TRANSITIONS ONLINE: **Tbilisi's Discount Rail Bypass**
by Tsira Gvasalia
26 July 2011

An internationally backed project will route hazardous cargo out of the city center, but residents in its path say they're being offered a pittance in exchange for valuable land and a way of life.

TBILISI | The view from atop a nearby mountain shows a yellow excavator tracing a brown line toward a mass of green. On closer inspection, the walnut trees of the Sesitashvili family's plantation come into view, and the excavator sits just outside the fence.

In two years, a new railway will cut through the 20-hectare plantation, making more than 2,000 square meters, or about 1 percent, of its land inaccessible.

In return, the government-owned Georgian Railway company has refused to pay the family for the land that will become unusable and is offering six laris ($3.60) per square meter for the nearly 3,000 square meters where the rail line will be laid. But the Sesitashvilis and other landowners nearby are demanding more than five times that sum.

The rail company's offer is based on an assessment that deemed the property not arable, according to televised comments by a company-appointed surveyor.

"How can the land be unproductive, when we've been cultivating a nut plantation for 22 years and taking a yield of eight tons annually?" Lia Sesitashvili said, adding that for more than seven years the family's tax rate has been based on a determination that the property is arable farmland.



David Sesitashvili's family says the land that they will lose in their walnut plantation is worth several times what the state-owned railway is offering. Photos by Tsira Gvasalia.

The dispute has ended up in court, along with a lawsuit brought by 80 property owners in this region north of Tbilisi.

Officials of the rail company did not respond to requests for comment.

Whatever happens, construction of the railway, which is intended to shift the transport of chemicals and dangerous cargo away from the city center, looks set to proceed. A court has already granted Georgian Railway the right to seize the land of property owners who dispute the price being offered.

But by modest calculations, hundreds of thousands of dollars are at stake for the people who live here. Some will likely lose their homes as well, and they have taken their fight beyond Tbilisi, to the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, which last year agreed to loan 100 million euros for the project.

Jumber Beridze is among them. Beridze, who used to have a vineyard on what is now a construction site, was also told his land was not arable.

“For two years they’ve been talking about the railway project. I was told that the railway would pass right through the vineyard and that they wouldn’t reimburse me for the vineyard losses. That’s why I didn’t improve the pipes for watering the yard, and it withered,” Beridze said. Like the Sesitashvilis, he has been offered six laris per square meter.

“It’s a very low price. The land is fertile; when my brother and I had a yield here, we never even added fertilizer,” Beridze said.

Zakaria Kutsnashvili, a lawyer for the landowners who brought the suit, said the rail company broke the law when it did not conduct a second appraisal, triggered by law when the company got the go-ahead to take over the properties. Kutsnashvili said the country’s constitution requires that landowners get “fair, timely, and advance” payment in such situations.



A house comes down to make way for the railroad.

“But six laris per square meter is not a fair price for the land they own,” the lawyer said.

Instead, the property owners say 20 laris is closer to the market value, which is the standard required by Georgian law.

TOO CLOSE TO THE RAILS

In the yard of Lali Jakobia’s two-story summer house, lilacs and azaleas bloom; fruit trees sag with cherries, figs, plums, and loquats. About a 15-minute drive north of downtown Tbilisi, the small house and garden sit on almost 600 square meters the family bought in the late 1990s.

“We chose it for the clean environment, to get away from the dust and noise of Tbilisi,” Jakobia said.

Then three months ago, Georgian Railway began to knock down nearby houses and ready the ground for the tracks.

“Trucks as big as my house go by every day. I don’t open the window because of the dust and noise from the early morning to the late evening,” Eter Doijashvili, a neighbor of Jakobia, said. “We settled down here 40 years ago. But now it’s impossible to live and we want to move.”

Doijashvili’s and Jakobia’s houses are among those closest to the path of the railway. They and eight of their neighbors said they tried to discuss the project with the railway company but got no response. So they wrote to the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, saying the project had not taken into account concerns about their living conditions.

