

Georgians' Ambivalent Discourses on Europeanization

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Raising Awareness about Georgia's Europeanization in Academia
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Erasmus+ Jean Monnet Activities



Performing Europeanization - Political vis-à-vis Popular Discourses on Europeanization in Georgia

- ◆ 25 in-depth interviews with politicians (members of both the parliamentary majority and minority) and opinion leaders/experts (NGO representatives, independent experts, and scholars) selected based on purposive sampling (Spring 2015);
- ◆ 18 focus group discussions with populations residing in different regions of Georgia, particularly Tbilisi and the major cities of Western and Eastern Georgia (Kutaisi, Batumi, Zugdidi, Telavi and Gori) (Autumn 2015).
- ◆ The respondents were selected and grouped based on their age, which also matches the stages of socialization undergone in the post-Soviet or Soviet times: those aged 18-25 (whose socialization took place in the post-Soviet era), those aged 26-40 (whose socialization took place both in the post-Soviet and Soviet eras), and those aged 41-65 (whose socialization took place in the Soviet era).

Utilitarian and Identity Factors in Georgians' Discourses

- ◆ Both political and popular discourses on Europeanization in Georgia are mainly dictated by the utilitarian and identity factors although these discourses are quite ambivalent: On the declarative level, the research participants offer socially desirable narratives on the EU and Europeanization process that are in compliance with Georgia's foreign policy course; however, their ambiguous attitudes are revealed behind this façade.

Utilitarian Factors: Security

- ◆ The EU is unanimously considered a guarantee of Georgia's stable political development and a safeguard against Russian threats:
- ◆ “It is one of the guarantees of our stable political development... Georgia is not able to cope with global challenges independently. This is why it is of immense importance for the country to be incorporated into a big union like the EU (E.T., Politician, Parliamentary Minority).
- ◆ “We have experienced and will still experience Russian aggression... We cannot deal with this challenge alone (Male, 41-65, Gori).”

Utilitarian Factors: Security

- ◆ Despite considering the EU a safeguard against Russian threats, one can also trace the perception of the EU as a threat to the country's sovereignty, especially because of Georgia's asymmetrical dependence on it:
- ◆ “The EU-Georgia Association Agreement preamble says that the EU informally establishes the rules of the game one should follow. Europe tells Georgia what should be done, though it is packaged as if it is better for Georgia, and indeed, it is. But the fact is that these negotiations are asymmetrical” (Z.T., Expert, NGO).
- ◆ “For example, at any international meeting our country's problems are not discussed by Georgians but other countries instead, say, the US and EU. Georgia cannot decide anything. Therefore, our independence is questionable” (Male, 18-25, Kutaisi).

Utilitarian Factors: Economic Benefits

- ◆ Both the interviewed elites and population consider the EU a supporter of Georgia's economic development and, in contrast to Russia, a reliable and stable trade partner:
- ◆ “If we recall history, we had unstable trade relations with Russia. They would have blocked us if they had wanted, while we will have stable relations with the EU. We will know in advance what to do” (Male, 18-25, Kutaisi).

Utilitarian Factors: Economic Benefits

- ◆ However, at the same time, the experts emphasize the issue of “façade” Europeanization that measures the country’s progress only based on external formal characteristics, which does not improve its actual economic performance;
- ◆ While the population (especially those residing in Gori and Zugdidi) hopes for the diversification of the market for Georgian export and believes that no matter how beneficial the trade with the EU, Russia as an alternative trade partner should still be maintained:
- ◆ “The farmers prefer the Russian market as it is closer and cheaper to take products to Russia than to Europe. Also, they cannot do this alone as they do not know the language, there are tons of documents to be prepared, etc.” (Male, 41-65, Zugdidi).

