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On the Specifics of the Development of Civil Society in Georgia

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30 YEARS OF JEAN MONNET ACTIVITIES

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Oliver Reisner

This chapter analyses the development of civil society in Georgia from the Tsarist Empire in the nineteenth century until today. I will discuss its specific function and role, configured during its modernization path. These differ significantly from Western ones. After one successful but almost forgotten precedent of adapting Marxism to the needs of local communities in the beginning of the twentieth century under Georgian Menshevik social democracy, today still requires an indigenization based on citizenship and less on ethno-cultural traits inherited from Soviet nationality policy in order to depoliticize the nation.

Keywords: civil society – citizenship –nation – participation – democracy.

The Concept of "Civil Society"

Civil society means, first of all, the defence of the individual from arbitrariness of the state (John Locke), support for the rule of law and the balance of powers (Charles Montesquieu), educating citizens and recruiting political elites (Alexis de Tocqueville), and finally institutionalizing in the public sphere a medium of democratic self-reflexivity, in which critical discussion of matters of general interest is institutionally guaranteed (Habermas, 1989). It is constituted in a nonstate sphere of action by a multiplicity of plural, voluntarily founded associations, which are articulating and autonomously organizing their specific material and normative interests. Situated between the private and the state in civil society articulated targets are always also public affairs (*res publica*). Their agents are involved in politics without striving for state offices. There exists no homogeneous "actor" but a conglomeration of heterogeneously structured, highly differentiated actors, who nevertheless share a certain basic consensus of tolerance, exclusion of violence as a means, and fairness. A basic consensus, of course, does not exclude internal competition but enables civil society members to engage in collective action in support of or opposition to political issues. Both civic consensus and an orientation towards public affairs via "communicative acting" (Habermas, 1989) constitute that ferment of civil society forming an individual sense of civility.[1]

How far this modern concept of civil society, developed in Western Europe, can be applied to assess civil society in nowadays Georgia will be discussed in this contribution. Focusing on specific roots and qualities of civil society in Georgia from the nineteenth century (Reisner, 1998) until today I will analyse Georgia's specific case following Merkel and Lauth. They state

[1] Taylor (1990); Komarovskij (1994): 42; Merkel and Lauth (1998): 7. "But the development of a modern, civilized society is not only the emergence of a market, but also of a civil society as a society that does not identify with the state, is not in paternalistic relations with it, but its own development and independent system social relationships; owns groups and institutes."

> that the precise positioning of civil societies can only be exploited in a context-dependent manner with regard to their potential for democratization. The deep structural and functional change of civil society in the course of democratic transformation or modernization process makes it impossible to model a universally valid, ideal type of civil society. For depending on the nature of the regime context, not only actors, structures and functions of a civil society change, but also their significance for democracy. (Merkel and Lauth, 1998: 12)

They propose three stages of the development of civil society during transition towards democracy: (i) liberalization of the autocratic regime – "strategic civil society"; (ii) institutionalization of democracy – "constructive civil society"; (iii) consolidation of democracy – "reflexive civil society". We will see how those stages can be applied to Georgia's 200 years of modernization, especially looking at the role of elites in the formation of civil society and the role of trust defined as a "generalized expectancy that other people are generally reliable and honest".[2]

While the concept of civil society is deeply rooted in the European Enlightenment and the French Revolution, where "the people" replaced kings as bearers of political sovereignty (Lepsius, 1990), typical patterns from Western Europe like the rule of law cannot be applied easily to an emerging civil society in Georgia. Social and political differences in Caucasia led to syncretistic forms of societal modernization following a complicated reception of Western ideas and their selective adaptation by a small group of intellectuals. Its outcomes do not follow Western prototypes either but generate new, interesting cases for comparative studies (Clowes *et al.*, 1991: 3–14). Two main principles have to be kept in mind:

- The extreme nonsimultaneity of social change. Social structures and attitudes are persisting long after the conditions that gave rise to them have disappeared. This persistence can have positive as well as negative consequences in historical developments.
- Instead of the idea of an inverse relation between tradition and modernity or the mutually exclusive rise of modernity at the expense of tradition, we have to presume "partial developments", which are not merely transitory complications. Not the whole, but only parts of society are changing, which do not interpenetrate the other parts. The introduction of modern institutions such as constitutions does not imply that the people behave adequately as a result (Bendix, 1964: 9; Hann and Dunn, 1996).

The Georgian Background: Between Tsar and People(s) at the Imperial Periphery

First we have to start with the concept of "Georgian statehood", which, in the eighteenth century, did not represent a centralized absolute and bureaucratic state but a weak king from the Bagratid dynasty representing the only unifying force among strong competing noble families (*sagvareulo*) for personal power and land. There was a multiplicity of actors, but no state power subjugating them as well as no common interest besides self-defence against invaders. Only after the annexation of Eastern Georgia in 1801 the Tsarist Empire introduced some kind of central bureaucratic state administration, which was far from a "subduing, but at once liberating (the individual

[2] Jones *et al.* (1997); Mühlfried (2018): 7–22. "The continuity of elites limits the power of a revolution of the rule of law, and the invention of traditions is as inevitable as it is problematic for the nation-state" (Bahners, 1997: 33).

from traditional ties of corporate life) state" (Nipperdey, 1972: 42) as in Western European states. Tsarism imagined "society" as a kind of state-arrangement (Geyer, 1966: 21–50). However, Tsarist bureaucracy remained an alien element in a patriarchal society at the empire's periphery, which was somehow able to erode traditional forms of private or personal authority without replacing it with a new, public one. That provoked a lot of frictions and local as well as regional popular resistance and uprisings (Lang, 1957: 244–284; Suny, 1994: 63–112; Rayfield, 2012: 250–305). Besides the political implication of ending "Georgian statehood" the Tsarist Empire fundamentally changed the social structure of a feudal society. It was imposed from outside.

The *Mokalakeebi* as Traditional Urban Upper Stratum of Tiflis

There is no civil society without citizens as main actors. The origins of civil society in Western Europe are seen in towns and cities and their inhabitants practising communal self-government. In Georgia these are the *mokalakeebi* or "eminent city dwellers", who formed the upper stratum of old-established merchants and craftsmen as well as royal servants in Tbilisi (Beriashvili, 1964: 77–80). In a list from 1814 there were 79 families of "first-rate" city dwellers named. It was only during the eighteenth century that the East Georgian Bagratid kings Vakht'ang VI and Erek'le II freed them from personal dependence and corporal punishment and put them on equal status with the lower nobility (*aznaurni*). They were even entitled to own serfs, as they supported the royal power against the centrifugal particularism of preeminent noble clans mainly through their financial taxes.[3] Following the establishment of a Tsarist administration after 1801 the *mokalakeebi* were pledging for guarantees of their previous privileges. However, until the 1850s their legal status was not regulated. The enlightened administrator Vice Roy Mikhail Vorontsov tried to find a solution of this status issue, which could only be implemented by his successor, Count Bariatinskii, in 1859.[4] The "*mokalakeebi* of the first rang" were made equal to the hereditary estate of "honorary citizens" (*pochetnye grazhdane*) that Tsar Nikolai I established in 1832. Thus the *mokalakeebi* were exempted from capitation tax, military service and corporal punishment. On the other hand the second and third rank *mokalakeebi* lost all their privileges and were downgraded to ordinary city dwellers (*gorozhane*). Finally, in 1861 the 79 families mentioned above were registered as "honorary citizens" of Tbilisi. Already during this period this estate was mainly defined by its property and not by origin. By 1864 another 166 wealthy families were added. Thus, in the year of emancipation of serfs in Eastern Georgia (1864) 255 families were hereditary "honorary citizens" of Tbilisi (Beriashvili, 1964: 76), who were granted the privileged status of *mokalakeebi,* giving them personal freedom and importance. Thanks to their property they began – within the limits set by the autocratic bureaucracy – their transformation into propertied citizens (Besitzbürger) (Beriashvili, 1964: 37–76; Suny, 1994). Even if they accumulated sufficient property and capital, to sustain their lifestyle, they

[3] Beriashvili (1964); Iobashvili (1983): 16–36; Ismail-Zade (1991): 131–135. In Western Georgia the merchants from Kutaisi were also of high economic importance in trade affairs for Imereti's Bagratid kings Solomon I and Solomon II, but without the establishment of an estate of *mokalakeebi*. A common currency was missing that could have eased trade and the development of an internal market. One of the first tasks of Tsarist administration in western Georgia was to crumble the trade monopolies of feudal lords that hampered economic development.

