

THE MAIN  
DEVELOPMENT VECTORS OF GEORGIAN  
NATIONALISM  
IN THE CONTEXT OF  
POLITICAL INSTABILITY  
*Between the Traditions of  
the Political Nation and  
the Challenges of Radicalization*

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**The Georgian Nationalist Discourse:  
Political Ethnicity**

Georgian nationalism is one of the main factors defining the formation of the political expanse in Georgia. Studies on national relations and the history of the autonomous formations in Abkhazia and South Ossetia have acquired particular relevance in the development of Georgian nationalism. Contemporary Georgian nationalists negatively assess the fact that Georgia was part of the Soviet Union: "Georgia was a country enslaved by Russia and Georgians lived in the Russian state, themselves becoming victims of the crimes of that state."<sup>1</sup> Contemporary nationalist-minded historians in Georgia believe that at the beginning of the 1920s, the country was forcibly annexed to the Soviet Union, and Moscow's policy in Georgia did not meet the interests of the Georgian people. For example, Levon Toidze shows that "after the forced Sovietization of Georgia (February-March 1921), two equal (*sic!*) Soviet socialist republics of Georgia and Abkhazia were formed in its territory. This political and legal nonsense was the result of the negligent attitude toward Georgia's national interests."<sup>2</sup>

Levon Toidze bases his analysis of Soviet national policy in Georgia on the firm belief that the Soviet model of resolving and settling national problems dramatically differed from the strategy by which the leaders of the Georgian Democratic Republic (which was eliminated after annexation to the Soviet Union) were guided. So he emphasizes that "the idea of independence was supported and highly popular among the non-Russian nationalities, including the Caucasian. Georgia brought this idea to

<sup>1</sup> "Abkhazskiy narod stoit pered vazhneishim vyborom: Rossiya ili Zapad," available at [<http://lazare.ru/post/11697/>].

<sup>2</sup> L. Toidze, "K voprosu o politicheskom statuse Abkhazii (stranitsy istorii 1921-1931)," available at [<http://www.georgianweb.com/history/rus/abkhazia.html>].

fruition in May 1918 by restoring its independence. Restoration of national statehood and the formation of the Georgian Democratic Republic were extremely important and joyous events in the history of the nation. Prominent officials of Abkhazia also genuinely shared the joy of the Georgian people at that time. We know that the Act of Independence of 26 May, 1918 was also signed by upstanding Abkhazians Varlam Shervashidze and Arzakan Emukhvari.”<sup>3</sup>

Levon Toidze believes that whereas as part of Georgia the Abkhazians and Ossetians had the opportunity to develop and preserve their national cultures, languages, and traditions, Sovietization of these regions inevitably turned into Russification. In this respect, he stresses: “As for the question of Abkhazia joining the R.S.F.S.R., it can be evaluated as the logical result of the seditious policy conducted by certain political, clerical, and other forces, first of czarist and then of Soviet Russia, to alienate Abkhazia from Georgia, eliminate the Georgian language and Georgian culture from Abkhazia, and introduce the Russian language and Russian culture into the Abkhazian milieu (which was achieved).”<sup>4</sup>

This shows a certain politicization of historical knowledge in present-day Georgia. History is used as a tool not only for political mobilization, but also in disputes with neighboring states with which Georgia has territorial conflicts. It is also worth noting that the arguments of Georgian historians in this context are politicized. Georgian nationalist authors are guided by political values and the ideas of the greater Georgian political and civilian nation, and not by ethnic myths, which is largely characteristic of their ideological opponents, the nationalist historians of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

## Synthetic Versions of Identity

National trends are largely manifested in attempts to write Georgia’s “great” and “synthetic” history, that is, in generalized studies of Georgian history called upon to stimulate the development of those trends in Georgian identity that perceive Georgia as one of the greatest nations in Europe and Georgian history as part of the European historical process. Such narratives were developed in Nodar Lomouri’s omnibus study called *Istoria Gruzii* (The History of Georgia), as well as in specialized educational literature designed to relay and reproduce the systematized discourse on identity formatted in keeping with political dynamics.<sup>5</sup> According to Nodar Lomouri, the uniqueness of Georgian history can be explained to a certain extent by the fact that the region “is located at the intersection between two continents, Europe and Asia, and this has had an impact on the civilization created by the Georgian people, which has experienced the influence of both the Western and the Eastern cultures.”<sup>6</sup> Georgian historians M. Vachnadze, V. Guruli, and M. Bakhtadze continue to develop ideas that are traditional for national historiography in their “great” synthetic version of Georgian history, putting, however, the accents in different places. Georgian researchers accept and cultivate the narrative that the Georgians are one of the oldest nations (“the Georgian people have

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<sup>3</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem (see also: A. Menteshashvili, “Istoricheskie predposylki sovremennogo separatizma v Gruzii,” available at [<http://www.georgianweb.com/history/rus/avtandil/index.html>]; idem, “Some National and Ethnic Problems in Georgia,” available at [<http://www.georgianweb.com/history/avtandil/politics.html>]).

<sup>5</sup> For more on history textbooks in the context of the development of nationalism in Georgia, see: L. Giginishvili, “Post-reform History Textbooks in Georgia: Changing Patterns and the Issue of Minorities in Georgian History,” in: *History Teaching in Georgia: Representation of Minorities in Georgian History Textbooks*, Geneva, 2007, pp. 7-22.

