

Georgia's Narrow Path

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The "awakening" of Georgia to nationalist tension is a rather recent phenomenon if compared to the violent conflict between the other two peoples of Soviet Transcaucasia, the Armenians and the Azerbaijanis. Extremely calm during the first period of nationalist agitation, Georgia has been emitting signals of a political situation rapidly evolving towards a confrontation with the central Soviet authorities. This has now occurred, and seems to mark the beginning of what could be considered a "second phase" of the explosion of the Soviet periphery in the Gorbachev era.

Not that nationalism is a new phenomenon in this particular region of the Soviet periphery, and without going into the history of Georgian resistance to Russian penetration of the Caucasus in the nineteenth century, it may briefly be recalled how Georgia initiated its life under the Soviet system with what amounted to the first large-scale national insurrection in the Communist world, in 1924. The insurrection was bloodily repressed on the personal orders of Stalin, who was a Georgian himself, and whose methods earned him severe criticism by Lenin for their brutality.

The second stage in the development of nationalism in Soviet-ruled Georgia was with the student revolt in March of 1956. This, as well, was marked by hundreds of dead, and was successfully presented by the Soviet media and propaganda machine as a pro-Stalin demonstration even though it was really a veritable nationalist demonstration. Proof of this is the fact that the first shots were fired at the moment when the students headed for the post office in order to launch an appeal for the secession of Georgia and its acquisition of neutral status. Unlike Hungary in 1956, the recourse of the Soviet authorities to military repression was not aimed at a population with a national army at its

side, though just as in Hungary, it was undoubtedly the realisation of the post-Stalin thaw, and the weakening of central authority which stimulated national movement tendencies. This authority then used the Stalinist term "unjustifiable justification" for the brute force exercised against the unarmed students.

Being our own masters

The events of 1956 have become a lesson for Georgia to meditate upon. From this date, in fact, the motto is often to be heard that the Georgians would do well to keep in the background: "We are too small a nation (3.5 million inhabitants) to allow ourselves to waste our forces like this."

It was not until the 1970s that a dissident group clearly emerged. It established itself during the years 1976-77 as an imitation of phenomena that took place in the centre of the Soviet system, such as the creation of committees for the implementation of the Helsinki agreements. This occurred at the expense of the more typically Georgian phenomena that took place during the years 1972-73, namely, illegal nationalist activity, on one hand, leading to symbolical acts such as the blowing up of Soviet monuments, or the Tbilisi opera attack, and on the other, a university-based intelligentsia performing with its limited means inside the university itself, a delicate and clandestine task of national preservation. In Georgia, then, the issue of human rights is always approaching those of the rehabilitation of the national patrimony (groups formed to conduct the restoration of churches) and the defence of the language (in 1973, Revaz Djapareidze gave, in this sense, a very official speech at the Georgian Writers' Conference that was a veritable prosecution of cultural Russification, a speech that would not be published in its entirety until ... 1988).

In this way, before Gorbachev and before *perestroika*, the Georgians had already, in 1978, taken to the streets to defend their constitutional rights, namely the maintaining of the official status of their language in the republic. These demonstrations were rewarded by success, and the upholding of the language clause.

Since then, the Georgians' demands have never ceased to focus on defence of the language and of national culture, and without any fuss, the supporters of nationalist claims have passed from a limited group of dissidents to a genuinely national movement. In fact it was probably over the last year, while the specialists on the "nationality" question were expressing their surprise at the

calm in Georgia compared to the ready activism of the Baltic movements and the agitation in the other two Caucasian republics, that a real "nationalisation" process took place during the uninterrupted celebrations for the birth centenary of Ilia Chavchavadze. The latter figure was Georgia's liberal, nationalist version of what Jaurès, with the addition of Victor Hugo, was to France, (or of what Garibaldi was to Italy), and his anniversary was a pretext for reiterating national themes in their entirety and marked the coming into the light of a real national strategy. With a strategy analogous to the one Chavchavadze adopted at the beginning of the century for the national emancipation of Georgia from czarist domination, Georgia's intellectual elite has formulated a kind of catalogue of possible and desirable national aims. Moreover, there was the decision to go the legal path, but without concessions, the only way that would enable the Georgians to obtain - and deserve - their independence. Their slogan "being our own masters" has been repeated on infinite occasions by the entire Georgian press over the last few months.

This national psycho-drama had domestic aims, however, and was not destined for the exterior world. Its objective was rather to re-familiarise the population with its own past - with certain historical dates and taboos, and with personalities who have "disappeared" (many journals have opened special sections such as "Left luggage" or "Personalities who have been allowed back to us"). This all culminated in July 1987, then, with the Georgian Patriarchate's official canonisation of Ilia Chavchavadze, now "Ilia the Just", the first personality of the Communist world ever to be canonised!

