



Georgia: Leaving the Soviet Legacy Behind

Mikheil Peradze¹

It's now official. The European Union not only positively assessed the reforms (i.e., implementation of the Visa Liberalization Action Plan) applied by the Georgian parliament, but also positively concluded the visa-waiver program within the parameters of the European Council and the European Parliament.

After the final text of the visa-waiver regulation was published, Georgian citizens gained the right to travel visa-free to the Schengen area on March 28. The political elite of both the EU and Georgia spent more than three years of sweat concluding the process. Despite the assertions and “minor” complaints of the EU's [Big Four](#), in particular Germany, with acknowledgement of the benefits for both sides, the political will triumphed.

Prime Minister of Georgia Giorgi Kvirikashvili [praised](#) the beginning of visa-free travel as a “truly historic day” and thanked the European Parliament. Foreign Minister Mikheil Janelidze, acknowledging the benefits for the Georgian people, [regarding the process of referred](#) to visa liberalization as a “logical consequence” of the hard work that had been put in. For his part, European Commissioner for Migration, Home Affairs and Citizenship, Dimitris Avramopoulos said the following:

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"I am very pleased that Georgian citizens with a biometric passport will soon be able to travel to the Schengen area for short stays without a visa. The hard work of the Georgian authorities over the past three years towards achieving this important goal for the benefit of Georgian citizens has given positive results. Now it is important to keep upholding all standards."

So far, so good, and this author would like to join the crowd of well-wishers. Nonetheless, there is something striking about this momentous event. In this framework, I would like to pay particular attention to the “real” benefits which are so dearly praised. Make no mistake, they are desperately needed. The discourse here is not only about economic benefits or gradual entrance into the European market with free movement of goods and touristic travel opportunities, though not yet close enough to Europe to visit the Cliffs of Moher.

It is also about much more: the normative power of the European Union, and for the sake of “a better life” in Georgia, to express it in a provocative way, about the cultural-psychological “adjustment” or “engineering” of Georgian society.

To make an analogy, hopes rest with a Georgian car dealer who now, no longer in need of a Schengen visa, visits Germany for certain reasons, drives around Germany, is socialized into the German way of driving and, after returning to Georgia, enthusiastically refrains from parking on the sidewalk. It sounds good, right? Who would disagree? But the reality on the ground is more complex.

The process of transitioning from the communist legacy to democracy is not an easy mountain to climb. There are considerable political challenges in this regard. It’s not only difficult, but extremely costly. Furthermore, there are evidently many with an interest in maintaining the status quo and with the resources necessary to protect their positions, domestically as well as internationally. The consequence, as a rule, is violence, hatred, and intolerance of the protagonists of democratization.

Knowingly, the status quo does not only hold an emotional advantage, but also some social and psychological bases for justifying the system. Here, it’s worth considering human nature. Social psychology has already dismantled the human capacity for adaptation. We are superficially able to adjust ourselves to traumatic surroundings: we can get used to being surrounded by beggars and even internalize constant noise pollution without complaint. We can see troubling images of children playing football in the bombed city of Aleppo without being bothered. “They just get used to it.”

How possibly could one explain life in the Soviet Union? Alexander Zinoviev’s “Homo Sovieticus” is a description of it; just like corruption—which on the micro level was a consequence

of limited access to goods—society just gets used to it. Some reflections on Georgia’s recent history in the post-Soviet era provide additional cases of misery, when at times of almost no electricity and hot water, a desperately thin social safety net, and the lack of a functioning healthcare system, the pervasive distance between the population and the political elite grew even wider.

Subsequently, people relying on their families and friends developed extraordinary skills with which to survive. The time was one of true catastrophe, when paramilitary gangs like the “Mkhedrioni” and “State Guard”, who were partially in the state’s service, looted the population. The reality of post-Soviet Georgia could be easily described as Hobbes’ natural state of anarchy: fear was the lone ruler. Those able to adapt, stayed. Others preferred the “exit option.” The country’s drastic demographic decline is a product of that sad story.

From a cognitive perspective, there are some plausible pictures illustrating the phenomenon. The status quo indicates a genuine state of affairs which can be intrinsically subjective and construed, far from an objective sense of reality. Furthermore, it is rather ubiquitous by contrast. People have longer experiences with existing states of affairs than they do with alternatives.

Thus, they are more familiar with existing dominant political parties and leaders and with established written rules and unwritten norms and customs. They even get acquainted to the fact that old-fashioned insults and Kung Fu fighting can be of great use in parliament when discussing important legislative parameters for the future of the country. As simple as it sounds, by frequency of exposure people become socialized and come to internalize their surroundings.

