

TAMUNA CHKAREULI



Tamuna is a Georgian journalist and photographer based in Tbilisi. With a keen interest in social issues, her work focuses on communities that have been oppressed, neglected, or are recovering from trauma, as well as disability, gender, and labour issues. Since January 2019 Tamuna has been a full-time reporter at OC Media, where she works on the long-term journalism pieces and photo stories in the vibrant and politically charged atmosphere of South Caucasus.

There are no happy people on the factory floor. This is the conclusion of investigative journalist Tamuna Chkareuli after spending a year infiltrating factories across Georgia.

In this groundbreaking investigation, originally published in three parts and reproduced here in full, Chkareuli travels across the country going undercover inside Georgia's textile industry.

In Kutaisi, she witnessed the birth of a new trade union, as workers banded together to fight for their rights. At a factory in Tbilisi, she saw how threats, corruption, nervous breakdowns, and \$4,000 coats were the order of business. And at a high-tech factory in Poti, robots ferried containers of Nike shirts across the factory floor while plasma screen televisions drive workers to labour ever faster.

Will Georgia's newly-passed labour bill bring change? Or will an attitude of 'attracting investments' and 'creating jobs' at the expense of people's well-being continue? Can Georgia break the vicious cycle of labour rights abuse?



INSIDE GEORGIA'S TEXTILE INDUSTRY

A JOURNALISTIC INVESTIGATION
BY TAMUNA CHKAREULI

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PROLOGUE

You are about to embark on the journey inside the Georgian textile industry and see a first-hand experience of what it's like to tolerate abuse and control for low wages, as well as to stand up and fight for your rights when pressed against the wall.

For a year, I studied the conditions in various garment factories in the capital and the regions, to understand if it is indeed as bad as I had heard it to be, and this three-part investigation is proof that it is.

In the first part, I looked at how trade unions are fighting an uphill battle in an environment where the employer is still 'always right'. I joined workers during a protest in Kutaisi, one of Georgia's biggest textile centres, witnessing the birth of a new union. I also saw why they don't always work out, and what typical problems that occur between employers and employees in the post-Soviet space.

In part II, I went undercover to see garment factories inside and out. I spent several days side-by-side with workers, pressing buttons to trousers for eight hours, in a small, dusty and hot workshop. To fit in, I had to buy a new set of clothes and make-up, invent a solid legend, and disappear from social media. However, after a few hours of work, I realised that the shared sorrows — the hard and monotonous work in an unsafe environment with constant pressure from the management, connected me with my colleagues more strongly than a supposedly same social background.

In the final part, I worked in a factory that is considered to be a textbook enterprise for Georgia. As long as you're fine with harsh control, a stressful environment, and a lack of other job opportunities, that is. Employees, disappointed with their low salaries and poor treatment, tend to emigrate or leave abroad for seasonal jobs, making it even more evident that the best available factory option still does not come close to a decent, dignified, source of employment.

There are no happy people on the factory floor. But when merely having a job is a privilege, you learn to swallow the humiliation day by day, but eventually, you're blamed for a fatal mistake or you simply can't function anymore.

Many former workers I spoke to remembered the months spent in the factory as a bad dream. Still, they had the courage to open up about their experiences, for which I'm immensely grateful.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the team at OC Media, for supporting me during this journey. I would also like to thank the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, without whose financial support this year-long investigation would not have been possible.

Today, one year after my investigation, employees continue to reach out to me with claims of mistreatment and low wages. They say nothing has changed, but are afraid to go on the record, scared to put their meagre income at risk.

In this investigation, we at OC Media call out those who are responsible for the abuse of labour and human rights — the owners, who don't intervene choosing to silently count their profits, the management,

who openly lied to us telling us ‘there was never any unfair or humiliating treatment in our organisation’, the global brands, who dodged responsibility, and ultimately, the Georgian Government that once again left their citizens at their employers’ mercy.

This isn’t a new story. These experiences are taking place all over the world, where brands selling their clothing for thousands of dollars per piece are paying a fraction of that price to their workers, the women who go home and then pull a second shift doing domestic labour.

Producing apparel in the countries in Eastern Europe is an increasingly popular practice amongst western brands. The cost of production is low and the companies are able to save on the shipping costs that would apply to Chinese or Indian production.

Will Georgia’s newly-passed labour bill, that envisions a broader mandate for the labour inspectorate, bring the significant change? Or will an attitude of ‘attracting investments’ and ‘creating jobs’ at the expense of people’s well-being continue? Can Georgia break the vicious cycle of labour rights abuse? This remains unclear.

As someone who has shared a fraction of what the workers in Georgia’s textile industry have to live through, I urge you to take a proactive stance in regards to these questions.

Tamuna Chkareuli

Part I

UNIONS



Illustration by Dato Parulava/OC Media.

'Who has been told, "If you don't like it, go home?"' the union organiser asks.

All the women raise their hands.

Later they add that they have heard harsher things too – 'Fuck off' or, 'I'll come over and drag you by the hair' are just some of the things they report being told by their superiors.

On 15 July, in front of the Kutex textile factory in Kutaisi, nearly all of the factory's 120 workers have gathered as part of a one-day protest to express discontent over the multitude of offences they have been subjected to from the factory's management: late salaries, humiliation, an unclear management structure, and cut working hours.



Women gather in front of the factory early in the morning, waiting to find out if they will be paid.

Photo: Tamuna Chkareuli/OC Media.

Kutex, which began operations in 2016, used to produce jeans for Turkish retailer LC Waikiki from the day it was opened. In July 2019 the factory's acting director Giorgi Gogolashvili told RFE/RL that the company revoked the contract after the last stock of product was turned in with many flaws.

OC Media reached out to LC Waikiki for comment. The company refused to go into detail about the revocation of the contract, stating simply: 'LC Waikiki does not have a commercial or organic relation with the company [Kutex]'.

The factory's owner, Mehmet Kurt, a Turkish citizen, is expected to come to the negotiations, and more importantly, to give out the salaries that were due five days ago.

Today is Monday – 'bank day' – when many of those with loans are supposed to pay.

Workers directly confronting the director is uncommon in Georgian factories. The director is usually an unapproachable authority, who at one and the same time has almost total control over the fate of their workers but rarely ever comes into contact with them.

In the case of Kutex, the separation is enforced not only by company structure but also by language, with the Turkish-speaking director surrounded by a coterie of bilingual managers who ensure that workers do not have direct access to the top of the company's hierarchy.

FINDING A VOICE

The women anxiously discuss all the wrongs that have been done to them at the factory with Irakli Mkheidze, director of the Kutaisi Trade Union, and Giorgi Diasamidze, who chairs the Agriculture, Light Industry, Nutrition Industry and Manufacturing Industry Workers' Union. This is the first time they've done so openly. Before they banded together, the company's heavy-handed response to any hint of worker dissent ensured an atmosphere of repressive silence.

'It seems like everyone is our boss here', one woman said. 'The director, the quality controllers, the regular administration workers – everyone has the right to come and yell at us. They're overstepping their authority, but it doesn't matter to anyone. The situation is very tense and unhealthy. They think they stand above the workers and have the right to humiliate us.'

'There is an inhuman attitude here', another worker chimes in. 'Starting from the director and ending with the foreman. We sometimes resist, but they find the most vulnerable worker to attack.'



*The bathroom doors at Kutex do not close and there is no toilet paper; the women bring their own.
Photo: Tamuna Chkareuli/OC Media.*



The factory has only the most basic hygiene amenities.
Photo: Tamuna Chkareuli/OC Media.

The women recall one tailor who left an extra thread on a pair of jeans and the technologist threw them in her face – she started crying from the pain and humiliation.

'I don't need to be yelled at, I am a human being, just explain what I've done wrong', another says. 'The other day, the new model [of jeans] came in and I was so scared of making a mistake that I just stood up and said – I cannot sew this.'

'The owner demands a certain quantity. But our contract is based on hours, quantity has nothing to do with it – yet people still believe him', another woman says. 'This man has studied our psychology and acts accordingly. He wants us to feel worthless because we "haven't learned how to work" in two years.'

Despite the accumulation of grievances, it was the late salaries that finally united everyone.

Diasamidze came to Kutaisi from Tbilisi in the hopes of forming a new union in Kutex. In an industry where staff turnover is high, it's a rare opportunity – there are currently only two unions in Georgia's textile industry.

THE SPARK

Tea Tslobiladze, a tailor at Kutex, was the first to begin organising. The weekend before the protest, she collected 90 signatures from employees, alongside a collective list of grievances. The petition was meant for union organisers, to show them that the workers were ready to unite. But, more than that, it was also meant to show her fellow workers that their struggles were not theirs alone – to break them out of their solitude.

'I started working [at Kutex] without prior experience', Tslobiladze told OC Media. 'For a year, everything was fine. When the problems began and I started talking, people sat scared and silent. I always pointed out what I didn't like. People saw that what I was saying was what was in their hearts and minds. You just need to give them a single impulse.'

Ultimately, Tslobiladze was moved to action not by her own experience with the company, but what she saw happening to the women around her.

