Civil Pessimism in Tbilisi: “Everyone is surviving as best as he can!”
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The first time I visited Georgia, it was a popular holiday destination with an aura of eternal joy and happiness. The people from this Soviet Republic had a reputation of being joyful, hospitable, and rich. The picture associated with all countries of the region was foremost a picture of party – for example, a wedding table full of traditional food, temperamental folk dances and huge amounts of wine. Another side of the coin was the stereotype of Caucasian ‘businessman’ associated with money – legal or illegal. There are still circulating numerous legends about huge sums of money and property these people possessed in the Soviet era and how easily they increased their wealth through different corrupt schemes. In one or another case, Georgians were perceived as constantly smiling easy going people. It should be noted that this image was largely spread by various Soviet era films that showed people from Caucasus as proud, oddly dressed and wine drinking.

The second time I arrived to Tbilisi, three decades later, I confirmed that nothing was more inaccurate than that idyllic image. Georgians were not constantly smiling. People were rather serious, even grim. I saw poverty everywhere and the people I met were struggling to survive. But the corruption was gone, rooted out by the previous president Mikheil Saakashvili. One thing that deeply struck me was people’s apathy towards anything related to the state and pessimism about the future. Indeed, most of young people I talked with dreamed of leaving the country and, if possible, going to Europe. Older people were rather missing back past days, whether the enthusiastic era of Saakashvili or the secure time of the Soviet Union. The only aspect reminding me of the Soviet time stereotype was wine – present everywhere and in huge amounts.

This all was in stark contrast with Kyiv, Ukraine where I spent few weeks before arriving to Tbilisi. Both in Georgia and Ukraine I encountered deep distrust to the government but the atmosphere in Ukraine was, nevertheless, joyful filled with a post-revolutionary euphoria and optimism. People smiled and most of them I talked to believed that once corruption and misgovernment are tackled, their country has a potential to become prosperous and European. In the case of Georgia, it was not just the mistrust to the government but the disbelief in any positive further development that made the overall atmosphere different.

Already in the Georgian soil I started to formulate an expression to describe what I was seeing, coming up with ‘civil pessimism’. Then back to Estonia, I did a quick search in academic databases to find out what has been written on the topic. It turned out that the expression “civil pessimism” is nearly non-existent in this literature. First quotes I found were addressing the issue of pessimism after 9/11 in USA (Carothers 2009; Waddington 2005). The second quote was about the hopes regarding the civil rights movement in the same country (Lawson 2003). Another ambivalent category in the academic literature is the one of ‘civil society’. In political and sociological literature, the civil society is defined through a particular ideological position, referring to the existence of autonomous non-governmental associations (e.g. (Putnam 2000). The anthropological literature rather applies to grass-roots practices or to trust between individual actors and a state community. In the case of the socialist Eastern Europe, the civil society conglomerated anything opposed to the socialist state, in a way existing in realms outside of the power of the state – i.e. informal practices (Hann 1996).
Here, I want to demonstrate, however, that apathy and pessimism can be also understood as the political resistance of a community towards the government politics.

**Marianishvili Street**

I stayed in Georgia the whole month of July of 2015. Mostly I stayed in Tbilisi, living in a part called “the Old Tbilisi” (*Staryi Tbilisi* in Russian). Contrary to tourist booklets, the people of Tbilisi use the name ‘Old Tbilisi’ to the large inner city area, reserving the title of ‘Old Town’ just for the medieval tourist district. When I booked the room via an internet agency I did not delve into substance of my future host district but looked for something cheap, possibly central and in vicinity to the metro station. By my arrival I discovered an idyllic atmosphere – old 19th century buildings, once beautiful and picturesque now needing fresh paint and renovation, lined up at the narrow street where broken pavements were hidden in a shadow of large green beech trees. Next to my future temporary home was a shop called ‘Wine gallery’, presumably the best wine store in the city as I was assured by everybody I talked to about it. The house I stayed was not far away from a huge exotic food market and one of the two main streets of Tbilisi – Marianishvili.