[4] On "Caucasian civil society" under Mikheil Vorontsov's governorship (1845–1854) see Rhinelander (1990): 169–184.

did not invest in production. “The merchant capital remained in the sphere of trade and the interest capital dealt with money trade.”[5]

One of the issues in Georgian economic history was its low productivity and competitiveness, which obstructed the formation of a Western-style *bourgeoisie* in the first half of the nineteenth century. If the *mokalakeebi* continued to strive for rights, then they wanted to be equal to the lower nobility (*aznaurni*) (Beriashvili, 1964: 104). From 1812 the community of *mokalakeebi* demanded from the Tsarist regional administration the right to become involved in the civic administration of Tiflis and to purchase land and serfs. Due to the resistance of the upper nobility the latter was finally rejected in 1832. In 1840, during administrative reforms, Governor General Golovin granted the urban upper stratum the right to establish an elected self-administrative body in Tbilisi. Even if the new city dwellers and state peasants formed only a very small minority of the city population, with two deputies and two candidates, and the head of the city, in 1840 they were overrepresented in the city administration in comparison to the other two estates. This underlines their political, social and economic importance for Tbilisi.[6] So far there has been no in-depth research on the “society of *mokalakeebi*”, who as a high prestige social group with close connections in the hierarchical estate structure of Tbilisi, managed to defend their interests beyond the reforms of the 1860s. The *mokalakeebi* were almost exclusively Armenians, who could be clearly distinguished from the orthodox Georgian nobility. In language and culture they adapted themselves to their Georgian environment. In the second half of the nineteenth century, two-thirds of the “commercial-industrial class” (Chkhetia, 1942: 208–209) were Armenian, dominating almost all of the 3000 commercial small businesses, workshops, and restaurants as well as the major caravansaries, important for the lucrative transit trade.[7] Consequently “in the trading class of the Southern Caucasus Armenian traders in fact occupied the dominant position” (Gugushvili, 1979: 336).

Trade and craftsmanship gradually developed in the western Georgian city of Kutaisi from the 1830s. Until 1865 the number of craftsmen in the Kutaisi province (*gubernija*) (without the vassal princedom Mingrelia) grew to about 5000, with 800 of them living in Kutaisi or 9% of the city population. The organization of craftsmen in guilds in places other than urban hubs like Kutaisi and Ozurgeti was not well developed. The main task of west Georgian traders was the provision of local products to the internal market. Favourable Tsarist custom tariffs also

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[5] Bakradze quoted in Beriashvili (1964): 83–84; on their economic activity, social position and property in Tbilisi see Beriashvili (1964) 77–96.

[6] Beriashvili (1964): 110–118. The “public administration” had to regulate the two most important urban issues: tax collection and accommodation of the military among the city dwellers. In 1851 the very cost-intensive maintenance (90% of the budget) of the city police was added, which amounted to 90% of its budget and urged the city administration to identify new sources of income to meet the other growing demands of the city. Thus the increase of taxes for urban restaurants by 25% triggered a huge urban protest in the summer of 1865.

[7] Suny (1994): 116–117; a detailed description of the economic affairs of Tbilisi population at Anchabadze and Volkova, 1991 on the “ethno-specialization”; an extensive discussion of the Georgian-Armenian relationship in Suny (Suny, 1994) and its review by Alasania (Alasania, 1997: 14–19) stating that the notion “Armenian” acquired an increasingly social function. Thus social stratification by ethnic principles served to prevent ethnic conflicts and assimilation in Georgia. However, religion and nationality were hardly used separately. Depending on the religious affiliation you were ascribed to a certain “people”.

led to a growing transit and long-distance trade with Europe or Persia and this contributed to the growth of merchants.[8] However, the level of economic development strongly lagged behind that of the east Georgian Tiflis province (*gubernija*).

With the recognition of the *mokalakeebi* as "honorary citizens" (*pochetnye grazhdane*) Tsarist attempts for legal unification to establish imperial estates as a community of subjects (*Untertanenverband*) in the South Caucasus were concluded in the 1850s. Even if privileged or nonprivileged estates existed, all of them, not considering their ethnic or religious affiliation, were all equally considered to be subjects to the Tsar. This form of state-bureaucratic integration differed a lot from the incorporation into the dominant personalized, feudal power relations of medieval Georgia on the one hand, but also from the West European economically independent *bourgeoisie*, striving for civic participation rights, challenging the *ancien régimes* of the nineteenth century on the other. Their power rested in their strong and well organized traditional crafts and merchants' guilds (*amkrebi*) in Georgia's towns, representing social actors rooted in the traditional urban fabric and dominating urban life. Only when they managed to demonstrate their collective power, mobilizing the urban population of Tbilisi in 1865 against the introduction of new Tsarist taxes, did the authorities try to replace them with more loyal elected bodies with a franchise linked to tax payments. This again privileged most of all the Armenian merchants and degraded the Georgian nobility. Thus the Tsarist interference in urban affairs provided for an ethnic segregation of the economic and political elites in Caucasian cities. This socio-ethnic segregation seriously hampered the development of an urban civil society (Egiazarov, 1891; Pirtskhalaishvili, 1940; Chkhetia, 1942: 247–295).

The *Tergdaleulebi* as a New Stratum of Georgian National-minded Intelligentsia

On the other hand, for administrative and military matters, the Tsarist state co-opted the old multifunctional elite, the nobility or *tavadaznauroba* in Georgia, and transformed it into a new group of Georgian military and civil servants backing Russian *chinovniki* in the conquest of the Caucasus. They received a secular education to meet administrative demands and to help create a community of Tsarist subjects at the Caucasian periphery. Being detached from traditional personal ties by the ratio of state-run administration, some of them became aware of the needs for societal modernization and called on their noble brethren for reforms, but without any success. In that way they generated a "basic we", called "the Georgians", under the guidance of the nobility. Accepting the Tsarist expansionist narrative of saving their Christian brothers from extinction, they combined it with a Georgian historical narrative (Church, 1997). In place of a missing *bourgeoisie*, the lower noblemen, who studied in Russia, formed a new layer of Georgian *intelligentsia*. Upon their return from Russian universities in St Petersburg and Moscow they tried to modernize and reform traditional Georgian society on national grounds. They called themselves *tergdaleulebi* – literally "those, who have drunken the water of the River Terek" (demarcating a cultural boundary between Russia and Georgia). They were inspired by the reform discourses for the peasant

[8] During the 1850s in South Caucasian cities, as in central Russian ones – the unification of merchants in guilds was promoted. In 1858, from 58 certificates issued for merchants of the second guild, more than 30 recipients were Georgians. In total, in the 1850s approximately 70 certificates have been delivered to merchant circles. At the beginning of the 1860s in Kutaisi, 870 souls or 20% of the urban population were registered as merchants (Iobashvili, 1983: 37–88, esp. 75).

