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The Georgian Dilemma: Backstage vs. Frontstage Discourses on Europeanisation

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Abstract

The paper analyzes the Georgians' popular discourses on Europeanisation after the country initialled the Association Agreement with the EU in November 2013. It investigates into a dilemma the Georgians encounter: their strong aspiration to integrate with the EU is combined with their perception of Europeanisation as a threat to the national identity. Consequently, the paper focuses on how the above discourses are performed at the domestic backstage vs. international front stage.

For this purpose, the author has studied the Georgians' discourses on the EU integration from two main sources: The discussions held on the popular amateur website - forum.ge and a Facebook discussion group entitled "National Identity and Europeanisation in Georgia," created and moderated by the author, and consisting of BA, MA and PhD students of Tbilisi State University. The two sources allow for a comparison of the discourses on Europeanisation between two groups: a large anonymous group of Georgians with various sociodemographic characteristics involved in the forum discussions and a closed Facebook group of the younger generation of Georgians with higher education - a category that, according to the nation-wide surveys, is the most pro-EU segment of the population.

The paper argues that despite the country's long-lasting aspiration towards the EU integration and the latest developments in this direction, the hopes of gaining political security, economic stability, and cultural integration are accompanied by the doubts and fears of asymmetric power relations, diminishing national sovereignty, and declining national identity. Despite these doubts, the EU integration is considered to be the only right path for Georgia, encouraging our discussants to voice their hopes on the front stage pushing their doubts and respective national sentiments to the backstage. These frontstage-backstage discourses on Europeanisation display rather ambivalent identities attempting to perform sufficient nationalism and sufficient Europeanness for the domestic and international audiences respectively.

Keywords: Europeanisation, Georgia, national identity, online discourse, international front stage, domestic backstage.

Introduction

The paper focuses on the Georgians' popular discourses on the EU integration and Europeanisation in the period between initialling (November 2013) and signing (June 2014) the Association Agreement with the EU. The main reason why I have decided to study the Georgians' popular discourses on the EU integration is that while the recent nation-wide surveys (Caucasus Barometers) steadily showed that more than 80% of the population supported Georgia's EU integration, the latest nation-wide survey (ISSP 2013) has revealed a larger portion of the population not being sure (10.5%) or not responding to the question (17.5%). Moreover, the Gallup survey of 2013 revealed that reflecting back on the collapse of the Soviet Union, the population of Georgia was rather polarized – while 37% believed that it had brought more benefit than harm, 33% saw more harm than benefit for the country (Esipova and Ray 2013). Thus, my question is whether the Georgians have become less supportive of the EU integration. And if so, how can the declining pro-EU attitudes be explained alongside the enduring desire of getting closer to the EU? How can one explain the fact that 1/3 of the population considers harmful the breakup of the Soviet Union alongside the manifest hopes that the EU integration will bring much desired security and protection from Russia?

I view the EU integration as a process of the EU's normative expansion in a particular country, even if it does not provide the latter with a definite perspective of becoming a member state; while I treat Europeanisation as not only a process of implementation of the EU's formal and informal rules and standards (Radaelli 2003, 30), but also the development of "a shared social imaginary" (Taras 2009, 7). The aim is thus to trace the impact of the EU's normative expansion on the Georgians' perceptions of Europeanisation and its influence on different aspects of their identity. For this purpose, I study the Georgians' popular discourses on Europeanisation sharing the idea that Europeanisation can be viewed as "a set of contested discourses and narratives about the impact of European integration on domestic political change" (Radaelli and Pasquier 2008, 35).

The Georgians' popular discourses on Europeanisation have been analysed based on two sources: One represents the discussions held on the popular amateur website forum.ge, with the population's immediate reflections on the ongoing political events, and another is the Facebook discussion group entitled "National Identity and Europeanisation in Georgia," created by me and consisting of 47 members – mainly BA, MA and PhD students of Social Sciences and Humanities at

TSU. While being a passive observer of the discussions held on the forum.ge, I have been posting questions to the Facebook group, as well as moderating discussions. The two sources allow for a comparison of the discourses on Europeanisation between two groups: a large anonymous group of Georgians with various sociodemographic characteristics involved in the forum discussions and a closed Facebook group of the younger generation of Georgians with higher education - a category that, according to the nation-wide surveys, is the most pro-EU segment of the population. The gathered data have been analysed using qualitative content- and discourse analyses.¹

On the Hopes, Fears and National Sentiments – The Forum Participants’ Perspective

On December 20, 2013 a new discussion topic was opened on the forum.ge: “Urgent: The EU has decided to speed up the signing of the association agreement with Georgia.”² A heated discussion followed with the supporters of the current government rejoicing that the former government was unable to achieve this result; with the supporters of the previous government responding that the current government would fail to prove its pro-EU course, consequently, there was a chance that the ratification of the document would be postponed to an indefinite future; with the pessimists noting that “the EU doesn’t care even about Ukraine, why bother about Georgia?”; with the pragmatists convinced that the EU needs Georgia in order to diversify its energy supply and reduce its dependence on Russian gas, and with the optimists believing that Georgia could be the EU’s appealing strategic partner in the South Caucasus.