I moved into a one bedroom apartment that was actually part of a larger flat. The landowners occupied the rest of it living mainly on the second floor. Everything was as I expected – I lived in a backyard shared by several families where walls were covered with the grape vines and the sky was hidden behind the laundry (mainly bed sheets) hanging on lines connecting windows of the upper floor. By the daytime, the yard was full of women and children sitting on walls and on the balcony or playing with cheap toys or water. On the second day I was invited upstairs for a welcome meal and this was the when I begun to discover the nature and history of the neighbourhood. “This neighbourhood has always been multi-ethnic, Kurds, Georgians, Russians, Armenians, Jews, different people used to live here!” the landlord told me. I heard some exciting facts like “In the early nineties, during the civil war, this district supported rebels (*boeviki*). Why? But Gamsahurdia had the slogan “Georgia for Georgians?” Of course, people here were against it”.

In coming weeks I explored the neighbourhood more profoundly. Buildings were, as a rule, in a poor shape. The poverty of inhabitants was hard to ignore. People on the streets, young and old, were dressed cheaply, in contrast to main streets where young people sported high quality clothes. During the daytime, our yard and most others were full of children and women, benches in neighbouring small parks were favoured meeting places for men to chat and play chess; That all witnessed the high unemployment in the district.

My landlord was a former engineer who had a high position in a factory during the Soviet era. Now he repaired different kind of electronics – TVs, radios, amplifiers and installed security signalisations. He told me that he struggled to meet his ends every month because “you cannot ask much in this district”. His wife was a housewife whereas the son earned money with various odd jobs when they were available. In that sense, the family was rather typical for the district, where men were trying to earn money and women were forced to stay home. In the Old Tbilisi streets were full of small stores selling everything from antiques to second hand clothing to insurances. Most stores seemed to have, however, nearly no customers with the exception of small cornershops selling food, a flamboyant wine store and – to my surprise – women’s head dresser in a next door.

Noticeable difference with most other parts of the town was the presence of Russian language on the streets of ‘my’ district. Most people conversed in a combined Russian-Georgian...
language, some of my neighbours also added Azeri to the mix. For instance, my host family considered themselves ethnic Russians but spoke Russian with a strong Georgian accent. Their Jewish friends, who often popped in for a coffee, spoke crystal clear Russian without any accent. Most people who I saw speaking Russian looked like representatives of local ethnic groups (including my landlord’s family) whereas clearly Russians were only few old women I met regularly in a corner shop. These old ladies distinguished by clean but extraordinary worn out old and simple clothes. I had the impression that they were pensioners surviving on a small Georgian pension having no relatives to rely on. Not far from my apartment there was a Catholic church, visited mainly by Armenians, as I figured out later. Few streets further there was located an Orthodox church, subordinated to the Russian patriarch of Moscow. Every time I visited that church, it was well crowded hosting both Georgians and Russians. All info and booklets were here in Russian and the church service was conducted in this language too. Apart of the Russian spoken language on the streets, people in the district also keenly watched Russian TV. When walking on the streets in the evening I heard locals enjoying Russian TV-news and when visiting my landlord’s family, the Russian TV was constantly on.

Average people in the Georgian Republic are not doing economically well. Unemployment is high, available salaries are low, and job opportunities scarce. Urban life already shows frustration and a grim atmosphere. Not untypically the disappointment is addressed to the state, particularly to the incapability of political leaders to develop the economy. Even so, there is one difference to other former Socialist countries I know. In them, the reference point of comparison, the ‘before’ an ‘after’, is usually marked by the break-up of the Soviet Union. However, in Georgia the point of inflexion is when Saakashvili came to power. He was the President of Georgia between 2004 and 2012, right after Eduard Shevardnadze resigned in the November 2003 bloodless “Rose Revolution” led by Saakashvili and his political allies.

