutionary movement of the South Caucasus (Kornfeld 1948). The left-most frieze panel shows 'The Workers of Batumi in 1902,' a reference to worker strikes following the Rothschild Petroleum Refining Plant's firing of some 400 employees (Khutsisvili 1981). The strike is seen as an early landmark in what later became the socialist revolutionary movement of Transcaucasia (Jones 2005), thus anchoring the new IMEL building to regional history. Adjacent to this is a frieze panel for 'October in Georgia,' which depicts the reactions of local Georgians to the events of the 1917 October Revolution in Petrograd (present-day St. Petersburg). <<Figure 4 near here>> The inclusion of these narratives in the frieze worked in a propagandistic manner to support the argument that Georgia had been a willing partner in the establishment of the Soviet Union, sharing the common heritage of the revolutionary movement. In other words, Georgia was an ally and friend to Russia, rather than a victim of Bolshevik military expansionism. The adjacent three frieze panels show 'Georgian Industry,' 'Georgian Agriculture,' and 'A Happy Life' in communist Georgia. They communicated the local benefits of communism, showing Soviet subjects working together to forge a prosperous future. Inserted between each panel was a cartouche containing the busts of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin.

As the frieze narratives of the building show, in 1920s and 1930s early Soviet rule, the concept of a common goal uniting Soviet citizens was crucial to engendering unity and subservience to the central leadership. The people of the newly acquired Soviet territories needed to be shown reasons for their at-times violent conquering by the Bolsheviks. This would quell feelings of neo-Russian imperialism, particularly as the Soviets had ideologically fought against the Russian Czar's imperialistic reign. Furthering these narratives, IMEL's façade had two 4.5 x 5.5-meter entablatures. Created by Georgian sculptor Iakob Nikoladze, 'one symbolises the unity of the working people, represented by a Georgian peasant, an oil worker from Baku and a Russian worker; the other commemorates the worker-heroes of the first five-year plan' (Khutsisvili 1981,

81). By emphasizing this unity among Soviet workers, IMEL's ornamentation depicted a sense of pro-Soviet sentiment in Georgia. Stalin, who was himself a Georgian, features prominently in both entablatures. As a result, they were removed from the building in 1991 after Georgian independence, alongside the cartouche busts of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin. In addition to these explicit references to pan-Soviet unity in the architecture of IMEL, symbolic inter-republic comradeship can be read in the pairing of a famous Russian architect with two of Georgia's most renowned sculptors, all working together in support of the communist future.

UAE Investment and Rapidly Developing Diplomatic Friendship

UAE investment in Georgia after the country's independence in 1991 follows a similar use of cultural diplomacy tied to friendship rhetoric, albeit developing a very different course from that of the Soviets. Rather than imposed political or militaristic influence, contemporary UAE interest in Georgia has been invited and economically, rather than politically, focused. UAE investment grew dramatically in Georgia in the late 2000s following substantial neoliberal reforms by the United National Movement government of President Mikheil Saakashvili. A range of property assets (both land and buildings) were privatized by the state, driving private-sector urban development. For example, in 2007, a \$817 million USD proposal was put forward by *Rakeen*, the real estate development arm of the Ras Al Khaimah Emirate for real estate investments in or near Tbilisi, including the creation of the country's largest shopping center and an entirely new district called 'Tbilisi Heights' (Civil.Ge 2007; Fenton 2008). The agreement was officiated on February 18th, 2007, when President Saakashvili met with the Crown Prince and Deputy Ruler of the UAE's Ras Al Khaimah Emirate, Shaikh Saud Bin Saqr Al Qasimi. Speaking of the deal, Saakashvili called burgeoning Georgian-UAE diplomacy 'a strong partnership in a short period of time' (Civil.Ge 2007).

Two years later, the High Education and Scientific Research Minister of the UAE, Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak Al Nahyan, gifted 10,000 palm trees to Georgia (1TV.GE 2009). They lined the streets of Georgia's second largest city, Batumi, and greened the western coastal settlements of Anaklia and Ganmukhuri. Seen against Georgia's long history of imposed foreign rule,ⁱⁱⁱ some citizens expressed skepticism about the rise of this outside interest in their small country, particularly from the Muslim world. Our focus group respondents felt that new architecture in Tbilisi targeted foreign buyers, especially those from the Gulf, Iran, and Turkey. Focus group respondents were also concerned about the growing visibility of Arabs on the streets of Tbilisi, suggesting a concerning rise in xenophobia because of foreign investment.

Contributing to the public's scepticism was the exponential growth in Gulf foreign investment in the late 2000s. In the build-up to the Biltmore Hotel's development, in both 2008 and 2009, the UAE was Georgia's top foreign investor, comprising 19.6% of the country's Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), reaching a total sum of \$306.6 million USD in 2008 (PropertyWire 2009). In total, the UAE has invested \$1.1 billion USD in Georgia since independence (Geostat 2020). Talks between Georgia's Foreign Minister Mikheil Janelidze and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCO) in 2017 expanded these relations to include other GCO member states like Bahrain

and Oman (Agenda.ge 2017). Today, the UAE surpasses its Gulf neighbors—as well as Russia and China—in investment spending in Georgia (Geostat 2020). These investments have mostly gone toward real estate development in the tourism and hospitality sectors, although they have at times involved large infrastructural projects like at the Black Sea port of Poti (Rahman 2008).