liberation in the late 1850s and early 1860s. In 1861 Dimitri Bakradze, a historian stemming from a rural clergy family, wrote emphatically to the editor of the literary journal "tsiskari", Ivane Kereselidze:

> All good beginnings of social benefit, as lotteries, subscriptions, and theatrical performances to be necessary for society were discovered in our days. . . . The time has passed when society has turned to the government for the realization of the needs of the people, asking for their help. This is how it is supposed to be. But the concern of the society for itself and in that respect the people will be given a beginning of a movement on behalf of their own affairs, will put it on the way of education. True education does not consist in the appropriation of studied subjects, as it does in the conception of social needs and their realization by the same society . . . as it was in ancient times. Most of the wonderful cathedrals and monasteries, as well as the translation of ecclesiastical and secular literature into the Georgian language, have been completed by the people for themselves . . . We still have to rely on this custom. And that's not difficult for us . . ., only a few well-prepared and caring leaders are needed . . . (Tsiskari, 1861: 445–447, quoted in Dumbadze, 1950: 24–25)

In an obituary to Dimit'ri Qipiani, a former Marshall of the Georgian nobility, who tried to combine loyalty to the Tsar with ethnic identity and who was murdered in 1887, Ilia Chavchavadze, the leader of the *tergdaleulebi*, characterizes "civil society" as follows:

> Human society demands so much virtue from every single human being for its permanence, imperturbability and existence that the coexistence of people is less impossible. She tells us that if you want the commonwealth, if you want to live together, then you must not be less truthful, not less diligent and true to your commitment, not less compassionate, sympathetic to the community? Load not less good and other more. In this way, a society of men, a bourgeois community, and life alone is a minimum of virtue. (*Iveria*, 1887 quoted in Jologua, 1997: 96)

This kind of "virtue" only applied to a small but growing group of educated people originating from different estates but having undergone a second socialization with university studies in Russia. However, they were marginalized in their own traditional society and insecure in their economic and social position. Being "strangers in a strange land" (Jersild, 1996, 1997; Reisner, 2005; Manning, 2012) they relied upon modern forms of interaction to disseminate their national idea. In order to overcome the estrangement of their own origins in a traditional feudal society they aligned themselves with the idea of a "progressive" Europe as a new role model.

Associations as a New Form of Social Activity in Georgia

The "Society for the Spread of Literacy among the Georgians" was founded in 1879 in Tbilisi – one of the modern institutions introduced into Georgian agrarian society. We can trace this society's origins to problems in the development of Georgian civil society in late Imperial Russia. Next to the Nobility's Land Bank, the Georgian press and the Drama Society, it constituted one of the most important pillars of Georgian public life in the late nineteenth century, appearing in the urban setting of Tbilisi after the Tsarist reforms of the 1860s. Its main supporters were the members of the small, but very active group of *tergdaleulebi*. As students returning in the early 1860s from St Petersburg University they realized, from their everyday contacts with Russians, that they

were not accepted as equal subjects to the Tsar. Ilia Chavchavadze described in his "traveller's notes" the Russians' feeling of superiority as "civilizers" of the Caucasus. They also became aware of the backwardness of their own society, which they tried to surmount by a project called "the rebirth of the Georgian nation". Influenced by Russian radical thinking they intended "to serve their own people".[9]

After the Turco-Russian War of 1877–1878 they managed to establish an association looking for private run grammar schools teaching in Georgian. Among the founding fathers Ilia Chavchavadze represented the young intellectuals of the *tergdaleulebi*; Dimitri Kipiani on the other hand was a member of Georgian civil servants, a layer that was transformed by the Tsarist state for administrative matters out of the old nobility for backing Russian *chinovniki* at the spot. Both of these groups were more or less detached from personal ties of traditional life and the needs of the populace. The latter called on their noble brethren to change their attitudes and behaviour to encourage more economic activity on their own estates, but without any success. Publicly they put their loyalty to the Tsar before their feelings for their homeland. Until the 1880s most of them could be found in private salons or in the offices of a few newspapers or journals. The reading public was still restricted to the nobility and some intellectuals mostly of noble origin as well. Only in the late 1880s and 1890s were radical political societies established (Raeff, 1984: 129–145; Clowes *et al.*, 1991: 135; Suny, 1994: 113–143).

The *tergdaleulebi* tried to constitute a "basic we" as Georgians, longing for a new legitimate public order to replace the traditional personal one. Of course, still under noble guidance they wanted the *national interest* (*erovnuli sakme*) to become the leading principle in public life and decision making. In a Tsarist state of repressive tolerance, where everything was forbidden if it implied political consequences, public activities were restricted to culture, sciences, and education. So the Society for the Spread of Literacy among the Georgians tried to organize some kind of Georgian secular primary education to combine the preparation for an administrative or military career and teaching in the Georgian vernacular. They founded several Georgian schools, editing and distributing the first Georgian textbooks as well as novels and lyrics. They were involved in collecting old manuscripts, opening reading rooms for the poor, organizing the funerals of prominent Georgians and striving to establish a university in Tbilisi. While organizing cultural life and its own nationwide network the active members of this "society" faced a lot of practical problems. Most of all they struggled to mobilize the gentry as well as peasants for cooperation, to make the members pay the huge amount of 6 roubles annual membership fee. This effectively excluded peasants from membership because they could not pay it. However, the membership rose from 245 in 1879 up to 611 in 1899, but doubled within the next five years until it was 1263 members in 1905. In 1914 they counted 3045 members. Thus the rise of the membership of this "society" followed social differentiation and mobilization of former noblemen with education and sufficient income. Most of them were civil servants, school teachers, clerks, and only some entrepreneurs; it meant that, as educated people with secondary or university degrees, they depended on state jobs, which were very rare and mostly reserved for Russians (Reisner, 2004: 121–143). They represented an equivalent of the Western "middle class" but their status was insecure. As in other parts of the Tsarist Empire most of the Georgian nobles had to arrange themselves with Russian administrators representing the Tsarist state and deciding about their careers. This policy of co-opting non-Russian elites delayed

[9] Reisner (2009): 36–50; detailed in Reisner (2004): 106–188; Gureshidze (1993). On the history of nonstate organizations and institutions in the Tsarist empire see: Clowes *et al.* (1991): 121–152.

the emergence of an ethnic conscious leadership of their own kin group outside the cities.[10] In this autocratic environment the Georgian élites preferred to attack the Armenian élite residing in Tbilisi's Sololaki district, who dominated economic life and the city council. Instead of a liberal urban civil society, two ethnically segregated communities competed in their nation-building projects in the same urban environment (Reisner, 2015).

Alongside social differentiation and mobilization from the 1880s onwards, the disputes in that "Society" reflected Georgian society's internal relations and conflicts – for example the debates about the funding of schools by the Noble Land Bank in Tbilisi and Kutaisi between intellectuals and noble representatives. While most of the leaders were of noble origin with privileged access to education, they wanted to lead the peasant mass without considering their urgent social interests. A common national morale preceded social interests thus practically excluding the peasants from participation. In the 1890s the "Society's" activities and its effectiveness for peasants were criticized by a new group of educated West Georgian *aznaurni* following Marxist ideas, later called *mesame dasi*. They managed to adapt their interpretation of Marxism to the local peasant interests and also criticized the high membership fee, which was finally reduced to 3 roubles after the revolutionary upheavals in 1905 and to 1 rouble annually in 1915. This allowed a mobilized peasant mass to enrol and influence the "Society".

