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"Old" Intelligentsia and "New" Intellectuals: The Georgian Experience

Zaza Shatirishvili takes stock of the differences and similarities between two generations of Georgian intellectuals: Old nomenclatura versus the new scholars who dominate the growing non-governmental sector.

About twelve years ago, when Sergei Paradzhanov¹ and Merab Mamardashvili² both died in the space of one year, everything was crystal clear in Georgian political life. The world was simple in a black-and-white way, divided into "us" and "them". "They" (the "Zviadists"³) were bad; as for "us" (the "anti-Zviadists"), although we might not have been perfectly good, we were still fighting for marvellously good, progressive and, as we later learned, "liberal" values. Today, a similar clarity reigns in Georgian intellectual life: on the one hand, there's the "old" (or, more pejoratively, "nomenclature") intelligentsia, on the other hand, there are the "new" (Western-type) intellectuals. This was the title of a seminar which took place last September at the Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development at the initiative of its director, the philosopher and political scientist Gia Nodia⁴.

In his address, Nodia noted that over the past ten years, a considerable gap has formed in Georgia between the "old" intelligentsia and the "new" intellectuals (to be sure, many of the "new" ones are recruited from among "old" ones whose intellectual position was shaped in the "stagnation era"⁵; and vice-versa, not all the "new" ones are really "new"). The "old" ones and the "new" ones use different types of discourse, indeed they hardly understand each other. There is also a striking difference in institutional affiliations: the "old" ones nestle in traditional academic institutions (the Academy of Sciences and the universities) and creative unions (the Writers' Union etc.), while the "new" ones prefer NGOs or new media operating on market principles. The "old" ones speak Russian as their second language (German coming next), while the "new" ones mostly speak English⁶.

Of course, there are many more differences between the "old" ones and the "new" ones, but I will consciously limit myself to these three – discourse, institutions, and language. For the sake of clarity, I will discuss them in reverse order.

"He rooted out this tongue of mine..."

As you may have guessed⁷, I am talking about the Angel of Western liberalism (let us not argue about how liberal this angel is), while the tongue he tore out

is, of course, Russian. Isn't that an exaggeration?, you'll ask. That's what I thought until I bumped into what they call reality.

My first collision with it occurred exactly three years ago. I was returning from London to Tbilisi via Moscow, since Aeroflot flies much more cheaply than British Airways; what's more, at that time there was still a visa-free regime between Russia and Georgia. On the plane I was sitting next to a 22-year old fellow citizen who had just obtained his MA in Economics from the University of London. Quickly we found a common language, discovered common friends (Tbilisi is a small place) and spent the whole journey discussing the fortunes of liberal values and the market economy in contemporary Georgia. We concurred in associating the Shevardnadze era with late Brezhnev "stagnation" which, by the way, my interlocutor did not remember. Suddenly my neighbour interrupted the conversation; a stewardess was proposing souvenirs, and he requested me to ask her to show him some item. When I stopped short at this, he explained why he was asking me for this favour: "You see," he said in an embarrassed tone, "I don't speak Russian."

I didn't attach importance to this episode then, but I did remember it. Two years passed. I was invited to give a series of lectures at the Tbilisi State Language and Culture University. My course was entitled "Narrative and culture". At first I was very pleased by the fact that we were studying Gérard Genett – and Gerald Prince in the original as well as in Georgian translation. But when more than half of my students asked for translations of Propp and Bakhtin, I was outraged. It turned out that no malicious intent was involved, no anti-imperialist or snobbish motives. It was simply that one of my students had had to leave for France with her parents when she was ten, had studied at a French *collège* and had returned to Georgia two years ago. She had begun to study Russian but for the time being preferred to read in French or English. Lucky she hadn't forgotten Georgian, I thought. Other stories were very similar: one had finished school in the USA, another one in France, yet another one in Germany, etc. etc. Many of them have now started learning Russian, it seems as though they're making progress, but it is a difficult language, and it's even more difficult to get to Russia. And indeed, many of colleagues who have travelled all across Europe and America thanks to grants and scholarships, complain that they haven't been to Moscow or Saint Petersburg for ten years or more.

