

RUSSIA AS A SUBJECT OF THE IDEOLOGY OF GEORGIAN NATIONALISM

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Russian Narratives of Georgian Nationalism

Today, Russian narratives have moved to the fore in Georgian nationalism and have a special role to play in its development. For a long time, Georgia was part of the Russian Empire, and then the Soviet Union, which Georgian national consciousness regarded as a predominantly “Russian” state.

Disintegration of the Soviet Union and Georgia's regained independence opened a new stage in Georgia's relations with Russia. The discourse on history, which concentrates on contemporary political figures, is intimately connected with a particular political myth¹ that presupposes the presence of certain political images ("others").

The post-Soviet expanse interpreted the collapse of communism as "disintegration of the official collective memory," which revived its numerous "unofficial narratives"² related to the "images" of various states, including Russia.

In the 1990s, when South Ossetia and Abkhazia detached themselves from Georgia, Georgian politicians and nationally-biased intellectuals imposed the "victim syndrome" on their nation and blamed regional separatism on the "hand of Moscow." "Deconstruction of the historical mythogenesis"³ of the Soviet period and the gradual crumbling of Russia's image as the "elder brother" contributed to these interpretations.

The political changes of the early 2000s and Mikhail Saakashvili's attempt to cut the Gordian knot of regional problems in August 2008 merely confirmed the anti-Russia stand of the nationalist-minded Georgian ideologists, which inevitably added to the tension between the two countries.

The Georgian political community believes that Eduard Kokoyty, the leader of the Republic of South Ossetia (RSO), has the "mind of a half-witted dictator"⁴; and the results of the armed conflict of August 2008 are described as follows: "The war of 2008 was the culmination of Russia's latent aggression which had been going on for many years. It brought Kokoyty's gang and the local people 'duped' by Russia's ideology 'the independence' they wanted so much."⁵

The Georgian nationalists are convinced that the construct Russia applied in Ossetia destabilized and aggravated the relations between different ethnic groups, which triggered the Georgian-Ossetian and Ingush-Ossetian conflicts: "There is no South Ossetia, just as there is no North, East, or West Ossetia; the Bolshevik artifact known as 'South Ossetia' disappeared along with the Soviet Union."⁶

D. Thompson⁷ writes that the recent developments, being related to national identity and self-awareness, are inevitably fairly painful, while their impact on politics is considerable.

The Georgian nationalists have the following to say about Russia's policy toward the South Ossetian regime: "The Kremlin is applying its North Caucasian tactics in South Ossetia: a corrupt client is receiving a *carte blanche* in exchange for loyalty. In other words, Moscow does not care a damn about the local Ossetians; the Kremlin is unconcerned about the embezzlement of funds intended for restoration."⁸

It is often written that a regime associated with Russian politicians and businessmen of dubious reputation⁹ can be nothing but corrupt: "Kokoyty's criminal regime is seeking maximum profits from money laundering; it is hard to imagine, however, that Russian officials are not involved: the Ossetian

¹ See: J. Friedman, "History, Political Identity and Myth," *Lithuanian Ethnology: Studies in Social Anthropology and Ethnology*, No. 1, 2001, p. 41.

² W. Outhwaite, L. Ray, "Modernity, Memory and Postcommunism," *Palitychnaia sfera*, No. 6, 2006, p. 29 (in Byelorussian).

³ A. Cusco, V. Taki, "'Kto my?'" *Istoricheskiy vybor: rumynskaia natsiia ili moldavskaia gosudarstvennost*," *Ab Imperio*, No. 1, 2003, p. 493.

⁴ "Pochemu sbezhal iz Gruzii bratia Karkusovy," *Ponedelnik*, No. 61, 2009, pp. 5-7.

⁵ B. Khubulov, "Iuzhnaia Osetiia: proshloe, nastoiashchee, budushchee," available at [<http://www.kavkasia.ge/index.php?action=more&id=53&lang=rus>].

⁶ G. Vasadze, "Svet i teni novoy strategii po okkupirovannym territoriiam," available at [<http://www.apsny.ge/analytics/1264907003.php>].

