Paper prepared for the

Third Euroacademia International Conference

Re-Inventing Eastern Europe

Berlin, 28 – 29 March 2014

This paper is a draft

Please do not cite

Strategies of Cultural Resistance to EUropeanisation in Eastern Europe and its Margins

Lia Tsuladze
Associate Professor of Sociology, Tbilisi State University, Georgia
Research Fellow, St. Antony's College, University of Oxford, UK

Abstract

The paper discusses the strategies of cultural resistance to EUropeanisation in Eastern Europe (the cases of Romania and Poland) and its margins (the case of Georgia). Based on the in-depth interviews and focus groups with Romanian, Polish and Georgian youth, the author argues that the EUropeanisation discourses display ambivalent identities that constantly negotiate between the EUropeanising forces and the national. This ambiguity is reflected in the youth discourses on the impact of EUropeanisation on the local traditions, religious beliefs, family relations, migration issues, and finally, their vision of freedom, provoking the young people's specific coping strategies, which seem quite ambivalent too, implying a dual attempt to "both embrace and eschew Westernization" (Blum 2007). On the one hand, there seems to be an attempt to copy a lot from the West, particularly the EU, whose standards and norms these three countries try to follow, while on the other hand, such a "copy-paste" is perceived as a local "mistake" and there is an obvious attempt to do things in a "specific" way, varying from rediscovering the local, even copying the local, to creatively mixing the Western, often equated to EUropean, with the local. Despite the fact that not all the coping strategies are considered as successful by the youth, it turns out that even the "strange" examples of bricolage can be applied as a means of cultural resistance insomuch as they represent the local way of doing things.

Key words: EUropeanisation, Eastern Europe, youth discourse, bricolage, cultural resistance.

Introduction

The following paper is a part of my cross-cultural research on the perception of EUropeanisation among the youth from the Eastern European countries (the cases of Romania and Poland) and its margins (the case of Georgia). Based on the youth perceptions,[i] I aim to illustrate how the EUropeanisation discourses provoke a new politics of ambivalence responsible for upholding ambivalent identities that constantly negotiate between the EUropeanising forces and the national. This ambiguity is reflected in the youth perceptions on the impact of EUropeanisation on the local traditions, religious beliefs, family relations, migration issues, and finally, their vision of freedom, provoking the young people's specific coping strategies or rather the strategies of cultural resistance. The latter seem quite ambivalent as well, implying a dual attempt to "both embrace and eschew Westernization," which is presumably their means of preserving "cultural intimacy" (Herzfeld 2005) alongside emphasizing their international integration.

On the one hand, there seems to be an attempt to copy a lot from the West, particularly the EU, whose standards and norms the presented three countries try to follow, while on the other hand, there is an obvious attempt to do things the local way, which predominantly implies a kind of bricolage - a mixture of the local with the Western, termed elsewhere as "Eurolocalisation" (Morawska 2003, 182). The youth discourses evolve along the same line: On the one hand, they complain about imitating Western Europe and copy-pasting everything Western, while on the other hand, they stress their own ways of combining the elements from different contexts, making the point that although not all the examples of bricolage can be considered as successful, they still represent their attempts to do things their own (local) way and to keep or invent "specificity" (Ditchev 2002, 247).

On the Local "Mistake"

As noted above, the young people are concerned about the lack of bricolage in their societies. According to the Romanian youngsters' narratives, they

> "try to look at all the possible examples of those Western European countries and to copy them, starting from the first names as lots of Italian, French, etc. names have been imported, especially as a result of this huge wave of migration, and ending with the arts" (Irina, aged 24).

The common perception that everything coming from Western Europe is "of a better quality, more modern and civilized" is assessed by my respondents as a local "mistake." Consequently, they call for a "selective incorporation" (Robertson 1995, 342) of all the outside elements:

> "Recently we have been taking everything from everywhere, especially from Western Europe, and now it's time to select, to keep only good things, not everything. It's a Romanian mistake to try to adopt everything" (from a focus group discussion with the BA students of political science at Bucharest University).

Some of them state that even the Eastern trends become fashionable among the locals only after the West approves them and they become popular there. For instance, Lelia (aged 18) is confident that "Romanians still look a lot at Western Europe and even the popularity of Chinese food can be considered as the Western influence as Chinese food is quite popular there and therefore, it has become popular here as well." Lelia concludes with a sad smile that "we should respect ourselves more."

Polish young people talk about the same type of Polish "mistake" though they might not use this very term:

> "After the communist era we believed that Poland is an extremely traditional country and our thinking is based on old, outdated ideas, while everything that is Western and can be called European is better and more enlightened! This is a generalization, which makes things really bad here" (Igor, aged 20).

This dichotomy of the old-fashioned/outdated vs. the modern/civilized can be traced in almost all the youngsters' narratives. Georgian respondents also express the concern about their peers' attempts to look "modern" or "cool" that is "Westernised" (recently translated into "Europeanised") which may range from the copy-paste of the latest Western fashion that makes everyone look "distinctively similar" (Tsuladze 2011, 70) to the copy-paste of popular music represented by Georgian pop, which is believed to be "a tasteless imitation of the Western pop" (Sandro, aged 17) (ibid, p. 72).

