

Interview ▶ Norber Meler Mayor of Foix

IRINA RYBALCHENKO

FOIX

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On July 19, Foix will host the sixteenth stage of the Tour de France cycling race, which will bring together cyclists and fans of this sport from all over the world, including neighboring Andorra. Foix could be interesting for all tourists coming from Andorra, not exactly cyclists. The city is known because of its medieval castle of the counts of Foix, famous in the Middle Ages. The Mayor of Foix, Norber Meler, told us about plans to develop the city and the biggest investment projects.

–What are the main economic indicators of your city?

–The budget of Foix is 25 million for six years.

Our city is a city of craftsmen, employees of administrations and service companies. Tourism is an important part of our economy thanks to the Château de Foix and the creation of a modern museum in the castle.

–Foix is just half an hour away from Andorra. Do you think that the logistics between Foix and Andorra should be better? There is a bus service between Andorra and Toulouse. Why is there no such direct bus between Andorra and Foix?

–Yes, but this requires an analysis of the situation point by point. Of course, in Andorra, food and gasoline prices are cheaper than in France due to its tax regime. We need a city without social problems because solving social problems is expensive. A direct bus to Andorra with cheap tickets would be a good solution and help our residents save money on food and car fuel.

On the other hand, the direct bus service between Andorra and Toulouse is very developed, buses run along the same road. There are often traffic jams at the French border, and problems with customs are common. All this hurts transport communication.

But anyway, I think that developing relations with Andorra could be useful. But so far neither side has the time or



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the desire to do so. And that's a pity.

We need more real exchanges of local goods with Andorra. And I can give you a good example. Director of Regional Natural Park of the Pyrenees Ariègeois Matthieu Cruège has established economic ties with Andorra. Andorrans come to Ariège with their local goods, our producers also go to Andorra. This park is about half of the Ariège, so it is very promising to develop such relations.

–The world has gone through some difficult years. You have already mentioned the difference in prices between Andorra and France. How much has the standard of living changed in Foix over the past year?

–Unfortunately, in recent years there have been more people living on the edge of poverty than ever before. Prices are rising while incomes are falling.

There are families in the city who live on 10,000 euros per month, there are pensioners who have a pension of 1,000 euros per month.

Wage growth amounted to 3.5%, while food prices and the school canteen rose by 5-10%, and prices for gasoline, diesel and heating rose by 10%. In a year, I think it will be even more difficult. We are heading for a big crisis.

–What solution?

–We come to the topic of politics. France voted for the president, who came to the result we see today. The same president was re-elected for another five years. But France is a democratic country and democracy is based on respect for the rights of voters.

–Are there any investments that may interest foreign investors?

We have land, but very little of it. Maybe there are some options in the private sector.

–What high-tech businesses are in Foix?

–There is only one example - Vitesco Technologies, which provides 500 jobs and develops innovative, efficient electrification technologies for all types of vehicles. The product range counts electronic controls, sensors and actuators as well as solutions for exhaust after-treatment.

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-Let's get back to economics. What are the city's main investment projects?

-We are building a social home for the poor who have nothing. The initial cost of the project was about 1,200,000 euros. However, during construction, there is an increase in prices for building materials. And now the budget is estimated at 1,800,000 euros. Who will pay the difference?

If the mayor's office suspends construction, it will put construction workers and material suppliers out of work. If construction continues, there will not be enough money for other projects, for example, for parking in the city center (cost about 1,000,000 euros) or reconstruction of the old bridge and its landscaping.

-The Robert Naudi University in Foix opened in 1990. At that time, it had the status of a «teacher training college». Now, this University Center named after Robert-Naudi is a full-fledged institution of higher education. How is it developing?

-In September 2022, we will have another faculty - a master's degree in theater arts. We hope that it will be popular among students, including foreign ones.