In conclusion, we have to consider the different functions that the "Society" fulfilled for its members. For many nobles, the charitable cultural evenings were used to spend leisure time. The most active members used the "Society" as a substitute for restricted political activities, so that in 1905, the revolutionary year, the "Society" almost died because everybody switched to politics. Like Ilia Chavchavadze, most of them were disappointed about the lack of support from the broader public. Especially for intellectuals, a new cultural-ethnic sensitive community was a substitute for a still nonexistent nation. Here they could develop and experience their national feelings as a value-constituting society. As an organizational carrier of the national movement it constituted a concrete and lasting "moral community" (Steinberg, 1992), where people with similar views could meet each other and concentrate its powers. In this way, the "Society" combined emotional impulses and rational control for their actions. In short, it became a "school of the nation". Its self-organization, the formulation and discussion of statutes, and the members' regular gatherings constituted political experiences in a prepolitical sphere, which destined its most active members for careers elsewhere in state administration (the *zemstvo* reform of local self-government has not been carried out in the Caucasus and the local level was run by the state), city councils, private enterprises, or political groupings.

In an ideological way the "national affairs" became an equivalent for the Polish "organic work", but unlike the latter it was not aiming to regain lost independence, but for equality as Tsarist subjects by the recognition of their own culture and some degree of internal self-determination. The Tsarist military, as a guarding force against Muslim powers, was widely accepted among the Georgian elites, so they developed no broad demand for secession from the Tsarist empire (Reisner, 2005).

Because of a continuing patriarchal mentality, lack of funds, and the dire socio-economic conditions and low educational level among the peasants, the Georgian intelligentsia did not succeed in mobilizing the population for their cultural issues. So the Georgian activists found themselves in marginal positions, where they managed to

[10] Velychenko (1995); Rieber (1991): 343: "The dynamics of social groups penetrate political institutions, for example, filling them with social content, profoundly effecting the formal, legal-administrative structures, and often transforming them beyond the intentions of their original architects."

develop their sense of ethnic affiliation as a cultural community freed from estate or locality, accessible to all of the potential members. With its cultural activities the members developed a forum of public socialization instead of the traditional ones. However, the social cleavage between nobility and peasantry and the domination of the Tsarist bureaucracy prohibited the development of political loyalty on a national base. On the other hand Tsarist autocracy did not formulate a new base for the integration of non-Russian subjects. It left an ideological vacuum to be filled by different forms of identity, and national as well as socialist ideologies. So we have on cultural-national grounds some special kind of a Georgian civil society without a nationwide authority that could counterbalance the authority of traditional, real communities as well as state power. This Georgian type of civil society still needs closer research in social and cultural history.

Mass Mobilization and Self-Organization in the Countryside

With the peasant emancipation in Georgia in 1864 the Tsarist authorities needed to connect with the peasant villages and therefore institutionalized representative village assemblies, which were to elect a village elder (*mamasakhlisi* or "father of the house") as interlocutor between the village communities and the underdeveloped Tsarist state. Until the 1930s these village assemblies at least partly allowed for mass mobilization and self-organization in the countryside. This turned out to be quite successful but was "forgotten" during the later Soviet period. Since the turn of the century there were several initiatives reaching from the establishment of food production and consumer cooperatives to libraries and educational facilities throughout Georgia. Some fresh research of case studies for this type of rural civil society demonstrates serious local initiatives to overcome the dire conditions. These studies will certainly advance Georgian social historiography (Margvelashvili and Tsereteli, 2015).

In the countryside schools, teachers from the "Third Group" (*mesame dasi*) introduced Marxist ideas of social emancipation adapted for the peasant communities. In Georgia, which did not have a strong industrial worker base, social democracy turned into a peasant party, which established a combination of self-organizing peasant communities with a revolutionary outlook that in the beginning of the twentieth century could hardly be controlled by Tsarism. The most successful example was the "Gurian Republic" in western Georgia, which managed to survive from 1902 until 1906. During the revolutionary year of 1905 there was a mushrooming of small self-reliant "republics" until the Tsarist military managed to subdue them by force in 1906 (Jones 2005: 129–158; Makharadze, 2016). To improve their socio-economic situation the peasants continued to organize themselves around very practical issues of self-help. This proves again that in times of intensive social change or weakness of the state, activity in associations intensified towards the end of the Tsarist empire. In 1915 there were around 30 cultural and educational associations in Georgia. However, economical associations like cooperatives, consumer and credit societies developed much faster. Their numbers exploded from 35 with 6143 members in 1910 to 333 with approximately 120 000 members in 1916. When the Tsarist state was unable to cope with the challenges of the First World War, society stepped in.[11]

[11] Jones (2005); Mosidze (1994): 32. Research on cases like Finland certify a broader range of "Voluntarily – Equally – Mutually" peasant mobilization from the nineteenth century until the early twentieth century (Stenius,

During the short-lived period of the Democratic Republic of Georgia (1918–1921) the social democratic Menshevik government tried to transform this organizational experience into a local self-government structure of "eroba", which was only partially introduced with the weakening of the Tsarist authorities in the Caucasus during the First World War (Khvadagiani, 2017). Here we have a different form of civil society that came into life by an innovative interaction between pragmatic Marxist intellectuals and peasant communities, which were longing for social change to improve their dire living conditions.

Soviet Legacy

In Soviet times the newly established Bolshevik party elite or *nomenklatura*, which took over Georgia in February 1921, transformed the limited beginnings of civil society formation from the Tsarist and independence periods into a conveyor or "transmission belt" of party politics to the broader masses. Being atomized and stripped of any possibility to organize themselves in formal associations against the overwhelming power of a superficially modernizing Soviet regime, Soviet citizens used informality to circumvent the growing inefficiencies of the socialist planned state economy. Uncertainty and instability distinguish life beyond a state-controlled public, because Georgia's rather Mediterranean character and values differed greatly from its northern neighbour, Russia. Relationships are only perceived as personal and are not framed in more abstract forms. Most important is the individual positioning and development of a personal (informal) network of connections, which required access to resources not available in the official Soviet economy. The demonstrative possession of merchandise, consumer goods or symbols of power were part of publicly proving manliness, because they were hard to obtain. In such a dynamic environment, hierarchical, formalized and official relations in state bureaucracy, for example, appear to be inhibitory as they evoke conflicts and antagonism. According to Mars and Altman, this was the motivation and dynamic force that drove the Georgian shadow economy. Personal trust and the virtue of mutual, personal loyalty in the form of friendships or "brotherhood" were essential, which proved to be stronger than any loyalty felt towards an abstract state, membership in "public organizations" or "the Party", principles or convictions. Competition among friends was nonexistent. Trust and loyalty were indispensable in the illegal shadow economy as no agreement could be signed and no official legal action could be taken.[12]

Correspondingly, the Soviet state and ideology were not able to take root in Georgia and were seen as a part of the unavoidable relationship with Russia. The institutions of civil liberties and the territorial constitutional state also remained foreign. As such, Georgians were able to free themselves relatively easily from the ideological weight of communism after the "Great Georgian" Stalin's death.[13] There were various traditional strategies one could choose from in order to adapt to, or thwart, these restrictive relations. Attitudes did not change but actually stabilized as a survey among Georgian Jews who emigrated to Israel and Tamar Dragadze's study on social relations in villages of Soviet Georgia's Ratcha province demonstrated. Both studies were conducted in the late

1980, 1987: 373–380) as institutions in which national identities have evolved in specific mass-based "ethnic organizations".