Utilitarian Factors: Economic Benefits

- ◆ As the respondents expect that Georgia's association with the EU will strain economic relations with Russia, they consider essential the separation of the economic and political aspects through the Georgian government's pursuit of a relevant policy:
- ◆ “If our government pursues a proper policy, it [the Russian market] will not be closed. They should maintain good relations with Russia, too. Does France not have trade relations with Russia? They certainly have some type of trade relations. It depends on our relevant policy whether the Russian market will be closed or not” (Male, 18-25, Gori).

Utilitarian Factors: A New Experience of Doing Politics

- ◆ The interviewed politicians and experts talk about the positive changes resulting from the Europeanization process in terms of both developing institutional collaboration and strengthening the internal capacity of political institutions, which has encouraged Georgian politicians to switch to the European model of doing politics:
- ◆ “Gaining experience is a constant accompanying process. State officials are constantly trained and educated. We have special programs that imply expert assistance for legislative approximation in these fields. Staff trainings take place locally and abroad. We are not reinventing the bicycle” (N.D., State Agency).

Utilitarian Factors: A New Experience of Doing Politics

- ◆ However, Europeanization is also perceived as a part of the political image created by Georgian politicians for a domestic audience, which is considered crucial for utilitarian reasons (socially desirable self-presentation, “hooking” the electorate, etc.) and has little to do with the political actors’ value system:
- ◆ “This is mainly used by politicians to present themselves as progressive. They have a utilitarian approach to Europe and Europeanness, rather than a value- or identity-driven approach. This is a utilitarian approach that aims to gain personal benefits” (N.S., Expert, Higher Education Institution).
- ◆ The ruling party ascribes such a performance to the oppositional parties, the oppositional parties to the ruling one, while the experts and population ascribe it to both the former and the latter.

Identity Factor: Safeguarding Georgian Identity

- ◆ The discourses on the EU as both a safeguard of and a threat to Georgian identity coexist side by side.
- ◆ On the one hand, the respondents note that the EU facilitates the preservation of the Georgian identity, as it is a multinational union governed by the motto “Unity in Diversity”:
- ◆ “I believe that EU integration gives an opportunity to reinforce our national characteristics as the EU represents a union of 28 countries that are ethnically, culturally and politically very diverse. They feel safe together. The EU’s slogan is ‘Unity in Diversity’” (V.D., Expert, NGO).

Identity Factor: “Mental Modernization”

- ◆ The cultivation of European values is considered as important as the transformation of local structures according to EU standards. It is argued that “mental modernization” is necessary for Europeanization to foster a real transformation of the society, that is, to transfer from the formal and discursive levels to the behavioral one (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2005):
- ◆ “This is a unique opportunity for our country and our citizens to experience mental modernization, which will in turn speed-up the implementation of domestic reforms. Without these reforms, both Europeanization and the Association Agreement will be empty words” (I.K., Politician, Parliamentary Majority).

Identity Factor: Threatening Georgian Identity

- ◆ However, on the other hand, Europeanization is perceived as a threat to Georgian identity as the interviewed population fear that Western values will cause the degradation of Georgian traditions. It might sound paradoxical but at the time when only 12% of the respondents assess negatively the EU and 61% support Georgia's joining the EU, 45% believe that the EU threatens Georgian traditions (CRRC, 2015).

Identity Factor: Christian Worldview

- ◆ The fact that Georgia is a country with a Christian culture and value set is believed to make it part of Europe. However, the country was forcibly torn away from Europe, and therefore, its aspiration to return to the “European Family” is natural:
- ◆ “Europe is nothing but a Christian civilization. Christianity was practiced in Georgia much earlier than in Europe. We were on the periphery, on the border, so the neighborhood with the Islamic countries did much harm to us” (Male, 41-65, Telavi).

