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21st Century in the Works of Ilia Chavchavadze

Abstract: As Iakob Gogebashvili put it, “probably no other world genius had such an impact on his nation as Ilia Chavchavadze had on Georgia”. Ilia mapped out the future path of the country¹.

1. He focused on the area of education planting the seeds of education for Georgians.

2. Thinking that monetary communications are important for national identity the very first Georgian bank was formed upon his initiative.

3. Ilia greatly contributed to the virtual communication space, well tested by than in Europe, development of the press, which facilitated the Enlightenment efforts. This scheme of new identities, which the public figure had formulated in slogan *Motherland, Language, Faith*, is certainly European.

The *Tergdaleuli* (literally: those who crossed the Tergi river, border with Russia) ideology of Ilia and his fellow thinkers was based on the European state of mind, which is based on personal freedom, development, and wealth through hard work. Ilia attempted to establish civil ethics, which by its nature socially and politically was developed by the Western, i.e. Euro-American thought. Ilia deemed that freedom of speech and thought was a significant achievement.

Today, the foundation of the Georgian state should be sought in the 19th century Georgian socio-political thinking when Georgians adequately realized, evaluated, and described Georgia under the Russian colonial rule. When introducing the Western political values

1. *Ilia's Cathedral* (Memorial Collection), Tbilisi, Publishing House “Education”, 1988, p. 10.

into Georgian socio-political thought, we should recall *Traveler's Letters*, which is considered by the Georgian literary historians a mission statement of Chavchavadze's activity. Moreover, in political terms, for the Georgian society it became a manifestation for the creation of a national state.

Key words: 19th Century, Russian Colonial Rule, War with Books, Socio-political Thought, Ilia Chavchavadze.

The second part of the 19th century saw quiet significant changes in Georgian society. After graduating gymnasiums in Tbilisi and Kutaisi Georgian youth started going to Russia (mostly to Petersburg and Moscow) in search for higher education. Some of them brought home new ideas widely spread in civilized parts of the world of that time. Inspired by ideas of the French enlightenment, including an idea of a rational system for intellectual development and an idea of political freedom, Georgian "enlighteners" were faced by a difficult challenge: to spread these ideas in a Georgian society oppressed by the Russian Empire. Introduction of new ideas was met by strong opposition.

From 1860s Ilia Chavchavadze became a widely recognized leader of a national movement solidly connected with people and finding peace of mind when caring for them. Ilia gave up his lands in favor of peasants and moved to the capital to look after his greater land, his motherland.

"It is possible that no single genius in the world means so much for his own nation, as Ilia Chavchavadze means for Georgia," Iakob Gogebashvili said².

"Let's end the sorrow over the past, / Let's follow a different star, / Let's give a birth to our own future, / Let's give future to people"³.

This is how Ilia saw the future of his nation. Not a single issue of importance went unnoticed by Ilia, because he regarded an open wound of a nation as a wound of his own.

Ilia and his brothers-in-arms acknowledged that the education system under the Russian rule would not provide Georgian youth with the national ideology. This is when the necessity of establishment of a "Society

2. *Ibid.*

3. Ilia Chavchavadze, *Selected works* in 5 volumes, vol. 1., *Poems, Translated Poems*, Tbilisi, Publishing House "Soviet Georgia", 1985, p. 44. [Our translation here and thereafter].

for Spreading Literacy among Georgians” arose. The society under Ilia’s leadership worked hard to put the education system back on a track of its national beginnings.

In early 1860s, a new generation of Georgians who had just graduated from universities in Russia, entered the national scene to confront the colonialism of the Russian Empire.

- They confronted the suppression of Georgian language by introducing a book by Iakob Gogebashvili, “Deda Ena” (a Mother Tongue);
- They confronted the russification of the education system by establishing a “Society for Spreading Literacy among Georgians”;
- Central and local Russian language newspapers were ousted by Georgian print editions, *Droeba* and *Iveria*;
- Monopoly of Russian books was limited by Georgian books;
- Professional theater troupes in Tbilisi and Kutaisi challenged the standings of Russian theaters in Georgia;
- Land Banks of the Nobility in administrative units of Tbilisi and Kutaisi rose as competitors of Russian financial institutions in Georgia.

Ilia Chavchavadze, as a longtime journalist, was closely following major political and cultural developments in the world. He was trying to establish the same social and political ethics in Georgia that prevailed in European and American societies. Through his publicistic and fictional texts, Ilia was quickly reacting to political processes globally. His print articles included the accounts on the rebellion on the Island of Crete, Istanbul conference and the meeting of the Emperors of Germany and Austria, as well as his accounts about Gladstone and Bismark. He dedicated a verse to Garibaldi and his movement for Italian freedom (“I hear a long desired sound of shackles breaking”) and another verse to the defeat of Paris Commune (“A huge banner raised to rescue the enslaved was trampled by oppressors”).

Democracy, as explained by political scientists and sociologists, does not solely mean the rule of people, or a political regime of the majority. Its lexical meaning (demos – people, cratos – governing) refers to “governing”, or a political structure; but democracy is also an ideology, a system of values and a way of civil thinking. The idea of democracy was first introduced in School of Athens by its first ideologists, Plato and Aristotle through their theories.⁴ However, those rudiments of democracy lacked the meaning that

4. *American Independence Declaration* www.iaw.indiana.edu/uslawdocs/declaration.html (accessed July 19 2017).

we attach to democracy in modern days. American democracy has played a significant role in developing a modern understanding of democracy. Principles of American democracy were carved out in the 1776 Declaration of Independence and further developed in post-colonial and in particular, a post-civil war periods. In 1860-70s Europe and America saw ongoing struggles to establish democracies and democratic values. However two World Wars significantly impeded the process. Modern democratic values imply certain rights and freedoms, civil equality and law obedience. According to a classic theory on democracy, a state can be formed by law abiding citizens who are united by civil values.