⁷ See: D. Thompson, "Must History Stay Nationalistic? The Prison of Closed Intellectual Frontiers," *Encounter*, Vol. 30, No. 6, 1968, p. 27.

⁸ "Osetiny mogut lishitsia svoey 'nezavisimosti' blagodaria Chechne," available at [<http://lazare.ru/post/21393/>].

⁹ For more details on the efforts of the South Ossetian authorities to obtain a loan from Russia to build a railway to connect South and North Ossetia which will bypass foreign territories and the territories of other RF regions, see: "Russko-osetinskiy La Manche: Alexander Zhmaylo v roli Ostapa Bendera," available at [<http://lazare.ru/post/28735/>]. It should be said that even in Soviet times similar projects were never discussed.

government is staffed mainly with Russian appointees. Logic suggests that both sides involved in corruption are equally guilty: this is honor among thieves.”¹⁰

Russian Narratives and the Image of Ossetian Separatism

The Georgian nationalist idea offers the following image of the Republic of South Ossetia: “Tyranical rule, social and economic hardships, and embezzlement of the money intended for postwar rehabilitation are far from a complete list of the accusations the opposition is presenting to the ruling regime.”¹¹

It is said that the RSO and Abkhazian regimes are pursuing a policy better described as “ethnic cleansing”¹²; supported by Russia, the South Ossetian separatists are moving toward an ethnocentric development model for their state, which is manifested as mounting Ossetian nationalism and persecution of everything Georgian. Georgian authors describe this policy as apartheid.¹³

It is said, on the other hand, that the South Ossetian regime has as good as rejected its social obligations to the Ossetian people and placed the responsibility for resolving the social and economic problems on Moscow: “Hardly twelve months have passed since the ‘cherished dream’ (recognition of independence of South Ossetia) was realized. Instead of finding themselves in the promised paradise, the local people were plunged into a struggle for survival; the hopes for prosperity and a cloudless existence have fallen through. It turned out that the Kokoyty regime was best at making empty promises; the tales of an independent and flourishing state proved nothing more than a utopia.”¹⁴

Jerome Friedman from America believes that historical studies directly related to the recent past influence the development of identity; today, being connected with the recent national catastrophe, they have moved to the center of nationalist reflection.¹⁵

Significantly, the Georgian nationalists are not so scathing of the RSO’s attempts to present itself as an Ossetian state as they are of the political regime existing in its territory. This narrative was also discernable at earlier development stages of Georgian nationalism when images of political adversaries (but not ethnic enemies) were formed.

The Georgian media are holding forth about the Russian and Ossetian sides, both of which “are trying to present the RSO as a bona fide state; the impression is created, however, that they have never heard of the key priorities of such a state (human rights, democracy, humanism, etc.). The local NGOs and human rights activists can serve as the best example of the degradation of Ossetian society. Sad but true, they are showing concern only for citizens of Ossetian nationality.”¹⁶

This narrative is intended as proof that, unlike Ossetia and the Russian Federation, Georgia is part of the European political expanse and that Russia and South Ossetia are pursuing a policy designed to put an end to human rights and set up an authoritarian political regime.

The Georgian nationalists present Eduard Kokoyty as a modern-day Nazi dictator who has pushed the non-Ossetians outside the sphere of law: “The liquidated Georgian villages are being replaced with

¹⁰ “Rezhimu Kokoyty ugrozhaet sotsialny vzryv,” available at [<http://www.kavkasia.ge/index.php?action=more&id=78&lang=rus>].

¹¹ “Pravitelstvennye i oppozitsionnye perepitii v separatistskoy ‘Iuzhnoy Osetii,’” available at [<http://www.kavkasia.ge/index.php?action=more&id=62&lang=rus>].

¹² “Maroderstvo i provokatsii—kak instrumenty sovremennoy politiki Rossii,” available at [<http://lazare.ru/post/13124/>].

¹³ V. Kvirikashvili, “Tskhinvalskiy region ili ... Rossiyskiy platsdarm ‘Iuzhny,’” available at [<http://lazare.ru/post/31147/>].

¹⁴ “Rezhimu Kokoyty ugrozhaet sotsialny vzryv.”

¹⁵ See: J. Friedman, “Myth, History, and Political Identity,” *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. VII, 1992, p. 195.