Pro-Russian Shevardnadze followed the first President of Georgia, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, who died in circumstances that are still unclear (many conspiracy theories around). In Gamsakhurda’s period, Georgia was caught in various civil wars. From the perspective of my respondents, the experience with both, Gamsakhurdia and Saakashvili, have been traumatic. The battles in the Old Tbilisi destroyed the humble private entrepreneurship that was created during the Perestroika. “I had a textile workshop with several sewing machines. I had several dozen workers. And then…” was a dry comment from my landlord about these painful years. Another neighbour told me how warring sides were confiscating automobiles for their needs leaving many people without their very important investment at that time. Not only material destruction but also the ‘Georgia for Georgians’ slogan of Gamsakhurdia’s followers is the reason why the first president of the country is not remembered well in the district. If the trust to the state was even restored by Shevarnadze, then Saakashvili contributed significantly to root a deep pessimism to the makings of the government and its institutions.

Saakashvili as a Landmark

Saakashvili era is very emotional issue in Georgia. During my stay in the country I did not meet anybody who had an indifferent attitude to the internationally famous Georgian leader. Saakashvili is either beloved or passionately disliked; and he still matters. Often people started to talk about him without any question from my side and his period was judged in terms of justice and prosperity, or even as a text book example of how power relations are able to define people’s identity. The reasons Saakashvili’s still-supporters praise him are the development of tourism industry, radically rooting out the corruption and street criminality, and anti-Russian politics. These supporters have no problems with Saakashvili’s lavish
lifestyle, violation of human and civil rights (“they were corrupt people who rebelled because they lost their income”) and autocratic manners. Saakashvili’s era is for such people a time of job security, predictable future, economic upheaval and investments to the science and education. “Everything positive you see here was done by Saakashvili”, was the way to sum up the era.

They see the current government as an antipode to their hero, destroying everything achieved by Saakashvili and therefore they feel deep distrust to the apparently pro-Russian politics of current president. Obviously, Saakashvili’s opponents’ position is different. The legacy of Saakashvili is for them one of the causes of the deep pessimism of contemporary Georgia. In their view, Saakashvili destroyed a sort of social contract between the state and society, according to which everyone was allowed to ‘muddling through’ or bribing their way out of problems. For instance, in many cases I heard criticism to the ‘new’ police, established by the Saakashvili’s period. Corruption was radically wiped out in that era, including in police but fines became harsher. There is no consensus what is the punishment for violating the speed limit or other traffic rules but the common opinion is that they are unjust. “Before one was able to get away by bribing the policeman; Anybody was able to afford fifty Lari for that. But now you must pay several thousands and people have no money for that!” was an argument in one of these discussions. When I mentioned that maybe people should drive following the rules, my companion delivered an angry answer: “The government should, first of all, do so that people had sufficient income to pay fines!”

The pessimism toward the state in Georgia is based on a perception that the state has violated its obligation to guarantee a predictable prosperous life for its citizens. Not an unusual attitude worldwide but the wish for the reliance upon the state is way more extensive in Georgia. Several foreign diplomats and people involved in EU-financed projects told me that one of the main obstacles in realizing the plans is the expectation that the state ‘or someone else’ as a last stage regulates all the conflicts and takes the responsibility. According to this narrative, Saakashvili went a step further by reversing roles and forcing people to contribute to the development of his governmental policy. “Do you know how Saakashvili developed the tourist industry? He told to a businessman that you should open a restaurant there or there. And when the businessman answered that he has no plan to invest in a new restaurants then he was told that otherwise you will be faced by tax office control or something even worse”, told me an entrepreneur living few houses down the road when we were degusting new wines in the ‘Wine gallery’.

Later, I asked for the clarification of my landlord who, due to his work as repairmen for all kinds of home electronics, knew most of the people and their histories in the district. “Yes, Saakashvili established better and transparent conditions for business. There were strict and fixed laws. But the system was unjust. Fines depended on your wealth. Everything was registered. Therefore someone with more wealth paid more for a minor crime than someone who was poorer but had seriously broken the laws”.