'When I witnessed my coworkers being humiliated, I couldn't stand this – I could never stand such things even from childhood. I always get in trouble because of others. I should have been a human rights advocate, probably.'



There's a general disbelief that workers can achieve justice through the courts: 'a fear inherited from the 1990s, when the supremacy of the law was not guaranteed', says union lawyer Irakli Mkheidze.

Photo: Tamuna Chkareuli/OC Media.

To organise and express discontent in Georgia is considered almost uncouth – with unemployment levels high (officially 13% but with surveys putting it as high as 21%) workers feel indebted to the factory for providing them with the opportunity of a job, even if it means up to 10 hours of work each day, for a mere ₾300 (\$100) per month.

When problems arise, workers usually try to adapt to the conditions or they simply leave. ‘The staff turnover in the textile sector is high and that makes it vulnerable – like the hospitality sector or construction’, union head Giorgi Diasamidze says. ‘For employers, these people are just machines.’

When there’s no material to work on, tailors were dismissed and would have to remain idle until new orders arrived. They would not be paid during this period, even though their contract remained in force – a violation of Georgia’s Labour Code.



Many women travelled from distant villages in the hope that the protest would have immediate results and that they would be paid their wages that day. Joining a union was not the outcome they expected.

Photo: Tamuna Chkareuli/OC Media.

‘Mehmet [Kurt] blames us for it. He says we’re producing flawed stock which he can’t sell and therefore can’t get new orders. These “flaws” are something he manipulates us with. Sewing is a kind of a craft where it’s impossible to go without flaws – but there’s hardly ever a flaw you can’t fix’, Tea Tsobnialadze said.

The majority of the workers that spoke with OC Media said that during the first year the factory was open, the flaws were not a problem, and that the management only started to bring up the allegedly shoddy workmanship of employees when they stopped paying salaries on time.

According to the Georgian Labour Code, employees are entitled to 0.07% of interest on their salary for each day it is late; Kutex has not delivered on this obligation.

The day of the protest, Tsobnialadze is elected to lead the negotiations with management alongside two other

women from the factory. But soon it becomes clear that the owner won't be present at the table – and there will be no salaries today.

After going through the problems in the air-conditioned office upstairs, negotiators announce the news to the women who are waiting below, in the dark, stuffy factory hall.



In Kutex, only the administration's offices are air-conditioned, despite the oppressive summer heat on the factory floor.

Photo: Tamuna Chkareuli/OC Media.

It is clear that many of them expected immediate results, but the workers manage to overcome their disappointment and sign on to create a new union. So far, all of them are unhappy and eager to unite – but it's unclear whether they'll manage to keep together under pressure from the management, refuse the quick deals, and distribute responsibilities within the union committee.

All of these are problems that usually emerge soon after workers' primary demands have been satisfied.



*Tea Tsnobiladze helps women to sign up for the union.
Photo: Tamuna Chkareuli/OC Media.*

SOLIDARITY FOREVER?

Imeri Ltd is one of Georgia's oldest textile companies – it was founded as a joint-stock cooperative in 1928 and survived through the collapse of the Soviet Union. In 1997, they got their first international client. They've also been supported with a ₾812,700 (\$275,000) investment from the Enterprise Georgia programme to create an additional 120 workplaces.

At the moment, Imeri is one of the largest textile factories in the country and works with both international and domestic brands.

The factory employs around 450 people, of which 320 are tailors.

On paper, it is also one of the labour-friendliest workplaces in the country. In 2016, they received the WRAP-gold certificate of compliance from the Worldwide Responsible Accredited Production (WRAP), a not-for-profit labour standards advocacy group initially created for American clothing companies. They were also named employer of the year by Kutaisi City Hall in 2015-2016.



'We like to keep the mood high here' says the Imeri foreman on a tour of the factory.

Photo: Tamuna Chkareuli/OC Media.

A former worker who has since relocated to France told OC Media that in her experience of working at Imeri, the company was far from worker-friendly.

Ana (not her real name) began work at Imeri as a tailor in 2013. She stayed at the company for four years. She describes the experience as four years of 'living in a madhouse'.

When she was hired, Ana was told she would work from 9:00 to 18:00, but she often stayed longer. According to her, nothing she was told at her job interview turned out to be true.

Her salary depended on fulfilling a monthly quota, which, she said, was set so high as to be impossible for a person to accomplish.

'The most I made in that factory [in one month] was ₾445 (\$150) – after we worked for five days a week from 9:00 till 22:00. Other times I would receive anything from ₾250–₦300 (\$84–\$100), but I was doing far more work than I was being paid for.'

Ana told OC Media that the company took pains to hide the reality of working conditions in order to protect its reputation.

'There was a WRAP commission that came for a checkup in 2016. We were told by the directors to [tell the inspectors] we didn't work Saturdays and that our working hours were normal, that we were satisfied', Ana said. 'We went to the interview room one by one, and on our way out, someone from the administration would meet us at the door, asking what we had said.'

Factory Director Maia Simonidze, who is also Imeri shareholder and the chair of Imeri's board of directors, con-

firmed to OC Media that the management could have requested the workers to give positive feedback. She said, however, that the interviews themselves were confidential and the staff could have expressed their concerns openly, if they so chose.

She also claims that, according to the contract they have signed with the workers, the company pays 30% more for every extra hour of work, and that often, they pay even more than that.



*The canteen in Imeri is not free, but the prices are lower than average.
Photo: Tamuna Chkareuli/OC Media.*

Workers at the factory went on strike repeatedly but found that their union refused to stand by them.

'What could we do? There was no unity', Ana said, adding that it was mostly Imeri old-timers that were the union leaders, 70-75 year-olds, who didn't want to jeopardise their positions in the union for the sake of younger workers.

YELLOW UNIONS AND A BAD ECONOMY

In Georgia, many industrial unions do not represent the workers, but rather serve the interest of business owners. Such 'fake' organisations are known as 'yellow trade unions'.

Eto Saginadze, who has worked at Imeri for over six years, says that the Imeri union is firmly on the side of the factory owners. She says that any recent improvements in working conditions have happened in spite of the union, not because of it.

'[The trade unions representatives] were not chosen by the people and they don't serve the people, I'm not afraid to say it openly', Saginadze told OC Media, adding that the union leadership had been staffed with company managers.

Maia Simonidze told OC Media that since the collapse of the USSR, the company has been engaged in a battle for survival.

'This area was seriously developed in Georgia during [the Soviet period] – there were 40 large-scale textile factories here, and Imeri was one of them', she said. 'From those large factories, only two are left – Batumtex, which was sold to Austrian investors, and us, who remained Georgian.'



Factory director Maia Simonidze with the history of Imeri – the oldest textile factory in Georgia.
Photo: Tamuna Chkareuli/OC Media

With little connection to outside markets and little demand within Georgia, the company first produced military uniforms, even though, Simonidze says, 'we knew it was not "real" work'. It was only in 1997 that they received their first international orders, from German company Barbara Lebek.

Since then, the company has produced clothing for a variety of international companies and has recently inked a deal to produce clothing for luxury Italian brand Moncler.

Despite the company's success, Simonidze said that they have struggled with high staff turnover and a labour shortage – trained specialists in particular.

In an interview with a Mkhare, a Kutaisi-based media outlet, she blamed the shortage on a lack of motivation among job-seekers and an 'epidemic' of workers choosing to seek employment abroad.

But when speaking with OC Media, she admitted that low wages are also to blame.

'At the moment, we can accept 20 more people to work here, but they are not coming, and I understand why. Because the salary is not as high as the work demanded from them.'

As for the role of the unions, Simonidze said she saw it as entirely positive.

'Our factory has always been unionised – since 1921', she said. 'I am a union member myself and I believe that it has serious power.'

She added that she also understands that workers may also be frustrated with the union and its leadership, but ultimately it is not the company's fault, as the union is not under the responsibility of company management.

'It's quite possible that workers might be unhappy with union's current chair - it was not selected by them but by the [union's] head office in Tbilisi', she said.'

Giorgi Diasamidze, told OC Media that Simonidze's claim is spurious and that the union's chair is never appointed by the head office. Rather, he said, the chair should always be elected by a general vote of union members at the worksite.

However, he added that he doesn't know how the union chair at Imeri came into her position.



At the moment, Imeri can accept 20 more workers, but there's a low interest, 'and I understand why', Maia Simonidze says. 'Because the salary is not high enough for the work demanded of them. But this is the reality.'

Photo: Tamuna Chkareuli/OC Media.

The union's current chair, Manana Deisadze, who has been in her position since 2014, told OC Media that she was neither appointed by the union office, nor elected by a general vote. Rather she said that she was elected by a 'committee' of five employees of the factory.

A LOSING BATTLE

However, even when a trade union is rooted in the workers and is of the sort where the chair of a company's board of directors cannot be a member, it does not guarantee success.

Marina Oboladze, a 61-year old former worker and union activist at Georgian Textile Ltd, was fired in 2018 along with 15 workers due to what the company called a 'staff reduction' – though Oboladze believes the company had an ulterior motive.