The young people passionately criticize such local "mistakes," whether the latter are Romanian, Polish or Georgian, and suggest various strategies of cultural resistance, some of which are quite successful, others quite complicated or even "strange."

Rediscovering the Local

The first and most common strategy emphasized by the youth from all three countries is "rediscovering" the local:

> "Maybe now a popular trend is to rediscover our own. You know, now all of us are into bio stuff and lots of women I know are rediscovering their mothers' or grandmothers' recipes... and this is searching into the traditional, I guess" (Maria, aged 21).

Alongside "rediscovering" the local in everyday life, the young people bring a number of examples of such a rediscovery from painting, music, cinematography, etc. For instance, Irina (aged 24), herself an artist, states that in response to copying the Western, a few years ago young Romanian artists started copying the local. She brings an example of the Cluj School of painting, which is characterized by a specific style and distinctive features such as the emphasis on social issues, expressionism, the domination of black and white colors, etc., and can be immediately identified as a Romanian style. She thinks that young Romanian artists tend to imitate the Cluj School as

> "the whole Western style of painting became not just boring but so common that by going back to the national style one wants to be not unique but, you know, somehow special, not common."

Andrei (aged 25), a film director, talks about the same strategies in cinematography noting that Romanian films have very specific and quite outstanding style easily recognizable as Romanian with its realistic and naturalistic emphasis, long talks, rather shaky camera, less care for technical aspects and more care for how feelings are transmitted, etc. He argues that Romanians can benefit a lot from the Western support but then they can always do things their own way, even if it does not imply only successful cases:

> "I think we are in a good position, where we try to take money from the EU and it's not by chance I am saying this first! We don't take good examples, we just take money mainly and at the same time, we keep our way of doing things, and this comes with good and bad examples. Even though we are European, we are still very, very much Romanian!"

Creatively Mixing the Local with the Western

Alongside rediscovering the local, there is also a trend of creatively mixing the local with the Western. It seems the Western cultural trends encourage improvisation and result in a culture-specific bricolage reflected in the modernized representations of the local. My respondents bring a lot of examples of such bricolage from various areas of social life, including fashion, food, architecture, painting, music, etc.

According to my Georgian respondent Irakli (aged 21), a DJ at one of the popular music clubs: "I may use the Western cover to decorate my Georgian sketch but it always remains Georgian and I am extremely proud of it!" Some young people even state that combining the Georgian with the Western has its historical roots, that the Georgian-European bricolage, exemplified by "Shin", "Zumba", "Assa-Party" and other Georgian performers today, has started in the 19th century, and that "Georgian academic music itself is a product of the combination of European music with Georgian folk" (Luka, aged 21).

Romanian and Polish respondents recall similar examples stating that their cultural traditions, say, traditional music, can be a powerful means of stressing the local and resisting the Western, especially the Western musical styles dominating the musical scene in the world. One of the most often cited examples among Polish youth is the group "Zacopower," which presents Polish folk songs and music in a modernised way that is "combining it with the best elements of modern Western music"; while Romanian youngsters often mention the group "Fara Zahar" ("Without Sugar"), which "adapts the Western-style music to the local reality and uses lots of irony and sarcasm to present the social aspects of Romanian life."

That's how "glocalisation" works: by adopting Western cultural elements and combining them with the local ones, especially the folk ones[ii] in a culture-specific way so that on their side "reworked traditional themes provide the basis for innovative and adaptive responses to outside influences" (Blum 2007, 27).

Though there is one danger the young people envision talking about the bricolage: They express their concern that even the most successful examples of bricolage are often assessed by the locals through the Western European lenses, that is they are accepted and become popular among the locals only after they have become popular in Western Europe. As one of my respondents remarked:

> "I guess we have a number of good examples of remaking things our own way though in general we are not very creative... I believe we adapt certain things but I don't think we recognize them. I think we take songs and change the words in Romanian – that's not creativity but that's the only phenomenon we recognize. There are many other phenomena that go unnoticed" (from a focus group discussion with the MA students of sociology at the University of Cluj-Napoca).

According to the young people's narratives, the "recognizable" cases of bricolage are measured by their "respect in Western Europe" though they are afraid that most of such cases are "very commercial and they all seem so similar, like one and the same" (Lucian, aged 20). Thus, another dichotomy

appears in this context – the local heterogeneity vs. the Western homogeneity, and the former as a means of resisting the latter.

"Strange" Cases of Bricolage

Besides those cases of bricolage one can be proud of, the young people recall less successful and even quite "strange" cases of bricolage. And although some assess them as failures and some perceive them as shameful, they tend to believe that these cases might still represent the strategies of cultural resistance.