And finally, another story: a year ago, my wife and I decided to hire a private Russian tutor for our first-born. Some of my friends started reasoning with us: what do you need Russian for?, they asked. The boy is going to a German school, soon he is going to start learning English, and there you are, wanting to force Russian upon him. Even from a purely pragmatic point of view it's useless: when he grows up, surely he will want to study at some Western university, probably in Germany or America. And why would you want to impose your own cultural past upon him? If he decides to learn Russian, he will do that on his own when he grows up. At first I wanted to object by referring to my personal library, half of which if not more is made up of Russian books. I wanted to say I didn't want them to remain merely part of the decor for him; that Russian, after all, is the language of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky... But to my own surprise I replied that our son comes from a region where Russia plays an important role (let's not get into judging this role), so that Russian would be of use to him in the West. And this is the argument that was accepted.

The lesson from all this is that for the new generation of intellectuals, Russian has turned from a privileged language of culture into one language among others – at best.

"Old Athens" and "New Jerusalem"

There is a popular joke in Tbilisi which says that the multitude of Western foundations and organisations which have established themselves in our capital (and in the whole of Georgia) fulfil the role of new missionaries attempting to convert our freshly-baked post-Soviet state to their faith. The same task has been taken up by various Georgian NGOs subsidised by those Western foundations. We call this whole intricate but also homogeneous complex the "New Jerusalem" of Western liberalism.

In this case the "Old Athens" would be the institutions inherited from Soviet times: the Georgian Academy of Sciences and its research institutes, the various creative unions (the Writers' Union, the Composers' Union etc.) and even the Tbilisi State Dzhavakhsishvili University (TGU) which, although it was founded during Georgia's first span of independence, in 1918, turned into a typical Soviet educational institution during 70 years of Soviet rule (1921–1991), with all the negative and positive consequences this implies.

The directors of many institutions of higher education assure our public that, having successfully reformed, instead of Party History and Scientific Communism they all now teach their students the new 'politological' wisdom – what's called political and social sciences in English. And indeed, former Marxists have turned into political scientists, and Departments of Scientific Atheism have been renamed Departments of the History of Religion or Departments of Orthodox Theology. But the system has hardly changed. The new structures are lodged on top of the old ones, creating a centaur: a Western university with a clearly recognisable Soviet face, being in reality neither one nor the other. Without mentioning overblown staff numbers, the absence of a system of credits, the purely formal nature of employment contracts etc. etc. All of this against the background of the literally beggarly salary of around 30–40 US dollars for teaching and research staff at the universities and scientific institutes.

It is not surprising that the best young talents have been abandoning science for the sector which has come to be called "the non-governmental sphere" or else "NGO civilisation". Many eminent Georgian intellectuals have left their academic positions for the local branches of various Western foundations, or have created non-governmental organisations: the philosopher Gia Nodia has founded the Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development (one of the most authoritative NGOs in Georgia and beyond); the classical scholar Levan Berdzenishvili has turned from a university teacher into a prominent public figure (to be sure, even in Soviet times he was not merely a scholar but also a well-known dissident who spent three years in the GULAG together with his brother David); the classical scholar, David Paichadze, the historian, David Losaberidze, the philosopher, Zurab Chiaberashvili, have all left their respective academic institutions (or have remained attached to them only nominally) to become public men. I have enumerated only a few; the full list is very impressive.

Another sphere to which the new intellectuals throng is that of the new democratic media. The most popular of them, and those which have gathered the main "liberal resources" of our society, are the *Rustavi-2* TV station, the

Tbilisi branch of Radio Liberty, the newspapers *24 saati* (24 Hours), *Akhali 7 dge* (The New 7 Days), *Rezonansi*, and some others. The many who work there include the Georgian literary scholar, Ia Antadze, the Abkhazian Romance philologist, Nodar Ladaria, and the classical scholar, Malkhaz Kharbedia.

Of course, the reason for all this lies partly in the low salaries paid for intellectual work in universities and other academic institutions, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, in the political situation, in that Western foundations readily subsidise various liberal and human rights projects.