Preservation and emancipation

All this conceptual background found its first application in 1987, when the concrete problem of the Transcaucasian railway was posed. The concepts behind the project go back to the czarist era, and there have been four Transcaucasian railway projects, it being an old Russian idea along the same lines as the "way down to the warm seas". In recent times, it has all of a sudden become a hot issue once again, as well as the object of a Politburo decision which has raised a general uproar throughout the Georgian nation. Archeologists are protesting against the destruction of sites as yet unexplored and of unmeasurable value in this thousand-year-old region; economists are casting doubts on the rationality of such a large investment without sufficient attention having been paid to possible alternatives; historians are pointing out that the railway will follow a route passing along some of the most ancient



Tbilisi.

Georgian churches; ethnologists are against disturbing certain regions which are still very isolated and where ancient customs and traditions have been preserved; demographic experts are protesting against the influx of foreign manpower into areas of ancient Georgian culture already threatened by a natural exodus which has increased the demographic imbalance to the disadvantage of the native Georgian population; architects are worried about the feasibility of construction work, as many records will have to be surpassed (tunnels longer than that under Mont Blanc, and at great altitudes; extremely long viaducts etc.). Last but not least, ecologists are sounding the alarm over the increased risk of avalanches due to disturbances of the Caucasian equilibrium (this also because Georgia witnessed one of its worst ever avalanches just one year ago), as well as the risk of polluting drinking-water sources and thus water supply to the capital.

In the above case, then, given "these new circumstances of reform" (a favourite expression to be found recurrently in every field), the Georgians this time decided to take to the very end the battles lost during the course of previous years against the construction of two gigantic dams that are no less dangerous and equally useless to the local economy: the Enguresi and the Jinvalesi. For the moment the results of this struggle would seem to be partly successful, and in any case, the Georgian authorities have suspended further construction work on what has already been done, and have accepted the creation of a commission to reconsider the issue. The outcome is far from being certain, however, firstly because the central planning decision has been neither annulled nor even suspended, and furthermore because Moscow television recently broadcast a documentary showing that construction work on the Transcaucasian railway was proceeding at a satisfactory pace (though they were referring to the northern side of the border, an area where the Georgians have no say in the matter).

Parallel to this open and multi-discipline struggle, the students have also launched a far more specific campaign which is much more dangerous on account of its involving taboo military secrets: they are demanding the re-siting of a Red Army firing range which would destroy the foundations of one of the masterpieces of Georgian religious architecture, the Monastery of David Garedja. Here again, the demonstrators have obtained a semi-victory, as the firing range has effectively been relocated, though only by a few dozen meters, a fact which has left the problem intact.

This account of the various themes of national emancipation also emphasises those which are absent, or which have been kept quiet. Territorial questions are handled with exceptional caution, even though Georgia has had more than its fair share of territory redistributed by Moscow. The first to gain was Turkey, as a reward for Russian-Turkish peace agreements and for the defeat of independent Georgia on October 13, 1921 (the whole of southern Georgia, stretching from Kars to Batumi - 12,000 sq. km.). In 1922, Azerbaijan got the entire historical region of Saingulo (3,500 sq. km.), and the republic of Armenia got the region of Borshalo. Then, under Stalin, Russia obtained territory on the Black Sea coast, including the famous resort Sochi.

The whole thus came to some 20,000 sq. km. of Georgian land - twenty per cent of its total territories, or the equivalent of Luxembourg - and this was not lost by the Georgian nation as a result of any conflict, but simply by diktat of

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the central power in Moscow. It is also necessary to add all the imperceptible border modifications which have taken place over the years, always reducing and never increasing Georgian territory. (Mount Elbruz, the highest mountain in the Caucasus, for example, which was still on Georgian territory according to 1949 maps, is now on the other side of the border!).

In reality, these border fluctuations are a sign of the Soviet era, and would have been impossible during the czarist empire as the latter had abolished the status of nation, transforming the Georgian monarchy into the Tbilisi Governorate. However, they do indeed reflect the general demographic redistribution which took place during the nineteenth century, and contradict the widespread idea, especially common since the Karabakh issue, that the Soviet authorities cannot afford even the slightest border change for fear of setting off an irreversible movement and sending their house of cards crashing, as though the seventy years of Soviet rule had formed a fixed and fragile structure. In other words, as if it had not been the central authorities who had effected transfers of national populations to an extent rarely experienced in history (under Stalin, the deportation of national minorities reached a minimum of two million people), and as if it had not been the government itself who had indulged in territorial redistribution, either to reshape the borders between the republics, or even to create or redistribute new autonomous republics in the territories of the existing federated republics. This power, without any provision for sharing, conferred on the central authorities by the new constitutional reform, has been used and abused in the past, and this is why it is perceived as a sword of Damocles by the individual republics, unable as they are to modify or oppose it.

