IUB Graduate Becomes Georgian Minister of Trade within a Year

When IU alumna Tamara Beruchashvili, a Muskie Fellow, left Bloomington in 1998 to return to her hometown of Tbilisi, Georgia, she knew she was much better prepared to help her country in the future. What she did not realize was that the future was now. Just a few weeks after receiving her master’s degree in public administration from the Indiana University’s School of Public and Environmental Affairs, she happened to meet Konstantin Zaldastanishvili, Georgia’s minister of trade and foreign economic relations, in the airport in Istanbul. On the flight to Tbilisi, Zaldastanishvili all but convinced her to become his deputy minister. Although Beruchashvili was five months pregnant, she knew she couldn’t turn down the job.

Shortly after she joined the ministry, Eduard Shevardnadze, president of Georgia, decided to make changes in his economic team. Zaldastanishvili was sent to Brussels as an ambassador to the European Union. An astonished Beruchashvili, by then eight months pregnant, was proposed as his replacement.

“I was really surprised the very next day to get a phone call from Shevardnadze wanting to meet with me that afternoon. It was really interesting and very nice, but he didn’t leave room for me to say no. He said that I was going to accept the job as minister,” Beruchashvili says. She worked for a month, gave birth to a baby girl, and then returned to the ministry full-time on January 1, 1999, to a workday that often lasts from 9 a.m. to midnight.

As minister of trade and foreign economic relations, Beruchashvili is in charge of the coordination of investments, foreign aid, and elaboration of trade policies. She also provides expertise on different projects with foreign companies. “During the Soviet period, foreign trade did not exist, particularly at the level of the republics. Now one of our priorities is developing relationships with other countries through the World Trade Organization. It is a high priority for Georgia because for such a small country it is very important to find the way to be integrated in the world economy.”

She is committed to trying to build her country. She says she tries to get professional satisfaction from each day but often finds that difficult at the end of a long day when she returns home to her husband, who is a surgeon, George, her 16-year-old son, and Rusiko, her 1-year-old daughter. Being a wife, a mother, and a minister is more than a full-time job. She has brought a new management style to the ministry, which surprises many older employees. She has an open-door policy and is accessible to any of her employees. She favors liberal and democratic relations and approaches, which she finds works better with the younger generation than with older ministry employees. One of her major problems is attracting bright workers to the ministry because salaries in the public sector are extremely low. She is pleased, however, that there are people who are dedicated to something other than money.

She views her days in Bloomington at SPEA as the best years of her life although her courses were often challenging and difficult. The two years spent there helped her develop new relationships, experiences, and knowledge. She learned to appreciate a professional approach to her work and the importance of strong relationships.

Although it is unusual for a 38-year-old woman to hold such a high position in Georgia, she does have some company. The minister of environmental protection is a woman and there are four or five deputy ministers who are women. “I cannot say that we have gender discrimination, but it is also in the mentality of people that in this position you have to be extremely mature, serious, and probably older than 45,” she says.

The minister of finance is also a Muskie Fellow, who graduated from Columbia University. He has arranged for interns to come from Columbia to work at the ministries in Georgia during the summer, and Beruchashvili hopes she can work out such a relationship with IU.

—Ruth Albright
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