¹⁶ “Rossiisko-osetinskiy gumanizm,” available at [<http://www.kavkasia.ge/index.php?action=more&id=63&lang=rus>].

Russian military bases; the Georgian language is banned in the Republic of South Ossetia; schools no longer use Georgian textbooks or Georgian. Works by Georgian and world classics are destroyed in public in the very center of Tskhinvali; inscriptions in Georgian are removed from the monuments of culture and history; Georgian burials are defiled.¹⁷

There is a more or less widely accepted opinion that while Georgia offers adequate conditions for the development of Ossetian identity, the Russian Federation in the RSO is moving toward assimilating the Ossetians and liquidating them as a nation.

Georgian nationalists believe that Russia's recognition of the RSO will gradually integrate it into a political region of the Northern Caucasus, which is fraught with persecution of Christians and Islamization of the Ossetians.¹⁸ They do not exclude ethnic clashes against the background of the still simmering Ossetian-Ingush conflict and the dramatically increased influence of President of the Chechen Republic Ramzan Kadyrov.¹⁹

Prominent Georgian analyst G. Maisuradze, likewise, has pointed to the alarming signs of growing Islamophobia in the RSO.²⁰

Many in Georgia share the opinion that Russia, which supports the separatist regimes in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, might be confronted with inflated separatist and nationalist sentiments in its own regions.

M. Abashidze, for example, has written: "The Russian media are keeping mum about the very complicated situation in the Northern Caucasus; the complications worsened when the so-called counterterrorist operation regime was lifted in Chechnia at the insistence of Ramzan Kadyrov... Independent Russian experts are very much concerned about the situation in the North Caucasian republics; some think that if the trend continues Russia might lose control, for a certain period, over this area of its territory... The Kremlin seems unaware of the fact that the Northern Caucasus and the federal Center communicate as parts of a confederation and that the Shari'a laws are much more effectively applied there than the Constitution of Russia."²¹

Russian Narratives and the Georgian Political Strategies in the Caucasus

Other Georgian nationalists are even more radical. Z. Kasrelshvili, for example, who heads the Confederation of the Caucasian Peoples, believes that Georgia should recognize the independence of Chechnia and Ingushetia.²²

He argues that this is suggested by Russian policy: "Russia is involved in active anti-Georgian propaganda in the Northern Caucasus." He is convinced that "this recognition will cause Russia's disin-

¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁸ See: "Religioznaia ekspansia v separatistskoy Iuzhnoy Osetii," available at [<http://www.kavkasia.ge/index.php?action=more&id=84&lang=rus>].

¹⁹ See: "Ramzan Kadyrov—novy gubernator Severnogo Kavkaza?" available at [<http://www.kavkasia.ge/index.php?action=more&id=59&lang=rus>]; "Kadyrov—novy sovetnik Kremliia po voprosam vneshney politiki," available at [<http://www.kavkasia.ge/index.php?action=more&id=81&lang=rus>]; "Chechnia v vodovorote avtoritarizma," available at [<http://www.kavkasia.ge/index.php?action=more&id=91&lang=rus>].

²⁰ See: G. Maisuradze, "Svadby s tochki zreniia gosbezopasnosti: v Tskhinvali opolchilis na Islam," available at [<http://lazare.ru/post/35018/>].

²¹ M. Abashidze, "Rossiia teriaet kontrol nad Severnym Kavkazom," available at [<http://www.inosmi.ru/print/249649.html>].

²² See: "'Konfederatsiya narodov Kavkaza' priznala nezavisimost Chechni i Ingushetii," available at [<http://www.apsny.ge/2009/pol/1256251549.php>].

tegration. The people in Abkhazia and the RSO will have to talk to Georgia for the simple reason that Russia will no longer be willing to support them. Tatarstan, Chechnia, Ingushetia, Daghestan, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, Kabardino-Balkaria, and Adigei will push Russia to the brink of disintegration.”²³