In a similar vein, the adoption of anti-discrimination laws in Georgia in May 2014—which came in accordance with the Association Agreement with the European Union—is another case to consider. Implementation of the above was met with fierce protests from radical conservative groups who complained it would essentially undermine genuine Georgian Christian culture. The Georgian Patriarchate objected and non-parliamentary conservatives protested, but as already mentioned above, for the sake of a better life in Georgia, implementation went along.

The devastating eruption of violence in May 2013 showed that, unfortunately, the culture of ambiguity is a scarce good in Georgia. A mob of intolerant “[supermen](#)” overran the overwhelmed police forces like a hurricane crashing onto a small fishing boat. There was something disturbing about those people attacking the yellow marshrutka. One would definitely observe “psychological tension” in the air. On a micro level, one would argue that this violence in its extreme forms is a result of cognitive dissonance introduced by fear of an “unknown future”, or perhaps by the emancipation movements of certain minorities.

Another interesting feature from the social psychological perspective is loss aversion. The term refers to a psychological mechanism which appears to manifest itself as general reluctance to reform or change. Individuals appear to be loss averse because they give more weight to expected losses than to anticipated gains, thus feeling more distress from action than from inaction and maintenance of the status quo. That is why the “past always seems happier than the present.” That sounds quite plausible when considering the nostalgia many Georgians feel about the “Moskovskaja Kolbasa”, which was truly a peak in the history of the Soviet food industry. With no disrespect, it was rightly a culinary jewel of countless Soviet Georgian feasts, but the “other world” has much more to offer than that. There are now cheap flights to the European Union and more are likely to come in the nearest future.

And what about the recent and tangible normative benefits for Georgian society? What about the EU’s normative power to promote progress? Just to name a few: universal human rights, property rights, freedom of thought and expression, the right to live in freedom and safety, the right to freedom from torture and slavery, the right to fair treatment by impartial courts, and the rights to privacy and freedom of movement.

All these are part of the Association Agreement and the Visa Liberalization Action Plan and the concrete improvements for every individual living in Georgia. Knowingly, the Soviet notion of human rights was quite the opposite from the conceptions established in the West, where the legal theory of human rights primarily benefited the individual and was meant as a “protecting wall” against any authoritarian impulses by governments. In contrast, the Soviet state itself was considered the lone basis for legitimacy and the legal system part of the long arm of politics. This was obvious in the granting, for example, of the secret police with extensive extra-judiciary powers. Georgia’s very recent history has demonstrated how disdain for universal human rights can lead to atrocities.

It is particularly striking and truly sad to observe that the dissolution of the Soviet Union has not really brought much needed shifts in the political cultures of its former member states. So far, the Baltic states are leaders of transformation in this regard. And there is much hope that Georgia can break the vicious cycle of the old Soviet legacy. It is time to acknowledge that, ahead of those political and emotional constraints, much effort should be invested in the transformation of Georgian society into a better democracy for the sake of every individual living in the country.

For that, everyone should participate. That includes the government, political parties, civil society and citizens, with a profoundly critical media as a topping. History gives us a great opportunity to learn the lessons of the past. The habits of the old nomenklatura should be condemned and cast off by Georgia’s political elite forever. The survival of Georgia’s democracy cannot be ensured by the

“government of my family, by my family, for my family”, and that kind of thinking should perish from the earth.

The media should work to break the cycle too, by criticizing and impartially dismantling undemocratic ideas and not just opposing something for the sake of opposition and sensation. Taking on the role of a watchdog for democracy against the tendencies of authoritarianism, and actively participating in the formation of decent public opinion, not only creates sustainable conditions for transformation and permanent striving for a better future, but also actively hinders the newly-elected political leadership from introducing new management into particular media holding through the ruling of a court with questionable independence.

Last but not least, every citizen of Georgia should play a central role in building a sustainable future by asserting his or her individual rights and responsibilities, not only by informing oneself about the real objectives of each political party, but proactively engaging in society, so that family members and friends are no longer forced to leave home in order to support their families.

There are some sad, critical “tipping points” in Georgia’s recent history, such as April 9, 1989, the civil war in the streets of Tbilisi, the wars in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and the invasion by Russia. There are also joyful moments of hope, like Georgia’s declaration of independence, membership in the United Nations and the Council of Europe, the Rose Revolution, and the country’s first democratic transfer of political power. In this regard, signing the Association Agreement with the European Union and successful implementation of the Visa Liberalisation Action Plan are additional reasons for hope.

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