The reflection about the past is present in how people evaluate their present and formulate the confidence to the possibility of an optimistic future c.f.(Petterson 2008). The complicated relationship to the state demonstrates the fact that during my stay I hardly met someone who did not give any credit to Saakashvili for his reforms. The attitude, however, was clearly distanced in a form of “He did many good things, but…”

Ethnic Tensions
It is difficult to say whether economic or ethnic injustice has contributed more to the reserved position to the state in my Old Tbilisi home district. As in the case of the controversies about the results and legacy of the economic reforms of Saakashvili, his ethnic policy initiated the several contradictory narratives. Central for the people in the district was the status and fate of Russian language in Georgia. Reforms that are still hailed by Saakashvili’s supporters are judged by the opponents as an attempt to destroy multicultural multi-ethnic co-existence of Tbilisi. The higher education reform with the aim to switch from Russian to English language and from Soviet-style scholarship to the Western scientific models neglected, to the opinion of my respondents, the position of an old Tbilisi intelligentsia. “There is hardly old intellectuals left now. Many went to Russia, many have died; the young people have no such education anymore”. The controversy around the status of Russian language is also demonstrated in the multiplicity of opinions whether Russian language as such is officially forbidden or whether there exist any Russian schools in Georgia at all.

My landlord and his family were convinced that the Russian language education in any form is forbidden in Georgia. On the walk with the landlord’s son Alex in hills around Tbilisi we came to that topic in our conversation and he asked me: “Is this right that a language is forbidden? What is it the language’s fault? Do you do so in Europe?” Pushing out Russian language from the public sphere offended Alex, as someone who considered himself an ethnic Russian. He, and most people around him, did not understand that taking from the Russian language its former dominant status was a needed political decision, and not just another language reform or a personal caprice of people in power. Also, he did not believe that Georgia is part of Europe, nor moving to the direction.

Georgia is a multi-ethnic state where ethnicity and language can be politicised on different levels. “Nowadays the young generation does not speak Russian anymore. They are fluent in English. And this is good so, this way the Russian influence diminishes”, this statement was made by a Saakashvili-supporting university professor in my first days in Tbilisi. Withal, the assumption of a general shift in foreign language skills has proven to be wrong. Georgian speaking youth is not coherent. Young people working in cafes in Tbilisi’s main street have more often both English and Russian skills. It is possible to encounter youth whose English is far better than their Russian, nearly fluent, among the university students. When one, however, goes to the outskirts of Tbilisi and into villages surrounding the capital then poor language skills of people are suddenly very apparent. Asking for direction, ordering a meal or shopping could be unexpectedly difficult.

Under such circumstances a Russian speaking multi-ethnic minority can sense uneasiness and feel endangered; Especially, when they draw back to the legacy of a Russian language in Georgia and associate to their current social position and economic well being. There are multiple opinions regarding the status of a Russian language in the Soviet era. “Earlier it was fashionable to speak Russian, all Georgians in Tbilisi spoke Russian at home and in many cases did not possess any Georgian command at all”, is a point of view presented by Alex.

Most of the people I met in the quarter were bilingual, although I was not in a position to judge the fluency of their Georgian skills. My neighbours told me few stories about their relatives and colleagues who were Russian speakers and had experienced difficulties because of that either in work or at school. Looking back, I, however, did not notice any hostility toward the Georgian language or its speakers. The decreasing status of the Russian language has first of all a symbolic meaning for the community defining ‘who has rights to have rights’.
The Role of the Russian TV

On the sunny hillside, Alex addressed a topic that often pops up in different conversations – Georgia’s European direction. Notwithstanding the fact that Georgia has participated in the Eurovision song contest the expression of ‘Europe’ embodies the ‘Other’, a world outside of immense poverty and hopelessness one encounters on Georgia. The crucial question for the Georgian political development is whether Georgia should become ‘part of Europe’ or not.

The last two presidents hold a so-called European course, and Saakashvili was especially eager to set it up in his deeds. His anti-Russian policy – both domestic and foreign – resulted in a short war in 2008. The methods he chose, were, however, not that popular among all groups of the Georgian population. Saakashvili’s ambivalent policy when rooting out the corruption and allowing corrupt practices for his inner circle, forceful democratisation and authoritarian politics in the last years of his term caused a loss of credibility of the ‘European course’. “Saakashvili did a lot to discredit the image of the West”, told me a colleague at the university.

It is no wonder that many people lost faith in the ‘European future’ of the country during the years when serious injustice was committed under the slogan of becoming an European state.