<sup>6</sup> N. Lomouri, “Istoriia Gruzii,” available at [<http://www.georgianweb.com/history/rus/history.html>].

gone through a very long period of their development and are one of the oldest nations existing at the present time that has spread since antiquity over the expansive territory of the Caucasus”),<sup>7</sup> while the territory on which the ancestors of the Georgians settled in the past covered almost the whole of Europe, believing that “5,000-6,000 years ago, most of West Asia, North Africa, and South Europe (the Pyrenean, Apennine, and Balkan peninsulas) were settled by related nations. Then Indo-Europeans arrived, who were subjected to the influence of these oldest nations: the Basques in the Pyrenees, the Etruscans in the Apennines, the Pelasgians in the Balkans, and the Hittites<sup>8</sup> and Subari in West Asia. The Subari occupied the territory from Mesopotamia to Caucasioni. The Hittites and Subari were the ancestors of the Georgians.”<sup>9</sup>

On the whole, Nodar Lomouri develops the “great” European narrative, believing that the history of Georgia has more in common with the European, rather than the Eastern, historical processes. The European identity in Georgia is associated with Christian trends within the framework of the contemporary Georgian nationalist discourse. So Georgians in the political context of Georgian nationalism figure as a Christian nation: “The Georgian Apostolic Church has made an enormous contribution to the history of our people. So, over the centuries, Orthodoxy and Georgia have become identical concepts. Christianity has penetrated all the spheres of our life.”<sup>10</sup> Particular attention is focused on the antiquity of the Georgian Church and the significant contribution the Georgians made to Christian theology: “...there is a country in the Caucasus between the Black and the Caspian seas that has an ancient history and culture—Georgia. At the same time, Georgia is one of the oldest Christian countries in the world. The Georgian people became acquainted with the teachings of Christ in the first century when, by casting lots to show the apostles where they were to preach the Christian Gospel, Georgia fell to the Most Holy Mother of God. So Georgia is considered the chosen country of the Most Holy Theotokos, who is the country’s patroness.”<sup>11</sup>

Secular Europeanism is characteristic of most members of the Georgian intellectual community. Director of the South Caucasian Center of Middle Eastern Studies E. Kikvadze emphasizes that “several Armenian experts, for example, regard Armenia as part of the Middle Eastern culture and sphere of reference. In Azerbaijan and Georgia, this type of identification is practically non-existent.”<sup>12</sup> In contrast to the Armenian intellectuals, Georgian authors are cultivating a narrative about the European identity of the Georgian nation.

Nodar Lomouri states that “in the 330s, Christianity was registered as the state religion of Kartli and, at around the same time, of Western Georgia, that is, Egrisi. This fact was of immense cultural and ideological significance and ultimately predetermined Georgia’s place and role in the Middle Eastern region. The victory of Christianity meant that the rulers of Kartli were very definitely oriented toward the West, particularly toward a political alliance with Rome. This orientation was the determining one for Georgia throughout its history, but it could not become a reality at that time.”<sup>13</sup> Nodar Lomouri believes that throughout history Georgia has never broken its contacts with the West. For example, in his opinion, in the 13th century, “Georgia enjoyed universal renown and authority in the West.”<sup>14</sup> The main indication of Georgia’s Western, occidental, and European character, according to

<sup>7</sup> M. Vachnadze, V. Guruli, M. Bakhtadze, “Istoria Gruzii s drevneishikh vremen do nashikh dnei,” available at [[http://www.krotov.info/lib\\_sec/04\\_g/ruz/ia\\_kr2.htm](http://www.krotov.info/lib_sec/04_g/ruz/ia_kr2.htm)].

<sup>8</sup> As of the present, it has been proven that the Hittites were Indo-Europeans, while the ethnic and linguistic affiliation of their predecessors, the Hattites, arouses dispute.

<sup>9</sup> M. Vachnadze, V. Guruli, M. Bakhtadze, op. cit.

<sup>10</sup> “Kratkaia istoriia gruzinskoii tserkvi,” available at [<http://lazare.ru/post/6344/>].

<sup>11</sup> “Kratkaia istoriia gruzinskoii Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi,” available at [<http://lazare.ru/post/6261/>].

<sup>12</sup> E. Kikvadze, “Iuzhnyy Kavkaz—subregion Bolshogo Blizhnego Vostoka,” in: *Psevdokonflikty i kvazimirovorchestvo na Kavkaze*, ed. by A. Rusetsky, O. Dorokhina, Tbilisi, 2009, p. 75.

<sup>13</sup> [<http://www.georgianweb.com/history/rus/history.html>].

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*.

Mr. Lomouri, is Christianity, which also made it possible to preserve Georgia's European identity during the coercive Orientalization practiced during the supremacy of the Muslims.

## Georgians as a Political Nation: The State Dominant of Georgian Nationalism

Within the framework of the "great" historical narrative in present-day Georgia, particular attention is focused on the state traditions of the Georgians and on continuity in the development of Georgian statehood. When commenting on the declaration of Georgian independence on 26 May, 1918, Nodar Lomouri emphasizes that "Georgia became a full-fledged independent democratic republic. Georgian statehood, lost 117 years ago, was restored."<sup>15</sup> Present-day Georgian intellectuals perceive the brief existence of the democratic republic as a National Resurrection: "Significant shifts are occurring in the country's cultural life: the consequences of czarism's Russification policy are being eradicated, and national elements and trends are being intensified in national education, science, literature, and art. Important measures are being carried out to expand, organizationally strengthen, and qualitatively restructure national education in the republic: by 1920 the number of schools and students had more than doubled, and new programs, textbooks, and teaching aids were written in Georgian."<sup>16</sup> Against this background, the actions of Soviet Russia, according to Georgian authors, should be evaluated as "occupation:" "as a result of Soviet Russia's intervention in February-March 1921, the government of the Democratic Republic of Georgia was overthrown and a Russian occupation regime was established."<sup>17</sup> Nodar Lomouri emphasizes that "the government of the Russian Soviet Federative Republic unilaterally violated the agreement of 7 May, 1920 and carried out occupation of the Democratic Republic of Georgia. Georgia lost its national sovereignty and was conquered by Russia for the second time."<sup>18</sup>