But along with this one should not forget the indeterminate nature of the reforms carried out in the sphere of higher education. I have already mentioned that the reorganisations are mostly superficial and formal – in most humanities faculties, it is very difficult seriously to change teaching plans or to introduce new courses; it is impossible to have teaching plans updated from time to time, etc. All this brings about a profound backwardness and provincialism in our academic milieu as well as an absence of new methods in academic research and teaching. And here I have come up against the third difference between the old intelligentsia and the new intellectuals – the discursive strategies of the "old ones" and the "new ones".

The Georgian Kingdom of Discourse

An interesting phenomenon that began to take shape after the collapse of Soviet rule and the overthrow of the Gamsakhurdia regime in Georgia, is that both left-wing and nationalist discourse has been completely marginalised. The "dominant discourse" in Georgian public space today is a liberal discourse which has absorbed some elements both of the rhetoric of nationalist traditionalism (of an Orthodox colour) and of outright left-wing rhetoric.

This discourse did not shape immediately. At its source we find Merab Mamardashvili who, during the final decade of his life, turned from a Moscow philosopher into a Georgian public figure and a Georgian intellectual. He gave his last big series of lectures in Georgian at Tbilisi State University⁸, but also took an active part in creating a number of social and political organisations and gave numerous interviews on Georgian TV and in the press. The concepts introduced by Merab Mamardashvili have proven tenacious and, in a sense, well adapted to the current situation: above all, I should mention the concept of the "Georgian knight's legend", a kind of legend which, according to Mamardashvili, was never based on any objective reality (as legends aren't supposed to be), but which helped the nation to gain consciousness of itself. Following Mamardashvili, contemporary intellectuals see Georgia's basic difference from the Byzantine–Russian world in just such autonomous phenomena of Georgian cultural and political life – somewhat akin to certain phenomena of European culture ("*raindoba*" – "chivalry"; "*midzhnuroba*" – "courtoisie"; "*the civilisation of Rustaveli*" – "the civilisation of Dante", etc.)

It was Mamardashvili who started it, though contemporary Georgian liberal discourse is less "metaphysical", more pragmatic, but just as critical towards the current state of affairs in our country as it was ten–twelve years ago.

One of the critical concepts developed within the space of Georgian social thought over the past few years is that of an "erosion of democracy" in Georgia, introduced into our public discourse by the political scientist, Gia Nodia⁹, Nodia noted that certain Western mechanisms, when "imported", simply stop working or start operating differently, adapting to local conditions.

Above all this goes for democratic procedures (the multi-party system and universal elections), which are more easily adopted than liberal values, but are also more prone to erosion. Thus over the past few years the parliamentary and presidential elections in Georgia have become a purely formal exercise, because the current regime effortlessly manipulates their results, not even shunning fraud.

Another example of a critical concept used in contemporary Georgian liberal discourse is that of "minor Empire", put forward by the late Andrei Sakharov. Contemporary Georgian intellectuals have tried to elaborate this concept and have discovered new substantial uses for it¹⁰. I am now going to give a brief overview of this new conception.

When the well-known scientist and human rights activist defined Georgia as a "minor Empire"¹¹, he had in mind on the one hand her territorial diversity and heterogeneity (as a union republic, the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic included the autonomous republics of Abkhazia and Adzharia, and the South Ossetian autonomous region), and on the other hand the inclusion of that complex formation into an even more complex one, the "big Empire", i.e. the Soviet Union. In creating his project of a constitution for a Union of Soviet Republics of Europe and Asia¹², Sakharov wanted to get rid of the territorial heterogeneity characteristic of the Soviet Union as a whole, and to turn all of the country's political entities into equal subjects of a new American-style federation.

But the potential uses of the concept of "minor Empire" are not limited to this aspect. The genealogy of the minor Empire goes back far beyond the territorial heterogeneity of Soviet Georgia, its roots are to be sought in the Romantic era, when the conquest of Georgia by the Russian empire (in 1801) prompted Georgian society to seek new strategies of self-identification¹³.

After its annexation Georgia practically turned into a colony and was divided into two provinces (in 1846), but the "Georgian kingdom" was included into the official list of territorial entities of the Russian empire, the Russian emperor began using the title of "Georgian Tsar" along with his other titles, and a governor-general of the Tsar was sent to Tbilisi (Tiflis) in 1844. Thus the different peoples of the Caucasus joined the Empire on different terms, which, by the way, also explains why some were privileged and others disenfranchised under Soviet rule.

