

The Evolution of Georgian-Russian Stereotypes

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The intensely emotional rhetoric and overreactions of Russians and Georgians in their recent war has puzzled outside observers. It is not that the belligerents lack rationality. Humans see the world through cultural lenses that have a particular cut; we all carry pre-rational patterns of action that come to us “naturally,” and with origins that are long forgotten or taken for granted. What sociologists call “habitus,” the English proverb “Once a priest, always a priest” captures nicely (if a bit too categorically – fortunately, cultural patterns typically contain contradictions and can change over time). By highlighting the key sources of Georgian habitus, we can try to better understand Georgia’s hate/love relationship with Russia and see how the wheel might yet turn.

The “Poland of the Caucasus”

Georgian culture is strikingly rich and aristocratic. This pattern originates in the geopolitics of medieval Caucasia. In the south, Armenians were crushed between perennially warring Persian and Roman-Byzantine-Ottoman empires. Their austere clergy remained to shape Armenian high culture. Towards the east, the Azeri Turkic khanates developed fully within the Iranian orbit (which, despite Azerbaijan’s language, renders it so different from Turkey). The Russian annexation of Azerbaijan in the early 1800s and the oil boom of the 1880s undercut the rural Muslim nobility and resulted in the rise of urbane and expansive Baku, with its dazzling hybrid culture but also torn by deep insecurities and rivalries. In the North Caucasus, the lasting domination of the nomads over the fertile steppe penned the indigenous peoples into the resource-

poor mountains, where an extreme degree of cultural and political segmentation became the norm. Only the Georgian lands, despite the ravages of medieval warfare, were blessed with a combination of protective mountains and fertile valleys able to continuously support a sizeable peasantry and large native nobility.

Reflecting its geopolitical complexities, Georgia's delightfully syncretistic culture combined local traditions with both Byzantine Christianity and Persian courtly sophistication. Yet it preserved an unmistakably Caucasian element which prized gallantry and conspicuous consumption. In a fractured political environment, the only guarantee of a prince's life rested in his dual reputation as a vengeful foe and a generous host.

The expansion of the Russian empire in the 1800s nullified Georgia's geopolitical threats and made Tiflis (Tbilisi) the splendid capital of the Caucasian viceroyalty. It also challenged the Georgian nobility, who scrambled to prove their status in the new environment. In these imperial borderlands, Russian officials regarded themselves as the vanguard of the European enlightenment. They commonly disdained the native noblemen as haughty, irresponsible, slothful, and barely Christian. These "primitive" Georgian attitudes, however, corresponded to a feudal parochialism in which loyalties shifted in accordance with survival, the absence of agricultural markets imposed limits on the extraction of peasant labor, and the main proof of nobility was princely behavior rather than formal titles.

Georgia posed a further peculiar problem to the tsarist empire. An extraordinary proportion of Russia's new subjects – just like the troublesome Polish *szlachta* – claimed nobility equal in rank to the Russian elite. This controversy dragged on for a generation and caused a series of Georgian rebellions. Georgian textbooks today describe this as the first phase of the emerging national resistance. In the 1840s, however, St. Petersburg (mindful of an Islamic jihad raging in the North Caucasus) accepted the demands of the Georgian nobility. Upon his arrival in Tiflis in 1844, the legendary benevolent viceroy Count Mikhail Vorontzov declared: "If His Majesty wished to follow the letter of law, He would have sent here the law rather than me."

The incorporation of the outsized Georgian nobility strengthened Russia's position in the Caucasus. It also created huge contradictions. The Russian census of 1891 recorded an improbable 17 percent of Tiflis inhabitants and around 7 percent of the population in the countryside as nobles. In comparison, merely a half percent of Britain's contemporaneous population enjoyed noble titles; in Russia's heartland the *dvoryane* comprised 3 percent. Only in the Polish provinces did the percentage of the nobility stand anywhere near as high, at almost one-tenth of the population. After all, how many lords could peasants sustain in a primitive agrarian economy? In this period new social pressures to

look European drove many Georgian noblemen to mortgage their estates to ethnic Armenian merchants, who were better positioned to profit from the rapid growth of capitalism starting from the 1860s. The Georgian peasantry, squeezed for higher rents, responded with rebellions and flights to borderlands like Abkhazia, which had been depopulated after the massive emigration of Muslim highlanders.