In their descriptions of what is going on in the RSO and Abkhazia, the Georgian nationally-biased media rely on narratives which speak of the local regimes’ illegitimacy and the high level of corruption: “After the war, the celebrations of victory over the ‘Georgian aggressors’ continued as a series of recognitions of ‘South Ossetia’s independence’ by the Russian occupants, the terrorist organization HAMAS, Hugo Chaves of dubious psychic qualities, and drug dealer Daniel Ortega, and was crowned with the ‘world’s largest barbecue.’ The euphoria ended, and the local people woke up to bitter reality. While Kokoyty held forth about large-scale housing construction, those who once occupied the houses destroyed by the Russian ‘liberation’ army are still living in tents. The protest rally of homeless people was described as anti-state and cruelly dispersed on the ‘president’s’ orders... Today, ‘South Ossetia’ is a bankrupt entity which will become a second-rate military settlement rather than an independent state.”²⁴

In this way, the nationalists are trying to build the idea of a Georgian political nation which includes the Ossetians and Abkhazians. A positive image of Georgia as a civil nation-state and the true home of all national minorities is being juxtaposed against the negative images of the separatist regimes.

Today, Georgian nationalism is concentrating on Russian narratives: Georgian authors and the nationally-biased media are not letting Russia out of their sight (including the crisis of 2009). It is presented as a country of omnipotent special services: “There is no sense in talking to the Russian special services about the lives of citizens of other states. When carrying out their shady projects, they never hesitate to sacrifice the lives of their own citizens. Russian officials would do better to revive the memory of the terrorist acts of 1999 carried out by the special services in Moscow, Volgograd and Budenovsk, of which Chechen fighters were accused. Three hundred people lost their lives, and about two thousand were wounded. Later, the FSB decided to repeat the ‘performance’ in Ryazan, where the local people sounded the alarm just in time. The special services described this as a ‘training exercise’ to check the vigilance of the locals. Mr. Putin used these events to invade Chechnia once more.”²⁵

These narratives not merely describe Russia as a backward country that poses a danger to Europe²⁶ and the post-Soviet expanse. The Georgian nationalists insist that the Russian Federation is gradually losing the features of a European democratic state and is sliding down to the development level of the undemocratic Asian regimes.

The Russian Federation as a state unable to cope with the Northern Caucasus is the pet image of the Georgian information expanse. Georgian nationalists insist that the Russian leaders are striving to restore a repressive model of governance over the national regions: “The new initiative of the Russian government—an employment program for the Ingush—caused quite a stir in Ingushetia... It envisaged resettlement of the Ingush... From the very first days of Russia’s military presence in the Northern Caucasus, each of the consecutive Russian rulers has inherited from his predecessors such measures as forced resettlement, physical violence, and the fanning of ethnic strife in full accordance with the ‘divide and rule’ principle. Each of these leaders applies his own interpretation of the ‘Russian plan.’ The North Caucasian nations have survived more than one attack designed to liquidate whole

²³ “Neskolko evropeyskikh gosudarstv gotoviatsia k priznaniu nezavisimosti Chechni i Ingushetii,” available at [<http://www.apsny.ge/interview/1255740461.php>].

²⁴ “Iuzhnaia Osetiia: proshloe, nastoiashchee, budushchee.”

²⁵ “Prodolzhenie informatsionnoy voyny ili podgotovka k novoy agressii?,” available at [<http://www.kavkasia.ge/index.php?action=more&id=89&lang=rus>].

²⁶ On how Europe perceived Russia’s foreign policy after the military conflict of August 2008, see: J.-Ph. Tardieu, “Russia and the Eastern Partnership after the War in Georgia,” *Russie.Nei.Visions*, August 2009, 26 pp.

nations. The smallest of them find it hard to stand up to the pressure of 'Mother Russia' and to preserve their cultures and their identity."²⁷

Russia as the Topos of National Intolerance

When commenting on the ideas of Russian politicians, the Georgian nationalists invariably point to the continuity between the assimilatory strategies of czarist Russia and the Russian Federation. They are convinced that the universal nature of the assimilatory policies and the deliberate destruction of national cultures are two elements of the Russian model of ethnic relations: "The aim of the Russian government is absolutely clear: today it will resettle the Ingush; tomorrow it will be the turn of the Chechens (if they survive), followed by the Avars, etc. This, very much in keeping with the tradition, will go on together with Russian settlement of the vacated lands. In Ossetia, this has been going on for a long time with obvious results: very soon, try as you might, you will not find an Ossetian speaking his native language or an Abkhazian speaking Abkhazian."²⁸