Georgian youngsters confess that there is a fashionable trend of "being intellectual" they try to follow, which is more an image than a true aspiration, and they share a number of cases when they spend the whole day at a literary café as if they were getting familiar with the latest fiction though they might stare at the same page all day long, or when they take their own comics to a university library and pretend they are getting familiar with academic material. One of my Georgian respondents commented on this trend:

> "I have a feeling it's a kind of response to this political project of 'enlightening our youth' though you would ask: why such a distorted response? I would reply: It is fetishism, a mock on our politicians' obsession with promoting these Western-style educational standards (especially after signing the Bologna Declaration), which stays on the surface and doesn't really go deeper. Maybe it's not a very successful attempt but it's a specific way to cope" (Giorgi, aged 19).

The corresponding examples can be found in the Romanian and Polish youngsters' narratives. The often cited case of Romanian bricolage is "Manele" – a "trash pop, which originates from Turkish-Arabic roots and combines all these strange elements from elsewhere, including the local Gipsy music." As the plot of manele is usually about money, women, expensive cars and houses, most of the young people perceive it as shameful though quite often they confess that despite the fact that their peers would commonly refuse that they listen to manele, many of them still do. The young people think that manele can be descriptive of the Romanian reality, not in a sense that "Romanians have all these golden things and expensive cars, or they possess the mansions in Spain, but these ideas and the respective attempts can be seen in the society." Nevertheless, they state that "this kind of music rejects the impact of the Western culture in a way" (from a focus group discussion with the BA students of political science at Bucharest University). To cut it short, we can conclude that manele, with its carnival characteristics, might represent the resistance to the Western-style order and rule through its emphasis on the "barbarian" elements and its

attempts to reverse the normality (the same way as a carnival reverses an everyday routine). It might have a deliberate shocking effect, consequently, being used as a means of resistance.

Another example of the "shameful" bricolage from a very different sphere of life though still applied as a means of cultural resistance can be found in the Polish reality. My Polish respondents share the following observation:

> "After the collapse of the communist regime we were desperate to adopt everything Western; then we found out that the actual Western didn't coincide with our ideal of the Western and our expectations were not met. Now, searching for the solution out of this difficulty, we have invented a very strange thing - we have combined the Soviet and European bureaucracies, which is a dangerous combination but we have tried to find our own way" (from a focus group discussion with the MA students of humanities at Jagiellonian University, Krakow).

Thus, based on the abovementioned discussion, there can be various strategies of cultural resistance as a response to EUropeanisation the youth from Romania, Poland and Georgia apply, from rediscovering the local, even copying the local, to mixing the local with the Western, often equated to EUropean. Despite the fact that not all the coping strategies are considered as successful by the youth, it turns out that even the "strange" examples of bricolage can be applied as a means of cultural resistance insomuch as they represent the local way of doing things.

Bibliography

Blum, Douglas. 2007. National Identity and Globalization: Youth, State, and Society in Post-Soviet Eurasia. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ditchev, Ivaylo. 2002. "The Eros of Identity." In Balkan as Metaphor: Between Globalization and Fragmentation, edited by Dusan I. Bjelic and Obrad Savic, 235-250. Cambridge, USA and London, UK: The MIT Press.

Edensor, Ted. 2002. National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life. Oxford and New York: Berg.

Herzfeld, Michael. 2005. Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State, 2nd ed. New York: Routledge.

Morawska, Ewa. 2003. "National identities of Polish (im)migrants in Berlin: Four varieties, their Correlates and Implications." In Europeanisation,

National Identities & Migration: Changes in Boundary Constructions between Western and Eastern Europe, edited by Willfried Spohn and Anna Triandafyllidou, 171-191. London & New York: Routledge.

Robertson, Roland. 2010. "Glocalization: Time-Space and Homogeneity-Heterogeneity." In Readings in Globalization: Key Concepts and Major Debates, edited by George Ritzer and Zeynep Atalay, 334-343. Malden and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Tsuladze, Lia. 2011. "Youth Identities through Bricolage in a Changeable Society: The Case of Georgia." In Multiculturalism: Critical and Inter-Disciplinary Perspectives, edited by Kelly Gallagher, 67-76. Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press.

---

[i] I have conducted a qualitative social research (June 2010-December 2011), namely, in-depth interviews and focus groups with the youth in Georgia, Romania and Poland: 50 in-depth interviews and 2 focus groups in the capital of Georgia – Tbilisi, 33 in-depth interviews and 5 focus groups in the capital of Romania - Bucharest and one of the main cities of Transylvania - Cluj-Napoca (according to the popular Romanian saying, the border between Western and Eastern Europe lies through Transylvania), and 14 in-depth interviews and 3 focus groups in Krakow as the old capital of Poland, which is believed to have always been experiencing the Western influences more than any other part of the country.

[ii] "Privileged forms of national identity have been those assumed to be linked with... a 'folk' culture" (Edensor, 2002, p. 141).

Lia Tsuladze is an Associate Professor of Sociology, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Tbilisi State University, Georgia. She is a Director of the Program of Applied Social Research at Center for Social Sciences (CSS). Currently she is a Research Fellow at St. Antony's College, University of Oxford, UK. Her research deals with the discourses on Europeanisation, particularly the impact of the latter on national identities, as seen in Eastern Europe and its margins.