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Nationalism and Hegemony in Post-Communist Georgia

Bakar Berekashvili

Introduction: Prelude for Georgian Nationalism

Georgian nationalism is a modern political and cultural project that embodies both liberal and conservative elements. The liberal narrative of Georgian nationalism is focused on the idea of sovereignty and statehood, and the trauma of the Soviet past. The liberal narrative of Georgian nationalism is, therefore, also an anti-Soviet narrative. The conservative narrative of Georgian nationalism, on the other hand, attempts to preserve what is labeled as “traditional values” and is not explicitly an anti-Soviet project. This narrative mostly presents itself as a “protector” paradigm for Georgia from foreign “alien” cultures. Moreover, nationalist ideology is part of the repertoire of all cultural and political elites who are involved in a struggle for power.¹¹

Georgian philosopher Zaza Shatirishvili (2009) identifies three national narratives of modern Georgia. According to him, the first narrative is a “classical” one that is “the history as well as story of the salvation and rescue of the Georgian nation despite invasions and imperial aggression over the ages” (Shatirishvili 2009, 391). The second narrative is related to the Rose Revolution, “narrating the birth of the new nation and ‘the mighty Georgian state’ from Shevardnadze’s chaos” (Shatirishvili 2009, 392). And the third narrative is a religious one, which claims that Eastern

¹¹ Nationalistic ideology based on the elements of victimization and traumatic past are the principal mechanisms for Georgian liberal political elites. Conservative elites are more focused on idealization of traditional cultural narratives.

Orthodoxy is a “genetically inherited religion” for Georgians (Shatirishvili 2009, 392).

Shatirishvili argues that all three narratives are linked with the Russian factor: “It must also be stressed that, in general, ‘the Russian argument’ (a specific version of conspiracy theory rhetoric) determines all three narratives: intelligentsia is ‘Russian’, authority and ‘new’ intellectuals are ‘Bolsheviks’ and the Church is also ‘Russian’, i.e. a branch of the Russian Church” (Shatirishvili 2009, 393). It could be argued that contemporary narratives of Georgian nationalism are mostly based on anti-Russian sentiments, especially observed in the nationalist narratives of Georgia’s liberal cultural and political circles. The church, on the other hand, remains reluctant to take an anti-Russian stance or support such narratives.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the first wave of Georgian nationalism began with the political rule of Zviad Gamsakhurdia. His nationalist discourse was based on anti-Russian rhetoric, on anti-Abkhaz and anti-Ossetian rhetoric, and on the superiority of the Georgian ethno-nation. Considering this, his ideological stance and rhetoric also threatened the Abkhaz and Ossetian populations and provoked greater waves of separatist sentiments in both areas of Georgia. Thus, the separation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgia could perhaps be seen as one of the first consequences of post-soviet Georgian nationalism led by president Gamsakhurdia. Therefore, it is no wonder that the birth of post-soviet Georgian nationalism began with the powerful ideological and cultural process of constructing an enemy image of almost all ethnic groups inside of Georgia and nations neighboring Georgia. Among these, the Russian, Abkhaz, and Ossetian factors were a key focus.

Gamsakhurdia’s nationalist regime collapsed in 1992 as a result of the civil war. The era of his successor, Eduard Shevardnadze, was a silent era in the contemporary history of Georgian nationalism. Although Shevardnadze deconstructed the powerful wave of romanticized ethnic nationalism pursued by Gamsakhurdia, it still did not help in restoring Georgia’s control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Shevardnadze could not play any role to transform the conflict.

The second and most powerful wave of post-communist Georgian nationalism was celebrated in the era of the Rose Revolution. The rhetorical-ideological habitus of Georgia's Rose Revolution was explicitly anti-Russian from the very beginning, but this rhetoric was radicalized after the war of 2008. In post-war Georgia, anti-Russian sentiments were intensively reproduced by the political and cultural institutions, and the reproduction of the Russian enemy image became the principal task of the ruling class.¹² This was a particular ideological and manipulative project organized by Saakashvili's neoliberal system. However, while demonizing Russians, Georgia's neoliberal government simultaneously conducted negotiations with Russian business companies and operators to attract Russian capital to Georgian market. Therefore, in this way, the anti-Russian sentiments of Saakashvili's nationalistic narratives was a populist project that aimed to strengthen the power of the dominant system.

Nationalism in Georgia after the War of 2008

Although the Rose revolution was organized by pro-Western liberal political and cultural elites, at the time the perception of Russia as an enemy was still vague. While Mikheil Saakashvili initially argued about the necessity of good relations with Russia shortly after the Revolution, the civic elites who came to power opted for a principally anti-Russian rhetoric.