Emphasizing the negative impact that becoming part of the Soviet Union had on Georgia, Georgian authors believe that Moscow was intentionally conducting a policy aimed at aggravating relations among the different nationalities living in Georgian territory: "Soviet Russia was not satisfied with conquering Georgia and creating an occupation government under its control. Now Moscow was resorting to its perfidious plan to divide Georgia into autonomous units. The Abkhazian and Ossetian separatists were not long in taking advantage of Russia's anti-Georgian policy."<sup>19</sup>

The active use of Russian narratives by present-day Georgian historians is causing them to cast Georgia as a victim of the policy of Soviet communism aimed at suppressing national movements. The tendency of Caucasian (in the broad sense) intellectuals to victimize the image of their own country was pointed out by well-known political scientist Johan Galtung in 1997 during his visit to Tbilisi. According to Johan Galtung's version, the Caucasus experienced "immense suffering, often even genocide, which many directly witnessed. Every group demands that its own traumas be given individual attention, and also asks what it should do about the evil-doer. But each group does not want the same attention to be shown to others. So any dialog quickly becomes a parallel monolog: no one listens, while each participant voices his insults. This bunker mentality, which can be explained psychologically, is a certain means for achieving a status quo. Any proposed idea will either be ignored or

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<sup>15</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>17</sup> [[http://www.krotov.info/lib\\_sec/04\\_g/ruz/ia\\_kr2.htm](http://www.krotov.info/lib_sec/04_g/ruz/ia_kr2.htm)].

<sup>18</sup> [<http://www.georgianweb.com/history/rus/history.html>].

<sup>19</sup> [[http://www.krotov.info/lib\\_sec/04\\_g/ruz/ia\\_kr2.htm](http://www.krotov.info/lib_sec/04_g/ruz/ia_kr2.htm)].

discarded, and not necessarily because it is a bad idea, but simply because it does not place the opponents' own interests in the center of attention. The combination of incompatible cognitive and emotional plans is important here."<sup>20</sup>

On the other hand, during the more than ten years that have passed since Johan Galtung gave his lecture in Tbilisi, the strategies of Georgia's positioning as a victim have undergone significant changes. They are associated with the territorial losses related to Russian interference, on the one hand, and the change in the way the information war is waged, on the other. Within the framework of this information war, the virtual expanse in which Georgian nationalist websites and information resources make active use of the set of victimized narratives has become an important sphere.

## August 2008 and the Georgian Political Nation

A new stage in the development of Georgian nationalism began in August 2008 related to Georgia's defeat in the conflict with the South Ossetian separatists, in which Russia became involved. The defeat, which was perceived by Georgian society as a national tragedy, ignited Georgia's nationalist imagination, making topics that likened Georgia to Europe and the Georgian nation to a Western nation that had become the victim of Russia's imperial ambitions highly popular.

The publications of Georgian intellectuals focused particular attention on the victimization of Georgia, creating the image of Georgia as a victim of Russian communism and Bolshevism. In this context, V. Guruli, N. Kipshidze, and L. Kereselidze focus particular attention on Georgia as a victim of the anti-Georgian policy of repression and persecution of the national intelligentsia and church.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, M. Barbakadze, K. Sarsevanidze, and O. Tushurashvili emphasize that the Georgians were not only victims of Russia, but also of its allies, for example, the Ossetians, who for centuries lived alongside the Georgians, but have almost always had a very negative attitude toward the Georgians, despite their progressive influence.<sup>22</sup> So a myth is being cultivated within the framework of the Georgian intellectual discourse about the historical ingratitude of the Ossetians.

The Georgian nationalist authors create a very unattractive image of Russia as a country that has been striving throughout its history for nothing but to seize territory,<sup>23</sup> and the time Georgian territory was part of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union is interpreted as "occupation."<sup>24</sup> The Georgian intellectuals focus particular attention on those topics it was impossible to study during the Soviet period due to the censorship and ideological barriers. These topics included the problems of cooperation between some Georgians and the Wehrmacht during World War II, the Georgian nationalist movement, and the history of Georgian emigration.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>20</sup> J. Galtung, "Nekotorye nabliudeniia na Kavkaze," *KRI*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 1997, available at [<http://poli.vub.ac.be/publi/crs/rus/R02-001.html>].

<sup>21</sup> See: V. Guruli, "The Impingement of Church Property Rights (Inventory of Property of the Kashveti Church of St. George Conducted in 1923)," *Archival Bulletin*, No. 2, 2008, pp. 22-24; N. Kipshidze, "The Accusation Fabricated to Discredit General Giorgi Mazniashvili," *Archival Bulletin*, No. 2, 2008, pp. 10-15; L. Kereselidze, "The Struggle against the Church," *Archival Bulletin*, No. 2, 2008, pp. 16-21.