Whatever the arguments, the overall attitude remains the same: Almost everyone sees the EU-Georgian relation in the positive light, awaiting the ratification of the document. Despite a general fear that Russia will try to “Ukrainise Georgia” (F.O., female), the discussants still believe that both attacking and coaxing Georgia is Russia’s long-practiced method and it won’t work this time.

On the same day – December 20, 2013 – another discussion topic was opened on the forum.ge: “Do we want the EU at all?”³ It seems as soon as the perspective of moving closer to the EU turned out to be realistic with the almost settled date of ratification of the association agreement, the Georgians started questioning whether the EU was appealing to them at all and the main discussion evolved around the question of “what the people would gain if Georgia entered (or rather was incorporated into) the EU.”⁴ The resulting discussion focused on the identity concerns accompanying the Europeanisation process.

How may the Georgian identity be affected by Europeanisation? The discussants fear that even in case of being incorporated in the EU, Georgia will retain “a permanent second-class status” (Vachudova 2005, 241). This idea directly challenges Georgian national pride, invigorating the arguments pointing to the long and glorious history of Georgia and its tangible and intangible cultural heritage, thereby proving the irrelevance of the so called “civilisational” discourse (Elias 1994) in relation to Georgia. However, the sceptics immediately remind those obsessed with national pride that it is the EU that sets the rules of the game and those aspiring for its membership have to “do things the EU way” (Grabbe 2006, 86), referring to the example of Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries and resonating Grabbe’s argument that the EU as a “hegemonic actor” easily imposed double standards on the CEE countries: the CEE candidates were treated like member-states in respect to their obligations under the accession partnerships, but at the same time, they had no rights to influence the substance of these relations (2006, 37). Thus, even the CEE countries with their candidate status could not influence their relations with the EU, and Georgia, lagging far behind, should therefore not expect to be granted a say in these matters. Nevertheless, they conclude that even such treatment can be tolerated in order to avoid the costs of exclusion (Gruber 2000). It seems “doing things the EU way” is a necessity at the front stage (Goffman 1959) so as to secure the inclusion, thus keeping national sentiments at the backstage so as not to derail the process.

Alongside the asymmetrical power relations between the EU and the countries aspiring to become its members, the Eurosceptics also express concerns about the loss of national sovereignty. However, the pragmatists remind those fearing diminishing national sovereignty that Georgia, being located in the South Caucasus and not possessing significant socioeconomic capacities, has to choose between the EU and the Eurasian Customs Union (ECU) and cannot, like Switzerland, remain neutral. Moreover, in their views, the EU membership is the only chance for such small and powerless countries as Georgia to survive in the today’s highly competitive world, even if it means giving up certain aspects of sovereignty.

The concerns about asymmetrical dependence and loss of sovereignty are reinforced by the worries about declining national identity. The forum participants fear that Europeanisation might threaten Georgian identity because of its elasticity and uncritical adaptability to the influences imposed from outside. This is, for instance, exemplified by the Georgian elites’ pro-Russian attitudes in the beginning of the 19th century, when Russia invaded Georgia, and later during the communist period. Hence those with “identitary obsession” (Iliescu 2009, 96) fear that affected by the EU integration “Georgian identity will lose its essence and completely degrade” (Iverieli, male). However, the sceptics step in again, ironically noting that “Georgian identity degraded within the Soviet Union so much that it cannot degrade further; therefore, Georgians do not have much to lose... What we have today are only the dreams about glorious past, no innovations at all” (Rhaegar, male).

Therefore, it is argued that certain innovations spread by the EU should be adopted; on the other hand, certain cultural traditions should be sacrificed for the sake of the EU integration; still others making inseparable part of the Georgians’

“cultural intimacy” (Herzfeld 2005) can be hidden in the backstage to avoid being labelled nationalist by the EU claiming to reside in the post-nationalist era (Delanty 2003).

Thus, it seems the goal of the EU integration encourages the Georgians to perform differently on the front (international) and back (domestic) stages, tolerating the ideas of asymmetric dependence on the EU, of diminished national sovereignty, and even the sacrifice of certain cultural traditions on the front stage though keeping their national sentiments active in the backstage. The twofold discourses of the Georgians resemble those of the Estonians in the period of the EU accession, projecting “different narratives of security to (elite) foreign audiences and to (popular) domestic audiences, depending on the expectations of these audiences” thus attempting “to perform a careful balancing act between sufficient nationalism” and sufficient neutrality for the domestic and foreign audiences respectively (Kuus 2007, 106).