At the very beginning, Saakashvili criticized Shevardnadze's inability to normalize relations with Russia. However, as soon as his social legitimacy and popularity started to decrease, Saakashvili himself gradually adopted an anti-Russian rhetoric. Prior to the August 2008 War, Saakashvili organized powerful anti-Russian propaganda by deploying the rhetorical tool of equating today's Russia with the Soviet Union. For example, the Soviet Occupation museum that was opened in spring of 2006 was the imitation of the institutional practice of de-communization and anti-Russian sentiments popular in the Baltic

¹² Here and henceforth, by "ruling class," I mean an alliance of political, financial, military, and cultural elites.

states.¹³ Swedish sociologist Göran Therborn wrote: “In May 2006 the Museum of National History, at the top of Rustaveli Avenue, announced a permanent exhibition on the ‘Soviet Occupation’—an idea of Baltic provenance—which Saakashvili had hastily taken over three months before it opened, financing it from the ‘presidential fund’. Inexplicably closed soon after for ‘restoration’, the museum is now open only to special guests of the President, such as his Polish and Ukrainian counterparts” (Therborn 2007, 79). To put it simply, Saakashvili organized powerful anti-Russian (anti-communist) rhetoric in Georgia by engaging international political actors involved in the construction of the enemy image of Russia (and of communists) in their own countries.

The August 2008 war deepened the process of constructing an enemy image and using it against the opponents of the regime. Particularly, the Russian factor became a major criterion for discrediting rivals in all fields. For example, the ruling class considered itself and President Saakashvili as the only pro-Western political force, and thus, resistance against such power was declared as resistance against national interests. Politicians, intellectuals, academics, and civic activists who resisted neoliberal autocracy were declared Kremlin spies and collaborators of the enemy’s secret services. Georgian democracy, already deeply challenged by right-wing radicalism, became more compromised by this process of oppression and marginalization of political and intellectual opposition.

Persecution and marginalization of the regime’s opponents by using this method of labeling the ideological opposition as spies of the Kremlin in post-soviet Georgia has its traditions rooted in the system of Gamsakhurdia. Saakashvili’s system imitated this anti-democratic practice in a more extreme way. The media, which considered itself as free and independent, was voluntarily tasked with the role of anti-Russian and thus, of anti-opposition propaganda. The goal of such propaganda in the media was to indoctrinate Georgian society with anti-opposition sentiments by accusing the opposition forces in pro-Russian orientation. The pro-governmental scholars and civic elites were regularly hosted in the formally independent media controlled by the

¹³ See for example the discussion on demolition of Soviet monuments in Estonia as a symbolic struggle against the Soviets: (Myers 2007).

government with the sole purpose of legitimizing the dominant governmental discourse on Russia and on the pro-Russian opposition. Considering this, the cultural elites of Rose Revolution practically imitated methods of Soviet intelligentsia, which legitimized the ideological discourses produced by the Soviet political apparatus.

Anti-Russian propaganda and the construction of an enemy image were also embedded into cultural and educational institutions. As I have argued elsewhere, the liberal and right-wing professors who supported the Rose Revolution have established stronger neoliberal ideological control over the academic field (Berekashvili 2017). Through this process, university professors and the academic community were swiftly assigned the role of missionaries of anti-Russian propaganda.¹⁴ The construction of enemy image of Russia also presented various ideals and values, including leftism, in an explicitly negative way. More precisely, socialism and all kinds of leftist ideologies were perceived as exclusively Russian phenomena, and Russia itself was equated with the Soviet Union. Therefore, in this context, new academic elites took the role of exorcists, to expulse “Russian devils” (which mean socialists, communists, and all sorts of leftists) from Georgian cultural and political life. Consequently, the construction of the enemy image was not simply concentrated on the demonization of Russia, but it was also deeply rooted in demonization of all ideological categories, apart from liberal democracy and neoliberalism.¹⁵

Interestingly, while the ruling class (alliance of government, civic elites, and financial elites) passionately promoted anti-Russian propaganda in the media and public life, Russian capital was welcomed by the government to acquire important economic and financial resources. More precisely, Russian financial companies and business operators

14 The regime controlled universities, but one of the most important instruments in the toolbox for career making was loyalty to the ideology of the government.

15 More specifically, academic disciplines in Georgia such as social and political studies are focused on marginalizing all social and political ideas other than neoliberalism. In this context, the Russian factor plays a key role as liberal or ultraliberal ideological categories are perceived as anti-Russian ideals. This process began in the era of the Rose Revolution and still continues to dominate Georgia’s cultural and academic life.

received political support from the government to implement their business activities as part of the Georgian economy. For instance, in the spring of 2012, the Minister of Internal Affairs, Vano Merabishvili, stated that “money has no smell” and that the “Russian investments are welcomed” (Civil.ge 2012).