The Transcaucasian context

It is in this context of slow and latent preparation that Georgia was confronted by the agitation that exploded across its borders in Armenia at the beginning of 1988, and it is all the more surprising considering that Armenia up until then had followed a pattern of nationalist claims similar to Georgian ones. It must

be noted that Armenia had been one of the republics which supported the movement of April 14, 1978, for the defence of the constitutional statute for the various republican languages. In Armenia, the dissident groups had a nationalist tint not unlike that which existed and developed in Georgia. In 1986, for example, parallel demonstrations took place in both Tbilisi and Yerevan in protest against the sending of conscripts to Afghanistan. In the cultural field, Armenia had no reason to envy Georgia, supported as it was by a powerful and flourishing diaspora and a Patriarchate of Eshmiazdin endowed with real autonomy. By the end of 1987, the Armenian movement had developed along lines parallel to those followed by Georgia: while the Georgians were struggling against the Transcaucasian railway project, the Armenians were opposing nuclear power station plans, and above all the construction of a chemicals factory which would aggravate the already worrying level of pollution in the Armenian capital.

These parallel paths suddenly diverged from one day to the next, however, curiously enough following declarations of the Soviet high official Aganbegyan. Armenian claims were thus transformed from ecology to territorial irredentism. Moreover, these claims, occurring as they did in a traditionally violent period in the Moslem calendar, sparked off reactions from the Azerbaijan side, as is well known. Between the Moslems of Azerbaijan and the Armenian Christians, however, Georgian sympathy has gone to their neighbours with the same religion, and all the more easily because the Georgian population in the territories handed over to the republic of Azerbaijan has never been treated particularly well. Nevertheless, this sympathy has not been transformed into political support, to the great disappointment of the Armenian nationalist public opinion.

With regard to the violence that has erupted around their borders threatening to drag them into the vortex, the Georgians' analysis has been that these claims are unrealistic, that they have no chance of success, that at the most they will provoke uncontrollable reactions from the Moslem peoples, and that they are dividing the Caucasus, thus losing any prospects similar to those achieved in the north of the Soviet Union by the Baltic nations.

With their historical experience going back to the seventeenth century, the Georgians are constantly surprised to see the credulity with which the Armenians entrust their interests to Russia. All the precedents, including the Armenian genocide by Turkey, should teach that despite the secret

encouragement given by the Russians, concrete aid is always lacking at the critical moment. Above all, and perhaps in part unconsciously, two things separate Georgia and Armenia: a strategy of prudence, and the fact that Armenia has no experience of armed Russian intervention. Firstly, Georgia can count upon no diaspora, and is still marked by the repression of its insurrections during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; it is thus not prepared to engage in desperate actions, and has succeeded in consolidating a national consciousness throughout the population on which it intends to capitalise in the long term. Secondly, the Armenian nation has never experienced armed intervention by Russia, even though it has undoubtedly been submitted to the same terror and general repression as the other peoples in the Soviet Union. Its experience is thus essentially that of extermination by the Moslem peoples.

For these reasons, then, the two nations make differing strategic choices. Even though it is a very gradual one, Georgia is undoubtedly aiming at national independence, but it is certainly inconceivable for this to take place within the federal structure of the Soviet Union. On the other hand, the Armenians are logically more interested in recovering those territories which are under Turkish control, with a view to their possible reunification with Soviet Armenia. With the exception of a minority, aims for true independence appear unrealistic and even dangerous in a regional context conditioned by neighbouring Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Iran with the Khomeinist Islamic revival. Considering these conditions, even the very recent anti-Russian wave of feeling is therefore only an epiphenomenon, and not a deep-rooted tendency in Armenian national consciousness.

Taking these particular historical factors into account, then, and independently of bonds of neighbourly friendship which have lasted some twenty-five centuries without any serious conflict, the Georgians feel infinitely more concerned for the strategies being carried out further north by the Baltic nations. Rather like Poland a few years ago, the latter countries have come to represent a model.