On the Hopes, Fears and National Sentiments – The Students’ Perspective

The young people from the Facebook discussion group associate Europeanisation with the rule of law, protection of human rights, security, and economic stability. However, despite the evident optimistic stand towards Europeanisation, variations in the frontstage-backstage discourses can be traced among the youth as well. Although there is a consensus that the EU integration is the only right path for Georgia, the issue of asymmetric power relations constitutes a major concern. It is believed to be reinforced by Georgia’s possessing three main features of peripheries that is “distance, difference, and dependence,” being “located at some distance from the dominant center or centers,” having a “sense of separate identity” (Rokkan 1999, 115), and being dependent on the central international players in the most important political decisions, as well as economic support. The young people are aware that “(p)eripherality, combined with small country status... encourage(s) a top-down mode of Europeanization” (Goetz 2006, 13). Yet, this awareness does not discourage them from supporting the EU integration, meanwhile not missing an opportunity to weaken the power of “civilisational” discourse in relation to Georgia. As one of the respondents argues,

In the period when the question of gender equality was discussed in “The Knight in the Panther’s Skin” (the 12th century Georgian epic poem) it did not exist in the European agenda yet; in the very same period, Georgia had “Darbazi” – a model of the contemporary parliamentary system established in Europe much later. Yes, Europe is much more advanced today but the civilisational progress has its own side effects, which is an advantage of rather “undeveloped” societies (Giorgi, male, MA student).

No doubt, this discourse on Georgia being ahead of Europe in developing the most essential aspects of democracy such as the parliamentary system or the ideas of gender equality is meant for “in-house use.” And even acknowledging the fact that currently Europe is far more developed can be viewed as its disadvantage vis-à-vis rather “undeveloped” Georgia, whose “civilizational inferiority” is counterbalanced by its “moral” or “spiritual superiority” believed to be deficient in the West (Morawska 2003, 172).

The impact of Europeanisation on the national identity is another issue that invokes rather ambivalent discourses. At first sight, the young people do not seem concerned about the declining national identity. Rather, they have an extremely positive view on what they call “European values” implying individualism, industriousness, universalism, tolerance, etc. Nevertheless, a certain concern is hidden behind this frontstage positive view, as expressed by Mariam, a female BA student:

Although the EU looks like a well-built clock, which is very good, there is a threat that the sound working conditions of this “mechanism” will overshadow genuine social relations. That is why I would wish to have the European well-built system with our local elements.

Thus, the necessity of “Eurolocalisation” (Morawska 2003, 182) or “domestic adaptation with national colors” (Risse, Cowles and Caporaso 2001, 1) is considered as a desired alternative to merely “doing things the EU way.” Adapting the EU norms and perspectives to the local reality and not just adopting them without critical examination is considered as a means of maintaining “the right balance between Europeanisation and nationalism” (Ilona, female, PhD student). Hence the young people prefer a “pick-and-choose approach... hoping to meet the EU midway rather than going all the way in adopting the EU’s standards” (Di Puppo 2010, 51-52). However, there is a high awareness of keeping such sentiments at the domestic backstage, as their overt manifestation is believed to be an obstacle in the process of the EU integration.

Conclusion

The frontstage-backstage discourses on Europeanisation invoke obvious confusion among the Georgians. It is noteworthy though that such confusion is characteristic of not only the Georgians but also other nations undergoing similar developments. This is particular so for the Moldovans, who initialled the association agreement with the EU on the same day as Georgia. As the recent nation-wide survey shows, despite the fact that the EU is deemed an attractive option, the Moldovans still exhibit significant scepticism.⁵ Furthermore, it turned out that quite similar ambivalence characterised the

Central and Eastern European countries during the period leading up to their EU accession. They were expressing the hopes of fast integration but also the fears of declined national sovereignty and national identity, as well as “the imagined threats” of “the renewed peripheral status vis-à-vis Western Europe” (Spohn and Triandafyllidou 2003, 7). Finally, as demonstrated elsewhere, not only those aspiring for the EU integration but also the EU itself is characterised by “the inherent ambiguity in (its) neighborhood approach” (Di Puccio 2010, 41), which is also termed as “creative ambiguity” implying that “in the absence of a clear and common strategy, the EU is sending mixed signals to the region” (Di Puccio 2010, 33). The EU’s “creative ambiguity” reinforced by “a fear of worsening EU-Russia relations” (Di Puccio 2010, 42) seems largely in line with the Georgians’ ambiguous attitudes and mixed frontstage-backstage display of contradicting discourses and confused identities.

1 The special feature of online discourses is that via introducing new “participant frameworks” (Goffman 1981) online media enhances a sense of co-presence and brings its language closer to spoken than written discourse; hence, the discussions among both the forum and the Facebook group members were closer to group conversations. This conversation mode and its accompanying sense of co-presence had an impact on the way the sentiments were simultaneously experienced and expressed. The online discussions have been analysed “both in a literal sense of what goes into its making and at an ideological level” (O’Keeffe 2011, 441).

2 The discussion is available at: <http://forum.ge/?f=29&showtopic=34605423>

3 The discussion is available at: <http://forum.ge/?f=29&showtopic=34605494>

4 It is one of the indicators of the Georgians’ lack of awareness regarding the questions of the EU accession as they view the signing of the association agreement as a guarantee of the future membership. This vision is characteristic of not only the public but also the government officials, who might believe that the “reforms within the Eastern Partnership framework will make a Georgian EU accession inevitable in the long-term” (Rinnert 2011, 16).

5 Moldovans Attracted to the EU but not Sure about Membership, 14 January 2014, available at: <http://www.cepolicy.org/publications/moldovans-attracted-eu-not-sure-about-membership>, accessed 15 January 2014.

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