Anti-Russian sentiments in post-war Georgia encapsulated Abkhazian and South Ossetian fears towards Georgian nationalism, and it made them look towards Russia as principal guarantor of their independence and right for self-determination. The conflict and misunderstanding between Georgians and Abkhazians as well as Ossetians deepened even more. In particular, Abkhazia and South Ossetia perceived Georgia as a historic enemy that oppressed their cultures and people, while Georgia considered Russia the greatest historic enemy that punished Georgia for its social, political, and cultural resistance against Russian domination. And in this context, Abkhazia and South Ossetia were perceived as an important part of this “inquisition.”

Although Saakashvili’s political rule collapsed after the parliamentary elections in autumn of 2012, the legacy of anti-Russian sentiments and the enemy image still shadows today’s political and cultural life in Georgia. Moreover, political parties compete in labeling each other “pro-Russian.” The former ruling party, United National Movement, accuses the current ruling party Georgian Dream of pro-Russian orientation. Conversely, Georgian Dream accused United National Movement and Saakashvili for playing the Kremlin’s cards. In this way, pro-Russian accusations still remain a major practice of political debates in contemporary Georgian media. Furthermore, the agenda of mainstream Georgian media is also deeply focused on “detection” or “identification” of the pro-Russian orientation of Georgian politicians even though they refuse to identify as being pro-Russian.

For instance, in August of 2018, presidential candidate Salome Zurbishvili stated that the war in August of 2008 was launched by Georgia. She also underlined that “A small country like Georgia cannot afford to be provoked: when you are a small country, you have to be smarter than your enemies” (Civil.ge 2018a). Zurbishvili’s statement was condemned by the opposition who accused her of being pro-Russian and betraying Georgia’s national interests. In another statement,

Zurabishvili argued that “We bombed our population, no president has the right to do it,” and she also added, “I want the territorial integrity of this country and I want that no president of this country bomb its territory and citizens” (ipn.ge 2018). Here again, furious by this statement of “traitor,” the Georgian liberal community (NGO elites, some young scholars and pro-liberal activists) on social networks labeled her as a “traitor of the nation” and “spy of the Kremlin.” This discourse has been common in the media supportive of Saakashvili and his party. For example, Nika Gvaramia, the General Director of Rustavi 2 TV station said, “I consider Zurabishvili a traitor and a great threat to our homeland, and yes, fighting against the country’s traitors is exactly what I will do, be it at Rustavi 2 or elsewhere.” (Civil.ge 2018b). The fact that Zurabishvili does not usually hesitate to be critical of Russia did not stop her from being portrayed by the mainstream media and opposition parties as a pro-Russian personality.

Talking about Georgia’s responsibility in the August 2008 war is not something that Zurabishvili “invented.” The report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia established by the EU in December 2008 underlined that “Open hostilities began with a large-scale Georgian military operation against the town of Tskhinvali and the surrounded areas, launched in the night of 7 to 8 August 2008.” The report also emphasized that the Russian response was “initially defensive, and legal, but quickly broke international law when it escalated into air bombing attacks and an invasion putting into Georgia well beyond South Ossetia” (Telegraph 2009).

Expression of support for normalization of relations with Russia is also considered the “language of a traitor.” The language of normalization is strictly stigmatized by the dominant class (those who influence formation of political and public opinion) and by the mainstream media who interprets this as an encouragement to “collaborate with the enemy.”

Civic and cultural elites, or in other words the “auditors” of Georgian democracy, are also involved in the construction of an enemy image of Russia by deploying anti-Russian rhetoric with references to ethnic and historical-anthropological speculations. For example, in his diary blog

published for Radio Liberty, Georgian NGO technocrat and human rights lawyer Giorgi Mshvenieradze quoted Georgian novelist Mikheil Javakhishvili (1880-1937) who once claimed that European culture filtered in Moscow and Petrograd “includes Mongol poison, not holy drink of West” (Radio Liberty 2018). The construction of the enemy image also involved presenting Russia as a historic enemy of “European civilization,” which also conflicts with Georgia as a historic part of the same “civilization.”

Therefore, contemporary Georgian civic elites are engaged in a wider, manipulative and ideological campaign spreading the message that if Georgians want to prove that they are true Europeans then they must resist Russia, which is a true enemy of European culture and civilization. Thus, in this way, pro-Western sympathy of Georgian civil society elites is mostly conditioned by cultural hate of Russia. At the same time, the pro-Western orientation and anti-Russian sentiments greatly contribute to the formation of class identity of contemporary Georgian civil society whose ideological habitus is based on cultural liberalism and on neoliberal imaginations of state and politics. Consequently, the role of Georgian civil society in the process of construction of the enemy image of Russia is significant as it serves for class interests of post-communist liberal and neoliberal elites.