Identity Factor: Christian Worldview

- ◆ However, simultaneously it argued that Europe disseminates debauchery (especially through promoting sexual freedom and the rights of homosexuals) and contradicts the Christian values itself, thus bearing threat for Georgian traditions. The fears of losing traditions are reflected in the narratives of not only the representatives of older generations but also the young people aged 18-25.
- ◆ “When it comes to EU integration, what I fear most of all is gradually losing our traditions. Neither pre-marital sexual relations nor same-sex marriages are in compliance with our religion. I am afraid it will be lost over time” (Female, 41-65, Gori).
- ◆ “No, they will not demand us to change our traditions. However, even if we follow our traditions, our children and grandchildren will be forced to forget the past. Future generations will follow other rules” (Female, 18-25, Zugdidi).

Identity Factor: Tolerance

- ◆ On the one hand, the EU is perceived as a disseminator of tolerance in Georgia. It is believed that alongside Georgia's approximation with the EU the level of tolerance, as well as freedom of speech and expression will grow, and hence the protection of minority rights will improve. Moreover, it is stated that "the closer Georgia gets to Europe, the more tolerant we (Georgians) become" (Female, 41-65, Zugdidi).
- ◆ "We need to realize that on a value scale we cannot become Europe unless we learn tolerance, appreciate the existence of different individuals next to us, and welcome their participation in political, economic and social life together with ours... That is why it is beneficial to adopt European values" (I.C., Politician, Parliamentary Minority).

Identity Factor: Tolerance

- ◆ However, simultaneously, such social learning invokes certain irritation and might even result in overestimating one's cultural identity and developing defensive reactions against Europeanization. Indeed, as the participants' narratives reveal, despite their aspiration to learn from Europe, they are still dissatisfied with the fact that the EU teaches tolerance to Georgia that has always been tolerant:
- ◆ “Georgia has historically been a tolerant country. Human rights have traditionally been respected here. There was no hostility towards national minorities and those who were not part of the local culture” (E.T., Politician, Parliamentary Minority).
- ◆ “We are characterized by excessive loyalism or tolerance towards others. What a shame that some TV stations teach us, Georgians, how to be tolerant! What a shame to teach hospitality, friendship and benevolence to Georgians! Quite contrary, we can teach and share all of this to cold Europe” (Female, 26-40, Kutaisi).

Identity Factor: Civic Values

- ◆ On the one hand, “European civic values” are considered exemplary for Georgians. According to our respondents, these values are represented even in minor details such as following traffic rules, discarding trash in garbage bins, etc. Eventually, they stress the importance of learning such values from Europeans:
- ◆ “On the way to development, everyone needs someone to learn from. We need others to learn from and also to give away the good we have. It is wrong to think that only ours is the best. It is elementary but we have to learn from Europeans not to discard garbage in the street” (Male, 26-40, Zugdidi).

Identity Factor: Civic Values

- ◆ On the other hand, the same frustration is expressed because the EU “behaves as a mentor” and attempts to teach Georgians the virtues that are “genetically” embedded in them:
- ◆ “Sure, Europe is very good and I think I am European but I should not be taught what friendship, manhood and Georgianness are. It is genetically inserted in me as a Georgian. It does not need dictation from the outside” (Male, 26-40, Zugdidi).

Georgians' Twofold Discourses

- ◆ On the one hand, one of the main benefits of Europeanization is considered the adoption of European values that Georgia lacks: “The benefit is in approximation with European values that are somewhat different from our traditional culture, but also much preferable” (N.D., State Agency).
- ◆ However, on the other hand, it is emphasized that Georgia used to follow European values even prior to Europe itself, which is even exemplified by then Head of Parliament Davit Usupashvili’s declaration: “Georgia used to be Europe even before Europe knew it was Europe” (5 June, 2015).
- ◆ “Today, when talking about the ideas of humanism, the equality of men and women, Georgian NGOs always refer to Europe as an example; but look at the epic poem, ‘The Knight in the Panther's Skin.’ The ideas of humanism originate from this poem. If we compare, the European Renaissance started in the 14th century, while the Georgian one started two centuries earlier” (Male, 41-65, Telavi).

THANK YOU!