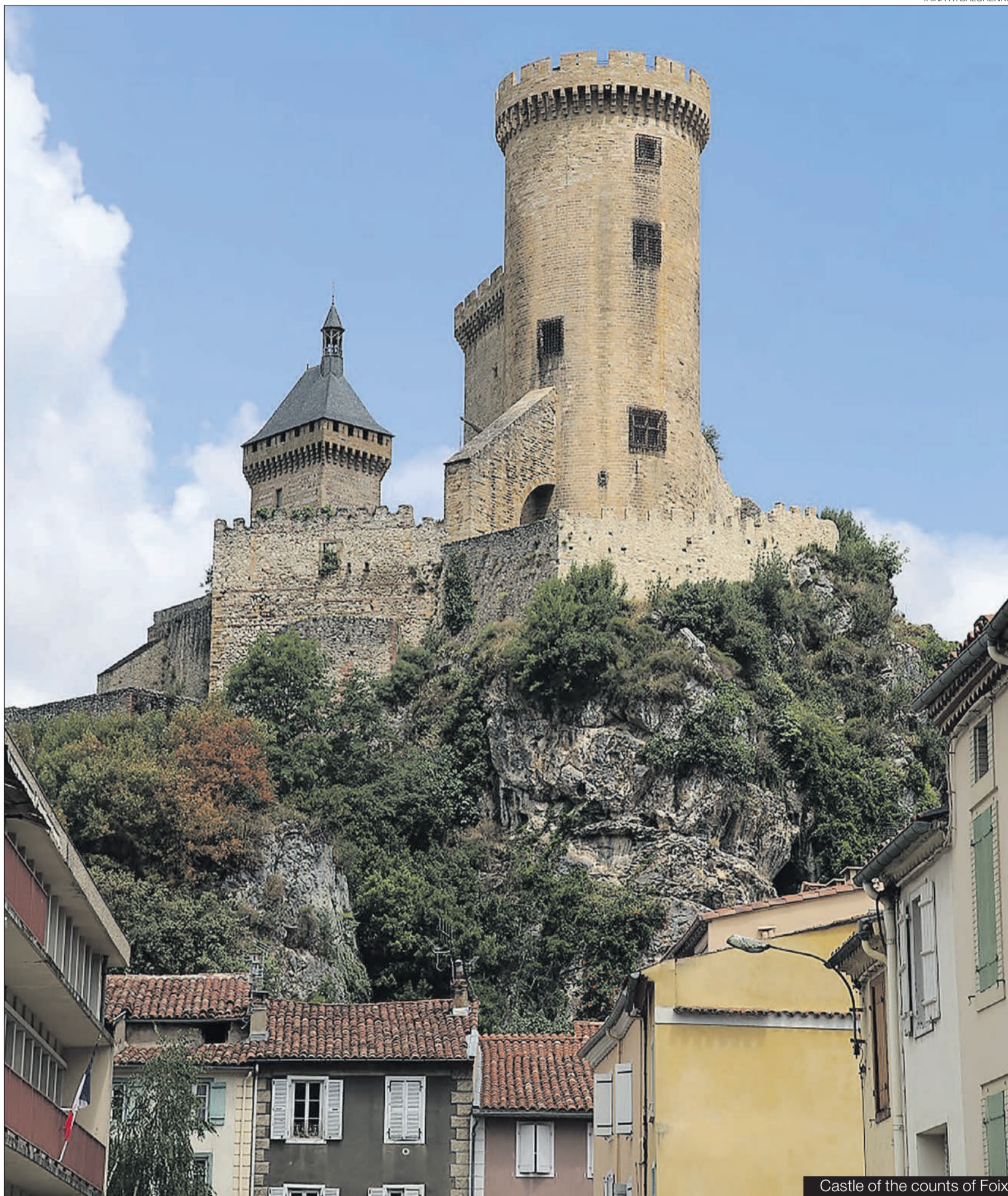
-On July 19, Foix will host the 16th stage of the Tour de France cycling race. How does the city plan to celebrate this event?

-The night before there will be a feast with street performances and entertainment. Once the tour arrives on the evening of July 19, the city will be blocked. Each time for us this is a grandiose event in terms of promoting the image of the city. The Tour de France has hundreds of millions of viewers all over the world. Helicopter filming will capture our castle, for us, this is the best advertisement.

-What would you like to do for the city as mayor that you have not done yet?

-You know, one worker was once asked: «What are you doing?» He replied: «I shaped a stone». And the other replied: «I shaped a stone to make a wall». And the third said: «I shaped a stone to make a wall of a beautiful cathedral».

Our work is part of a global and common project. It is this idea I try to instill in those who work with me - and this, as a rule, is the younger generation of 35-40-year-olds. ≡



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