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Challenges of liberalization and democratization in Georgia: the case of the modern civic calendar of the country

Ivane TSERETELI*

Abstract

The case of Georgia's transformation through the analysis of a civic calendar demonstrates existing problems on the way of country's democratization. Its design in terms of national festivities and celebrations contradicts the declared course of the Georgian state, which is aimed at building an inclusive civic Georgian nation, as it is centered only at the Orthodox population of the country. The multi-ethnicity of the Georgian nation – the political and cultural role of national minorities in the Georgian state – is not reflected in the civic calendar of the state. Considering the popularity of the Georgian Orthodox Church among the Georgian society and its influence on the formation of public opinion, a range of challenges could emerge on Georgia's way towards democratization, as some aspects of the liberal ideology is termed as dangerous for the Georgian culture by the Georgian Orthodox Church.

Keywords: Georgia, calendar, democratization, transformation

Introduction

The last decade of the 20th century was the most complicated period in the history of Georgia, full of controversies. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union “unifying, all-encompassing Soviet identity became a thing of the past” The ruling elites of the post-Soviet Republics started to create new memory projects with the aim of introducing an entirely new historical narrative. This process itself appeared to be hard enough, since the Soviet legacy, however vague and ugly it might have been, was still deeply rooted in the present time of Georgia.

One of the effective ways to establish the historical narrative is to create places for remembrance. Pierre Nora notes that “realization of breaking away from the past is related to the experience of losing the memory” (Nora, 1989). This situation requires fixating and localizing the memory in concrete places where it can continue to exist.

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The civic calendar was chosen as a focus of inquiry for filling in the above-mentioned gaps, as calendar is an important realm of memory on the one hand, and a subject of constant change according to the shifts of political conjunctures on the other hand. Generally, calendar is a system of organizing days for political, cultural, social, religious purposes, but we intend to explore the change of design of a calendar in its form and content. In case of Georgia, this was and is a kind of ideological machine, with stories on events, which have been changing in terms of political and social transformation. Study aims to investigate extent of reflection of main line of political-cultural development of Georgia according to its main paradigm – building the multi-ethnic Georgian nation through the calendar.

Individual memory is formed as a result of interaction of individual and social groups. Collective memory is always socially determined as the perception of past is conditioned by the modernity. The constantly changing discourse of memorizing and forgetting is determined by political conjunctures. These changes can be traced through different narratives and memory places.

Calendar reflects, and at the same time determines the process of transformation of system and influences on development of chosen course of state. The concept of transformation could be considered as a process connecting past and present, which makes the tentative prognosis of influences of past on the future possible, whereas calendar is one of the most effective tools of its management and direction.

In our opinion, calendar is one of the crucial “mediums/areas” which reflects and stores oral traditions, important dates, as set by historians, etc. Calendar mirrors the process of re-evaluation of past and this has an important influence on the formation of collective memory. The dynamics of institutional memory and changes in political conjunctures pushes re-evaluation of the stored texts and information of calendar. Calendar is a plan for the entire year. It is a tool of time management, which differentiates working days and day-offs, highlights holidays and festivals, reminds biographies of important personalities. It is crucial as it constantly rotates important events across years – celebration of independent day, commemoration days of saints, kings or religious rituals, which is an important element for the formation and transformation of collective memory.

1. From Soviet to a New Reality

The last decade of the 20th century was the most complicated period in the history of Georgia, full of controversies. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union “unifying, all-encompassing Soviet

identity became a thing of the past”. The ruling elites of the post-Soviet Republics started to create new memory projects with the aim of introducing an entirely new historical narrative.

In the age of colonialism, the established opinion among Georgians on being a tolerant, patriotic and a united nation was put in doubt by the post-Soviet life, which has entailed nothing but civil wars, bloodshed and uprisings for Georgia of those times. Georgian people had no guarantees of protection and security, which naturally caused the chaos and inner tensions. There was an obvious crack in the national identity. The Georgians did not have any experience in consentaneous fighting against colonialism. The absence of state institutions and common values prevented the state from setting democratic order acceptable for all, which exacerbated the situation even more.