'They just got rid of me because I couldn't stand iniquity and was always voicing my concerns', she told OC Media. She was fired shortly after requesting to speak to the factory owner about working extra hours, for which she says said she and other workers had not been compensated.



*Marina Oboladze has carried the Georgian labour code in her bag ever since the first strike she took part in. Photo:
Tamuna Chkareuli/OC Media.*

With legal help from the union's head office, Marina appealed to the court, but instead of rehiring them, the company has paid them two months compensation. However, the payout only included the base rate.

'Our salary was ₾1.30 per hour, plus bonuses for good quality', Oboladze said. 'Discipline, and performance – we never got compensated for those. Just ₾250 (\$84) each'.

Oboladze and two other workers decided to lodge another appeal and are still waiting for the results.

'The others didn't go to the court', Marina said. 'They didn't want to pay the expenses.'

Marina works in another textile factory now, where the salaries are low. Even though she's dissatisfied, she refrains from discussing it with the management.

'After what happened, I'm afraid to raise my voice. I'm scared to lose this job too'.

SMALL VICTORIES

After the owner of Kutex was a no show on the day of the protest, the newly unionised workforce took their battle against the company to court. With the help of the legal team at the Agriculture, Light Industry, Nutrition Industry, and Manufacturing Industry Workers union's headquarters in Tbilisi, a court case was started.

The judge ruled in favour of the workers and the company was ordered to sequester (i.e. sell-off) assets in order to pay the workers the wages they are owed.

Kutaisi labour union head Irakli Mkheidze believes that the sequester is more than just a financial victory.

'After the sequester, the people of Kutex realised that the court can be a way to achieve justice', Mkheidze told OC Media. 'These people often think that the employer, being financially powerful, can bribe the court. These prejudices make them lose hope that the court can defend those who are weaker'.

Mkheidze sees reasons for optimism for the Kutex workers, despite the difficult conditions for organised labour in Georgia.

'First of all, there are several leaders here who believe they will achieve justice. People like Tea ignite faith in others and that means a lot. [Secondly], the employees believe that if they lose this job, with their skills and experience it will be easy to find a new one in the same field.'



*Tea Tsnobiladze was one of the workers who started to express discontent and organised others:
'I cannot stand injustice. I should have been a human rights advocate'.
Photo: Tamuna Chkareuli/OC Media.*

But despite the victory, Mkheidze believes the Kutex case showcases the weakness of labour in Georgia, which can only be addressed by wider systemic change.

'Labour litigations appear when labour condition abuses are large-scaled', Mkheidze said. 'Employees prefer to endure small violations and stay silent and not spoil their relationship with the employer. This fear accumulates the problems that result in the final explosion [a strike].'

As a result, grievances, he said, are only addressed after prolonged suffering by the workers. He says that international examples show that wider unionisation among the Georgian workforce would ensure that such grievances would be addressed earlier, or not occur in the first place.

For this to happen, however, the social attitude towards unions must change.

'There are remnants of Soviet cliches that a person who raises their voice for justice is just a skilful manipulator that seeks their own benefit', he said. 'This mentality affects a whole range of industries in the country.'

For the moment though, he concludes, it is, in fact, Kutex's poor treatment of workers that gives them leverage. By violating their rights to the extent that it has, the company has lost their ability to punish them for any further organising and mobilisation – now the workers 'have nothing to lose'.

Part II

UNDERCOVER



Illustration by Dato Parulava/OC Media.

It was easy to get a job at the Geo-M-Tex factory. The Human Resources manager did not ask many questions – just briefly explained that as a newbie, I would perform basic sewing operations and learn them step by step.

I was told to come the next day when she would meet me by the security stand and escort me to one of the four workshops – coats, trousers, cutting, coat filling – that the factory is divided into.

But no one met me on the first day. When I entered, security just told me to follow the women on the factory's lower floor, to the place where they manufacture jeans.

My job consisted of marking the spot for buttons and then attaching them with three different presses – a hazardous job, since the press slams down in the blink of an eye.

We were working on special protective trousers from Uvex – a German sports clothing brand. The thick, denim-like material left a layer of blue dust over everything in the entire workshop. I still prefer not to think of how much of it ended up coating the insides of my lungs.

There were about 30 of us in the room, amidst a constant din of machines that was only every drowned out by the angry yells exchanged between workers and supervisors.

It was stifling and impossible to breathe. The air conditioner was on, but all it could do was emit a useless, luke-warm wheeze. Even it, it seems, had succumbed to the blue dust.



*Working with jeans leaves a layer of blue dust on every surface,
including the hands of the workers.*

Photo: Tamuna Chkareuli.



Many develop an allergic reaction.

Photo: Tamuna Chkareuli.

PRODUCE IN GEORGIA

The Produce in Georgia programme was unveiled by the Georgian Government in June 2014.

It is supposed to encourage investment in the manufacturing sector by providing co-financing on loans and handing out state-owned property for the symbolic price of ₾1 (\$0.35).

Through it, the government promotes Georgia as a growing market as the country has signed numerous free trade agreements and has low utility costs, and especially – competitive labour costs.

According to the programme's official website, the apparel production sector 'is characterised by [...] extremely cheap workforce (around \$265 per month)'.

Their brochure on manufacturing also boasts a 'favourable labour code', continuing on to say that, 'the country doesn't have minimum wage regulations and compensation for labour depends on the agreement between employee and employer'.

In fact, there is a minimum wage in Georgia, one that has not changed since 1999. It is a mere ₾20 (\$7) per month – a bitter point of contention for trade unions and labour rights activists.

Produce in Georgia has succeeded in promoting 'nearshoring' – a relatively new tendency in the apparel sector that allows major brands to save on shipping costs to EU markets by producing in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Turkey.

There are currently 13 factories operating in Georgia that have benefited from the programme.

A TEXTBOOK BENEFICIARY

Geo-M-Tex is a textbook beneficiary of Produce in Georgia, receiving a preferential loan of ₾5.5 million (\$1.9 million) and a building for ₾1 to open a factory to produce western brands for export.

The factory was opened in 2015 and, until 2017 was majority-owned by two individuals, Lasha Bagrationi and Ramaz Sagharadze, with each controlling 42.5% of shares.

Lasha Bagrationi is the son of Mukhran Bagrationi, a powerful Tbilisi businessperson who owns three large retail zones in the centre of Tbilisi, as well as the construction firm Ekometer, which has built two upscale residential projects and the Besiki Business Centre in the capital.

Lasha's older brother, Giorgi Bagrationi, is the head of Security Police department at the Ministry of Internal Affairs, was a former head of the Municipal Inspection Department at the Tbilisi City Hall, and was also previously the head of the Samgori District Municipality.

Seventy-two year-old Ramaz Sagharadze is the father-in-law of Grigol Morchiladze, a wealthy entrepreneur and a powerful political figure.

In April 2014, Morchiladze was appointed by Economy Minister Dimitri Kumsishvili as an advisor to the chair of the National Agency of State Property, the very institution that allocates properties and buildings to Produce in Georgia beneficiaries, just one year before the opening of the Geo-M-Tex factory.

Morchiladze is also the former business partner of the Minister of Regional Development and Infrastructure, Zurab Alavidze, and a heavy party donor both to the opposition United National Movement party and the ruling Georgian Dream party, donating ₾60,000 (\$37,000) to the former in 2012 and ₾50,000 (\$20,000) in 2016 and ₾60,000 (\$22,000) in 2017 to the latter.

Following a labour and quality control scandal in 2017, Ramaz Sagharadze legally became the sole owner of Geo-M-Tex.

Despite his official ownership of the factory, workers' at Geo-M-Tex still regularly referred to it as 'Morchiladze's factory'. Many of them believe that the Morchiladze is the real owner, with Saghardze acting as a thinly veiled middle-man.

LOCKED DOORS

We worked from 09:00-18:00 with three breaks – 10 minutes at 11:00, 40 minutes at 13:00, and 10 minutes at 16:00.

I noticed guards always appeared in break areas several minutes before the clock ran out to tell everyone the break was over. Technically it wasn't, but as they explained, the way back to the workshop took two to three minutes.

That's why on a 10-minute break no one could relax or even smoke a cigarette properly – even if we couldn't see them, we could always feel the security there, right over our shoulders.



'We could always feel the security there, right over our shoulders.'
Illustration by Dato Parulava/OC Media.

The factory's main door is locked for most of the day and was only open during the 40-minute lunch break. On short breaks, we couldn't leave the factory and were only permitted to smoke in a little area in the inner yard.

For lunch we went to the kitchen. But the fact that it was a kitchen, was, at least for us, nothing but decoration – we weren't allowed to cook there.

All the women came with their own food and ate from plastic containers.

In the bathroom, two-thirds of the stalls were nailed shut and in the rest there was no toilet paper; we all had to bring our own.

MARINA BLAKUNOVA

Five months after establishing Geo-M-Tex, a newly-formed company, Eurotex Ltd, managed by Marina Blakunova, took over management of the enterprise.

Marina Blakunova is a stateless person born in Latvia and is a representative of the Egeria group. Her daughter, Veronika, also joined the managing team and later established her own clothing line, Movi, currently produced in Eurotex.

