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**Article**

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## Controversial Face of Europe in the Official Discourse of Georgia After Independence

Irakli CHKHAIDZE\*

### Abstract

*Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union independent country of Georgia was faced ultimate challenges both in internal as well as foreign political spheres. Leader of the national movement and the first president of the Republic Zviad Gamsakhurdia was found victim of international isolation. Pro-European course of Georgia is connected to the presidency of Eduard Shevardnadze, former foreign minister of the Soviet Union, whose political project was to push Georgia to full membership of Euro Atlantic organizations. These tendencies became even stronger since 2003, after the “Rose Revolution”, under the government of the third president of Georgia Mikheil Saakashvili. In parallel with achievements on the way of Euro Integration anti-Western feelings were gradually emerged and strengthened in the Georgian public discourse. The successes in the pro-European politics and attempts to ratify the European legislative and constitutional norms were accompanied with protests supported by some public and political figures. The paper aims at analysing controversial nature of the process of Georgia’s European Integration with its under streams and flows what have been making the process complicated.*

**Keywords:** *Georgia, Europe, Official Discourse, West, Independence*

### Introduction

Georgia is among the countries to which identity crisis and exclusive nationalism posed serious problems at the dawn of independence, and determined political and social disintegration (Gachechiladze, 2011, pp. 330-332). The situation changed in the subsequent period and, in parallel to strengthening pro-European political aspirations, Georgian national project gradually acquired civil characteristics (Jones, 2006, p. 249; Chkhaidze, 2016, pp. 144-157). The paper analyses the post-Soviet experience of the country in terms of Europe’s symbolic as well as real role in the Georgian

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official discourse. Critical analysis of the period of time is crucially important at the given stage of social development.

Since the late 1980s independence was the ultimate purpose for the national movement emerged in the Soviet republic of Georgia. After achieving the goal and gaining sovereignty in early 1990s, building of independent democratic state represented as the crucial challenge for the Georgian society. In the process of deconstruction of the Soviet system Georgians started looking for new identity construction and place of the country within the international system. From the time the idea of Georgia's European origins and tight relations to the West were broken into the Georgian public and academic discourse (Coene, 2013, pp. 77-80). The "Europeanness" still plays one of the key roles in Georgian identity discourse, but attitudes towards Europe are not unequivocally positive. Following the process of Euro Atlantic integration on the political level, featured as the major message of the Georgian national project, fear and mistrust of Europe (and of the West in General) eventually conquered the part of the Georgian society. Some groups of the Georgians people jeopardize the West, but the "Western devil", unlike the past time, threatens not the great "Soviet motherland" but centuries long traditional, Orthodox Georgian country.

The paper tries to explore the two separated as well as closely interrelated tendencies in Georgia for the short period of the post-Socialist independence. The study of identity and nationalism is a new trend in Georgian humanities and social sciences. Many issues in this respect are still to be analysed with the use of modern theories and new methodological approaches (Smith, 2004, p. 5). There are only a few works that review the subject of our research from the above perspective. Despite having rich and diverse empirical material, most part of it is not systematized within certain theoretical approaches. This reality itself determines the importance of the issue of our research.

The problem analysed in this paper is a part of the recent history of Georgia. Processes that developed in the research period have largely determined the domestic and international political developments and also stipulated many achievements and failures of the post-Soviet Georgia. At the present stage of the country's development, it is vital to provide critical analysis of the way Georgian state has passed since independence. Analysing these processes from the perspective of identity Studies will be favourable for rethinking Georgia's past, as well as determining regional and international context of current events.

This investigation is based on the analysis of public speeches, addresses and interviews of political and intellectual elite, academic and journalistic works. Post-Soviet Georgian public discourse is a constructed phenomenon, which has been developed by the elite and has undergone

several transformations throughout decades from the dawn of independence. The main objective of this research consists in its analysis and keeping track of the dynamics.

## **1. Theoretical basis and methodology**

The paper uses the instrumental approach to the research as its theoretical basis, according to which ethnic and national identities are flexible and changeable, their content depends on time and environmental changes. Instrumentalist theory relies on the idea that nationalism and ethnicity appear as a result of political, economic and social processes (Brubaker, 2006. p. 134). Important is the fact that an increasing number of modern-day Western scholars agree that such identities are social constructs (Coene, 2013, p. 77)

In order to comprehend empirical material the method of content analysis is considered to be the most relevant. While using this method, the research is interested in the particular aspect of the documents under investigation – specific social relationships reflected in them, the author's attitude to any given issue, etc. The paper analyses how the issues regarding Europe in the sources are treated, what are the main characteristics of the post-Soviet Georgian official discourse in terms of Euro Atlantic integration (Mayring, 2000).

