

Georgian Scandal Over Economics and Bimbos

By [Matthew Collin](#)

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The latest media scandal between Russia and Georgia is another indication of their twisted relationship. The photograph of Georgia's 28-year-old economic development minister, Vera Kobalia, dancing on a table with some friends in a nightclub, first appeared on Facebook. But when it reached the Russian press last week, the venue miraculously had been transformed into a strip joint, with the defamatory insinuation that Kobalia — although fully clothed in the photo — is an exhibitionist bimbo who is somehow involved in the sex industry.

The leering Russian media coverage appeared to be intended to portray Georgia as a demented bordello where hedonistic ministers cavort in strip bars instead of tending to their offices. Kobalia, a recent appointment to the ministerial post, says the photo was taken years ago. Certainly, the fact that many 20-

something women like to have fun in clubs should not come as a surprise to anyone — least of all to Russians.

In Georgia, concerns centered on President Mikheil Saakashvili's hiring policy rather than the image itself. "I don't have a problem with the photo," a Georgian friend told me. "What bothers me is that someone so young and inexperienced has been given such an important job."

Indeed, Kobalia has what could be described as an unconventional resume for Georgia's top economic post. She studied business in college, worked for her father's bread company in Canada and apparently has no political experience whatsoever. The yellow press, of course, has suggested that Saakashvili hired her because she looks hot in a miniskirt.

That is not Kobalia's fault, either. Saakashvili has regularly appointed astonishingly youthful faces to key roles in his quest to establish the post-Soviet generation as the driving force in Georgian politics. But since this scurrilous little tale was picked up by the international media, it has not played well for his administration.

This is not the first time this year that Georgia has had to endure the wrong kind of headlines. The Kobalia story comes several months after the global embarrassment caused by a poorly judged television broadcast that showed a mock Russian tank invasion of Georgia that many Georgian television viewers mistook as real. But as the Saakashvili administration continues to fight an information war for international public opinion against its enemies in Moscow, the battles ahead will inevitably involve more important issues than miniskirts and nightclubs.

Matthew Collin is a journalist based in Tbilisi.

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