The Egeria group, officially registered as Egeria Limited, is a limited liability company based in Cyprus. It works as an intermediary between the factory and brands, supplying the factory with fabrics and specifications for different models.

While working at the factory, Eurotex had secured deals with the clothing brands Equiline, Dainese, Uvex, and Moncler.

Moncler was the most high-end of the brands, with winter coats selling from \$252 to \$4,587. By the summer of 2019, all Moncler clothing made in Georgia was produced under Blakunova's watch. Some production processes were outsourced to different factories in Kutaisi and Rustavi, and Geo-M-Tex in Tbilisi was the main production and dispatch centre.



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Post

Marina Blakunova and Natia Sagharadze at Tbilisi Fashion week.

Photo: Natia Sagharadze's Instagram.

'MIND YOUR FINGERS'

My first day was marked by two major events.

In the morning, a woman in my work area started screaming and then collapsed, and started convulsing. She had an epileptic seizure.

After they carted the woman away, all the workers on the floor started to talk about how stressful the job was and how no one was safe from things like this.

A little while later, Marina Blakunova, the factory director, came down and began yelling at everyone demanding that 'whoever is responsible for this' step forward. She told us that tailors treat each other like animals and it was clearly their responsibility, not hers.

After haranguing us, Marina left and was replaced by her daughter Veronika. A little while later, a representative of a company from Italy – we suspected Moncler but could not find out for certain – joined Veronika and the two were in the workshop with us for the rest of the day.

The Italian did not seem to care that there was no air in the room, and mostly just chatted with Veronika. But, if any of the women working on the floor spoke too loud, or worse yet, laughed, then Veronika would yell at them – telling them that she was ashamed of them, right in front of the Italian visitor.

In the second half of the day, we found out that a batch of trousers had been sent back from Germany. A flawed batch. The trousers had been produced in Eurotex's subcontractor in Tkibuli, but the final quality was checked here in Eurotex by both senior controllers and Marina herself. Nevertheless, she was outraged. She told us off, and said that if we made mistakes 'we would pay for them'.

My coworkers' faces dropped when they found out they would have to stay until 20:00 to fix the flawed stock. Two more hours of work. Though they ended up staying even longer.

The whole day, the HR manager came to check on me only once, and even then our 'conversation', if you could call it that, lasted several seconds. She walked past me, and before I could say or ask her anything, she quipped 'mind your fingers' and then left.



*White particles on the floor are from the feather stuffing inside of coats.
Photo: Tamuna Chkareuli.*



The particles mingle in the air with dust and threads.

Photo: Tamuna Chkareuli.

I asked my supervisor if I would earn money for my first day and she said this was 'a decision that the accountant will make'. I later found out I would be getting paid an 'apprentice rate', which they told me, 'would obviously be less than that of the others', but never specified what it would actually be.

At the end of the day, on my way out of the factory, the security staff checked my bag, lest I might have stolen anything. Not that theft was uncommon, in fact for one employee of the factory, it would appear to have been par for the course.

MADONA'S STORY

Madona Tarkhnishvili began working as the assistant storage manager but was promoted after the latter was fired for allegedly stealing several sacks of feathers.

Madona didn't want the job.

'I felt unsafe in that place because it's the storage staff who see what really goes on in this factory.'

Indeed, Madona witnessed with her own eyes that factory director Marina Blakunova often didn't play fair.

'Every Moncler jacket has a sewn-in electronic chip that makes it unique', she recalled. 'But sometimes, the storage would receive more material than there were chips. It would be sent to the cutting workshop as usual, and for instance, instead of details for 100 coats, they would end up with the details for 120.'

'The trick is, you can make a perfectly good Moncler coat from those. Those "Moncler" jackets, without the original chip, Marina would gift to her immediate circle or workers from the administration. Some people have seen those jackets on the Lilo market [in Tbilisi] as well.'



Special electronic chips are the only way to identify a Moncler coat.



An anonymous employee gave OC Media photos of coat components, smuggled outside of the factory.

Blakunova had a contract with an enterprise in Rustavi – Eurotex storage would send them the material and finished jackets would be sent back. Madona always sent the right number of goods for every order, so Rustavi manager Nugzar Kakhidze usually didn't count what came in.

'He trusted me. We had a good working relationship and Marina noticed it. Once, when we received expensive fur, she came to storage and before I could say anything, took a couple of pieces from the box, without tearing the security [anti-tamper] tape.'

'This man trusts you, he won't check', Madona recalled Marina telling her.

Madona couldn't sleep that night. She ended up calling Nugzar. Next day, he counted everything on the spot and when there were pieces missing, he confronted Blakunova. She, in turn, blamed Madona and said it was her mistake.

'Since then', Madona said, 'she was always trying to arrange something [bad] for me'.

Meanwhile, Madona kept noticing suspicious activities from the management. One of those was employing people that no one ever saw. When Madona was promoted, no one came to replace her as assistant to the storage manager.

'My salary back then was ₾450 (\$160), but no one came to claim it', she told me. '[Head of Human Resources] Nino Eloshvili's daughter had some position too. And so had an accountant's mother, but no one ever saw them in the factory'.

At one point, Marina fired the cleaners and asked the regular staff to clean after themselves. Madona couldn't help but wonder where the money went.

'Marina doesn't want honest workers. No one who started wondering about the money remained in the factory for long.'

Madona had a fixed ₾700 (\$300) salary but not even once received it in full. Marina used every occasion to dock her pay.

'She asked me to help in the cutting workshop once, but I couldn't work there – you need to bend over a lot and my back started to hurt. She subtracted ₾150 (\$65) from my salary for something that wasn't even my job', Madona recalled.

'In the last month, they put a ₾5 banknote on my table and said – this is your salary for this month. You made too many mistakes to receive more'.

Because her salary had been too low, Madona ended up taking out a loan. 'I couldn't admit it to my husband', she said. 'My family almost fell apart because of this job.'

She told me the stress of the job, the abuse, was the worst of it.

'I couldn't stand when she [Blakunova] would start screaming for no reason. I quit after she threw a pack of zips into my face and called me a bitch.'

Madona stayed friends with some of the people at the factory after she left. She later found out that the head of human resources told her co-workers she was fired for stealing, 'just like the person who had my job before me.'

THE SECOND DAY

My second day on the job, I discovered that my coworkers stayed at the factory until 21:00. A 12 hour shift. I tried to figure out if they received overtime pay, or if they were paid at all for these additional hours, but no one seemed to know – not even the women themselves.

Generally, no matter who I asked about the salaries, the answer was always along the lines of ‘we’ll see how this month goes’.

As a general rule, tailors were divided into three categories according to their abilities, and for each category, there was a minimal fixed-sum paid monthly. However, the final pay still depended on the quota, so most of the workers didn’t know what they would receive at the end of the month.

Rusiko (not her real name) is in her fifties, short-haired and tall. She’s a former teacher with a dry, sarcastic wit. We ended up sitting side-by-side, and she told me her story.

She saw a vacancy on Jobs.ge with a promise of ₾600 (\$200) per month, free food, and health insurance. None of that turned out to be true. There was no food, no insurance, and the most Rusiko ever made in a month was ₾400 (\$140).

Most of the workers at Geo-M-Tex have been at the factory for less than half a year. All the women told me they are trying to endure the work just long enough to find a better job – they suggested I do the same. But lucky for me, they said, I would go on holiday soon.

That’s when I found out that on 24 August, everyone would be going on a month-long ‘holiday’, whether they wanted to or not. Only people who had been working there for years would receive a salary during that month; the majority wouldn’t get a single lari.



The factory floor is always dirty. A cleaner comes only once a day, in the morning.
Photo: Tamuna Chkareuli.

As a new worker, I tried to figure out what my salary would be. First of all, I was not learning how to sew as promised, but already performing the job of someone who left before me, so we could fulfil the quota. Because my role was one of the least-skilled, I could never hope to make any more than ₦550 (\$190) a month, even if I produced more than the quota.

Rusiko also didn't have any experience when she arrived at Geo-M-Tex. Most of the women I spoke with didn't. Yet the demands of the job are very high – workers are expected to rapidly manufacture expensive brand name clothing, without errors, and in very large quantities.

Speed was paramount, it seemed – even though it was my second day everyone was telling me to work faster.

'WORKERS ALWAYS PAY FOR THEIR MISTAKES'

Each pair of trousers that were manufactured at Eurotex would mean a certain amount of money for the workers who made them, usually one pair nets each worker a few tetri.

The system works something like this: a pair of jeans pays out a certain sum to the workers, that sum is multiplied by the number of jeans manufactured and then divided by the different processes of manufacture (e.g. sewing pockets, belts, attaching zips), and by the number of workers involved in each process – some processes pay more than others.

Tailors note what process they were involved in, and how much stock they manufactured.

The one exception seems to be the button press, despite asking repeatedly, I could not figure out how my salary was to be calculated.

Flaws in the product seemed to be a constant issue, but management was loathed to address it. Instead of allowing us to take our time, they constantly pushed us to work harder. They set unrealistic goals for inexperienced workers.