Georgia's special position began to take shape during the Russian-Caucasian wars (1817-1864) in which it participated on Russia's side. The Georgian public perceived these wars as an auspicious occasion to take revenge for the devastating raids into Eastern Georgia which the Caucasian mountain-dwellers had carried out during Georgia's independence, before its annexation by Russia. This revenge is based on a desire to compensate the loss of independence: having become part of the Russian Empire, Georgia began to identify with Russia in some instances. One of these instances is the Georgia-Russia-Caucasus trichotomy, within which Georgia identifies with Russia, not with the conquered Caucasus. This can be called the complex of the "conquered conqueror"¹⁴. Many Georgian Romantic poets were active participants of the Caucasian wars, while the then most famous one of them, Grigol Orbeliani¹⁵, made an outstanding career in the military and state service thanks to the war. Even those who (like e.g. another Romantic poet, Nikoloz Baratashvili¹⁶) did not participate but watched from a distance, not only approved of the conquest of the Caucasus, but devoted some of their works to

it.

This phenomenon may be designated as a strategy of partial identification of the colonised with the coloniser – a strategy which is expressed with utmost clarity in the works of Georgian Romanticism, where Georgia is assimilated to Russia, while the Caucasus, an undesirable barrier, disappears¹⁷. This is where we have to look for the genealogical roots of the ideology of the "minor Empire" in Georgian culture.

According to the new Georgian intellectuals, the reflexes based on this ideology can be clearly seen not only in the Georgian–Ossetian and Georgian–Abkhaz conflicts, but also in the Georgian political establishment's ambivalent attitude to the Russian–Chechen conflict. Thus, on the one hand, Chechen refugees find shelter in our country, but on the other hand last November one night many Chechen refugees and Georgian citizens of Chechen origin were searched and arrested without approval from the Office of the Public Prosecutor. They were all taken to various police stations across Tbilisi, ostensibly for identification and registration. The Georgian public and human rights organisations immediately protested. Reminders of 1937 were heard in the statements of such public activists as the director of the Caucasian House, the well-known writer Naira Gelashvili, the human rights defenders Levan Ramishvili and Gia Bokeria (Institute of Freedom), the rights activist and former dissident Emil Adelhkanov–Shteinberg, and others.

Thus for many Georgian intellectuals, the politics of the current regime towards the Chechen conflict bears clear traces not only of conformist ambivalence, but also of an anti-Caucasian world view which continues and reflects the ideology of the "minor Empire".

But where does the "old" intelligentsia "dwell"? How does it express its own ideology? What is its discourse like?

Here we have a paradox of our social, political and intellectual life: the discourse of the "old ones" uses the same clichés and conceptual schemes as that of the "new ones" (even such "heretical" ones, from a nationalist point of view, as the "minor Empire" ideology), imitating their entire rhetorical arsenal. A situation described by Merab Mamardashvili comes to mind: "At any time when you want to start thinking, your thought [...] already exists as a likeness of thought [...]. There is always a verbal world which generates pseudo-questions, pseudo-problems and pseudo-thoughts on its own, and it is practically impossible to distinguish them from true thought."¹⁸

Far from me to assert that the new Georgian intellectuals generate only true thoughts (especially now that mentioning truth has become a sign of backwardness and bad taste at best); on the contrary, I do not share their "liberal ecstasy" and their eschatological optimism about the "new world order". But evidence can't just be brushed aside: they are working, elaborating new concepts and rethinking old ones. They are no longer alone – they have partners almost all over the world. People they are; whether they will become eras depends not only on them, but also on the spirit of the times and on the spirit of the narration of those times.