[12] Gerber (1997): 39: "Nearly the entire party, government and economic apparatus was integrated into a network of family, kinsman and compatriot relations and enabled a prosperous shadow economy to emerge."

[13] A protest of several thousand adolescents against Khrushchev's de-Stalinization and to ensure the memory of Stalin was violently repressed on 9 March 1956. Gerber (1997): 34–40; Blauvelt and Smith (2016).

1970s and emphasize the importance of social networks. In order to get anywhere with bureaucrats prone to shy away from responsibility, an applicant had to demonstrate his trustworthiness by implicitly presenting the following characteristics:

- Belief in the Georgians' superiority to others, allowing no deceit, belittlement, or criticism among compatriots (generalized reciprocity).
- Preference for the Georgian traditional faith in culture, honour, family and fellow countrymen before the Soviet era; a consciousness of their own history.
- Refusal to assimilate to Soviet customs, which in real terms were seen as Russian, and adherence to "Georgian" mannerisms, whatever was meant by that.[14]

This mostly situational use of a national affiliation can be suggestive of the importance that the nation or national identity has in Georgia as the highest value relative to all other differences and group ties (Elwert, 1989; Hobsbawm, 1990). It was the time when the Georgian feast or "supra" became popular all over the Soviet Union as an ideal forum to establish personal, mutual relationships and to institutionalize the informal in the private rather than the public sphere. It is a telling indicator of the development of ingroup bound "bonding social capital". This kind of "invention of tradition" (Anderson, 1983) seriously inhibited the establishment of trust in the public institutions of state and society, and this remains a challenge today (Ledeneva, 1998; for Georgia: Mühlfried, 2006; Stefes, 2006; Hough, 2011).

With its nationality policy, the Soviet regime under Stalin introduced primordial national cultural forms attached to administrative territorial units all over the Soviet Union with the titular nationality being privileged on its "own" territory. In Georgia since the mid-1930s national cultural forms were revived to foster identification with the Soviet state. They were imposed on the broader society through mass education. Attempts to politicize the nation were condemned as "bourgeois nationalism". However, towards the end of the Soviet Union the exclusive "ethnos" remained the only reference point for a political "demos". At the end of the Soviet Union, nationality replaced citizenship. Competing political elites used the "nationalist form" instead of the "socialist content" for the legitimization of territorial claims in the post-Soviet space (Suny, 1993: 84–126; Shils, 1995; Shnirelman, 2001; Cheterian, 2008: 37–85; Reisner, 2010; Maisuradze and Hohenstein, 2015).

Civil Society – Traditional Concepts and New Beginnings

In Georgia, civil society organizations re-emerged only during the late *perestroika* period as part of the national movement challenging the Communist Party. The liberal concept of civil society became very popular among critical intellectuals, because it aimed to help to reinstate the citizen as a subject and not as an object of politics. Its main idea is to constitute the state as an instrument of politically binding decision making for the whole society on the basis of republican, constitutional, and democratic principles. Civil society should enable the people to live a new political "life in truth" (Stammen, 1993: 29), but it needed to be re-established under difficult circumstances. Without public space and social interest groups, the national idea and Georgian Orthodox religion became the main focus of public activity. Beyond symbolic forms like hunger strikes there was neither sufficient capacity for

[14] Dragadze (1988): 32; Mars and Altman (1983); UNDP (1997): 6–9.

sustained collective action nor control of independent resources to limit state power and hold public servants responsible for their corrupt practices. At the height of the national movement it was believed that nation and state should be merged with the nation replacing class in a homogeneous society (Gerber, 1997: 149–228; Nodia, 2005; Reisner, 2009). During the 1990s, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that were established and survived only thanks to grants from international donors remained alien elements with only limited impact, effectiveness and legitimacy among the broader population, but they provided political activists with a niche for economic survival.

During the "Rose Revolution" in November 2003, which overthrew Eduard Shevardnadze after flawed parliamentary elections, next to the independent TV station Rustavi 2 the role of NGOs became crucial for the first time in channelling public discontent through many newly established associations like the youth organization "Enough" (*Kmara*), following a Serbian model. However, a survey conducted in 2011 showed that generalized trust, membership in voluntary organizations, and the value of exerting influence on decisions as preconditions of democracy were still very low among all generations in Georgia (Simecka, 2009).

> Generalized trust proved to be very low across all three generations. Only 20.6% of respondents think that most people can be trusted, while 79.4% believe that one needs to be very careful in dealing with people . . . The lack of participation poses a serious threat to the development of democracy, however. It is neither highly valued nor practiced. Participation has a specific character in Georgia. It cannot be claimed that the population as a whole is an impartial observer of events, however. From time to time it actively gets involved in protest actions, but the general tendency is to entrust certain political actors with the responsibility to act, and then wait for them to act in their stead. (Sumbadze, 2012: 69–71, quotes: 99 and 113)

The political scientist Stephen F. Jones characterized Georgia as a "'limited access social order' in which mobility and entry into the political system is blocked by poverty, inequality, and systemic hierarchies," which were not even addressed under Saakashvili's administration. As a strong proponent of economic liberalism he focused, in his charismatic populism, more on values of consumers than on values of citizens. "Deregulating the state has led to a greater disenfranchisement of its citizens" (Jones, 2013: 108–109), with one-third of the population living on the poverty line, an absent middle class, and missing stimulation of market entrepreneurship and civic engagement alike. In contrast to "despotic power", stable democracies rely on strong "infrastructural power" (Mann, 1984) through institutional development, strengthened civil society and reduction of poverty. Saakashvili's "minimal national state" has given up on individual rights and constraining powerful private business interests, so that the state in Georgia often failed to implement its own statutes.

Due to the absence of clear social cleavages and the persistence of traditional loyalties to kin, peers, and patrons the marginalized civil society organizations could not be turned into a "school of democracy" (Putnam, 1995). The weak political participation beyond elections became endemic with only 2–4% of the population being involved in some form of collective action. This is accompanied by a "confidence gap" with little faith in citizens' ability to influence government policies and a low popular belief in the benefits of democracy. Jones is warning that "civil society networks without effective state institutions to support and regulate them are no guarantee of democratic growth" (Jones, 2013: 112). Saakashvili modernized the state but increased economic insecurity and diminished citizens' power at the same time, which only strengthened the ambivalence over substantive outcomes of democracy. In a 2006 survey, 57.4% of the respondents declared "order" being more important than popular

influence on government decisions (Jawad, 2005; Gürsoy, 2011; Jones, 2013: 112). However, this "increased economic insecurity" after eight years of UNM rule resulted in a short-term massive voter mobilization for the parliamentary elections in 2012.

Structural Challenges of the Civil Society in Georgia Today

Over the years, civil society participation slowly emerged as an important and influential factor in pushing for constructive and principled change in political culture, including a moral atmosphere conducive to the peaceful change of power before, during, and after the parliamentary elections in October 2012. After Saakashvili's defeat the once-vibrant NGO sector returned as an active interlocutor with the government in several important fields of civil rights reform. On the positive side, cooperation between the new government and civil society organizations improved considerably. The practice of repression and intimidation of opposition was discarded. On 12 December 2013, the Georgian Parliament acknowledged the important role of CSOs in a memorandum with the civil organizations, and thus intended to establish a new tradition of cooperation, e.g. providing civil society representatives with greater access to the legislative process, both in terms of influence on policy making, and the submission (through amenable members of parliament) of draft bills.[15] The government and CSOs collaborated on issues such as a new labour code, state budget, or local administration reform (Lortkipanidze and Pataraia, 2014).