Georgian elites had to seek livelihoods in occupations favoring cultural capital. This led to the impressive overproduction of a world-class intelligentsia bent more on artistic achievement than on scientific or technological development. This transition to modernity underlies the plot of the popular comedy *Khanuma* ("The Matchmaker"). A desperately indebted and ageing Georgian prince who owns nothing but his title reluctantly seeks to marry the young daughter of a rich Armenian merchant. However, the girl's heart belongs to her modest and dedicated tutor of French and etiquette. In the play's happy ending, the teacher turns out to be an aristocrat and the nephew of the old hapless prince!

Remarkably, the next generation of Georgian elites responded to their predicament by converting to socialism in the 1890s. This was, however, a peculiarly nationalist variety of socialism. In this setting, liberation meant the struggle against Russian rule, anti-capitalism targeted Armenian merchants, socialist progress promised to move Georgia closer to Germany and away from the surrounding "Asiatic" backwardness, and, last but not least, socialism provided a political platform for uniting the impoverished and educated aristocracy with their peasant compatriots. In the following decades, ethnic Georgians would constitute over half the membership of the Menshevik wing of the Russian social democrats. In 1918-1921, Georgia became the world's first social-democratic state (a fact curiously downplayed by Georgians themselves).

Outsized and downwardly-mobile nobilities have often proven more revolutionary than the usual proletarian suspects. In this, Georgia acquired an uncanny resemblance to Poland. The convergence of the Polish and Georgian national ideologies grew from their analogous positions within the Russian empire, as well as by mutual learning: scores of Georgians studied in Warsaw before 1917 or bonded with Polish exiles in Siberia and Paris. Both the Polish and Georgian ideologies departed from the claim that their Christian nations could not attain Western levels because they had been bled pale during their medieval defense of Europe from the onslaught of Turco-Mongol hordes. Christianity served to underscore Georgian and Polish claims that their nations properly belonged to Western civilization. The new Georgian flag with five crosses could not be more conspicuous in this respect. Finally, the notorious unruliness of Polish and Georgian kingdoms prior to their submission to Russia was retrospectively evaluated as the manifestation of an innate libertarian individualism standing in contrast to Russian despotism. The Italian

Risorgimento provided inspiration to both Polish and Georgian liberation movements. In the process they developed a remarkably high and Western-leaning self-perception.

The Contradictions of Soviet Developmentalism

The Bolshevik terror decimated the Georgian aristocracy and intelligentsia as grievously as anywhere else. Nevertheless, their inherited cultural pattern continued to shape the attitudes and behavior of twentieth-century Georgians. The main reason for this, it seems, is that throughout the Soviet period Georgia remained relatively unaffected by heavy industrialization, thereby preserving the essentials of its village life and an urban society supported by networks of “good families.” There is no solid evidence to the popular claim that Joseph Stalin and Lavrenty Beria particularly favored their native land. Rather, Georgia’s climate and geography rendered it less promising for the creation of giant factories or grain farms.

Nevertheless, due to its pivotal position in the Caucasus and the successful lobbying of the local *nomenklatura* (rumored to have been generously greased by corruption), Georgia acquired more than its share of central investment. This went a long way towards developing modern infrastructure and creating a panoply of comfortable positions in the administrative hierarchy and cultural institutions. The justly famed *Gruziafilm* studio provides the most splendid example.

Moreover, since the 1950s Georgia greatly benefited from the growing consumption of Russian industrial urban populations who actively sought out Georgian wines, winter fruits, and summer resorts. The cash flows generated by Soviet consumerism fed the channels of Georgia’s underground markets, creating all sorts of material opportunities all the way down to prospering villages. This was the political economy behind the remarkable empowerment of the proudly outgoing, often defiant, and endemically corrupt Georgian civil society. It also helps to explain why Georgia managed to supply a grossly disproportionate number of criminal bosses (“thieves in law”) who reigned in the Soviet underworld.