## **2. Dawn of Independence: In searching for “Lost Glory”**

In the late 1980s from the rubble of the Soviet Union Georgian radical national movement was emerged. The movement was greatly defined by the personality of its leader, famous Georgian dissident Zviad Gamsakhurdia. His reflections on the Georgia's past, present and future were mostly emotional and sacral then rational based current needs and necessities. In his understanding, Georgians had been oppressed for a long period of time and now the time for prosperity and glory of the people came out. Georgians should have taken the proper place in the modern world, which they had deserved as the permanent victims of the turbulent history. In his work “Spiritual Mission of Georgia” published in 1990 (Gamsakhurdia, 1990, pp. 8-9), Gamsakhurdia represents the mission of the country in restoring its historical function as a bridge between West and East. Gamsakhurdia's particular attention was paid on the issue of religion. According to him, Georgians played crucial role in development of Christianity. The stress on religious feelings coloured early Georgian nationalism with sacral sentiments shoving it to be tended to isolationism and exclusiveness. Such an exaggerated

vision of Georgia's role and lack of rationality hindered country's foreign integration and collaboration with international community (Coene, 2016. P. 31). Moreover, new political elite, consisted of former dissidents and leaders of national movement, was tended to look for rather enemies than friends. By their opinion, Georgia's aspirations to be flourished and glorified were under the jeopardy coming not only from the North (Russia) but also from the West. The members of newly emerged political establishment were trying to find out international conspiracy against Georgia. Western leaders, despite seems to be paradoxical, were represented as the major conspirators allied to Russia.

All the troubles of Georgia do not lead to Gamsakhurdia. He emerged in extreme time, characterized by economic collapse, state fragmentation and political polarization. As famous researcher of the Caucasian issues Stephen Jones mentions, Gamsakhurdia like many third world leaders was a product of Imperial system. Although bitterly opposed to Soviet structures and values, he was cast in their likeness (Jones, 2013, 53). This sounds true regarding tolerance towards opposition, lack of ability to build the state on the base of wide consensus as well as not real but virtual threats coming from the West and threatening Georgia's traditional values like religion, family system, morality etc.

From the period dual perception of Europe was rooted in the Georgian official discourse – traditional, “civilized”, old, morally sustainable Europe which we belong to VS contemporary conspirator, depraved Europe without moral standards. Absence of alternative political visions and debates, and fear of conspiracies and plots led the former president of Georgia to ethno-populism. His rhetoric called for patriotism, sacrifice, protection of little man against the powerful, exclusion of outsiders, and the search for enemies.

Gamsakhurdia, naively, believed that Christian Georgia from ancient times has been the part of European civilization, and this gave Georgia a place at European table. “We Georgian have always had a European orientation”, he declared, “We want to be part of common European home”. Muslims, on the other hand, were the classic “other, a threat to Georgian cultural survival. Gamsakhurdia envisaged the West as a new patron for independent Georgia, but in August 1991, after president Bush's speech to the Ukrainian supreme Soviet, which pointedly condemned “suicidal nationalism based upon ethnic hatred” and offered US support for Gorbachev's draft Union treaty, Gamsakhurdia accused Bush of supporting communism, tyranny, and mock reforms”. Instead of seeking Western Patronage, he turned to regional support. He promoted the idea of common Caucasian civilization and proposed a Caucasian People's Forum. He developed especially close relations with the North

Caucasian countries and in the end fled his life to Chechnya after the coup 'D'tat against his government. Resistance to the Western countries supported Georgia's isolation and hindered international integration. By the opinion of Stephen Jones, the absence of Western support was crucial to the Georgian elite's disillusionment and the president's political demise (Jones, 2013, p. 68).