<sup>22</sup> See: M. Barbakadze, "The History of the Settlement of Ossetians in Georgian Lands," *Archival Bulletin*, No. 3, 2008, pp. 48-54; K. Sarsevanidze, "The Criminal Gangs of Dianoz Dzokgoev," *Archival Bulletin*, No. 3, 2008, pp. 55-66; V. Guruli, O. Tushurashvili, "Debates About Statehood in a Troubling Time (The History of the Establishment of the South Ossetian Autonomous District)," *Archival Bulletin*, No. 3, 2008, pp. 107-112.

<sup>23</sup> See: V. Guruli, "The Russian World. Past, Present and Future," *Archival Bulletin*, No. 3, 2008, pp. 80-90.

<sup>24</sup> See: V. Guruli, "The Russian Occupation," *Archival Bulletin*, No. 3, 2008, pp. 91-100.

<sup>25</sup> See: K. Sarsevanidze, "Homeland Betrayed for Love," *Archival Bulletin*, No. 2, 2008, pp. 55-61; G. Mamulia, "Bitva za Kavkaz. Kavkazskoe soedinenie osobogo naznacheniia 'Bergmann,'" *Archival Bulletin*, No. 2, 2008, pp. 62-65.

Civil ideas and values clearly predominated on the wave of the post-revolutionary upswing in nationalist rhetoric, although there were still trends toward ethnicization of the nationalist discourse. Georgia's new elite declared its willingness to engage more actively in nationalist modernization. The new president, Mikhail Saakashvili, and his main partners, Zurab Zhvania and parliament leader Nino Burdzhanadze, tried to implement this model of Georgia's nationalist modernization.

The first major political achievement of new Georgian nationalism was Tbilisi's ability to take control over Ajaria. On the other hand, the political regime established after the Rose Revolution was transitional and unstable and consolidation of the elite proved insubstantial. This led to a rather rapid split in the post-revolutionary political camp<sup>26</sup> and a collapse in the temporary coalition of democrats and members of those groups that had acquired their political experience in independent Georgia during the 1990s.

## Nationalism and Contradictions of the Political Transformation

At the end of the 2000s, negative trends were manifested in the political dynamics that were not associated with the authoritarian strivings<sup>27</sup> of President Mikhail Saakashvili or with his anti-Russian nationalism. Transformation of the regime was not aimed at restoring authoritarianism: a local model of non-liberal democracy developed in Georgia. The reasons for this metamorphosis should be sought in the intellectual sphere. Western political science emphasizes that the emergence of non-liberal democracy is associated with the crisis or unsuccessful development of the civil model of nationalism<sup>28</sup> and "ousting of official institutions of a constitutional-lawful state and their replacement with unofficial rules and institutions,"<sup>29</sup> although nationalism (exploitation of national memory, nationalist reflection, and the forming of new political, cultural, and historical myths<sup>30</sup>) is probably a more effective factor of political transformation.

This change in the functioning of the regime should probably be associated with the lack of European-style political experience. On the other hand, the nationalist discourse has been developing in the context of gradual ethnicization and radicalization. Such processes created fertile ground for the emergence of internal challenges aimed against democracy and related equally to the weakness of the Georgian political class and the significant strength of ethnic nationalism and radicalism. In this situation and in the context of Russia's more active policy toward Georgia, which Tbilisi always saw

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<sup>26</sup> For more on these trends in the development of the political process in Georgia after the Rose Revolution, see: J. Devdariani, "Georgia's Rose Revolution Grapples with Dilemma: Do Ends Justify Means?" *Eurasia Insight*, 26 October, 2004.

<sup>27</sup> The authoritarian strivings of not only the Georgian president, but also of other European politicians came as an unpleasant surprise for political scientists who regarded the transit theory as universal, believing that sustainable democracies would take the place of leftist authoritarian regimes. The degree of sustainability was largely exaggerated, which is shown not only by Georgia's experience, but also by that of its closest neighbors (for more on the authoritarian trends, see: D. Čorkalo, N. Stanaković, "Autoritarnost i percepcija ostvarene demokracije u Hrvatskoj: analiza odnosa na uzorku studenata," *DI*, Br. 9, No. 1, 2000, pp. 67-81).

<sup>28</sup> For more detail on the development of civil nationalism and political identity in a transitional society, see: E. Machukov, "Нація і громадянська суспільність," *Політична сфера*, No. 4, 2005, pp. 88-99.

<sup>29</sup> V. Merkel, A. Kruassan, "Formalnye i neformalnye instituty v defektnykh demokratiakh," in: *Povoroty istorii. Postsotsialisticheskie transformatsii glazami nemetskikh issledovatelei*, St. Petersburg, Moscow, Berlin, 2002, Vol. 1, *Postsotsialisticheskie transformatsii: teoreticheskie podkhody*, p. 246.

<sup>30</sup> Theoretically on such processes in transitional societies, see: Ў. Аўтўйт, Л. Рэй, "Мадэрнасць, памяць і посткамунізм," *Палітычная сфера*, No. 6, 2006, pp. 27-43.

as an attempt to interfere in the country's internal affairs,<sup>31</sup> the bloc of seemingly moderate Georgian nationalists and supporters of democratization dissatisfied with Eduard Shevardnadze's regime proved incapable of either uniting the values of democracy and an open society or the slogans of Georgian nationalism. So the nationalist discourse became ethnicized: Russian, Ossetian, and Abkhazian narratives again became popular, which turned out to be sought after in the Georgian political discourse.