Under these circumstances, flaws in the product were inevitable, and inevitably, management would take its anger over these flaws out on the workers.

Workers in senior positions, like technologists, supervisors, and quality controllers, have realised this, and that the buck usually stops not with them, but with the workers below them.

Sometimes, when I noticed flaws and showed them to the technologist, she would tell me it was all right, and that we shouldn't return them to the tailors for a fix. I produced a lot of flawed trousers that day because I was so tired I could barely sit, and the controllers saw but turned a blind eye.

Better to let some flaws through than not meet the quota, they seemed to reason.

But occasionally, heads do roll and someone in management is fired or has to pay for mistakes made by the workers. Ultimately, it was all the same if someone paid the price – so long as it wasn't Blakunova and the top managers.

'BE CAREFUL'

On a smoke break, I befriended a new girl who worked upstairs in the jacket department. She said the situation there was as bad as in our part of the factory. It was too hot and the workers quarrelled all the time. She only started to work here because she couldn't find a job for four months.

When I met her, all she could dream about was the [unpaid] holiday. Most of the workers dreamed about it – I would hear them saying, 'fuck the money, just let me rest a bit'.

By 16:00 workers barely talked to each other, no one had the energy for it. More than once I heard the women refer to the factory as a 'madhouse'.

Maiko, who worked next to me, said she cried every day during her first month on the job. 'But don't worry', she told me. 'You'll get used to it'.

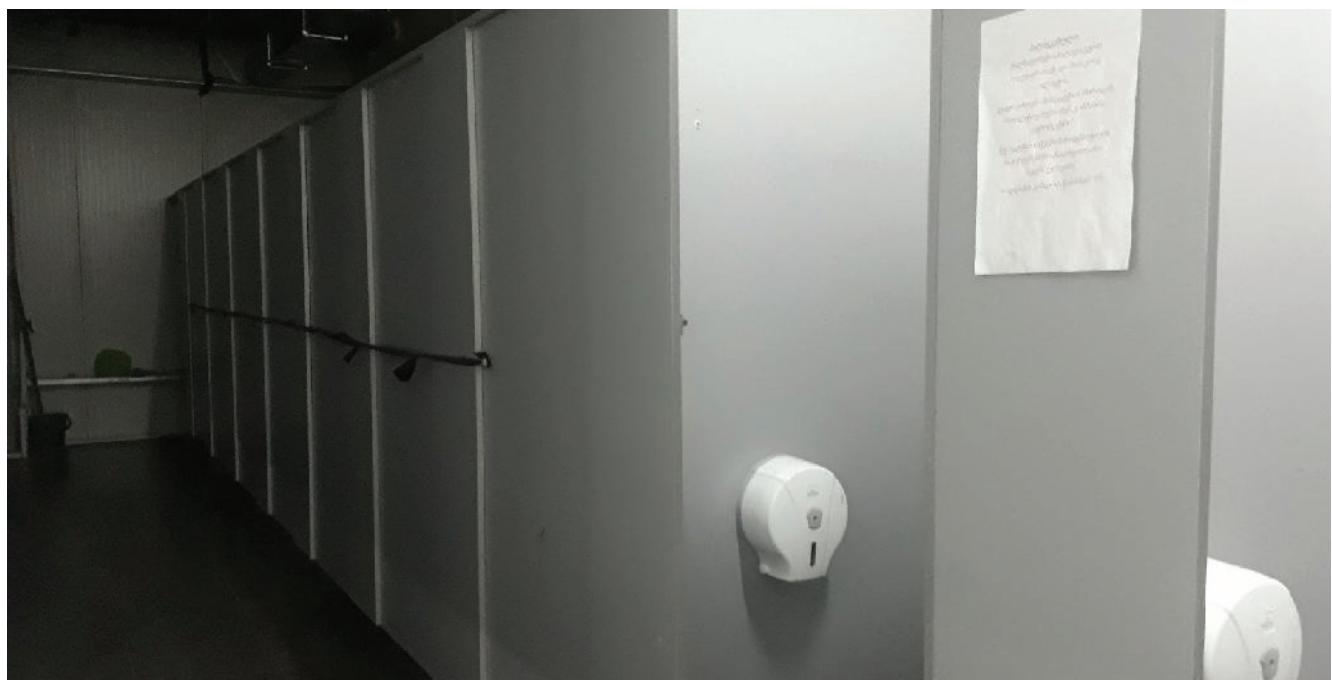
The women would casually tell stories of how they would get home and fall on their sofa as if they were dead. I felt the same. But I had it easy. Unlike me, most of these women have families, and after work they'd have to pull a second shift of domestic labour.

By the afternoon I started to develop an allergic response to something in the air. I developed an itchy rash on my face and I told the other women about it. They told me they suffered from such symptoms all the time.

The cleaner was supposed to come once a day, in the morning, to vacuum, but when I saw her she merely swept the floor. By 15:00, I started to lose concentration and a couple of times the press caught the edge of my finger.

'Be careful', the other women told me.

Rusiko suggested that I pretend to need to use the bathroom just so I could get a little bit of rest. She said she did it all the time.



*Most of the toilets are locked and none of them have toilet paper.
Photo: Tamuna Chkareuli.*

While we were working, she too received an injury, accidentally cutting her finger with a pair of tailor's shears. When another worker brought a first-aid kit, it turned out it didn't contain even a single plaster.

By the end of the day, HR head Nino Eloshvili came down and said that the Rustavi minibus would be late, and that those who were going to Rustavi would be leaving at 19:00.

Management controlled even the minibus schedule. We were almost entirely under their control. But, I would later learn a story, that would make what I had seen with my own eyes almost quaint by comparison.

LELA'S STORY

Lela Migeneishvili, 36, the supervisor of the cutting workshop back in 2016, was the 'director's sunshine' – as she told me Marina used to call her. That is, until the Sunday when her staff didn't come in to work.

The large quantity of work her team had to do each day put enormous pressure on the workers, and Lela would take the work home or call her team and beg them to work late hours or on Sundays. The workers' weren't paid for the extra days and hours. Lela told me they only did it to avoid abuse from the bosses.

Nevertheless, Lela was devoted to her job and, until that Sunday, Marina was always good to her. More than just any weekend, that particular day it was also Giorgoba, a Georgian holiday in honor of Saint George. Lela did not dare to ask her staff to come to work.

The next day, the production manager of the cutting workshop reported her actions to Blakunova.

Outraged, Marina came in and began to berate Lela in front of her staff.

'She was screaming and banging a ruler on my desk'. Lela hoped it would be a one-day misunderstanding, but that didn't pan out. 'I was always eager to earn her approval, but she didn't appreciate it'.

Then a new, and very complicated cutting pattern arrived that Lela couldn't figure out quickly. She was afraid to approach Marina for help, for fear of further abuse.

As a result, the workshop did not meet their quota.

In despair, Lela asked for a few workers to help out in the workshop but Blakunova refused. When one of the workers in the cutting workshop quit because of the stress Marina blamed Lela. She said that Lela had plotted with the worker to undermine her and the factory itself.

She threatened Lela, who recalled the director telling her 'You don't know who I am. I will destroy your life and you will beg me to stop.'

Lela said that, at that moment, she felt like she would pass out. She stumbled out of Blakunova's office and headed for the factory doctor. A few seconds after Lela had entered the doctor's office, Blakunova flung open the door, screaming and tried to lock herself in the room with Lela.

'She absolutely lost her human face. I have no idea what she wanted to do to me in that room'. After a brief scuffle, Lela managed to escape the room, and ran to the cutting workshop.

Lela threw away the cutting charts, the pens and the pencils off her work table, and crumpled to the ground, sobbing. Frightened co-workers tried to pull her hands away from her face but her body was completely frozen. When they finally managed it, Lela was blue in the face.

Blakunova had her thrown out of the building into the cold rain outside.

Lela was fired the day before her son's birthday.

Because of Lela, the cutting shop staff didn't receive their salaries that month. Though after they objected, everyone received salaries except for her. After receiving the salaries the workers later collected signatures stating that she was a bad manager and deserved to be fired.

One member of her team even wrote a letter of gratitude to the management.

BROKEN PROMISES

Lela was far from the only person at the factory to suffer the wrath of Marina Blakunova and the other Eurotex managers. The same year that Lela was fired, 2016, almost three dozen workers, with Lela among them, approached the Georgian Trade Unions Confederation (GTUC) for aid in helping them secure unpaid wages.

The GTUC campaign was spearheaded by Giorgi Diasamidze. He told me about his first major interaction with factory director Blakunova.

'She told me we [Georgians] should be grateful that she gave jobs to those people', he said. He warned Marina that the trade unions would go over her head and address Moncler, Eurotex' chief contractor, with an official letter, but Marina laughed it off. 'She said that Olga Markova from Moncler is her friend, and we would achieve nothing.'



*Olga Markova with Moncler representatives during a visit to another factory which also manufactured the brand in 2014.
Photo: Facebook 'Sewing factory Laura Ghachava'.*

Lela said that representatives of Moncler would come from Italy often. Workers were forbidden from speaking to them. There was one tailor who knew Italian perfectly and talked to the Italians. She was fired without reason.

