

Brain Drain: A new series on Georgians studying abroad

Some of Georgians best minds are overseas, either in universities or working. While programs like the Open Society Foundations' Academic Fellowship Program try to bring scholars back home, resources are scarce. Over the next year, Investor.ge will publish interviews with Georgians studying abroad. Who are they, what are they studying? Why did they decide to go abroad, and are they planning on returning? The first article in the series looks at one of AmCham Georgia's own scholars abroad: Ketii Sidamonidze and Salome Tkeshelashvili.



Salome Tkeshelashvili MBA, University of Bologna

In 2009, I graduated from the Caucasus School of Business which was the driving force for me to become fully employed while still a student. After having 5 years of working experience, I decided to deepen my theoretical knowledge and step into an MBA program. In October 2012, I left for Italy and began my MBA at the University of Bologna. For me there were four main reasons for choosing one of the oldest universities in Europe: a full scholarship opportunity which made it possible to minimize costs while getting a high quality education from professors who were prominent professionals from top companies all over the world; an intensive program of less than one year; the geographic location and culture of Italy which makes it possible to broaden the scope of vision, thinking and open doors internationally; and finally field trips including real on-site experience with real life projects in worldwide renowned companies with internship opportunities. These reasons were enough for me to take the important

decision of choosing the University of Bologna.

The MBA program included all the necessary courses related to general business management; however, the program allowed me to attend extra lectures in the field of my interest which is fashion, design and luxury goods. After presenting the business development project to the board of directors of Kering Group company Gucci, I was chosen by them to have a three month internship at the head office in Milan. Despite the job opportunities in Gucci's Moscow office, I chose to remain in Milan to continue my professional growth here.

Last year has been very dynamic in terms of political changes in Georgia. Clean and fair elections have been a positive message of a maturing democratic country to the main driving force of the country's economy – investors. I believe at the moment it is crucial to keep the national agenda on keeping focus and integration in the Euro Atlantic community to enable political stability to make the transition process as smooth as possible for local and foreign businessmen.

In general, I think that the main challenge for local Georgian companies is providing a high quality service/product which will enable the 'Made in Georgia' label to compete on the developed and emerging markets alongside with well known competitors. The improvement process can be fostered if government directs its resources to attracting new investors who will employ local professionals and intensify the competition on the local market; this is direct motivation to increase the quality of products and services. Encouraging startups and new ideas of Georgian business would also aid in environment enhancement process.

My intention is to come back to Georgia and actively participate in the maturing process of Georgian businesses, which is moving so fast nowadays. In my opinion being where the development progression takes place is the best way to increase professionally. Additionally, I believe that my skills, knowledge and experience will allow me to create real values for the companies and community.

Keti Sidamonidze **MBA ESADE Business School**

How long have you been abroad?

I have moved to Barcelona, Spain a little over a year ago - in August 2012.

Why did you decide to study abroad?

The driving force in deciding whether to get an MBA abroad was not to improve my career prospects as I already had a very interesting, well-regarded and challenging professional experience in Tbilisi, nor was it to brush up my business concepts as I hold a BBA degree from ESM Tbilisi... but rather to gain global exposure and to improve my ability to do social good.

Where are you studying and what is your major?

I am doing Full Time MBA at the

ESADE Business School. The ESADE MBA has been ranked among the best in the world – most recent rankings published by The Economist and Forbes place the ESADE MBA program among the top 5 in Europe and the top 10 in the international category.

How have your views on Georgia's business climate changed since you have been away? What has influenced your new perspective?

We live in an ever-changing environment, and the clockspeed of industries overall has sped up drastically compared to last decade or so. It is only natural that our views on Georgia's business climate change in one way or another but the underlying fact is that I believe that Georgia will continue to prosper and remain as an increasingly attractive country for both foreign and local investors.

Georgia has made significant progress in the recent past in creating a dynamic business environment and every time new doing business rankings come out pride and satisfaction overwhelm me

(e.g. Georgia has improved in all areas measured by – Doing Business 2013, IFC and World Bank). But I also understand very well that a strong business environment does not necessarily produce economic success per se. I mean you may have fantastic laws for the entry of new businesses but if these new entities cannot get let's say, affordable credit, that will eventually cause problems.

Having said that, I trust the best indicator of how healthy a business environment in a country is would be how local entrepreneurs dwell in and the amount of formalities they will have to overcome to do very basic transactions. That's why I think the experience I gained while sitting on the board of the Georgian Small and Medium Enterprises Association (GSMEA) for two years has given me invaluable insights.

What do you view as the economy's biggest challenges moving forward?

As the economy's biggest challenges moving forward I would name enforcing the rule of law, tackling unemploy- ►►



► ment issues and increasing qualified workforce. Having said that, I trust the upcoming generation has the potential of overcoming the mentioned challenges.

Do you want to come back? Why or why not? What would influence your decision?

What an “easy” question! My honest answer on an emotional level would be – absolutely, right away! And yet I have so many commitments, there are so many things I would like to do in life and ES-ADE has opened up even wider horizons for me. We regularly have career forums where well-established companies come on campus to recruit MBAs and try to convince us why their company would be the best fit for us, a completely different approach to what we are used to when it comes to how a job market operates.

The offer package and the nature

of work would be the main determining factors when deciding where I will head right after the MBA. By going away I risked it all but I think coming to Barcelona to do world’s one of the best MBAs was a wise decision already from today’s standpoint - the internship I landed as an MBA student helped me grow professionally even further. The Social Enterprise that I was working for within the auspices of the Momentum Project is called Grupo Sacendi. We helped them devise a growth strategy for their new line of business called Saraiva Senior, through which they will offer all the services dedicated to the different stages of aging in a single space. This new concept of housing, together with their own personalized methodology centered in each user addresses currently unmet needs.

Luckily, this internship has given me an opportunity to work in my fourth language i.e. Spanish for the first time in an enterprise that genuinely makes a powerful and noticeable social impact. In addition, being practically the only non-native Spanish speaker in the project has put even greater pressure on me that augmented my desire to succeed in helping these people acquire funding that they so much deserved!

Ideally, I would like to gain experience working in one of Europe’s leading socially responsible multinationals for a year or two before going back to Tbilisi, Georgia. But I by all means will consider offers from home as well. Only time will tell where I will end up but I do believe wherever it will be, I will be making a difference... hopefully, in a very positive and impactful way! ■