Following the search for the Georgia's place in the civilized Europe, Gamsakhurdia differentiated and even opposed two faces of Europe. The approach, whose one of the pioneers was Gamsakhurdia, still plays major role in the Georgian society's attitude towards Europe. This dualism clearly revealed in the appeal sent by the former president to the Georgian TV from exile, in 1992 (Gamsakhurdia, 1992). In his statement, he discussed Georgia's Western orientation. Gamsakhurdia denied accusations about his non-Western and isolationist politics. Former president confirmed his aspirations to Caucasian unity but, in his opinion, this would not hamper European integration. He condemned western world what meant "pornographic and horror movies, gangsters heroism", Western way of life, begging for money and credits in the West, suspicious political agreements with the adventurist Western politicians, their invitation to Georgia and selling to them country's natural and fossil resource, resorts, industrial objects etc". "Instead of this, Western culture, civilization, art, political thoughts, philosophy, social and legal systems are utterly familiar and close to us", so adoption of these values and building democratic society on the base of them is the key paradigm for our orientation, he declared.

In the letter the unique role of Georgia in synthesis of Western and Eastern world is particularly stressed. The reflections expressed in the appeal distinctly represent Georgian mainstreams at the dawn of independence. Political elite was a victim of emotions caused by achieving the sovereignty. Attitude to Georgia as an oldest European country prevailed over the society in the time. The people did not think to do much for the European integration because Georgia and the whole Caucasus itself is Europe. Georgians had to find their ancient ethnic, cultural, and spiritual traditions which laid foundations for the all Western and Eastern worlds. 'The Caucasus is a cradle for all civilizations; we do not confront foreign orientations but express our self-consciousness and identity'.

The distinction between spiritual, civilized, moral in contrast to depraved, wicked Europe has been pursuing Georgia's independence for the last decades.

### 3. Parallel Process: Official Pro-European Politics VS. Anti-Western Discourse

On 7 March 1992, former foreign minister of the Soviet Union Eduard Shevardnadze returned to the Georgia and led the country to post-Soviet transformation. During his term, President Shevardnadze's course of foreign policy sharply swerves to the West. Relationships with the European countries became stronger.

Given the intricate relations with Russia, Georgian government deepened cooperation with the West even more. Along with practical steps taken on the way to European integration, pro-western rhetoric also became stronger from 1996. Shevardnadze saw establishing close relationships with the West as the only direct way out for Georgia, having been bogged down in civil war, aiming to establish statehood. In 1999 Georgia became the member of the Council of Europe. This fact can be considered one of the most significant achievements in the post-Soviet period of independent Georgia, the step it made towards European integration. The head of the Georgian Parliament Zurab Zhvania, in his historic speech at the Council of Europe said: "I am Georgian, and therefore, I am European". Later this utterance was turned into a certain motto of Georgia on the way to western integration. (Chkhaidze, 2016, pp. 106-110)

Pro-European political course of Georgia represented as the drive for civic transformation and replication of Western legislative system. Along with building up state institutions, Eduard Shevardnadze's government passed the Law on Citizenship anew, on 25 March, 1993. Adopting this law, which was explicitly of liberal character, the government took into consideration the existing ethnopolitical situation in the country and granted citizenship to all inhabitants of Georgia. The law did not envisage such qualifying demands as the knowledge of the state language and the country's history, for instance. From the point of view of liberalism, the law on citizenship in Georgia was much more liberal than in other European democratic countries (Jones, 2013, 224).

The second most significant act, which determined the inclusive and civic character of the Georgian national project in its final form, is the Constitution of Georgia adopted on 24 August, 1995. The preamble of the Constitution reflects Georgian citizens' will to establish democratic social order, guarantee universally acknowledged human rights and freedoms and strengthen state independence and peaceful relations with other nations. After adopting the law on Georgian citizenship, the issue of citizenship occupied one of the central places in the 1995 Constitution. Consequently, official state policy of Georgia finally switched on to the track of civic nationalism. In terms of adaptation to the western legislation, one of the most crucial facts was the law adopted on 14 January 1999, according



to which ethnicity category was removed from the identity cards of citizens of Georgia (Reisner, 2010, 158).