Although the goal of Georgia’s liberal political and cultural elites is to impose and expand extreme anti-Russian sentiments in Georgian society, many ordinary Georgians neglect the politics of anti-Russian sentiments. In particular, a part of Georgian society believes that a strong Russia is necessary to balance western influences, and moreover, many Georgians also believe that the dissolution of the Soviet Union had a negative impact on Georgia (Pew Research Center 2017).¹⁶ However, many Georgians, especially young people, are influenced by anti-Russian discourses, particularly urban young people trained by neoliberal cultural elites at various pedagogical institutions.

¹⁶According to an opinion poll conducted by Pew Research Center, 52% of Georgians are in favor of a strong Russia, while 69% are in favor of Western powers. Also, 42% of Georgians consider the collapse of the Soviet Union as a bad thing for Georgia. However, according to the poll, this argument is supported mostly by older people.

Ghosts of Russian Propaganda

Although Georgia is considered a successful model of democratic transformation in the post-soviet space, it is still difficult to call Georgian democracy a “success story.” In the era of post-communist transition, Georgia could not manage to aggregate relevant social requisites necessary for democracy, such as economic growth and urbanization. Additionally, poverty and an economic crisis permanently threatens Georgia’s democratic future well-being, and a certain standard of life is essential for a democratic system to function. Nevertheless, considering Georgia’s pro-Atlantic aspirations and formal institutionalization of democratic culture, local and global elites mostly refer to Georgia as a democratic country. However, the elite perceives Russia as the biggest threat to Georgian democracy today. This narrative is especially backed and expanded by liberal politicians and think tanks trapped in a Cold War mentality where they see global (and local politics) in black and white, where the dark power is Russia and the white one is the US. This position is regularly emphasized by President Margvelashvili, who accused Russia of having “dark plans” against Georgian democracy and development, and he underlined that “our response to this position is the following: we will not impede Georgia’s development, nor advancement of democracy, nor the EU and NATO integration” (President.gov.ge 2018).

Furthermore, similar to Margvelashvili, pro-liberal Georgian think tanks also identify Russia as well as pro-Russian forces to be threats to Georgia’s democratic transformation, even though such forces are marginal and they have no influence over mainstream media and public opinion. For example, the author of one of the policy briefs prepared by the Georgian Institute of Politics, a liberal think tank based in Tbilisi, argues that one of the main obstacles for democratic reforms in Georgia is “the strengthening of anti-reformist forces, which are supported by Russia and feel stronger due to the current fatigue in the process of Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic integration” (Lebanidze 2016, 3). Among other obstacles, the author also names insufficient attempts of Western actors to democratize Georgia and the lack of political culture. The

author does not examine economic development and other relevant factors as crucial requirements for Georgia's democratic future. Instead, similar to other liberal experts, he attempts to accuse the "other," in particular Russia for threatening Georgian democracy.

To summarize, what mostly disturbs Georgian democracy is an impoverished society and life in total despair. Georgian political and cultural elites are reluctant to face the real challenge of Georgian democracy and they try to hunt for external conditions, for enemies of Georgia's "flourishing" democracy. Sadly, this is a mistake historically committed by many nations when the problem is stemming from the inside. Obviously, in this way, the real enemy of Georgian democracy is endemic poverty and demoralization of society, unemployment, and growing social inequality, all of which make individuals anti-democratic and vulnerable to look for strongman in politics who will play on the emotions of hopeless individuals.

Conclusion

As we saw, contemporary nationalist discourses concentrating on a secular, Westernized Georgia are mostly propelled by anti-Russian sentiments led by liberal elites. Moreover, since liberal nationalism is a relatively alien phenomenon for Georgia, it's high on the agenda of the liberal class to indoctrinate citizens with liberal nationalism narratives. In this way, the principal objective of liberal elites is to deconstruct traces of ethnic nationalism in Georgia and overall politics of "Georgianization" of Georgia that started in the Soviet era.

Therefore, minority protection and de-idealization of Georgian nationalistic traditions are the main focus of today's liberal political and cultural class in Georgia. Although campaigning against hate speech towards any nationalities is an important part of liberal rhetoric in Georgia, hate speech against Russians is not included in the list of liberal heresies. As was expected, ideological and ethical conflict between ethnic nationalists and liberal ones in Georgia ended up with an identity

crisis in the country. In other words, both camps, supporters of liberal and ethnic nationalisms, employ respective narratives for their own purposes. While liberal nationalists argue that they are true pro-Westerners due to their standpoint, ethnic nationalists also argue that they are true pro-Europeans, by making reference to the current conservative and populist uprising in the EU. Therefore, in this context, ironically, liberal (secular) and ethnic nationalists are engaged in competition to prove their pro-Western stances.

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