On the 9th of April 1991, Georgia adopted the Act of Restoration of State Independence. This was a transitional period in the political history of our country, which had overcome the totalitarian regime and now it had to struggle for building a democratic state. This process itself appeared to be hard enough, since the Soviet legacy, however vague and ugly it might have been, was still deeply rooted in the present time of Georgia.

On the 14th of April 1991, the Supreme Council of Georgia elected Zviad Gamsakhurdia its first President. Shortly after he came to power, he immediately restored the flag of Georgian Democratic Republic (1918-1921), the anthem and the coat of arms. His government supported nationalization of education. He paid great attention to religion and language since he associated them with the statehood. In Gamsakhurdia’s epoch, the foundation was laid for restoration of the past glory and old traditions, and that is why the first thing they did was to restore national symbols, holidays, Georgian street names and later on, these trends were spread in all spheres of the political life (Jones, 2012, p.84).

Stephan Jones considers that “Gamsakhurdia was an effective revolutionary, but an ineffective builder of the state”. He placed the emphasis on national attributes, on which basis he removed the term “Soviet” from the Constitution. Gamsakhurdia failed to establish institutional structures relevant to the policy, he did not have well-functioning government machinery, nor the plan for economic reforms or the guarantee of the supremacy of the law. It was impossible to build a democratic state with just public support. Gamsakhurdia’s inability to form a stable state was due to: 1) “Post total destruction” legacy as Alexander Motyl calls it. 2) “the problem of “Statehood” (it was disputable who belonged to a new state) and 3) Gamsakhurdia’s weakness as of a leader (Jones, 2012, p.90-91).

On the 6th of January 1991, the President and his government left Tbilisi. Military council headed by Jaba Ioseliani and Tengiz Kitovani, who had defeated Gamsakhurdia’s regime, took over

the reins, dismissed the Parliament and abolished the existing Constitution. They branded this process as a “popular revolution”, which in reality was a coup d’état resulting in civil war. Georgia was seized by chaos. Economic crisis, pillage and ravaging of armed persons reached the peak. There was a total lawlessness in the country.

Soon after the presidential power went into the hands of the former Soviet official, Eduard Shevardnadze, who arrived from Moscow at the request of the Military Council. Georgian population pinned their hopes on his pro-western and democratic ideas. However, Shevardnadze’s government failed to establish a flexible state mechanism to achieve the civil accord. Supremacy of the law, justice and equality were completely ignored. Energy crisis, poverty and unemployment became insurmountable problems. Former communist officials held the top positions in the government. Bribery and corruption were widely spread in all government structures. (Janelidze, 2009, p.234)

Under totalitarian regime, historical memory of Georgia was adjusted to the forgotten and altered Soviet system and ideology, especially to the history of Georgian Democratic Republic (1918-1921). Political elite, who came to the power after the “Rose Revolution”, set their foremost aim to bring this history to the foreground and show the real face of the criminal Soviet regime. In view of this, the modern “memory project” represented Russia as an occupant and aggressor, which served the basis for the reinforcement of Georgian national identity. Post-revolutionary government had decided to cut off all the links with the past and minimize its legacy. It was essential to establish a western type of democracy, to set the right political course and mental revolution of the nation (Toria, 2012, p. 22).

It is noteworthy that the issues of collective remembrance and collective forgetting are intertwined processes, which was quite an urgent topic in post-Soviet countries. One very clear illustration of collective forgetting can be political discussions that took place regarding the removal of Stalin’s monument from the central square in Gori. For a large part of the population Stalin was a symbol of violence that played a decisive role in the establishment of a totalitarian regime in Georgia. Consequently, it was believed that he did not deserve to be eternalized by any monument in those fast progressing countries that had rejected violent rule and took up the path of democratization. (However, for the other part of the society, this did not mean the fight against Stalinism. The monument for them was not the subject of worship but rather a place of a historical memory, which could not have been expunged from the memory of those families who had served the Soviet regime (Toria, 2012, p. 24).

One of the effective ways to establish the historical narrative is to create places for remembrance. Pierre Nora notes that “realization of breaking away from the past is related to the experience of losing the memory”. This situation requires to fixate and localize the memory in concrete places where it can continue to exist. In this case, calendar, as a place of remembrance, is of great interest to me, where it clearly reflects political, cultural and social changes that have distinctly delimited the Soviet and post-Soviet spaces of Georgia from each other.