Thanks to the newly gained greater freedom in comparison to most other post-Soviet countries, a growing network of watchdog NGOs – based mainly in Tbilisi – is increasing its capacity to advocate for civil rights through campaigns, monitoring and controlling the performance of government and state agencies. These are functions that are normally exercised by the political opposition. In 2014 this was effectively demonstrated in the public campaign "This Affects You – We Are Still Spied On".[16] Leading watchdog NGOs criticized the government's legal initiatives strengthening surveillance, which the authorities rejected as politically biased. Ex-Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili considered the activities of several civil society activists to be "threatening", which in return was condemned by 46 NGOs in a joint statement on 2 February 2014.[17] In May 2014 Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili warned that the participating watchdog NGOs would "damage" Georgia's international reputation and "undermine" the country's security. In December 2015, the newly appointed prime minister, Giorgi Kvirikashvili, did not renew these allegations. In April 2016, the Constitutional Court ruled the legislation that allows state security services to have direct, unrestricted access to telecom operators' networks to

[15] On 30 April 2014, the National Strategy for the Protection of Human Rights in Georgia, 2014–20 was adopted. This provides numerous entry points for civil society to reinforce the observance of human rights in Georgia, although the mechanisms for its implementation are not yet fully in place.

[16] Its purpose was to resist the direct, unfettered access of the state security agencies to the telecom operators' networks, after the parliament passed a government-backed surveillance bill allowing the Interior Ministry to retain direct access to telecom operators' servers. At the same time, this law gives the Office of Personal Data Protection inspector the right to electronically authorize law enforcement agencies' legal interception of communications, once there is a court warrant.

[17] For threats against participating NGOs in the advocacy campaign "This affects you!" and protest petition against Ivanishvili's threats see Puig (2016).

monitor communications unconstitutional and ordered the authorities to reform surveillance regulations by March 2017.[18]

These watchdog NGOs continued to be an important pool for the recruitment of government and political personnel, as well as a field of activity for former members of parliament or government creating new NGOs critical of the current government. The lines between civic advocacy and party politics became blurred. Civil society remains a field mainly for the elites.[19]

The parliamentary elections of October 2016, which were conducted in a much less polarized and tense environment than four years earlier, confirmed the ruling Georgian Dream Democratic Georgia (GDDG) party gaining a constitutional majority in the legislature. On the other hand, the political opposition was left behind in shatters, with liberal parties falling apart and the main oppositional force, the United National Movement, splitting over the role of former president Saakashvili in the party. Thus the executive power remained, again, the strongest branch of Georgia's state institutions. The civil society sector was trying to control the government but without broader support among the population it can hardly exert pressure on the political actors. The problem remains how to transform passive voters into active political citizens as anticipated in the pioneering work of Almond and Verba through cross-national investigations that distinguished between subject and participant cultures (Almond and Verba, 1963: 515; Giddens, 1985; Tonkin *et al.*, 1989: 260; Bremmer and Ray, 1993: 536).

Internal Constitution of Civil Society Actors: Participation, Interaction with Population and Social Capital

While the civil society sector keeps growing in terms of the numbers of organizations and in capacity, it remains primarily concentrated in the capital and some bigger cities such as Batumi, Kutaisi, and Rustavi, and is restricted to the politically active elites. Although increased NGO activity is also observable now in rural areas, most of these lack a broader membership base and mostly leave out the most pressing issue for broader society: socio-economic development. Four categories of CSOs can be identified: (i) formal interest groups (business, journalist clubs etc.); (ii) amorphous interest groups (farmers, pensioners, petty traders, etc.), (iii) Western-style NGOs, often inspired or sustained by international NGOs, and (iv) transnational working international NGOs or foundations. They can be distinguished from the informal patronage networks that are not active in the public realm and that are therefore more difficult to identify (which may be the reason for blossoming conspiracy theories in Georgia – see Jones, 2013: 113).

Most of the CSOs in Georgia continue to demonstrate low levels of overall sustainability, but, unlike political parties, they are entitled to apply for international grants and therefore remain "donor driven". The emergence of an elitist NGO sector focused on professional consulting, service provision, and advocacy is to a

[18] Overview: Beraia *et al.* (2017); Transparency International Georgia, 2018.

[19] With the inauguration of Georgian Dream (GD) candidate Giorgi Margvelashvili as president in November 2013, previously adopted constitutional amendments entered into force shifting the executive's powers from the president to the prime minister. Margvelashvili turned his attention to internal control over the legislative process, vetoing several draft laws, consulting with civil society activists, and hiring some of them. Once again NGOs became the main reservoir for recruiting into state positions and thus into the political elite.

great extent disconnected from the broader population. Due to the fact that NGOs do not represent broader parts of society, they often follow an agenda not directly aligned with the needs of the population. Therefore CSOs and other interest groups do not enjoy much trust in broader society but are perceived being a part of the unpopular political game (e.g., in comparison with the Church, army or patrol police, or recently, the media).[20] Thus NGOs are still vulnerable to allegations of being "grant eaters" or politically biased when they criticize government policies (Mühlfried, 2005; Pugno and Verme, 2012; Chitanava, 2013). Among the younger generation, mainly students, civic activity has become more common, but not more lasting. According to the annual "USAID NGO Sustainability Index 2016" Georgian civil society remains steadfastly in the evolving sustainability category, with no change, either positive or negative, over several years.[21]

The idea of self-organization around certain group interests to advocate them in public is unfamiliar to a nation socialized mainly under neopatrimonialism. The principle of aggregating competing interests in a plural society for achieving consent about the common good has not yet taken deep root. However, slowly – with expectations from the state disappointed for two decades – some progress in the self-organization of society can be observed within serious structural limitations.

Georgia has been characterized as a country with high "bonding", but low "bridging" social capital. The World Bank (WB) defines it the following way: "Social capital refers to the institutions, relationships, and norms that shape the quality and quantity of a society's social interactions" (World Bank, 1999; Gutbrod, 2011: 2). In the Civicus Civil Society Index for 2010, Georgia scores comparatively low on sociocultural environment, which encompasses elements like propensity to participate and trust, as well as giving and volunteering. Levels of social capital are generally low, i.e. ingroup solidarity and outgroup mistrust ("bonding") still limit civic engagement in Georgia (on oligarchs see Konończuk *et al.*, 2017), this being mainly apparent in extremely low rates of group membership reaching beyond peer groups into generalized institutional trust ("bridging").

In June 2015, severe flooding in central areas of Tbilisi, taking many lives and severely damaging urban infrastructure, showed that civic engagement is possible. An unprecedented mobilization of volunteers significantly raised public and government appreciation of volunteer work. A rare moment occurred when a sense of community appeared, which only confirmed the findings of a 2011 survey on social capital and civic engagement that, despite low levels of formal participation in the civil society sector, widespread norms of openness and altruism underlie vibrant forms of bridging social capital that already exist in Georgia (Gutbrod, 2011). The Western form of civil society therefore still remains alien to the Georgian environment as long as it is serving the "political" elites. There will be no way, how to extend existing in-group solidarity into a broader We-group one. The key challenge is how to increase civic activity among Georgian citizens and formally institutionalize currently overwhelmingly informal patterns of self-organization. Here, alternative formats for this process might be established by aligning the civil society sector with the population's existing priorities and needs regarding, for example, employment and the eradication of poverty.

With several thousand members, trade unions and professional associations represent some of the few exceptions. They have developed slowly and mainly in the capital and bigger urban or industrial centres with

[20] Specific and regularly updated survey data can be downloaded from the Caucasus Research Resource Centre (CRRC) "Caucasus Barometer's" web site.