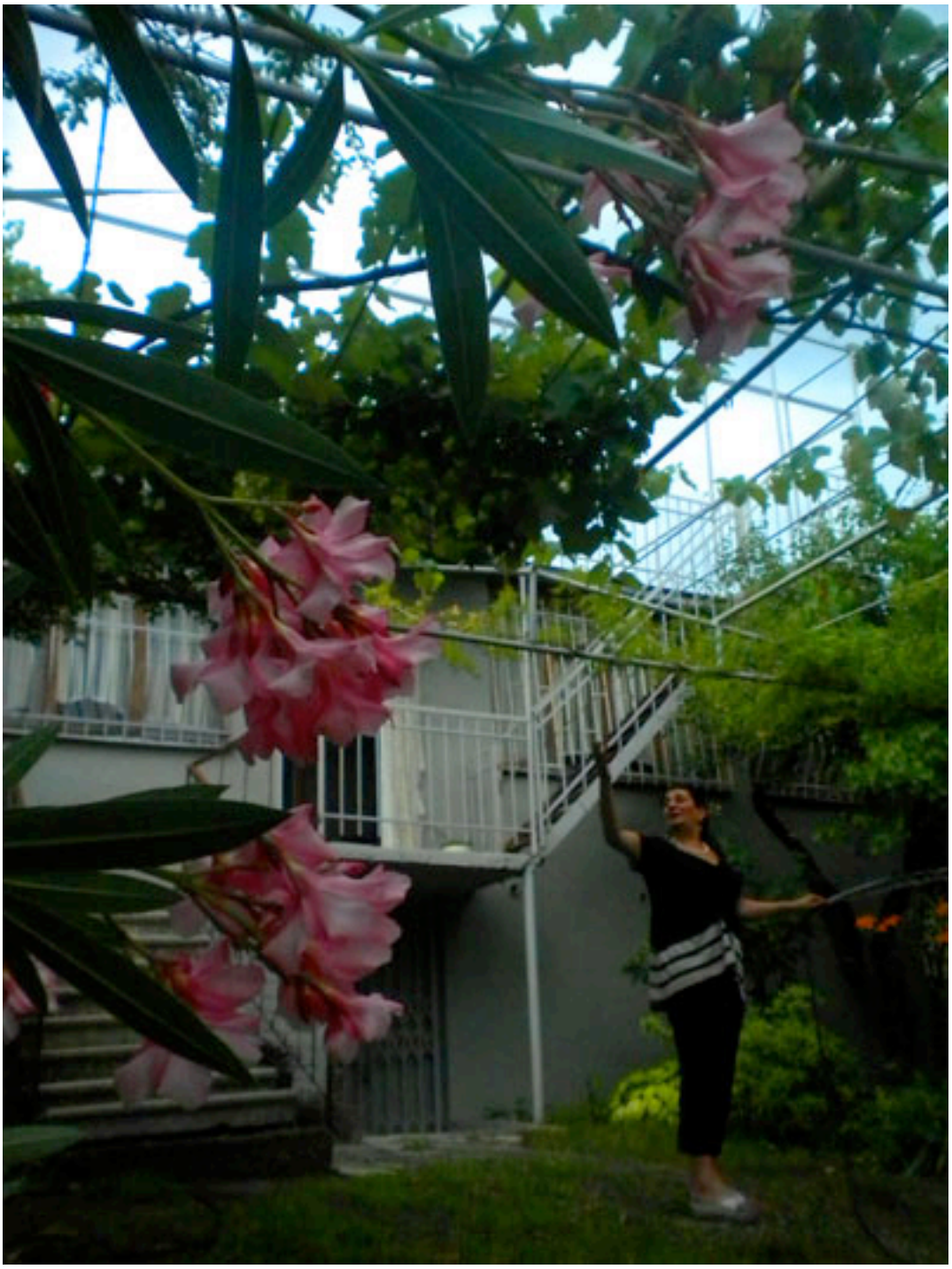
Specifically, they are worried about an 18-to 20-meter-high embankment that will carry the tracks alongside their houses.

“I don’t want to live under the railway. If there was an accident, oil could spill and ruin my land,” Jakobia said.

Residents at a public hearing in 2009 suggested that the company run the rail line through a tunnel to bypass the neighborhood, but Georgian Railway said the route would add almost 35 million euros to the total project cost of 300 million euros.

The fumes from the oil along with the vibrations and noise caused by trains running over high embankments will ruin the quality of life for those living close to the line, said David Chipashvili, who monitors international financial institutions like the EBRD for the Tbilisi-based Green Alternative environmental group.

The neighbors’ letter to the EBRD resulted in a meeting between the residents and the rail company, also attended by Chipashvili. He said the meeting went nowhere because Georgian Railway refused to consider creating the buffer zones that his group advocates, which would move those living near the lines farther away and compensate them accordingly.



Lali Jakobia moved here to get away from the noise and pollution of Tbilisi. When the railroad comes, she says, no one will want to buy her property.

Jakobia said the officials from the rail company have not visited the neighborhood to see why she and her neighbors are complaining. She also said that, in the absence of compensation, she could not hope to sell her property and move away.

“The smell from the oil, the noise, and dust will ruin the place,” Jakobia said. “No one would buy it now.”

The EBRD appointed independent consultants to advise on the amount of compensation to offer residents in Jakobia’s neighborhood. They came to Georgia in May but have not yet released findings.

Dariusz Prasek, director of the bank's environment and sustainability department, said the auditors' report "would be the basis of our discussion with Georgian Railway to find a solution which would be acceptable to all parties.

"When we looked at this project we thought this was a good idea because this is a project which removes hazardous, dangerous traffic from the city center to the outskirts which is a general very positive thing. But a project of that scale always encounters some problems," he added.

Tsira Gvasalia *is a reporter for Liberali magazine in Tbilisi.*

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