These visitors often saw Blakunova yelling at workers, but didn't say anything.

After the GTUC campaign, some monitoring was performed by the brand.

'The workers were in a room with the [company] representatives for questioning, but were met by the management at the doorstep', Giorgi Diasamidze said.

But compensation for the workers, among other demands, was only satisfied after footage of Marina Blakunova screaming at workers and preventing them from leaving the factory was posted online.

Lela received all of her unpaid wages, while other workers were only partially repaid.

But, for Lela, the victory came at a heavy price. She said that several days after she won her unpaid wages, her husband received an anonymous call claiming that Lela had sex with numerous co-workers, in the private room where she worked (in truth, she did not actually have her own room).

Lela's husband left her and their two children.

Even though today Lela has recovered, has a new job, and lives with a new partner, she remembers the work at the Geo-M-Tex as the most traumatic experience of her life.

'For months after they threw me out, I couldn't pass the turn to the factory without breaking into tears'.

THE THIRD DAY

The morning of my third day, Nino Eloshvili loudly announced that today those who would like to stay longer could do so. It sounded as if yesterday and the day before people also stayed of their own will. When she left the room, workers exchanged comments about how everything here was 'a bunch of lies'.

Before leaving, Nino told me she would bring some safety documents for me to sign. She never came back, but I asked other women what it was and they said they all signed this paper in which they took full responsibility for any injuries. If they break any of the machines, they would have to pay for them.

But these machines do not need any mistakes or mishandling to break. The dust and regular wear and tear is enough. Technicians are a common sight on the factory floor and the machines seem to be just as exhausted as the workers.



Machines often break down because of the accumulation of dust.
Photo: Tamuna Chkareuli.

That day, they also cleaned the air conditioner. They emptied a desert's worth of dust out of it. The same with the vacuum cleaner – either it doesn't work because it is choked with dust, or it wheezes ineffectively. No matter what happens, the dust, like the management, always seems to win.

My goal for the day was to try to understand how the salaries are distributed. I spoke to the main technologist, who explained the maximum fixed salaries within three categories of workers, ₩300 (\$100) – category one, ₩400 (\$140) – category two, and ₩550 (\$190) – category three.

But despite the seeming simplicity of the system, it is unclear how much you'll get in the end. This depends on the performance of the workers in your section of the factory and how close you come to meeting the quota – one which is, as one technologist told me, 'far from normal'.

What in most places is called 'over-performance' is considered normal here. She also told me that for me, while I'm still 'learning' it's hard to say what my salary will be, and I will only see how much I've earned on payday.

'So what's the point of the fixed salary?' I asked. But, as always, I never got a straight answer. The reality is that no one knows for sure how lucky they will be next month, and no one asks questions. People who ask questions don't stay here for long.

During lunch, I meet another controller woman from the upstairs shop and she confirmed this, also adding that once she missed a day because she was ill and it was subtracted from her salary. Controllers have to stand all day, so it's common for them to have back pain, sometimes bad enough that they cannot work.

The workers at Geo-M-Tex understand that they're being mistreated, but they don't see what they can do about it. Nor do they blame the government. For them, it seems, the factory is a country of its own.

'It's private property', Rusiko told me. 'They do what they want here, these are their laws.' I remember when she said these words, she wore a scarf. Emblazoned on it was the logo of Georgia's ruling party, Georgian Dream.

After three days at the factory, I decided to talk to the HR manager and ask when I will finally be doing what I came to learn. I spent half an hour in front of the office, but she never came out. I went to the senior technologist again.

'Oh it won't be before long', she told me. 'We have a new model of trousers coming now, and there's no one else to press buttons'.

EPILOGUE

After finishing my time at Geo-M-Tex, I reached out to Eurotex and the companies whose brands were made at the factory.

I asked about the litany of abuses that took place during my time there, and the terrible stories I heard.

Eurotex wrote that 'there was never unfair or humiliating treatment in our organisation. During the three years of our operation, we never had such complaints, including legal cases'.

German clothing company Uvex, who had been manufacturing safety trousers at Geo-M-Tex, informed me that they had moved production to the factory for 'test purposes' and 'finished the collaboration by the end of November 2019'.

Luxury brand Moncler wrote that they had 'committed to respect and uphold human rights in all areas of its operations and within its sphere of influence. To this purpose, we regularly audit our suppliers through third-party inspections. This approach is applied uniformly across all countries in which Moncler operates'.

'For your information', they added. 'Even if we did in the past, we are not currently working with the supplier named Eurotex.'

Equiline thanked me for informing them of what had happened at the factory but added that they 'have always implemented the procedures and verifications according to our corporate standards without detecting anything'.

Update: When I wrote to Eurotex, Veronika Blakunova, Marina Blakunova's daughter, supplied a document authored by Eurotex lawyers which stated that Eurotex had shut down the operations indefinitely. After completing the article, I went to check out what was happening at the factory. Part of the building was demolished, however, another part of the factory remained intact and, more importantly, seemed to be fully operational. I even saw my former co-workers walking out for a lunch break. This article has been updated to reflect this new information.

Part III

CONTROL



Illustration by Dato Parulava/OC Media.

Imagine you're a woman in her forties from the industrial port city of Poti, Georgia. Your husband probably works at the port, perhaps in customs or in shipping. You have two children who are at university or in school.

You have debts and your husband's salary is not enough to cover everything, so you are constantly saving money. You don't go out – not that there is someplace to go, even if you wanted to. You don't take any holidays.

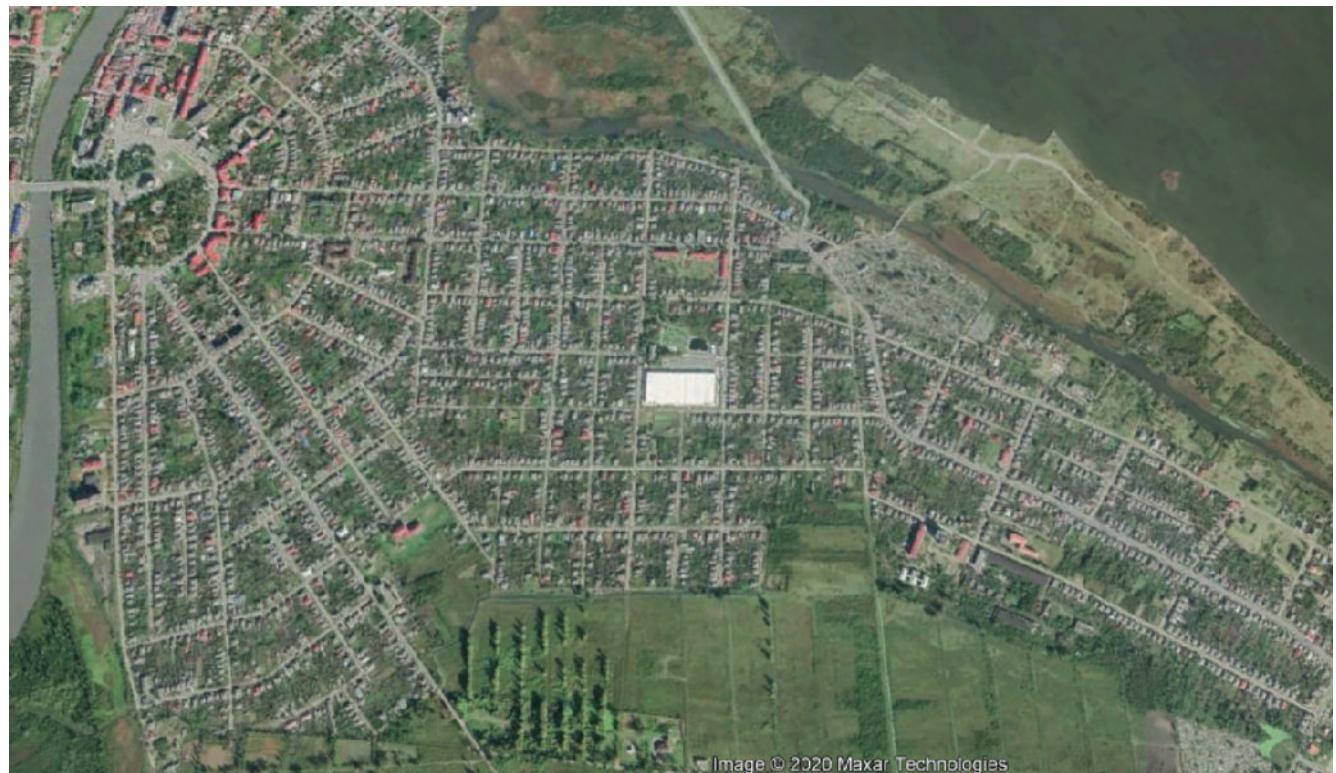
Your only entertainment consists of talking to relatives on the phone and visiting the neighbours. You haven't been to a doctor in years, despite that nagging pain in your chest. You prefer to save on anything and everything because the children need an education. Maybe they can get out of this dead-end town, where there is no perspective for them.