The proposal to convert Tbilisi's IMEL into the Biltmore Hotel emerged amidst this surge in UAE development. It surfaced in the face of scepticism toward both foreign investment and the erasure of architectural heritage. The Biltmore Hotel was a focal point of civic protest and contestation because of its rushed, opaque real estate transactions, heavy-handed renovation, and exceptional building height (Gogishvili 2010; Frederiksen 2016; Berikishvili and Sichinava 2018). On June 20th, 2007, IMEL was removed from the national heritage list by Minister of Culture Giorgi Gabashvili under dubious circumstances (Chapidze 2012). Eight days later, it was sold to a private investment company for redevelopment and subsequently purchased by *Dhabi Group*, which then led the Biltmore Hotel's construction. Several focus group respondents described the project as exemplifying all that was flawed with Tbilisi's opaque urban development regulations. The Biltmore Hotel was, therefore, very much in need of positive marketing to counter such criticisms. Georgia's Ministry of Culture and Monument Protection included the project in a 2012 marketing guide positively showcasing new architecture in Tbilisi. The guide was distributed to all households for free and included a quote from President Saakashvili connecting the Biltmore Hotel to UAE diplomatic support in no uncertain terms, calling it 'one of the "gifts" that I brought back from Abu Dhabi' (MCMPPG 2012, 12).

The Biltmore Hotel further conveys this narrative of Georgian-UAE diplomatic friendship through a permanent fifteen-meter-high media screen affixed to the top of the building, cycling through images of the UAE and Georgian flags. <<**Figure 5 near here**>> The primary spectacle showcasing the countries' alliance, however, was the grand opening celebrations, the narrative of which was that of friendship and deeply shared cultural heritage between Georgia and the UAE. The event's video projection on the façade begins with a large countdown display from ten. Upon reaching zero, a clock icon explodes and the entire façade is brightly illuminated in gold. The year 2016 then appears and a new countdown begins: 2015, 2014, 2013, 2012, 2011, next exponentially jumping back centuries until the clock stops at the twelfth century and oriental instrumental music begins to play. The message is that, while contemporary Georgian-UAE diplomatic relations may be less than a decade old, the connection of the two nations has taken place over centuries. Contemporary state friendship is thus presented as the natural progression of an ancient bond from the time of the eighth century when Georgia was under Arab rule and the capital functioned as the Emirate of Tbilisi.

Rather than the video delving into the complexities of this past, which invariably raises contentious questions about violent conquest and Islamic dominance in a Christian region, the video quickly switches to a portrait of Georgia's national poet, Shota Rustaveli. From here, images are shown from Rustaveli's most famous literary work, *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*. This is a love story including an Arab prince's journey from the fictitious location of 'Arabia.' After rapidly showcasing other examples of Georgian culture and heritage, the video highlights scenes

of Georgia's contemporary sovereignty. The content is carefully curated in showing select historical successes; key legislative and political events are recognised while more recent and impactful urban development initiatives by both the Soviets and post-independence governments are curiously absent. Only very stylised, cartoon-like drawings are used to show the current image of Tbilisi, focusing on its low-rise, old fashioned, nineteenth century vernacular buildings. This is despite much new architecture being built throughout the 2000s. The implicit message is that, while Georgia may be a successfully independent country, it is still in need of outside assistance for its successful urban development.

How the UAE will provide such development prosperity is then demonstrated by the showcasing of dramatic architectural projects back in the Emirates. In the video, a dhow adorned with Emirati flags sails across the waters of the Gulf against a vacant landscape that then rapidly transforms into the skyline of Dubai, complete with its iconic high-rise buildings. Contrasting with the previous cartoon-like image of Old Tbilisi, the audience watches as high-tech computer renderings show iconic new architecture in the UAE, like the Aldar Headquarters (2010), Capital Gate (2011), the Al Bahr Towers (2013), and a collage of several iconic buildings from Dubai, including the Burj Khalifa. The portfolio of state-of-the-art Emirati architecture communicated to the Georgian audience that—with UAE support—they, too, could benefit from the offshoots of brand Dubai. The audience quickly learned, however, that this would not be a friendship built on equal collaboration, but instead one established through dependency, with a Georgian economic reliance on the UAE to reach its development goals.

Tellingly, for a video intending to showcase diplomatic alliance, there were no Georgians involved in the production. Instead, it was the work of Creative Factory, a visual design studio based in Mumbai, India, hired by Dhahi Group. Describing the commission, Creative Factory Director Vibhore Khandelwal stated:

The hotel to be launched played a key role in strengthening relationships between UAE & Georgia, hence, the projection mapping should not only showcase the history, art, culture & growth of Georgia but should also showcase the potential of UAE & its development (Jain 2016).