The role of a Russian TV is not to underestimate in endorsing the pessimistic attitude toward the state. The research among Russian speakers in Estonia shows that the might of the Russian TV in influencing people’s political views is often overestimated. People use TV for the entertainment purpose, watching films yet ignoring news or other programmes with political content. Russian TV is pretty much followed in Georgia and often because of its superior entertainment quality to Georgian channels. In the district I lived, Russian TV news were, indeed, consumed enthusiastically. Alex, rather sceptical to the pro-Russian position of his parents, openly admitted the ability of Russian TV-discourse in defining one’s world view: “When you watch Russian TV and even when you do not believe it, at some point it affects you. I can notice it even with myself”.

The chicken and egg question is, of course, whether Russian propaganda is in position to formulate people’s political views and their interpretation of what is going on in the world and in their own country or they watch Russian TV because it confirms their already existing views. I would argue that people around me believed Russian propaganda because they wanted to believe it.

Russia, as it appears on a TV screen, is a country that, notwithstanding Western economic sanctions and ‘temporary’ economic hardships, is doing economically well. Russian TV shows the opening of new factories, hospitals and schools, everything that is not happening in Georgia currently. When I tried to explain that in a real life the population of Russia is much worse off than is shown in news and the prospects for a bright future of that country are slim, the response of my landlord’s friend was: “At least they have work there!” I must admit that I had nothing to argue with that statement.

My hypothesis that economy plays influential in forming views of pro-Russian Georgians, was also confirmed by a diplomat whose career in Georgia started a decade ago: “The perception that Russia is a rich country comes from the stories Georgians who live and work in Russia tell to their relatives. We both know that most of these people are economically not that well off but their living standard, comparing to their Georgian relatives, is much higher. Most Georgians in Russia survive thanks to their informal networks, they have to encounter xenophobia and so on. But when they come here, they flash their money and tell how well they live in Russia”.

Russian TV also screens local news as a supplement to their news about Russian and world events, in which they discredit not only the Georgian government but also the European Union. During my stay, the Russian TV screened several fake news about the relationship between Georgia and the EU. For example, one of the neighbours by the courtyard told me during our coffee session that “yesterday it was said on the TV that the EU made a statement confirming that Georgia will never be a member”. To my question who made that statement and why, my neighbour just shrugged his shoulders. After checking all possible news I, of course, could find nothing to confirm what my neighbour had told me. In general, the distrust to the existing Georgian state and its institutions affects also how much people believe Georgian information channels. It is no wonder that Russian TV fills the vacuum.

Conclusion

In my article I wanted to show that civil pessimism is a strategy to position oneself toward the state. As informal practices can be a sign of civil society, then also pessimism might be a form of personal and communal agency. Civil pessimism includes denial of support to whatever initiatives the state offers and cultivation of scepticism of righteousness of the state’s action.

For people of a multicultural community around the Marianishvili street, the Georgian state embodies a failed state that is unable to organise people’s lives and protect their citizens’ well being. That pessimism is a product of a historical development, when failures of the state and its institutions are projected to the present and towards the future. Such pessimism has a strong economic and ethnic dimension, yet it is also supported by the Russian propaganda.

The disbelief that prosperity is possible in a Georgian society has been reassured in my discussions with young students too. Most of all wanted to migrate and move to Europe. The picture of a monolithic and rich Europe is naïve but the Georgian state has failed to offer its own optimistic counter-narrative.

I heard my landlady constantly repeating a phrase “Everyone is surviving as best as he can!” The poverty, the trauma of civil wars, and the betrayed enthusiasm of the Saakashvili’s regime have destroyed the faith not only to the ‘European direction’, but also the hope to any positive change at all.


1 For example, some people argued that a punishment for speeding up is a prison sentence whereas others knew that it was different sums of payment.

2 This reform is seen from all sides as a policy to cut Georgia away from Russia and Russian speaking world. ‘Our youth does not know Russian anymore but instead of that they speak English,’ explained me an university teacher. As a fact, it is not entirely true. Outside of university circles, the English skills of young people are modest and in many cases they also have difficulties with communication in Russian.