## Integration Potential of Georgian Nationalism

The integration of Ajaria into the Georgian political expanse demonstrated that the Georgian nationalist discourse possessed a fair amount of mobilization potential, while the ruling elites were able to establish order in the rebellious regions relatively quickly and using non-military methods. Before the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Ajarian A.S.S.R. was part of the Georgian S.S.R.: its status was higher than the status of the South Ossetian Autonomous District, being closer to the status of the Abkhazian A.S.S.R. In contrast to Abkhazia and Ossetia, ethnic Georgians live in Ajaria, some of whom confess Islam. During the 1990s-2000s, the Ajarian political elite headed by Aslan Abashidze did not pose itself the task of separating from Georgia and did not cultivate a local national project, being content with complete political and financial control over the region.

In the spring of 2004, the relations between official Tbilisi and Ajaria became aggravated to the point that Aslan Abashidze ordered for the bridges that join Ajaria and Georgia to be blown up, hoping that Russia would support him in this, since there was a Russian military base in Ajarian territory. But the Ajarian leader miscalculated: the mass protest demonstrations and remonstrances of Russian diplomats forced him to transfer power to Tbilisi and to abandon Ajaria. After this, Tbilisi integrated Ajaria into the Georgian political system, while preserving its autonomous status: the republic's powers were cut back, while the Constitution of Ajaria was brought into harmony with the Constitution of Georgia.<sup>32</sup>

Under Mikhail Saakashvili's political regime, Georgian nationalism enjoyed greater attention from the government than during Eduard Shevardnadze's rule. In the 2000s (despite the forecasts by several researchers about how democratization would put an end to the era of nationalism,<sup>33</sup> replacing it with the universal values of rights and freedoms), nationalism not only did not yield to other ideologies on the European periphery, but successfully competed with them, taking advantage of the ideas of the nation, political and ethnic communality, and the glorious historical past. Nationalism, on the contrary, showed that it was very capable of adapting to the changing circumstances, combining the ideas of the nation as a political priority with the values of freedom as no less important for civil and political nationalism.

Georgian nationalism of the end of the 2000s showed amazing adaptation capabilities when reacting to both external and internal challenges. Anthony Smith is most likely wrong in concluding that the main characteristic of the phenomenon of nationalism in the contemporary world is its

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<sup>31</sup> For more detail, see: "Georgia's Interim Foreign Minister: Russian Security Depends on Georgian Stabilization," *Eurasianet*, 6 January, 2004.

<sup>32</sup> See: "Georgian Parliament Defines Autonomous Status of Ajara," *Prime News*, 1 July, 2004.

<sup>33</sup> For more on the discussions about the end of the nation and, consequently, era of the domination of nationalism, see: Z. Posavec, "Je li država prema svojem najvišem određenju — prošlost?" *PM*, Vol. XXXVII, Br. 4, 2000, pp. 3-11.

temporaries. According to him, nationalism acquires primary significance for only a short length of time — “in crises of nation-building, external threat, conquest, disputed territory, or the internal perceived dominance of a hostile ethnic or cultural group...”<sup>34</sup> Georgian experience, on the contrary, shows that nationalism has become thoroughly entrenched in the political map of the country, being deeply institutionalized in its political expanse.

On 24 January, 2004, President Mikhail Saakashvili's inauguration was held at the Gelati Cathedral in Kutaisi in Western Georgia.<sup>35</sup> During the ceremony, Mikhail Saakashvili emphasized not only the Christian,<sup>36</sup> but also the European foundations of the Georgian political identity, pointing out that the Georgians “are not simply old Europeans, they are ancient Europeans.”<sup>37</sup> The choice of place for the inauguration was not accidental since the cathedral symbolizes not only Georgia's centuries-long Christian choice, but also its significant political experience in the past. And Gelati is the burial site of David the Builder, who is one of the central figures in the Georgian national pantheon.

So the president's inauguration was a unique act of commemoration called upon to emphasize the continuity between medieval and contemporary Georgian statehood. Moreover, on Mikhail Saakashvili's initiative, the Georgian state flag was changed: the banner adopted by the Georgian Social Democrats in 1918 was replaced by a new, nationally branded, flag with five red crosses<sup>38</sup> that also underscored the religious<sup>39</sup> component of the Georgian national identity.

The symbolic aspect proved to be extremely important for the functioning of the Georgian nationalist discourse during President Mikhail Saakashvili's rule. Georgian political nationalism began to make active use of the practice of historical commemoration as a means to reinforce identity. In particular, on 23 November, 2006, a monument to George the Victory Bearer was erected on Freedom Square in Tbilisi.<sup>40</sup> This event was meant to confirm the nationalist or nationally oriented discourse in the perception of Georgia's past. On the other hand, the ceremony also had quite a significant symbolic content: Georgia was positioned as a country that had not only preserved its freedom and identity, but was also ready to defend them. So steps were taken to create a historical and symbolic background for this political strategy, to which the Georgian ruling elite adhered.

<sup>34</sup> A. Smith, *Nationalism: Theory, Ideology, History*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2002, p. 24.

<sup>35</sup> For more on this, see: “Catholicos-Patriarch to Bless Saakashvili as President of Georgia,” *InterPress*, 24 January, 2004. For more on the political component of the civil rituals in the context of the development of nationalism, see: A. Krivolap, “Konstruiruia novoe prostranstvo. Belorusskiy opyt vizualizatsii Dnia Nezavisimosti,” *Палітычная сфера*, No. 8, 2007, pp. 81-93.