What was the reaction of Russians to these developments? It ranged from the sincerest admiration of the Russian intelligentsia, who envied the artistic achievements and careless freedom of their Georgian counterparts, to the increasing disdain of common Russian consumers who felt snubbed by the braggadocio of Mediterranean machos and swindled by Georgian traders. The Soviet leadership watched with a suspicion that grew into desperation as Georgia began spinning out of control. The dramatic events of the spring of 1989 fully confirmed their darkest forebodings. Even before Poland, communist rule had in effect disintegrated in Georgia.

The Nationalist Jacobinism

The positional configuration that first shaped the modern Georgian worldview in the late nineteenth century re-emerged with a vengeance at the end of the Soviet period. Instead of the old Menshevism, however, the new Georgian mobilization emerged as overt nationalism. The Georgian intelligentsia, invested in their exceptional status and high national/cosmopolitan culture, successfully extended their self-ennobling vision to the entire ethnic community. Unlike most post-communist countries, in Georgia neither bureaucrats, nor industrial managers, nor military and police commanders could match the exceptional symbolic power of the intelligentsia. The domination of the national intelligentsia in post-communist politics rendered it factionalist and rhetorical to the extreme.

The severe degradation of Georgia's bureaucratic, economic, and military sources of power during the post-1989 era elevated the symbolism of national identity unnaturally high in Georgian politics. Georgia recorded the deepest of all post-communist depressions, losing almost two thirds of its gross domestic product. This wild fluctuation was mirrored in the political futures of successive Georgian presidents: the meteoric rise and demise of Zviad Gamsakhurdia between 1990-1991, the second coming of Eduard Shevardnadze in 1992, and Mikheil Saakashvili's exuberant rise to power in the Rose Revolution of 2003. Georgian society supported each of these men with initial near-millennarian expectations, which soon turned into widespread feelings of betrayal.

For this reason, the presidency of Mikheil Saakashvili, who is sustained by his ambition to make an historical difference, has perhaps a closer prototype in Jacobin revolutionary populism than in conventional democracy. Such a regime must compensate for its institutional weaknesses by recurrently mobilizing the emotional energy of the masses and by offering dizzyingly rapid promotions to its young commissars. Yet Jacobinism produces three different kinds of political threats. First, it provokes the rebellion of old vested interests. Second, in Danton's last words, it tends to "devour its own children" in factional clashes. Finally, through self-fulfilling prophecy, Jacobinism prompts foreign powers into military intervention.

Epilogue

The preceding text was written several months before Georgia's ill-fated attempt to at last reconquer all of Shida Kartli (the Georgian region which includes South Ossetia). It is still premature to speculate about the political fallout. Nevertheless, three duly uncertain conclusions may be sketched.

First, the Georgian strategy of actively manipulating Western sensibilities now seems profoundly in question. The common thrust of every post-communist Georgian president (Gamsakhurdia, Shevardnadze, Saakashvili) has been to replace the geopolitical and economic rents Georgia once drew from the Russian

Empire and the USSR with similar benefits from the West. Saakashvili's policies moved the furthest along this vector, almost attaining cargo cult-like symbolism: the George W. Bush Avenue in Tbilisi, the flag of the European Union (and of the Council of Europe) flying on Georgia's parliament. Everyone, including the Russians, should hope that the Western-looking state institutions installed under President Saakashvili will survive the military debacle – otherwise Georgia could well revert to the situation of a failed state.

Second, it is now clear that Putin's project of national revanchism has not only granted him a large boost in domestic popularity but has also become the determining factor in the post-Soviet space. Russia is back with a vengeance, and this poses dilemmas as well as opportunities to the ruling elites and their various political oppositions in the now uncertainly independent states.

Finally, it must be acknowledged that Putin's strategy draws its internal legitimacy and force not only from Russian nationalism and the revived Soviet memories of being a superpower (arguably not just in Russia alone), but also, by counter-reflection, from the geopolitical and ethical overextension of American power over the last decades. Much now seems to depend not only on developments in Moscow and Tbilisi but in Washington after November as well.