Since the “Rose Revolution” in 2003, civic transformation of Georgian identity discourse and the process of European integration became even stronger. Under Presidency of Mikheil Saakashvili Europe became symbolic part of an official discourse as well as mainstream of the foreign politics. The idea about Georgians as the oldest Europeans revived and being used as an instrument for drawing symbolic strings to Europe. The Dmanisi case of archaeological excavations is deserved to be stressed in this respect. An international team of archaeologists found 1.8 million years old human jaws on the territory of Dmanisi site (Eastern Georgia). Two of them were given Georgian names, **Zeza** and **Mzia** and have been reconstructed by artists to show how they may have looked. They have been represented as the first Europeans. Representatives of the political elite frequently use the case for international popularization of Georgia as an oldest part of European civilization (Georgian Journal, 2016).

“A nation is a project for the present and the future – a project that unites us beyond our political, social, religious, ethnic, or regional differences and characteristics. A nation is not an ethnicity and it cannot be only a common History. A nation, ladies and gentlemen, is a national project”, – this is a fragment from the president Saakashvili’s speech after the clash between the members of former president’s party “United National Movement” and the supporters of the new ruling party “Georgian Dream” led by the former Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili on February 8, 2013. Georgia’s ex-president declared a course aiming at creation of modern Georgian nation-state based on civic nationalism. In the above-mentioned speech, Mikheil Saakashvili also presented main features of the Georgian national project: independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity, democracy, prosperity, Europe; he stressed interconnection of all these principles as in the absence of even one of them, the whole edifice can crumble (Saakashvili, 2013). It is obvious from the speech Europe has been established as one of the key features of the modern Georgian national project.

In the recent years, Georgian government has considerably succeeded in the official politics of Euro Atlantic integration - In June 2014, the EU and Georgia signed an Association Agreement, which entered into force on July 1 2016. On February 3, 2017 the European Parliament has voted overwhelmingly to approve visa liberalization for Georgia, paving the way for Georgian citizens to travel to the European Union's Schengen zone without obtaining visas.

Inconvertible process of “Europeanization” or “Westernization” in the official politics has been accompanying with demonization of Europe by the certain segments of the Georgian society even by



the some members of political elite. Major steps towards Europe especially adoption of legislative framework were clashed to resistance and, sometimes, huge protests by the part of the Georgian society. For example, the law regarding abolishment of ethnic markers from the ID cards of the Georgian citizens in 1999 was resisted by number of the Georgian people including members of the parliament. Head of the committee of immigration politics Guram Sharadze claimed “After the few years we will be unable to count exact number of ethnic Georgians among more than 80 nationalities residing on the territory. In case of losing our (Georgian) majority the name of the country may put under question. “We are the experimental polygon for cosmopolitanism” – he stated (Sharadze, 1999).

Some more or less influential figures in contemporary Georgia still publicly express their opinion about European values. One of the representatives of the business elite Levan Vasadze, like the first president of Georgia, differentiates good and bad Europe: “I am one of the devoted apologists of Europe and of the West, but it makes me sense that historic Europe is one and the culture in which it swims now, is the second. I have nothing common with the Europe where gay marriage is granted for.” “We will integrate into the Europe with our dignity or will not” – he declared (Vasadze, 2013). In his understanding, Georgia’s political elite should take neutral position. Making pro-politics is baneful for Georgia. This approach to the Georgia’s foreign policy reveals close connections to the political view developed at the beginning of independence.

## **Conclusion**

The issues related to Europe occupied major part of the Georgian society’s mind after gaining independence. Analysing of empirical data enables us to separate two contrasted as well as interrelated tendencies dominated over the Georgian official discourse for almost whole period of independence.

In early time of the post-Soviet independence Georgian society was marked by the controversial understanding of Europe – old, “civilized” Europe with close cultural links to the similarly old and unique Georgia versus modern, immoral Europe with the secret intention to assault Georgians’ national identity. The period also characterized with the tendencies of “isolation” and alienation from the Western world tended to turn to the past where the great time was left.

Later on, this indistinct attitude to Europe was transformed into the distinctly opposed processes. On the one hand, Euro Atlantic integration canonized as the inseparable part of the

Georgian national project. That meant civic transformation of the country, adoption of European legislative and constitutional framework. This course, which resulted in the concrete successes in the way of Euro integration, drove Georgian political elite building the state according to democratic standards. On the other hand, political process in favor of Euro integration kindled anti-Western feelings in the part of the society. In the name of protection traditional values and morality, the people demonize Europe and propagandize jeopardies threatening the Georgian society.

The “European ball” is still rolling on the field of Georgian society. The game is going with the little advantage of pro-European force, but both teams are still far from the final whistle.

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