2. Re-evaluation of the past according to the calendar

In this case, calendar, as a place of remembrance, is of great interest to me, where it clearly reflects political, cultural and social changes that have distinctly delimited the Soviet and post-Soviet spaces of Georgia from each other. Along with gaining independence and political conjuncture, the public calendar saw a number of changes. For instance, Communist holidays were taken out and replaced by religious holidays bearing in mind national sovereignty. Hence, my aim is to analyze change of the context and based on communist ideology see which holidays were given priority in the Soviet Union and which holidays have replaced them in the post-Soviet Georgia.

After the traditional celebration of the New Year on the 1st of January, the 2nd of January, the so called day of luck, was declared a holiday. It was not a religious holiday but this day had been celebrated in Georgia for centuries. According to the tradition, Georgians believed that the whole year would pass in the same way as they would spend this day.

A new holiday that appeared on the Georgian calendar was the 3rd of March, which is now called Mother's Day. It was established by the first president of Georgia, Zviad Gamsakhurdia and in 1991 the Supreme Council of Georgia approved it. It had to be celebrated instead of the Women's International Day the 8th of March, however, this change has never been implemented and Mother's Day is celebrated independently. Zviad Gamsakhurdia's desire to substitute 8th of March with the 3rd of March may be connected with his initiative to create a new narrative, whose creator would be Georgian nation, which had always been engaged in the common historical and divine mission – in this case, it implies that Georgian, orthodox and independent people attached a special, symbolic importance to mother's cult.

9th of April – the day of restoration of Georgia's independent statehood appeared on the calendar. On the 9th of April 1989, there was held a peaceful demonstration to demand independence, which was brutally dispersed by the Soviet punitive forces. Innocent people fell victims to these

processes, 21 people were killed, and hundreds were wounded, poisoned and maimed. On the 9th of April 1991, two years after the tragedy, the supreme council of Georgia headed by Zviad Gamsakhurdia adopted the Act of Independence of Georgia. After that 9th of April was marked on the calendar as the day of restoration of independence, national unity of Georgia, the day of victory and commemoration of people who died for the homeland.

The most important holiday which appeared on the post-Soviet calendar was 26th of May - the day of adoption of the Act of Independence. 1917 bourgeois revolution in Russia resulted in the collapse of the monarchy and Empire's dissolution. In the same period, national council was created in Georgia, which ruled the country. On the resolution of the Council, Georgia was declared an independent republic on the 26th of May 1918. Marking of the 26th of May on the calendar demonstrates the transformation of memory which offers the society to rethink the past and analyze results. A new narrative appeared, offering the nation a new vision based on modern criteria. Independence and not the day of Georgia's joining Russia becomes of foremost importance for post-Soviet Georgia to which the monument was erected in the entrance of Tbilisi. That is why the memory spaces are created, to reevaluate the past, respond to modern challenges, create new heroes, holidays and so on.

After gaining independence the epoch of revival of religion starts in post-Soviet Georgia. The interest towards religion and its role has increased. Religious themes have stridently entered public and political reality. The first president of independent Georgia, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, was trying to bring back the lost traditions and glory of the country. He identified the Orthodox Church of Georgia with Georgian statehood and consequently started this process by restoring religious holidays, changing the content of the calendar and information contained in it entirely. The holidays that appeared on the calendar included most important days for Georgian Orthodox Church and congregation such as Christmas and Easter. (Good Friday, Easter Eve, the Easter Day and the following day of commemoration of the departed are also holidays).

19th of January – is the Epiphany. According to the gospel, twenty centuries ago, Joan the Baptist baptized Jesus Christ in the river in Israel on this day.

On the 12th of May Georgian Orthodox Church celebrates the day when Saint Andrew the Apostle came to Georgia. All churches hold liturgy and prayers to commemorate the saint.

St. Mary's day is celebrated on the 28th of August, the Dormition of the Mother of God. 14th of October marks the day when the greatest relic – the tunic of the Lord was brought to Georgia due to which the main temple of Georgia, Svetitskhoveli was built.

23rd of November is St. George's day who was broken on the wheel. St. George is the patron and the protector saint of Georgia and most churches in the country have been built in his name.