¹ Sergei Paradzhanov (1924–1990) A famous Georgian-born film director who spent several years in prison. [Translator's note]

²

- Merab Mamardashvili (1930–1990) One of the best-known Soviet philosophers, a liberal thinker who spent most of his life in Moscow. His interests were wide-reaching but most crucially concerned human consciousness. [Translator's note]
- 3 Zviad Gamsakhurdia (1939–1993) was the first president of independent post-Soviet Georgia. [Translator's note]
- 4 The proceedings of this conference make up the first section of No. 4 (2002) of the institute's journal, *Sazogadoeba da politik'a* [Society and Politics], pp. 9–79.
- 5 The Brezhnev years, especially the 1970s. [Translator's note]
- 6 Gia Nodia, "Dzveli inteligentsia da akhali intelektualebi: p'aradigmis tsvla?" [Old Intelligentsia and New Intellectuals: A Change of Paradigm?], in: *Sazogadoeba da politik'a* [Society and Politics] No. 4 (2002), pp. 9–10.
- 7 From one of Alexander Pushkin's most famous poems, *Prorok* [The Prophet]: Parched with the spirit's thirst, I crossed An endless desert sunk in gloom, And a six-winged seraph came [...] And, like a lover kissing me, He rooted out this tongue of mine [... translated by D. M. Thomas] [Translator's note]
- 8 Merab Mamardashvili, *Saubrebi pilosopiaze* [Conversations on Philosophy], Tbilisi: Metsniereba, 1992.
- 9 Gia Nodia, "Ra kveqana vart archevnebis shemdeg?" [What Kind of a Country are we after the Elections?], in: *Ra kveqana vart archevnebis shemdeg? Saqartvelos parlament'is 31 oqt'ombris archevnebi da qartulis demokrat'ia* [What Kind of a Country Are We After the Elections? The Georgian Parliamentary Elections of the 31st of October and Georgian Democracy], Tbilisi: CIPDD, 2000, pp. 7–13.
- 10 See e.g. the articles in: "Aspekty gruzino-abkhazskogo konflikta" 7 [Aspects of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict, No. 7], in: *Materialy gruzino-abkhazskoj konferencii: "Pa"kt stabil'nosti na Kavkaze i strategiya mirotvorcheskogo processa* [Proceedings of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conference "The Caucasus Stability Pact and the Strategy of the Peace Process], Irvine: UCI, University of California, 2001.
- 11 Andrei Sakharov, Vystuplenie na Pervom s"ezde narodnyh deputatov SSSR [Speech at the First Assembly of People's Deputies of the USSR], in: Andrei Sakharov, *Mir, progress, prava cheloveka* [Peace, Progress, Human Rights], Leningrad: Sovetskij pisatel', 1990, p. 115.
- 12 Konstituciya Soyuza Sovetskikh Respublik Evropy i Azii: proekt A.D. Saharova [Constitution of the Union of Soviet Republics of Europe and Asia: Andrei Sakharov's Project], in: *Oktyabr* [October] No. 5/1990, P. 145–160.
- 13 It needs to be pointed out that the conquest took place against a background of rebellions in different parts of Georgia and was not a legitimate process, as the imperial centre would have it. The rebellions in the mountainous part of Eastern Georgia (1804) and Kakhetia (a province in Eastern Georgia, 1811) were episodes carrying no further effect. The conspiracy of 1832, involving the Georgian aristocracy, was discovered early on, betrayed by one of its participants. Nevertheless, the conquest of Georgia was radically different from the conquest of the rest of the Caucasus, which spawned the series of Russian-Caucasian wars that continue to this day.
- 14 For a more detailed discussion, see Harsha Ram, Zaza Shatirishvili, *Romantic Topography and the Dilemma of Empire: The Caucasus in the Dialogue of Georgian and Russian Poetry*, in: *Russian Review* (forthcoming).
- 15 Grigol Orbeliani (1804–1883) was a Georgian Romantic poet. From 1838, when he was enlisted as staff-captain into a Georgian grenadier regiment, until 1858, he fought in the Russian-Caucasian war. He retired holding the rank of infantry lieutenant-general. In 1859–1865 he was several times acting as the Tsar's governor-general for Georgia.
- 16 Nikoloz Baratashvili (1817–1845), a Georgian Romantic poet, was the son of Grigol Orbeliani's sister.
- 17 For an analysis of these works, see Harsha Ram, Zaza Shatirishvili, op. cit.
- 18 Merab Mamardashvili, *Estetika myshleniya* [The Aesthetics of Thought], Moscow: Moskovskaya shkola politicheskikh issledovaniy [Moscow School of Political Studies], 2000, p. 14–15.

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