Or maybe you are younger, one of those young women whose parents did not have the opportunity to send you to Tbilisi or Batumi to get an education, so now you're stuck in Poti.

The only job a woman like you can get is in hospitality or maybe at the bank. But these jobs are underpaid, and anyway, you don't speak English so they would never hire you. Most of your friends have left town or got married, and so you are desperate to change something, anything in your life.

Or you live in one of those villages near Poti that have no workplaces at all.

Or you're a pensioner who's struggling to find an income not to be a burden to the family.



*Ajara Textile (the large white rectangle) on the outskirts of Poti is one of the few workplaces in the area.
Photo: Google Earth.*

It doesn't matter who you are, so long as you lack opportunity and are willing to work. You start to think about going to Turkey for seasonal work, as other women like you hear about it – 'The big factory'.

Maybe it was a friend, or maybe a neighbour who told you about this place and said that it is taking everyone, literally. No experience is needed.

You are amazed. Can this be real?

You build up the courage to go there and ask for a job. The moment you walk in, you are struck by the magnitude of the place. How big, how clean, how organised it is. But even more, you are amazed at the conditions you are being offered – free transportation, free food, and a salary that 'entirely depends' – as the factory representative tells you, 'on your desire to work'.

Breathless with excitement, you agree.

They bring in a bunch of papers and quickly tell you what to sign and where. Then the HR gives you a sheet of paper with very large letters that say 'I have read, understood, and am confirming', you need to copy these words right here, they tell you. The salary is a bit low, but it's definitely better than what you have now. You sign one last time.

This did not happen to me. Not exactly like this. But this, or some variation of this, happened to my co-workers who told me their stories. And when I applied to work at the Poti branch of Ajara Textile, I pretended that I too was one such woman.

AJARA TEXTILE

Ajara Textile is a subsidiary of Turkey-based Abay Uluslararası Tekstil Turizm ve Yatırım (Abay International Textile Tourism and Investment) which is, itself, a subsidiary of Aceka holding, a large Turkish company that has been operating in the textile industry for over 60 years.

Ajara textile has three branches in Georgia, one in Poti, one in Batumi, and one in Bobokvati. It employs roughly 3,000 people.

The Poti branch was supported by a ₣9.2 million (\$3.3 million) loan from the Georgian government through the Produce in Georgia programme (also known as Enterprise Georgia). It has produced t-shirts for the Polish and Croatian teams competing in the FIFA World Cup in 2018, as well as for the Italian team competing in 2012.

The Poti municipal assembly told OC Media that before the opening of the factory in late 2017, company representatives had several consultations with then-assembly chair Aleksandre Topuria, who has since left the public service.

Topuria denied having consultations with the company, stating that his only interest was to 'create more jobs' in the region and his involvement did not go beyond 'offering the Turkish directors to open a branch here [in Poti] through an acquaintance'.

After resigning, Aleksandre Topuria became the general director of another Turkish co-owned textile factory in Poti.



Upon entering Ajara textile, workers have to pass several security checkpoints.
Photo: Tamuna Chkareuli.

GETTING INSIDE

To get inside the factory on a typical day, a worker must pass through gates flanked on each side by high walls topped with barbed wire, usually, they are driven in on a minibus supplied by the company.

Within the walls, the factory is surrounded by guards, mostly serious-looking men in grey coveralls. Inside, the guards, while no less numerous, are all women, in case a worker is acting suspicious enough for a pat-down search.

Under the watchful eye of the guards, workers walk in through the main entrance, which is equipped with a small fingerprint scanner. The scanner ensures that only factory workers get in or out through the main entrance, it also works as a biometric punch clock, tracking late arrivals and absences.

Past the fingerprint scanner is the locker room. That's where you change into your uniform, usually blue or orange coveralls, and deposit your phone in a locker – lest you think of taking photos of trade secrets.

After the locker room, you have to walk through the metal detector, and if it goes off, you are carefully searched. Espionage is taken very seriously at Ajara Textile.

Unlike Geo-M-Tex, the previous factory I infiltrated, the Ajara Textile factory was hyper-clean, orderly, and high-tech. The factory building itself is a single floor, a warehouse large enough to fit several Boeing 747s.

[Read more on OC Media: Inside Georgia's textile industry: Part II – Undercover]

The building is subdivided into several large sections, each designated for a particular stage of production (sewing, cutting, etc.). In any given section there are rows upon rows of tables where workers sit in front of machinery, each of which performs one specific task at a rapid pace (for example, applying the bottom stitch to a shirt).

In between the tables and down the halls, large markings are painted on the ground. These are for the many robots that constantly patrol the factory. From what I could ascertain, they scan the markings to orient themselves.

The robots serve the function of efficiently moving large quantities of in-production clothing throughout the factory, ensuring that raw fabric is turned into a t-shirt at a quick and regular tempo.

The workers seem fearful of the robots, and not simply because the robots move along with little regard for whoever might be in their way. Rather, the robots, when they take the containers of products from the desks of the workers, do not ask if the worker needs a little more time to fill it, nor do they respond to pleas of 'just give me one moment more!'. They operate with a cold mechanical efficiency in the service of a production quota.

If a worker turns their eyes up, they can see plasma televisions hanging above the factory floor. With constantly changing numbers they too serve the quota, reporting what percentage of it the workers have completed at any given moment – driving them to keep up or increase the pace.

THE LEFTOVERS

'It's not too bad here', I said to Inga, the woman who was in charge of my apprenticeship at the factory. My voice was still shaking from all the security I had to pass before entering.

'Let's talk in a month', Inga replied. She has worked in the factory for one-and-a-half years, and as there was nothing better, so she got used to it, she said.

Inga started as an apprentice just like me.

She escorted me through the factory to the place where I would receive my training. The largest and quietest of the factory's production sections. I quickly began to think of those who worked there as 'the leftovers'.

Ajara Textile, like many factories in former communist countries, organises its workers into 'brigades', groups of workers who form production teams. When a brigade becomes very efficient, it often gets dismantled so its workers can join other brigades and speed them up.

While it may be a good strategy to speed up the overall production, some workers do not get reassigned to new brigades. These workers are the 'leftovers'. They work on small tasks, like sewing on labels, or fixing minor mistakes. While the leftover condition is temporary, as eventually brigades will be formed of the leftovers themselves, it is still undesirable, as leftover workers do not receive the salary bonuses that those in brigades do.

Apprentices like myself worked side by side with the leftovers. We too would be part of the brigades assembled out of the leftovers.

The plans for these new brigades are always ready before all the necessary workers are in place, the requisite slots simply need to be filled. And so from the moment I started training, they put me on the same machine that I would work on as part of a future brigade.

From the moment I walked into the leftovers room, I realised that at Ajara Textile, everything and everyone has their place.

DISCIPLINE AND PUNISHMENT

On the second day, all the new employees, including myself, were called out to the meeting room. There we were trained by Achi Martalishvili, an energetic young man from human resources who addressed us in a soft kind tone and called us his ‘dear friends’.

He taught us about our contracts and about the company’s internal rules and regulations.

The contract at Ajara Textile stipulates a base pay of ₾300 (\$100) per month, for 45 hours of work per week. A sum that amounts to ₾1.33 (\$0.47) per hour. Workers get a 50% higher wage for any overtime hours and double the hourly wage if they work on weekends or holidays. Rates that, according to the company, were determined by looking at ‘the payroll data and wages of those employed in the field in Georgia’.

‘After a month of work’, Martalishvili told us: ‘you’ll be moved to the bonus system’.

The bonus system exists both at the level of the individual and the level of the brigade.

At the individual level, there are three separate bonuses: a discipline bonus that can net you an extra ₾20 (\$7.20) per month; a ‘stars’ bonus for passing examinations on new equipment which is worth another ₾20, and a perfect attendance bonus worth ₾10 (\$3.60).

Martalishvili described the system in glowing terms. ‘You can receive an extra ₾50 in total by doing practically nothing’, he said.

However, this seemingly effortless money-making opportunity also doubles as a method of discipline and punishment. Each of the three separate bonuses also come attached with a series of violations, that reduce their value. For example, an imperfect performance in the equipment examinations lowers the stars bonus, while missing workdays lowers the attendance bonus.

The discipline bonus is the most complicated, with a long list of infractions that lower the payout. Each is usually worth -₦2. These infractions range from the very specific to the incredibly general, including eating or drinking at the workplace, talking to a colleague while working, not doing what you are told, and turning a blind eye to a mistake.



*Showing up without a uniform is a discipline violation in Ajara Textile.
Photo: Tamuna Chkareuli.*

Worse still, the list of infractions is mentioned for only the briefest of moments during training. You must try to memorise it – a nearly impossible task. As a result, as you work you police yourself excessively, trying not to break any of the real or perhaps just imagined rules. It is mentally exhausting.

Compared to all this, the brigade bonus is relatively simple.

For any given item, a quota of a certain number of items for a particular period of time is established. When a brigade completes 60% of the quota, all of its members immediately receive a ₩10 (\$3.60) bonus, when they complete 100% of the quota, the bonus is upped to ₩50 (\$18).