<sup>36</sup> It is probably not wise to exaggerate the role of religious trends in the functioning of the contemporary Georgian nationalist discourse. Nationalism is a rather anti-traditional ideology. The historical process of modernization of the peripheries was associated with their secularization. On the other hand, taking account of the slowed rates and lag in modernization in Central and Eastern Europe compared with the West, religious trends should be kept in mind. The problem of the correlation between religion and nationalism has been studied quite extensively (see: Ž. Boneta, “Politički identiteti periferija,” *RzS*, Vol. 34, No. 3-4, 2004, pp. 143-158; D. Marinović Jerolimov, “Tradicionalna religioznost u Hrvatskoj 2004: između kolektivnog i individualno,” *SŠe*, Vol. 43, No. 2, 2005, pp. 303-338; D. Marinović Jerolimov, S. Zrinščak, “Religion Within and Beyond Borders: The Case of Croatia,” *SOC*, Vol. 53, No. 2, 2006, pp. 279-290).

<sup>37</sup> “Georgian President Optimistic about Future in Inauguration Speech,” *BBC Monitoring Former Soviet Union*, 25 January, 2004.

<sup>38</sup> For more on national symbols in the context of the development of nationalism, see: В. Жикиќ, “Амблемот на трите прста: како србите го конструираа визуелниот имиџ на нивниот национален идентитет во деведесеттите години од дваесеттиот век,” *ЕАЗ*, No. 4, 2004, pp. 10-25; I. Лялџкоў, “Пытаньне дзяржаўнай сымболікі ў Беларусі: гісторыя і сучасны стан,” available at [http://arche.bymedia.net/2002-1/alk102.html].

<sup>39</sup> For more on the religious factor in largely secularized European societies and nationalisms, see: D. Sekulić, Ž. Šporer, “Religioznost kao prediktor vrijednosnih orijentacija,” *RzS*, Vol. 37, No. 1-2, 2006, pp. 1-19; Z. Šram, “Religioznost i društvena svijest: analiza odnosa na uzorku građana Subotice,” *CuS*, Vol. 36, No. 4, 2001, pp. 389-419; idem, “Dimenzije etnocentrizma i nacionalna pripadnost,” *DI*, Vol. 11, No. 1, 2002, pp. 1-22.

<sup>40</sup> For more on this event and its intellectual prerequisites, see: Z. Andronikashvili, “Slava bessilia. Martirologicheskaia paradigma gruzinskoj politicheskoi teologii,” *Ab Imperio*, No. 4, 2007, pp. 87-120.



## Political (Civil) Leitmotif in the Development of Georgian Nationalism

The anti-communist trends which developed along with the anti-Russian rhetoric were also part and parcel of Georgian nationalism in the 2000s. In this context, Russia's image quite clearly correlated with the ideological challenges presented by authoritative ideologists who in turn cast aspersions on the right of nations to self-determination and free development of their identity. The Georgian nationalist discourse presents an extremely unattractive image of Soviet/Russian communism, which is associated with authoritarianism and the destruction of national cultures and identity of the non-Russian nations. Georgian nationalist politician Iulon Gagoshidze believes that during the 20th century the "Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was characteristic of Russian history and, as its consequence, the division of Poland between Hitler's Germany and the Soviet Union, followed by suppression of the Warsaw Revolt and, of course, Katyn, where twelve thousand Polish officer prisoners were cold-bloodedly shot in the back of the head."<sup>41</sup>

The anti-communist trend is presented in particular in the work of a Georgian political scientist, Devi Khaindrava, entitled *Ethiopia and Soviet Power*. D. Khaindrava associates the increase in Soviet influence in Ethiopia with the Soviet Union's imperial ambitions, "Soviet ideological imperialism," and the striving of the Soviet elite toward military penetration into Africa.<sup>42</sup> On the other hand, in the context of marginalization of the leftist idea in the 1990s-2000s, the anti-communist trends within the framework of Georgian nationalism, although they were elements of the nationalist discourse, nevertheless did not play the main role in the functioning of nationalism, which was inclined toward ethnic radicalism rather than political ideologization.

## Nationalism as a Universal Language: Domestic Political and Foreign Political Prospects

Most of Georgia's political parties are characterized by the nationalist political language.<sup>43</sup> The most influential party, which adheres to the values and principles of political nationalism, is the United National Movement (*Ertiani natsionaluri modzraoba*).

In its platform (2003), the new conservative party also places particular emphasis on the national values and traditions of the Georgian nation. The new conservatives believe it necessary to build an "independent, free, and strong"<sup>44</sup> state in Georgia. In its 2002 platform, it focused partic-

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<sup>41</sup> I. Gagoshidze, "Transformatsiia postsovetskogo prostranstva. Rol Rossii," available at [<http://lazare.ru/content/view/13207/45/>].

<sup>42</sup> D. Khaindrava, *Ethiopia and Soviet Power*, Tbilisi, 2006, 85 pp.

<sup>43</sup> For more on the development of the party system in Georgia in the 2000s, see: *The Political Landscape of Georgia. Political Parties: Achievements, Challenges and Prospects*, ed. by G. Nodia, A. Pinto Scholtbach, Eburon Publishers, Delft, 2006, pp. 43-60, 89-203.