Khandelwal conceded that, 'in terms of creative challenges—the first challenge was that I had no knowledge about the history of Georgia' (Jain 2016). As our focus groups showed, the result was the production of a video that—while superficially promoting bilateral diplomacy—was ultimately erroneous and less convincing to locals. The video's content underscored how state diplomacy often takes place on uneven footing. Thus, Tbilisi was depicted not as a collaborative venue for diplomatic friendship, but as a new stage for the UAE's unilateral investment ambitions. As with the original Soviet IMEL, the Biltmore Hotel's architecture did more to broadcast the superiority of its patrons than to foster a sense of diplomacy. The dramatic glass tower of the hotel—designed to be the tallest in Tbilisi—exemplifies this unequal relationship. Standing more than twice as tall as Tbilisi's only other nearby high-rise and roughly five times taller than any surrounding low-rise building, the Biltmore Hotel broadcasts the UAE's power to Tbilisi residents. Whereas the original IMEL conveyed Bolshevik power through its giant neoclassical order, the Biltmore Hotel uses its iconic glass skyscraper to send a contemporary message of foreign superiority.

Conclusion

This article has traced the evolving use of friendship rhetoric in iconic architecture for cultural diplomacy in Tbilisi, Georgia. It has focused on the 1938 Soviet construction of the Institute of Marx, Engels, and Lenin and 2016 UAE adaptive reuse of the building as the Biltmore Hotel, arguing that in both projects a narrative of friendship was used to further politico-economic goals. While the concept of cultural diplomacy unites these projects, we have also shown crucial differences, pointing toward its divergent uses and benefits. The Soviet leadership relied on the rhetoric of friendship in architecture to foster comradeship between union republics. It was used not for speculative real estate investment, but as part of bio-political governance to create complacent Soviet subjects. Beyond the geography of the USSR, such rhetoric enabled the Soviet politico-economic structure to stand as an ideological rival to Western capitalism. Ideas of friendship underscored the development of a united and equal communist society. The city was a useful arena for conveying this ideology. The UAE, by contrast, is not responsible for governance in Georgia and has not yet used its influence toward hegemonic means. Its narrative of friendship in diplomacy has been to foster foreign investment acceptance. Cultural diplomacy, therefore, facilitated the UAE's attempts to better establish itself through international real estate assets.

One of the most significant differences between Soviet and UAE cultural diplomacy is how the built environment was used to communicate friendship. The socialist classicist friezes and entablatures of the IMEL building draw from centuries-old practices of neoclassical architectural ornamentation to tell their stories. By contrast, the Biltmore Hotel relies on state-of-the-art digital media technologies. In both cases, building façades are reduced to communication surfaces broadcasting messages to society. The evolving use of building façades for such political communication is a topic that would benefit from greater research.

Unlike Soviet times, however, today's sovereign political agents offer their friendship in a city increasingly occupied by other powerful actors. With new foreign investors seeking to profit from Georgia's post-independence urban boom, narratives of friendship are helping to normalise several outside entities. A geography previously under the purview of a singular hegemonic force has today evolved into an arena for multiple, competing foreign influences. How the messages of each may compete or coincide with one another—and the resulting impacts on the collective identity and livability of Tbilisi—are also important topics for future research.

The case of the Soviet era IMEL building and its conversion into the seven-star Biltmore Hotel is, therefore, an example of how cultural diplomacy is not just rhetoric, but a crucial component of state politico-economic legitimacy. In this narrative, we see bilateral relations, or state 'friendships,' rarely being equal and instead supporting the foreign patron's superiority. Considering the IMEL/Biltmore Hotel project holistically, it becomes clear that there is much value in iconic architecture to communicate such narratives. The point at which feigned friendships may evolve into either genuine alliances or animosity will, therefore, be worth monitoring closely.

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FIGURES

- << **Figure 1** >> Image of Tbilisi's IMEL building converted into the Biltmore Hotel (2020).
- <<**Figure 2**>> A Soviet mosaic in Tbilisi, Georgia showing figures from different union republics dressed in their native attire, holding hands.
- <<**Figure 3**>> The IMEL façade on Rustaveli Avenue, including the frieze featuring five bas-relief panels by Georgian sculptor Tamara Abakelia.
- <<**Figure 4**>> Detail of the IMEL frieze panel of 'October in Georgia,' depicting reactions of Georgians to the events of the Russian Revolution in October 1917.
- <<**Figure 5**>> The fifteen-meter-high media screen affixed to the top of the Biltmore Hotel, continually displaying the UAE and Georgian flags, implying diplomatic friendship.

ⁱ The six focus groups with Tbilisi residents were comprised of eight adult participants each, aged 18+, broken down by geographic area and age group, with mixed gender. Focus groups were administered in November 2019.

ⁱⁱ In 1937-8, the All-Ukrainian Association of Marxist-Leninist Scientific Research Institutes (VUAMLIN) was dissolved and replaced in 1939 by the Ukrainian branch of the Institute of Marx-Engels-Lenin.

ⁱⁱⁱ Georgia was under the control of the Ottomans in the mid-fifteenth century to nineteenth century; the control of Imperial Russia in the nineteenth to twentieth century; and the control of the Soviets between 1921-1991.