[21] Puig (2016); USAID (2016): 101–109; US Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (2016): Georgia.

limited influence. The new government abandoned a discriminatory policy against trade unions, revised the Labour Code in June 2013, allowed for collective bargaining, and acknowledged increased activity by employees demanding improvements in their dire working conditions after years of repression and negligence. Just after the change of government, in some sectors, trade unionists started openly to address previously suppressed labour conflicts, which led to an increased number of strikes in 2014 and 2015. In February 2016 the teachers' trade union (Educators' and Scientists' Free Trade Union of Georgia, ESFTUG), the biggest professional association with about 30 000 members, officially opened negotiations with the Ministry of Education and Science as a major employer over a new sectoral agreement, which were successfully concluded in March 2017. Due to the low public appreciation of trade unions the importance of this achievement was not adequately noticed in the media, which focused mainly on political developments. This agreement represents a first step towards the formal negotiation of diverse interests in the labour sector through framework agreements. With only one-third of the national workforce employed and the rest, mainly farmers in the countryside, registered as "self-employed" – thus reducing the high unemployment rate – and the memories of old corrupt Soviet trade unions, readiness to join trade unions is still quite low. On the other side, self-organization among employers in the Georgian Employers' Association is also growing slowly with approximately 600 members. Most small-scale employers still show reluctance to self-organize in the business sector. However, social dialogue as an institutionalized form of conflict mitigation has not taken root yet but could become a tool to strengthen "bridging" social capital and, indirectly, democracy in Georgia, which still needs to be investigated in terms of internal democracy (Jgerenaia, 2012; Kardava and Jgerenaia, 2016).

In rural and mountainous areas, the few existing NGOs are exerting very little or no influence on local affairs. In the agricultural sector, in which two-thirds of the work force are "self-employed" in inadequate subsistence farming, cooperatives are slowly gaining ground as the word spreads that they cannot be compared with Soviet-style collective farms and joint efforts help to increase their output, efficiency, and quality. Thanks to international support programs like the European Neighbourhood Programme for Agriculture and Rural Development (ENPARD) there are now more civil organizations to support rural development and self-organization in villages, leading to successful examples of collaboration. Although increased NGO activity is observable now in some rural areas, most of these lack a broader continuous membership base (ENPARD, 2017). We can conclude that self-organized and self-reliant activism is still the exception and not the rule, which represents a serious obstacle to fully valorizing on Georgia's potential for its development.

The "Other" Civil Society – Georgian Orthodox Church and Illiberal Societal Actors

Without the resources and experience to participate in public affairs the majority of the impoverished and disenfranchised population is turning towards Georgia's Orthodox Church (GOC) for orientation, and to patronage networks or friends for assistance in need. The GOC represents an increasingly strong actor in civil society, which was neglected by the liberal-minded part of civil society for a long time. Over the years the GOC significantly increased its influence with the authority and capacity to act independently of the secular state and broader society. It represents the most trusted institution in Georgia, led by Patriarch Ilia II, with extraordinary approval ratings of over 80%. Of course this builds on the fact that 82% of the population adheres to Georgian Orthodox beliefs. Since independence the Orthodox religion has become the main marker of national identity and the GOC claims

to be its pivotal mentor legally recognized by signing a concordat between the patriarch and the president in 2002. In 2014, public financing of the GOC was increased to 25 Mio. GEL per year, but is not accountable to the state on how this amount is spent.[22]

However, for further accommodation towards the EU, on 2 May 2014 Georgian legislators adopted an antidiscrimination law despite the GOC's strong resistance. Since then some civil society organizations mediated a dialogue with the GOC on EU issues, which in December 2016 led to a first official visit of GOC representatives to the headquarters of the EU and NATO in Brussels. Positive assessments by the current GOC leadership to accommodate with Georgia's orientation towards EU and NATO notwithstanding the infighting among strong traditionalist and Russia-leaning factions in one of the least transparent organizations in Georgia continues (Jawad and Reisner, 2013; Minesashvili, 2017).

Since the late 1990s, besides the GOC, several downstream organizations like the Union of Orthodox Parents, which claim to represent "true" believers in specific policy sectors, appropriated the form of civil society organizations and formed an illiberal segment of civil society, which is more driven by national-religious identity. While there were no formal restrictions on freedom of association or assembly by the government, after the Georgian Dream coalition came to power in 2012 a new phenomenon of counter-demonstrations emerged, hindering minorities and liberal minded groups from publicly expressing their opinions (e.g. Muslim communities demanding the establishment of a mosque in their village or protesting against discriminatory acts or decisions concerning their religious practice). After the violent disruption of a small, authorized and peaceful manifestation trying to celebrate the International Day Against Homophobia (IDAHO) on 17 May 2013 by a massive counter-demonstration of about 30 000 people including Orthodox clerics, there were no public manifestations in defence of sexual minorities or the freedom of assembly. The year 2017 was marked by increased activity from illiberal actors. On 14 July, ultranationalists organized a "Georgian March", which presented itself as being "against illegal immigrants" and "uncontrolled migration", expressing growing homophobic and racist sentiments. In October 2017, the captain of the national football team became the subject of stigmatization and was called on to resign because he wore a rainbow-coloured captain's armband while playing for a Dutch team (Freedom House, 2018). This demonstrates the fragility of civil society, in the Western sense, in the Georgian environment. Despite initial progress achieved in the civic integration of ethnic and religious minority groups on the level of civil society by respective, there was insufficient enforcement of essential constitutional rights for religious and sexual minorities and the public mood towards certain minorities became more hostile. This was instigated by "nativist" or "uncivil society" organizations (Nodia, 2017: 25).

Interaction of Civil Society with the State and Evidence-based Policy Development

[22] Four other major religious communities (Muslims, Armenian Apostolic Church, Roman Catholics and Jews) for the first time received a total of 1 Mil. GEL per year. Other religious groups, in particular "nontraditional" actively proselytizing denominations (e.g., Jehovah's Witnesses, etc.) are still excluded from state funding. They face strong resentment from broad parts of the public and from the Orthodox clergy. In February 2014 the GD government established a "State Agency for Religious Issues" to regulate the relationship between the state and religious communities, which is staffed with people leaning towards the GOC, thus recognizing the dominant position and influence of the GOC (Gvidiani, 2017).

The legacy of an autocratic political culture strongly affects state institutions in performing their roles and political parties in developing inclusive political programmes beyond populist promises. Decisions are taken by a small circle of people in the political leadership who are often reluctant to consult with the population and civil society if their personal interests are concerned. Here Georgian civil society, with its limited resources, provides some counterbalance. Slowly institutionalized channels through which policies can be publicly negotiated are being developed, still mixed with the tradition of imitating democratic institutions and procedures in a formal way. This does create real interest in the content of policy debate unless politically relevant for certain actors and often leads to widespread populism instead. At an early stage after coming to power, the Georgian Dream government consulted broadly, for example, on the revision of the deregulated labour code. Again the implementation of newly adopted rules by state agencies is problematic.

The personalization of politics, e.g. between the oligarch and billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili (Georgian Dream) and former President Saakashvili (UNM) persisted even after the 2016 parliamentary elections. The programmes of the competing parties on the other hand resembled a list of promises more than a coherent strategy or programme based on political principles (Nodia, 2017; for more on patrimonialism see Roth, 1968 and Roniger and Günes-Ayata, 1994). Slowly institutionalized channels through which policies can be publicly negotiated mainly with civil society actors are being developed. Some attempts were made toward inclusive strategy elaboration in the case of less influential ministries like those of sports and youth affairs, or of culture and monument protection. However, it was in the field of culture that the scandal emerged around the destruction of the 5000 year-old gold mine (mankind's oldest) in Sakdrisi, which fell victim to a mining company's commercial interests, violating national laws and international conventions. So far, the Georgian Dream government has to demonstrate in its second term that it is committed to establish effective participatory mechanisms to solve an increasing number of conflicts of interest.