<sup>44</sup> *Platform of the New Conservative Party of Georgia... Approved at the Party Congress on 27 June, 2003*, Tbilisi, 2003, p. 3.

ular attention on the fact that in the past the Georgian nation was forced to fight against “Soviet tyranny.”<sup>45</sup> Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic orientation is perceived by the new conservatives as part of the strategy aimed at preserving and strengthening political independence.<sup>46</sup> The leaders of the new conservatives are sure that “the only way to achieve full national security is to join NATO.”<sup>47</sup> On the other hand, some Georgian political scientists believe that Georgia’s striving to join NATO is aggravating relations with Russia and causing an increase in anti-Georgian sentiments in Russia. In this respect, Ivliion Khaidrava emphasizes that Tbilisi’s policy aimed at integration into NATO is arousing the “greatest fury” in Moscow.<sup>48</sup>

Relations between Russia and Georgia worsened after President Mikhail Saakashvili came to power, which was expressed in periodical spy scandals and diplomatic demarches by both Russia and Georgia and a rise in nationalist ideas in Russia<sup>49</sup> aimed, among other things, against the former Union republics.

Georgian nationally oriented intellectuals have been trying to find an explanation for these dynamics in Georgian-Russian relations. “We have angered Russia by striving to be independent and to join NATO, and now it is punishing us by annexing our territory and closing the Russian market to Georgian products...”<sup>50</sup> However, Georgian nationalist intellectuals are sure that if Georgia joins NATO, Russia will be forced to reconsider its position and step down from its aggressive political rhetoric about Georgian sovereignty, as happened when the Baltic states joined NATO.<sup>51</sup>

When commenting on the role of the Russian factor in Georgia’s latest political history, Iulon Gagoshidze draws an extremely negative picture of Russia as the main source of instability, conflicts, and separatism in the Southern Caucasus: “On 19 December, 1991, Georgia refused to join the CIS, and on 22 December, preplanned armed demonstrations of the ‘opposition’ supported by Russian troops began which ended in the military coup of 6 January, 1992. The legally elected Georgian government was exiled, and Georgia began to be ruled by a junta of protégés of the Russian special services. This was followed, in keeping with the plans hatched in the Kremlin, by revival of the South Ossetian conflict and an internecine war in Abkhazia, which ended in ethnic cleansing—expulsion of almost half a million Georgian citizens, most of whom were ethnic Georgians, from their homes and Russian military occupation of the conflict zones.”<sup>52</sup>

Georgian political scientist Kakha Katsitadze is inclined to explain this ambivalent Russian policy by the special features of the Russian consciousness, which, in his opinion, has been inherent in imperialism from the outset as the result of Napoleon’s invasion of Russia in 1812 and Germany’s attack in 1941.<sup>53</sup> Georgian analyst Georgi Khelashvili emphasized that Russia’s entry into the conflict was not at all dictated by the desire to support the Russian citizens, but to symbolically declare its new imperial ambitions and strivings.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>48</sup> See: I. Khaidrava, “Gruzia: mezhdru Iuzhnyim Kavkazom i Chernym morem,” in: *Kavkazskoe sosiedstvo: Turstia i Yuzhny Kavkaz*, ed. by A. Iskandarian, Erevan, 2008, p. 61.

<sup>49</sup> For more on the development trends in Russian nationalism which deserves separate scientific study, see: O. Kildiushov, “Russkiy natsionalizm kak problema rossiiskoi obshchestvennosti,” available at [<http://magazines.russ.ru/logos/2006/2/ki12.html>]; V. Kurennoi, “Zametiki o russkom natsionalizme,” available at [<http://magazines.russ.ru/logos/2006/2/ku14.html>].

<sup>50</sup> K. Katsitadze, “Zamorozhennye konflikty: dozirovannaia eskalatsiia,” available at [<http://www.pankisi.info/analytic/?page=ge&id=246>].

<sup>51</sup> See: K. Gogaloshvili, “V zapadnom mire eti tsenosti progressivnye,” available at [<http://www.pankisi.info/analytic/?page=ge&id=253>].

<sup>52</sup> I. Gagoshidze, op. cit.

<sup>53</sup> See: K. Katsitadze, op. cit.

<sup>54</sup> See: G. Khelashvili, “Internatsionalizatsiia ne panatseia, a neobkhodimost, ne obeshchaiushchaia prostogo resheniia,” available at [<http://www.pankisi.info/analytic/?page=ge&id=249>].

## Transformation of Russian Narratives

On the other hand, Georgian analysts stress that Russia is conducting such a policy to the detriment of Russian citizens. Georgian analyst Tengiz Ablotia points out that Vladimir Putin's policy led to institutionalization of a regime that is extremely ineffective and incapable of development, despite the "ten years of the most outstanding foreign economic dynamics in history." In this respect, Tengiz Ablotia emphasizes that in Russia's recent history, it is Vladimir Putin who "has not carried out one more or less radical reform, has raised corruption to the rank of the driving force behind the system, and has doubled the size of the bureaucracy."<sup>55</sup>

According to T. Avaliani, the Russian political elite is guided by its narrowly corporate interests and is conducting a policy of economic imperialism aimed at complete subordination of Europe: "Europe is in for the unenviable fate of a territory that is covered in the malignant tumors of Russian pipelines."<sup>56</sup> When commenting on the most recent Russian-Georgian relations, Georgian analyst N. Gudushauri points out that "Russia's victory over its small and incomparably weaker neighbor has in no way strengthened this country's position or its influence in the world (instead we can say it has been weakened). Moreover, having recognized the separatist regimes, it has earned itself a headache for many years to come in its relations with the West and created additional threats to all those countries where separatists are eroding territorial integrity and the state organism from the inside."<sup>57</sup> G. Khelashvili states that instead of resolving the problems existing in the Northern Caucasus ("the Northern Caucasus will rest assured as long as money infusions into the economy of the North Caucasian republics is guaranteed and while contingents of Russian armed forces are deployed there. The Russian leadership has never intended to fundamentally resolve the Caucasian problems, which is fraught with complications as soon as the Russian economy begins to experience its first serious problems after the growth of the past few years"),<sup>58</sup> the Russian political elite is inclined to demonstrate its foreign political ambitions without thinking about the possible consequences.