According to the nationally-biased Georgian media, Russia's policy in the Northern Caucasus can at best be described as highly contradictory: while suppressing the national movements in Chechnia, Ingushetia, North Ossetia, and Kabardino-Balkaria, it is flirting with their leaders. The Georgian nationalists point out the following: "The Kremlin is cornered in the Northern Caucasus. While Moscow is looking for a way out, the situation is going from bad to worse by the hour. The experience of many years confirms that force alone cannot bring stability to the region. The Northern Caucasus turned out to be a test of sorts of Russia's ability to preserve its territorial integrity."²⁹

It is frequently said that the Russian Federation is in a grave crisis: "The Russian crisis is a bouquet of crises. It consists of several components: the crisis of the physically depleted technosphere caused by huge under-investment. Russia-91 entered the era of global confusion and crises as a worn-out state; it should expect an avalanche of technogenic accidents, breakdowns, and catastrophes. In the Russian Federation, the average age of industrial equipment is 21.5 years compared to 9.8 years in the Soviet Union (1990) or 10 years in the developed world today. The share of investments in basic assets in the developed countries is 25 to 30 percent of GDP; in Russia, it is a mere 18 percent."³⁰

The huge efforts being exerted to create a negative image of Russia and its history show that in Georgia history is geared at politics.³¹

While insisting that the Russian model of economic development is detrimental to its own interests, the Georgian nationalists point out the following: "The West has managed to set up a corrupt regime in Russia patterned on the banana dictatorships, the members of which, while pursuing their own interests, guarantee that in the near future the country will remain uncompetitive and, therefore, a raw-material appendage of the developed world."³²

²⁷ "'Mirnaia' deportatsiia ingushey?!" available at [<http://www.kavkasia.ge/index.php?action=more&id=64&lang=rus>].

²⁸ Ibidem.

²⁹ "Neskonchaemye strasti na Severnom Kavkaze," available at [<http://www.kavkasia.ge/index.php?action=more&id=33&lang=rus>].

³⁰ "U nas—dva krizisa," *Ponedel'nik*, No. 93, 2009, pp. 6-7. On what the Georgian nationalists think about Russia, see: "Prosushchestvuet li RF do 2014 goda?" available at [<http://lazare.ru/post/12646/>].

³¹ On the interconnection between historical studies and politics, see: R. Lindner, "Immutability and Changes in Post-Soviet Historiography of Belarus," in: *Belarusika/Albaruthenica* (Minsk), Vol. 6, 1997, Part 1, p. 114 (in Belorussian).

³² G. Vasadze, "Strategiia natsionalnoy bezopasnosti Gruzii," available at [<http://www.apsny.ge/analytics/1264126857.php>].

In 2009, while the crisis was gaining momentum, the Georgian nationalists became even more concerned about Russia's future: they feared that its economic collapse would trigger its disintegration with highly negative consequences for the situation in the world.³³

The nationally-biased Georgian authors turned to the memory of the common past; they posed themselves as the defenders of Russian interests before the Russian political elites, which, according to some intellectuals, "are steering the country toward annihilation."³⁴

The Impasses of Modernization: Socioeconomic History of Contemporary Russia and Georgian Interpretations

The Georgian nationally-biased media are especially critical of the RF Armed Forces; much is being done to create an extremely negative image of the Russian army as a backward and thoroughly corrupt institution: "The Russian army is facing a multitude of problems: the structures and mechanisms of command and control are outdated; discipline is slack, while the corruption level is high... In fact, the Russian army is unfit for action... Numerous factors interfere with the reforms, the top military bureaucrats being one of them, since the cutbacks will primarily affect the generals and officer corps. They will lose their jobs, their privileges, and their source of income (created by the corruption that reigns supreme in the armed forces). They cannot command brigades for lack of adequate experience, which will affect the end result. The Defense Ministry and the General Staff cannot agree on the reforms; there is no new conception of national security. This means that military reform, the military doctrine, and the national security conception will be realized independently which, in the final analysis, will negatively affect the results of the reforms in the Russian army."³⁵

