

# The State

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## Promoting diversity at the Columbia International Festival Event strives to foster better understanding among dozens of cultures

By *CHUCK CRUMBO* - [ccrumbo@thestate.com](mailto:ccrumbo@thestate.com)

"Hey, that's Soviet Georgia," a woman pushing a stroller said Saturday as she approached Irakli Machitidze's exhibit at the 14th Annual Columbia International Festival.

"It's not Soviet Georgia," said Machitidze, who was manning the Georgia booth. "We have our own language. We don't even speak Russian."

"Oh, yeah, I knew that," the woman said, walking past.

And so it went Saturday on the opening day of the weekend event aimed at celebrating the Midlands' cultural diversity.

By noon, hundreds had streamed into the Americraft Canteen Building at the State Fairgrounds to visit the exhibits of about 60 nations. Visitors collected pamphlets and pencils, shopped the bazaars for imported gifts and souvenirs, sampled the cuisines of a dozen countries and watched dancers performing in their native dress.

The event continues today from noon to 6 p.m.

Machitidze, a USC graduate student in international studies, spent much of the day trying to counter misinformation about Georgia. First, Georgia is not a neighbor of South Carolina and not a member of the Southeastern Conference. It borders the Black Sea, sandwiched between Russia and Turkey. Second, it has not been "Soviet Georgia" since the Soviet Union collapsed in 1990.

"We're an independent sovereign nation with our own language and alphabet," said Machitidze, who plans to be a career diplomat. Machitidze wasn't the only one trying to clear up some misunderstandings.

Eve Martineau, who was at the France booth, said some Americans still grouse about her country not backing the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

"The Iraq war was very hard for me," said Martineau, a chef who hails from Toulouse in southern France. "They let me know that they think the French should have gone in."

France, though, has backed the United States in a number of other fights, including the Revolutionary War, she said. France also contributes troops to the U.S.-led NATO effort in Afghanistan, she added.

The theme of this year's festival focuses on the Nordic countries of Norway, Iceland, Sweden, Finland and Denmark. Located near the entrance of the exhibition hall, the Nordic display included products familiar to U.S. consumers such as Volvos and Saabs, and the leather-covered Ekornes jazz recliner and ottoman, reputed to be the most comfortable chair in the world.

Henry Henriksen, an affable Norwegian and retired SCE&G hydroelectric engineer, smiled when he mentioned the question people ask him most about Norway.

"They want to know if Norway is the capital of Sweden," said Henriksen, who has lived in Columbia for 22 years.

Norway, of course, is an independent nation and Oslo is its capital. Sweden, likewise, is an independent nation, and Stockholm is its capital.

To Zlatko Zagrafski, a native of Macedonia and a computer science and engineering professor at S.C. State University, the festival seemed to accomplish its goal.

"I think this is a great event," Zagrafski said. "It promotes diversity. It's good for the state."

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### International

Conjunto De Proyecciones Folkloricas Recuerdos De Mi Panama (Group of Folkloric Projections 'Memories of my Panama') traveled from Orlando, Fl. to share traditional dances from Panama. An estimated 10,000 people are expected to attend the 14th Annual Columbia International Festival held in the Americraft Canteen building at the South Carolina State Fairgrounds this weekend. The festival showcases the music, culture, arts and food of various countries around the world.

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