The brigade bonus is limited by quality control, which is different for each brand. When we worked on Nike t-shirts, for example, 30 items were chosen at random from each brigade and if they were considered to be below standard the whole batch would be sent back.

Each batch returned decreases the brigade bonus.

For some workers, bonuses are a very significant portion of their monthly pay-cheque.

Achi Martalishvili told us that at Ajara Textile, they were proud of their ‘no-fines’ policy.

After listening to his speech, we proceeded to the evaluation tests.

We took two tests, one on the payments and one on health and safety hazards. We aced the tests. How do I know? Martalishvili gave us the answers. It seemed he just wanted to get it over with.

One of the hazards mentioned in the health and safety test was the danger of developing back injuries during work. It was suggested we sometimes stand up and do a three-four minute exercise during our workday to remedy the problem. After I began working, I noticed that no one did such exercises.

None of the workers, it seems, was ready to lose their brigade productivity bonus because of something as trivial as their physical well-being.

JUST DO IT

For nine hours a day, I was learning how to quickly set thread into the sewing machine and sew straight lines that would, in short order, be the bottom of Nike’s Dri-FIT t-shirts, the same ones that the workers next to me were tagging and packing in plastic to ship to Europe.

T-shirts that didn’t pass the quality control were labelled ‘tamir’, or ‘fix’ in Turkish.

I later found out that not all the stock labelled ‘tamir’ was sent back to be fixed. Instead, some of it was later sold to the factory workers themselves.

One of my colleagues described the process to me. Boxes with clothing labelled ‘tamir’ are placed outside, behind the factory, and workers are given the chance to buy them below retail cost.

She strongly advised me not to participate in this ‘madness’.

'They are really killing each other for those shirts', she said.

Madness or no, for the company, it seemed to be a brilliant system. They got to profit on flawed stock twice: the first time, when they subtracted money from the workers for producing substandard goods, and the second time, when they sold these same goods back to them.

After my time at Ajara Textile, I reached out to the company for their comment on the practice.

'Employees can, once in a while, purchase the clothing produced by the apprentices in the learning period for a symbolic price', they wrote. 'By which the company encourages and supports their employees.'

Working at Ajara Textile was not easy, all the operations require accuracy and a good eye; even the way you hold the material matters – but the workers were up to the task, I was truly impressed with how quickly and accurately they worked.

But despite the workers' skill, speed always seemed to remain an issue. Cutting through the noise of hundreds of sewing machines and the extraordinarily loud music (which according to the employers, was requested by the workers themselves), I could always hear the repeated shouts the brigade supervisors demanding their subordinates work faster.

Every once in awhile, loudspeakers would echo the names and surnames of women who needed to 'immediately show up at the factory administration'. You never knew the reason. It could be for punishment because of a discipline violation or perhaps for praise or even a promotion. But no one ever knew, not even the ones being called.

We had three breaks, 10 minutes in the morning and late afternoon, and 45 minutes at lunch, all announced by the ringing of a bell.



*Lunches in Ajara Textile are free.
Photo: Tamuna Chkareuli.*



They are not particularly nutritious.

Photo: Tamuna Chkareuli.

For our lunch break, we all rushed to the canteen where we were served a bit of soup with potatoes, some cucumber slices, and half a loaf of bread on metal plates. After eating, the workers would take a little time to relax, though they remained on factory premises, which include a small park and a little duck pond.

During the shorter breaks, women either chat with their neighbours or talk on the phone, as these are the only times they can do so. No one seems too happy, but they've come to terms with the work. It's better, after all, than much of the other factory work available in the country, especially when one considers the lack of opportunities in Poti.

'It was so hard at first', said a young woman working next to me. 'But I'm used to it now'.



*Workers are allowed to use phones only on breaks.
Phones are not allowed on the factory floor for 'security reasons'.
Photo: Tamuna Chkareuli.*

She even encouraged me, telling me that when I joined a brigade, I would earn more. She said that even though the tempo of work would be faster, it was worth it. She was a leftover, and like all the other leftovers, dreamed of being part of a brigade again.

The closing bell rang at 19:00. Before we left the factory, the other workers and I gathered near the factory exits where security guards searched our bags. It took quite a while since they had to search over 1,000 people.

After we were allowed to leave the factory, most of the women headed to the waiting minibuses which took them straight home. Other than me, very few women preferred to walk.

FEAR FACTOR

In early 2018, a young worker, Sopio Gogoladze, left her job at Ajara textile after a conflict with the management. She was five minutes late to her station after a break because she went to the restroom.

When she returned to the assembly line, she received humiliating treatment from her brigade supervisor. She complained to human resources, but Achi Martalishvili told her she didn't have the right to use the restroom without permission.

'He literally said that the [brigade supervisor] had the right to behave that way if I was slowing down production', Sopio told me. 'He spoke with such arrogance that I decided to resign. I couldn't take this kind of treatment'.

Sopio promised Achi that she would return, this time with trade union officials and journalists in tow. The young HR manager responded that she would never find a job with better working conditions than in Ajara textile.



Sopio Gogoladze was the only worker from Ajara Textile to ever reach out to trade unions and the media for help.
Photo: Sopio Gogoladze.

Sopio tried to make good on her threat and got in touch with Giorgi Diasamidze, a union leader with the Georgian Trade Union Confederation (GTUC). He advised her to gather several like-minded colleagues and to begin organising and fighting as a collective.

'Unfortunately, they were too scared. Only one person came to the GTUC meeting – a cleaner who has also had problems', Sopio said. 'At one point, Ajara TV was interested in recording three of the workers, who agreed on the conditions they would be filmed from behind, but on the day of the recording, none of them showed up.'

In Poti, where almost everyone knows everyone, people generally refrain from complaining, as it might affect their future.

'Fear is the key factor', Sopio concluded.

After her resignation, Achi Martalishvili told a journalist from Fortuna Plus that Sopio had 'psychological issues'. Her former classmate, who was a security guard at Ajara Textile, kindly advised her to stop talking and said that the company was willing to rehire her.

'He told me that he could speak to the head of security and they would put me in the brigade and position of my choice, and "figure it out" with the people who offended me. I should just stop talking.'

She refused.

After her attempts to fight back against the company failed, the workers in Sopio's brigade got a single time monthly bonus of ₾40 (\$14). To this day she is the only Ajara Textile employee who has ever shared her experience publicly.

'I know it's Georgia and we have to close our eyes to certain things, but I was not treated like a human being there', she said.

AS GOOD AS IT GETS

While writing this three-part investigation, I worked inside several Georgian textile factories and heard stories of conditions inside many more. For me, there is no question, Ajara Textile is as good as it gets. While most textile factories in Georgia seem like 19th-century workhouses, working at Ajara Textile was like visiting the future.

And yet, to me, it seemed a deeply dystopian future.

My co-workers at Ajara Textile seemed miserable at their jobs. The constant stress of making the quota, the rules against speaking to each other even as we sat side-by-side for hours. Every action being constantly monitored and measured. Even something as personal as a finger-print becoming a routine part of the production process.

It felt like we were just machines in the shape of people, no different than a sewing machine.

I don't think my co-workers wanted to be there. But they had no choice. To feed their families, to rent a flat, to help take care of their elderly parents, to get a decent university education, or to save enough to have a shot at a decent future outside of Poti, they had to go to the factory.

And even when workers agree to a contract, there are still internal regulations to consider.

'Violating any point of the Internal Regulations is the same as breaking the contract', Lela Gvishiani, an analyst at the Human Rights Education and Monitoring Centre (EMC), who I spoke to after my time at Ajara Textile told me. 'Very often employees don't have the possibility to thoroughly go through such a huge document and announce their own conditions.'

'Instead of being equal', she added, 'The employee is already weakened before even signing the document.'

In principle, she said, the employee and the employer should be equal but ‘there is no voice of the employee in the [Ajara Textile] contract’.

This is, of course, not unique to Ajara Textile, far from it.

The wider legislative structure in Georgia is also geared towards privileging employers, Gvishiani said. Indeed, Georgia has even been criticized by Human Rights Watch for its ‘lax labour regulations’. For example, Georgia has a minimum wage of \$7 a month, largely symbolic overtime legislation (no monetary amount for extra hours worked is specified), and a labour inspection agency that, at present, employs 40 inspectors for all of Georgia, – though, they plan to increase the number to 100 this year. In the entirety of 2019, labour inspectors only visited two textile factories.

‘The investor doesn’t have any responsibilities to [Produce in Georgia], and we don’t give directives’, Nina Kakulia, investor relations manager at Produce in Georgia, the Georgian government’s programme to promote international investment in the country, told me.

Their only goal, she said, is to serve the investor to maintain an ‘investment-friendly atmosphere’ in the country.

‘We don’t perform monitoring’, she added. ‘We keep communication open [with the investor] because it’s generally very important how the investor feels in the country after starting the business and that they know that the government is eager to help them.’

According to Lela Gvishiani, this attitude is par for the course. ‘No one ever checks and asks employers for anything’, she said. ‘They are dominant, and given the job situation in the country, merely having one is already a luxury. Employers make their own rules here.’

‘Employees are left at the mercy of employers.’