As it can be seen, most holidays on the post-Soviet calendar are related to religious festivals. Consequently, we can clearly see what a great role religion has played since Georgia's independence and how much it contributes to the social and political or cultural life of our country.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the country, bogged down in civil wars and poverty, was left with very few institutions that had survived and managed to develop afterwards. Once Georgia overcame totalitarian regime, it started development and the impact of religion gradually increased, which found the reflection in almost all spheres of people's life. However, the highest activity on the part of clergy can be felt in politics. Neither do political parties nor their leaders refuse to use religion for their political goals. Through constitutional agreements and other spheres of influences, the church has become one of the most powerful and rich structures in Georgia.

17th May is the International Day against Homophobia and Transphobia in the world. Non-governmental organization "Identity" decided to hold a peaceful march in the Freedom Square on May 17, 2013; however, the representatives of the Orthodox Church did not allow the LGBT activists to celebrate the event and dispersed the demonstration cruelly. After 2013, the Patriarchy tabooed the place and did not let the activists hold the event. In 2014, Catholicos- Patriarch of all Georgia declared 17th of May the day of protection of family unity. On this day the parish comes out into the street to march to Sameba church carrying icons.

17th of May caused great confrontations in the society. More than 12 000 citizens of Georgia signed the petition where they appealed to the president, prime minister and the head of the Parliament to punish the violent orthodox abusers who transgressed Article 10 of the Criminal Code of Georgia. However, the government never responded to it.

By introducing 17th of May as an International Day against homophobia and transphobia, Georgia clearly emphasized the country's political course, its aspiration to equality and democracy, its willingness to take care of the rights of sexual minorities like other European countries. Declaration of the 17th of May the Day of family unity by Patriarchy, as opposed to the International Day, once again emphasizes that the Church does not recognize Georgian legislation and it can even be said that it stands above the law. It is trying to "occupy" the secular space, which has to be absolutely free from religion. The church must not interfere in politics and impede the right course of development of the country.

Georgia is a secular country which cares about the integration of minorities into civil society, where there is no state religion and where no privileged religious or ethnic groups exist, where the freedom of faith and the idea of equality are declared in the Constitution. A good example of this is a different attitude developed since 2004, which could always be felt in president Mikhael Saakashvili's public speeches, where he emphasized the idea of equality, when he visited mosques, synagogues, attended various important religious festivities. This was a symbolic act which played an important role in changing the public consciousness and the development of the right outlook. Given that Georgia is not a mono-religious and mono-ethnic society; the reality in our country is reflected on the public calendar in a totally different way. To be more precise, the calendar, as a certain narrative, shows the contrary. From it, we cannot see that Georgia is a multicultural state based on the idea of equality, since it marks only Orthodox holidays. There are no other religious days in the calendar, for instance, Muslim holidays observed by ethnic Georgians, or Azeri population, who represent an important part of ethnic minorities. Their religious creed has not been taken into consideration. This is a very problematic issue and in my opinion, Georgia, which claims to be a tolerant and secular state, should by all means care about the protection of the rights of religious and ethnic minorities.

Conclusion

Soviet totalitarian regime managed to discredit individualism through its propaganda campaign and idolize the essence of collectivism. This system created a totally new, Soviet type of human being, who had permanently been fed with the idea that only the Soviet Union could provide them with a carefree and happy future. The ruling regime used collective memory for manipulating and pressurizing. Communist regime "uprooted" certain memories from the history of Georgia, and appropriated the rest to adjust to its system.

Georgia, which seceded from the Soviet Union and became independent, started to rethink its history. Along with the change of priorities, the desire to remember also changed, new questions were posed and important facts analysed. The change of political conjuncture was in the first place reflected on the public calendar, its form and content changed totally, the information it included fitted in with modern visions and the advantages of an independent state.

Memory is a live organism which social groups bear. That is why it experiences permanent evolution, it is either remembered or forgotten depending on the change of the political context.

The research has shown that the public calendar can be attributed one of the most important functions of being the space for keeping memories, since it is a live chronicle of social-political and cultural transformation. The observations have shown what Georgia was like in the Soviet Union and what process it had to undergo after gaining independence, what ideology the former public holidays served and which holidays they were substituted by in the post-Soviet Georgia.

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