Georgia has thus witnessed the formation of a national-democratic party which regroups previous factions of nationalist tendencies: the Ilia Chavchavadze and Rustaveli associations and the committee behind the project for the Georgian language (claiming among other things the printing of an annual telephone directory in Georgian, but also more important works such as Georgian-

Armenian and Georgian-Azerbaijani dictionaries and manuals, and Georgian computer programmes for future use in informatics).

The progressive increase in the numbers of demonstrators from last September to the hundreds of thousands of the most recent rallies must be seen in this context. At the end, when violent repression began, the number of hunger-strikers had risen from the eighty initial ones to some eight hundred, claiming not only constitutional re-integration of former articles providing for the right to secession of the republics, but also changes to many other modifications which have been introduced into the constitution. These latter modifications, in fact, are all designed to reinforce the power of the central authorities, albeit surreptitiously, and to establish Moscow's right to control the autonomous choices of the individual republics "on all issues which are of greater or lesser interest to the Soviet Union". The fear is that in the long run Moscow will comply over the visible part of the iceberg, that is, the right to secession, which everyone knows is purely formal, while in reality increasing concrete and substantial prerogatives in centralised economic planning, as is apparent from the amended articles.

Constitutional subterfuge

The impression of all the leaders of the nationalist movement who communicate from the columns of the Georgian-language press is that the present moment simply represents a further stage of national resistance. It is a long-term process which is under way. In this process appearances do not always represent reality and relative relaxation of power can conceal greater firmness over the more important economic options which hold the Soviet edifice together.

The majority has felt its principles satisfied in unfolding the national colours instead of the Soviet flag and in being able to make national (i.e. nationalist) speeches: in other words, in undoubtedly being able to go much further than previously in verbal and visual expression. But this has not deceived the more intelligent, who are well aware that nothing, to use Marxist terms, has changed in the structure, and that former power relations have stayed the same.

The only one exception to this - and it is not negligible - is that the local republican authorities have been affected by the general tendencies progressively taking place in Eastern Europe, and thus up to the beginning of

April 1989, they could no longer afford to dissociate from the claims made by their local populations. These various national leaderships have undoubtedly been losing real power since the good old days of patronage, favouritism and practically autonomous Party bureaucracies, especially if we consider Central Asia, or Georgia itself, where there has certainly been a loss in power between Shevardnadze's and Patiashvili's leadership positions. On the other hand, local authorities, in order to gain a certain legitimacy, have been obliged to go along with the demands made by the majority of their native populations. In the end, however, this proved to be an impossible exercise, and the central authorities showed where the real power is in deciding who will rule and how in the individual republics.

Ongoing uncertainty

In 1956, the then First Secretary of the Georgian Communist Party, Mjavanadze, suffered from the events of the time no more than did First Secretary Orakhelashvili in 1924; on the other hand, in the case of Armenia as also in the case of Azerbaijan, the leadership has retired into the background, having had to choose between absolute alignment with the population or efficient re-establishment of law and order.

This example seems to have had its effect in Georgia, where the leadership has been making superhuman efforts for some months to renew its dialogue with the population and regain some degree of legitimacy. This is even clearer in the Baltic nations, where in some cases the local Party leadership has even been ahead of the people with respect to nationalist claims - claims which it may be channelling, but is certainly not restraining.

As far as the future of the nationalist question in the Caucasus is concerned, it is difficult to hazard predictions because the situation is in a state of permanent, daily evolution. Nevertheless, a certain number of hypotheses may be made:

First of all, the Azerbaijan-Armenia issue will remain an irreducible and unresolvable latent conflict, with possible bouts of violence in those moments when the economic and unitary claims of the Balts and the Georgians get more precise and more destabilising.

Secondly, the central authorities in Moscow will make immediate and apparent concessions, but will not allow any sharing of power unless as the last resort.

This will become clear only during changes in top Party and state leadership, which for the moment show no sign of any power redistribution among the various nationalities.

Thirdly, an increase in nationalist extremism can be expected, as the authorities can only attempt the traditional strategy of division if they wish to conquer. They will give as much encouragement as possible to all the opposing points of view between the nationalities in order to create a situation in which they counterbalance and cancel out each other, in the end, giving the central power a not negligible role of pacifier and arbiter, accepted and recognised by all.

In conclusion, then, it can be said that in this difficult period of nationalist movement, (which has always been the most delicate problem to handle in the Soviet Union), Moscow is paradoxically not far from preferring nationalist extremism, with all its violence, to less radical and more unitary manifestations, which might lead to possible coalitions of interests among peripheral groupings against the centre. To divide and discredit the nations by letting the evil genius of fanatic nationalism develop is perhaps the only card left for Gorbachev and his successors to play.