Georgian analysts are also inclined to focus attention on the extremely low level of development of the political culture in the Russian Federation. Kakha Katsitadze emphasizes that "the Russian elite has no intention of recognizing Georgia as an independent state. The Russian elite regards us as a temporarily breakaway area that sooner or later will return to the mother empire's fold. This applies not only to Georgia, but also to the whole of the CIS. Russia is holding onto the illusion that as the price of energy resources rises and it subjugates the European energy market, the West will sooner or later recognize Georgia and all the CIS as a zone of Russia's influence."<sup>59</sup> On the other hand, the Georgian authors have not only been focusing their attention on the incomplete formation of the political elite in Russia, but also wondering what principles are used to recruit this elite.

After Russia recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgian authors began making more active use of Russian narratives designed to form a negative image of the Russian Federation. According to T. Mchedlishvili, the Russian media intentionally distort events, engaging in political disinformation: "...under this squall of disinformation that plays on the best human sentiments, the ordinary Russians genuinely believe in 'Georgian fascism' and the Kremlin's peacekeeping mission." When analyzing the strategy for positioning the image of Georgia and the Georgians in

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<sup>55</sup> T. Ablotia, "Glavniy pozer Rossii," available at [<http://www.apsny.ge/articles/1259628341.php>].

<sup>56</sup> See: T. Avaliani, "Mirovaia problema po imeni Putin," available at [<http://apsny.ge/analytics/1243015266.php>].

<sup>57</sup> N. Gudushauri, "Chego khochet Rossia ot Gruzii?" available at [<http://apsny.ge/analytics/1242406377.php>].

<sup>58</sup> G. Khelashvili, *op.cit.*

<sup>59</sup> K. Katsitadze, *op.cit.*

Russia, Georgian authors believe that the Russian elite is intentionally engaged in “fomenting national discord.”<sup>60</sup> In this respect, a narrative is being cultivated by Georgian nationalist authors, according to which “Georgians are being persecuted due to their ethnic affiliation.”<sup>61</sup> In this situation, the blame is placed on Russia, which, as the Georgian nationalists believe, is not only responsible for starting the August 2008 war, but is also conducting a policy of ethnic cleansing aimed at expelling Georgians from Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

### *In Lieu of a Conclusion: The Prospects for Ethnicization of the Georgian Political Field*

The anti-Russian narrative that was encouraged and created not only by Georgian radicals, but also by Russian nationalists, as well as the not entirely correct attempts by the Russian leadership to place the blame for the conflict entirely on Georgia gained a firm foothold in the Georgian media and in political journalism between the end of 2008 and 2009. On the other hand, some Georgian researchers believe that President Mikhail Saakashvili’s policy regarding the separatist regions that are ethnically different from Georgia was very radical, on the one hand, and very untimely, on the other. According to Archil Gegeshidze, “after the end of the 1993 war, Georgian-Abkhazian relations were difficult, but this was mainly due to the fact that the so-called national projects of Georgian and Abkhazian society proved incompatible—Georgia was striving to restore its territorial integrity, while Abkhazia was trying to achieve independence. In addition, a direct reason for this was the sides’ mistrust in each other, as well as the ever strengthening enemy image, particularly in the perception of the Abkhazians.”<sup>62</sup> Despite this, in 2008, the Georgian political elite attempted to radically resolve the territorial problem, which led to Russian intervention, Georgia’s actual defeat, and a breakdown in diplomatic relations, making the Russian narratives much more popular within the framework of the Georgian nationalist discourse.

It is likely that a combination of the political and the ethnic, the significant experience of political participation, and the development of Georgian nationalism as a primarily political and civil movement are saving present-day Georgian nationalism from the extremes of radicalization and ethnicization which are characteristic of certain nationalist movements in the post-Soviet and post-socialist expanse of Eastern Europe. In this context, it is obvious that Georgian intellectuals are trying to write the history of Georgia of the 20th century as the history of intellectual oppositions where European-style political Georgian nationalism is clashing with Russian-Soviet communism. On the whole, political nationalism is largely characteristic of the historical system of contemporary nationally oriented Georgian historians and intellectuals, and although in its concept of Georgian history it is written from the ethnocentric standpoint, the powerful political trend associated with Georgian civil nationalism is nevertheless obvious.

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<sup>60</sup> T. Mchedlishvili, “Avgust 2008—psikhologiya rossiyskoy lzhi,” in: *Gruzia: informatsionnye ugrozy i voprosy bezopasnosti*, ed. by A. Rusetsky, O. Dorokhina, Tbilisi, 2008, pp. 91, 94.

<sup>61</sup> “Rossiysko-osetinskiy gumanizm,” available at [<http://www.kavkasia.ge/index.php?action=more&id=63&lang=rus>].

<sup>62</sup> A. Gegeshidze, “Analiz novykh realiy v kontekste gruzino-abkhazskikh otnosheniy,” in: V. Kolbaia, I. Khaindrava, N. Sardzhveladze, E. Chomakhidze, A. Gegeshidze, *Garantii po nevozobnovleniiu boevykh deystviy: opaseniia v kontekste gruzino-abkhazskikh vzaimootnosheniy*, Tbilisi, 2009, p. 18.