European Union and Civil Society Interaction

In June 2014, the EU and Georgia signed an association agreement (AA) including a deep and comprehensive free trade area (DCFTA), which entered into force on 1 July 2016. A visa liberalization regime followed on 28 March 2017, which foresaw lifting visa requirements for the citizens of Georgia by transferring Georgia to the list of countries whose citizens can travel to the Schengen area without a visa. Thus the political elites could harvest the results of a decade of reform efforts towards EU approximation. However, the approval procedure continued for 15 months as some member states required the introduction of an additional suspension mechanism that could be used in case of massive misuse of visa liberalization, hinting at the serious socio-economic problems and social divide in the country.

Implementing the AA Georgia is a challenging task and might fundamentally change the country's setup (Emerson and Kovziridze, 2016). The Association Agenda guides the reforms and the development plan of the Georgian government according to Georgia's commitment to a long-term approximation to EU principles and standards. Its implementation is reviewed annually by the EU. Being the major donor the EU is supporting Georgia's approximation process under its European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) 2014–2020 with €610–746 million

for reforms of public administration, agriculture, and rural development as well as in the justice sector, while providing complementary support for capacity development and civil society.[23]

Very important is the acknowledgement of civil society as a consultative and advocacy partner for the EU in its neighbourhood policy as well as in the negotiations for the AA. A "Georgian National Platform" of the multilateral "Civil Society Forum" is the formalized body leading the interaction with the EU. Due to the special EU funding and its prestigious position as a dialogue partner for the EU it represents one of the few functioning horizontal platforms in Georgia. This is also laid down in the "Georgia. EU Country Road Map for Engagement with Civil Society" (European Union, 2014). In addition the EU is assigning civil society a monitoring role for the implementation of the Association Agenda in a bilateral "Civil Society Forum", which assigns civil society extra leverage in Georgia's political process.[24] Other foreign actors like Russia are trying to interfere in domestic politics through funding for certain NGOs according to their interests (Emerson and Kovziridze, 2016: 189–192).

Effective use of Support for Civil Society Actors?

Still the question remains of how to implement European values of democracy, good governance, rule of law, the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms in everyday practice. Over two decades, three different governments introduced a number of reforms, modernized financial and public institutions, initiated the harmonization of Georgian legislation with EU regulations, and made considerable progress in the fight against corruption. However, there exists an "operational gap" or "dark side of Europeanisation" (Börzel and Pamuk, 2011: 6–8) in implementing these reforms not only formal, but also its inherent principles. For example, for years the establishment of an independently functioning judiciary remained a major obstacle for the formation of a stable and predictable legal environment in Georgia. Let us take the example of the "Open Government Partnership" between state and CSOs to increase transparency and free access to public information. The 2014–2016 End of Term Report clearly states:

> Georgia has shown significant progress in increasing access to information through using open data and improving public participation mechanisms in decision making. The three most important commitments – developing a separate Freedom of Information Act, a petitions web-portal for citizens, and an interactive crime statistics and map system – were not implemented by the government. These commitments were highly demanded by local civil society and directly addressed open government values of transparency, public accountability, and civic participation. (Gogidze, 2016: 1)

This again mainly applies to watchdog NGOs and think tanks based in the capital. However, as one evaluation of EU support to strengthening minorities found, there are innovative approaches developed in Georgia's regions that perfectly adapt to local conditions and needs, but are not considered in strategy or policy formulation because

[23] The US government, as another important donor, is focusing on building democracy, promoting regional stability, and fostering economic growth and health services. USAID aims to promote attitudes and values that encourage citizens to be responsible and accountable for their country.

[24] Open Society Georgia Foundation (2017). Unfortunately Georgia is not covered by Firmin (2017).

the local civil society actors are not aware of their own innovativeness (Gulakova and Khurtsidze, 2015). Thus the intensified cooperation with international donors creates a lot of strategies that are accessible for public scrutiny but are often not relevant for the local beneficiaries. Unclear indicators in action plans are not only difficult to measure but show the missing evidence base and lack of strategic vision in policy formulation through a bottom-up process. They are mainly driven by short-term political or superficial public relations objectives. Even when strategic priorities are set, these may haphazardly change or may not be followed in a consistent manner, due to a tradition of decision making by a small circle in the political leadership reluctant to involve independent experts or to seriously consult with the population and civil society. Political changes can result in serious policy U-turns just to distance the new leaders from their predecessors. Without local ownership, organized by grassroots civil society a good deal of voluntarism and unpredictability will continue.[25]

Conclusion

Overall, the divide between the political establishment and the masses inherited from the Soviet Union has not yet really been overcome since Georgia's independence. A democratic state cannot properly function without interaction with, and involvement of, civil society in a systematic way to overcome the endemic lack of trust in public institutions and societal actors for a pragmatic law-making process. Participatory approaches could promote dialogue at the political level in order to ensure a proper implementation of legislation and coordination among relevant authorities. Civil society organizations themselves still have not extended their limited outreach towards the population in Georgia.

Besides ephemeral mass actions during the Rose Revolution, opposition protests in November 2007 and during the election campaign in 2012, there is only a limited public sphere, and no strong network of broad, membership-based voluntary associations that may defend civil rights in an institutionalized public sphere as a medium of democratic self-reflexivity and public debate. Georgian civil society can only grow if it is strongly grounded in social reality, including its regions. There is a need to look more closely for more original ways of development of a civil society rather than blindly following Western European definitions and pathways.

As Somers (2005: 465–466) emphasized, the underlying concept of civil society is the individual citizen, neglecting the social, economic and cultural underpinnings of their mobilization for collective action, which are often based on ethno-cultural group identities and not on abstract, universal principles for individuals. This also applies to the Georgian case with its openly liberal assumptions about civil society among the intellectuals, neglecting the fact that a major part of the Georgian population is living around the poverty line and is easier to mobilize for "nativist" or religious attachments. So we can follow the irresolvable conflict between citizenship and identity, demos and ethnos in its Georgian form (Lepsius, 1990; James, 1996; Jahn, 2015; for a comparison with Armenia see Fischer and Grigorian, 1993). This might contribute to what Tatur (1991) termed the specific "dialectics of civil society" in Eastern Europe during the transformation.

What does this imply for the three developmental stages of civil society during a transition towards democracy proposed by Merkel and Lauth (1998)? Since the liberalization of the autocratic regime during perestroika was accompanied not by a "strategic civil society" but by its reinstitution through Western donor

[25] For a global assessment of the EU delegations' engagement with civic societies see Bosac *et al*. (2012); CONCORD (2015).

funding, it could not prepare the ground for a clear understanding of the function and role of democracy. The stage of institutionalization of democracy accompanied by a "constructive civil society" did not therefore really take off, but became a policy tool in the hands of political elites. Instead of the "reflexive civil society" deemed necessary for the consolidation of democracy, we are facing more and more an antiliberal, "nativist" and often un-civil society. This is a consequence of the overall optimism regarding the spread of liberal democracy in the 1990s on the one hand and the underlying paradigm of universal citizenship that informed our conceptual approach to civil society research. This contribution hopefully convincingly demonstrated that we have to look for new ways to conceptualize civil society in countries like Georgia.

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