Georgian intellectuals are convinced that the Russian elites have opted for the wrong model of crisis settlement, which is leading to an impasse: they prefer to look for external enemies to distract the nation's attention from the real problems. The Georgian media have written the following in this respect: "Aware that it is losing its grip on the region, the Kremlin is resorting to the time-tested Soviet methods: it is concealing its own impotence by pumping up fear of an external enemy. This is being done to brainwash the domestic audience and to shift the blame for the regional problems onto Georgia. Russia is trying to convince its own people and the world community that Georgia is a terrorist state. It remains to be seen whether these outmoded tactics are justified or not. The fact is that Moscow is tilling the soil for another military operation in Georgian territory. Russia is seizing any pretext to build up tension along its borders with Georgia and create the necessary context for military provocations. This explains why Georgia is being accused of contacts with al-Qa'eda."³⁶

The development of these narratives within the Georgian political expanse shows that the Georgian nationalist ideas are gradually changing: on the one hand, nationalism is growing more ethnic; on the other, the strong tradition of civil nationalism (despite the national catastrophe of August 2008) has survived. This probably explains why ethnic nationalism that demonizes the Russians as universal "others" (today, demonization is limited to Russia's political class) has failed to develop in Georgia.

³³ See: "Razval 'sverkhu' kak elitarny interes," *Ponedel'nik*, No. 93, 2009, pp. 13-15; "Velikaia nesamostoiatel'nost," *Ponedel'nik*, No. 93, 2009, pp. 13-15.

³⁴ "Gotovitsia k momentu 'Ch,'" *Ponedel'nik*, No. 93, 2009, pp. 12-13.

³⁵ "Reforma vooruzhennykh sil Rossii," available at [<http://www.kavkasia.ge/index.php?action=more&id=76&lang=rus>].

³⁶ "Prodolzenie informatsionnoy voyny ili podgotovka k novoy agressii?" available at [<http://www.kavkasia.ge/index.php?action=more&id=89&lang=rus>].

Conclusion

The political transformations in Georgia did not bring about the “triumph” of civil society (which cast doubt on the universal nature of the Western political model of coexistence of civil society and civil nationalism);³⁷ instead they revived ethnic and ethnicized nationalism, radical political thinking, and protest. In the conditions of a democratic transit and political instability, Georgian nationalism remained as prominent as in the Georgian S.S.R.

The Georgian nationalist discourse, a product of independence, lived through the following stages:

- (1) early 1990s-1993—the period of political instability and dramatic ethnic radicalization of Georgian nationalism;
- (2) mid-1990s-2003—unstable development of the nationalist discourse within the political regime of Eduard Shevardnadze which exhibited a strong authoritarian bias;
- (3) 2003-August 2008—the period from the Rose Revolution to the military operation against South Ossetia and Russia’s interference when the nationalist discourse was consolidated and radicalized and when attempts were made to use radical methods to settle the problems;
- (4) the present stage of the nationalist discourse; amid political instability, Georgian nationalism is developing as a sum-total of political and ethnic trends in the country with considerable and diverse nationalist experience.

It seems that considerable radicalization of Georgian nationalism, which relied on rich traditions, transformed it, in the 1990s-2000s, into state ethnic nationalism, thus creating its main development problem: the Georgian ruling elite imagined that it could move away from a dialog toward military force as a method for settling territorial disputes.

This transformation of the Georgian nationalist narrative became possible under the impact of several factors. In Georgia, political transition has been taking place in a society burdened with an authoritarian past; for several decades it was subjected to enforced modernization, which destroyed the traditional relations and political institutions. This has probably made the democratic transit much more complicated by radicalizing Georgian nationalism to a certain extent, and, in the final analysis, supplying the nationalist discourse with considerable ethnic overtones.

The fact that Georgia was part of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union for nearly two centuries warped the Georgian political culture even more.

³⁷ On the problems of establishing a civil society in transition regimes discussed theoretically, see: J. Kocka, “Evropeyskoe grazhdanskoe obshchestvo: istoricheskie korni i sovremennye perspektivy na Vostoke i Zapade,” *Neprikosnennyy zapas*, No. 2, 2003, pp. 54-61.