Ilia considered the major value of democracy, the freedom of expression and thinking, as a significant achievement of modern societies. Ilia saw weakness of Russian political class in its efforts to limit print media, including periodicals and literary publications.

Writers have no ways, or means left to express their opinions and beliefs freely. ... in other countries where they have at least a little understanding of importance of printed words, print magazines and newspapers and literature in general, no matter if it is a correspondent of a very small newspaper, they will treasure and safeguard him and carry him in arms⁵,

– said Ilia and added that press could form a public opinion, therefore, it had a “sacred mission” that bestowed a special responsibility upon it. “The duty of press is not setting peasants on nobility, or the rich on the poor, but its duty is to act as a middleman, stand in between and make peace”⁶.

Ilia Chavchavadze would say, “it is a different warfare today, the warfare with books and knowledge. Will it not be pity to see the Georgian flag that has seen fires and swords and survived eaten by moths and worms?”⁷ These words are still meaningful today. Today, people have created a new form of warfare, which is information warfare. In our days countries and political rivals are mostly waging this type of warfare against each other. Information warfare promises to become a decisive form of warfare in future. In today’s reality mass media has become a principal weapon in information warfare. Ilia’s writings from as early as late 19th century show he was already seeing the challenges newspapers and magazines were going to face in future.

5. Ilia Chavchavadze, *Works*, vol. 15, Tbilisi, «Ilia Foundation», 2007, p. 80.

6. *Ibid.*

7. Ilia Chavchavadze, *Selected works* in 5 volumes, vol. 4., *Publicistic Letters*, Tbilisi, Publishing House “Soviet Georgia”, 1987, p. 175.

Fondements philosophiques de la littérature.

Magazines and newspapers have two purposes. On one hand they are intermediaries between life and science; they are a tool to spread what mankind has obtained by intellect, what mankind has investigated and recognized as a truth. On the other hand, they are a mirror of a complicated life of the society, a mirror that reflects society's intellectual and ethical moves and the flow of everyday thinking. ... There are times and there are societies where magazines and newspapers stand in the vanguard of life casting light to the paths to be traversed and life in return decorates the streets of the knowledgeable by the best of its flowers. But there are times and there are societies where all that magazines and newspapers do is abusing and swearing at each other. Sadly, the latter is also true, but it is what it is. The life of a human resembles a gigantic body that cannot be spared from a pimple or a wound in its lifetime⁸.

Ilia Chavchavadze is accurate in his description of a state and a role of media in various political developments. He's also accurate in showing impacts of these developments on various parts of the society, as well as on media itself.

Diversity of magazines and newspapers is determined by various circumstances. In countries where societies' self-motivation is weakened and their intellectual and ethical abilities are in a state of sleep, literacy in general and newspapers specifically can hardly be a conduit for public opinion and mood. Spreading knowledge, inspiring self-motivation and helping intellectual and ethical abilities emerge from sleep must be the utmost goal of newspapers⁹.

The significance of these words is still clear today. Multiple individuals involved in press, both owners and reporters, have either no understanding of the true mission, significance, or influence of press, or they willingly become involved in dangerous games against public and political processes, as these days it is media that is most widely used to promote propaganda. As Ilia noted, and it is because of these observations that he's outrun his time, "Obtaining and spreading scientific information among public, observing and retelling stories of other people is the program of our newspaper"¹⁰. It is noteworthy, that these words of a great thinker makes a point for Georgia's print and electronic (Internet televisions and internet-newspapers) outlets.

Ilia's works, including literary products are focused on people independent of their social status, ethnic origin, religious faith, or gender.

8. *Iveria*, n°1 Tbilisi, March 3, 1877, p. 2.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*

He distances himself from the “generation of fathers” who he accuses of having tendencies of dividing public in those groups. Ilia robs literature of its elitist status and makes it folk by writing in an everyday language used by ordinary people. Ilia seeks an opportunity for education for every young individual independent of their origin and economic power. Ilia’s publicism reflects his personal attitudes towards issues. His writings remains a must read for the development of a civil society.

One of the key signs of civic awareness is equality before the law and compliance to the law. Ilia’s understanding of freedom and equality is based on a principle of compliance to the law. Let’s see what he says in this regard:

Bossuet says in his History of the World, that freedom is a state of a human being and human mind, where everyone complies to the law and no individual stands above the law. ... This is the meaning of freedom that is true and widely recognized by today’s knowledgeable men and states. This is what true society of people should be based on. And if it is missing, those societies know only brutality, violence and abuse. And a human’s life in those societies becomes a life of a beast and a human, the son of God, is turned into a beast¹¹.

Civic awareness and compliance to the law are related to the notion of civic dignity. Civic dignity holds an important place in Ilia’s reports. In one of his articles,¹² Ilia tells a story of a wealthy merchant from Breslov who takes local government officials to court over an unfair fine of three roubles.

Dear readers, it looks funny to cause so much trouble for just three roubles, doesn’t it? And who’s causing the trouble? – A wealthy merchant. If he were one of us, he’d immediately take the money out of his purse and pay it. What are those three roubles for him? – Just dirt that stains his hands, a dust and nothing more. But if you look deeper into his case, you’ll start respecting him, not mocking. He’s not bothered that they are taking his three roubles. He’s bothered because he believes the law and justice are violated. He regards justice to be his castle. He believes justice is so valuable that he cannot allow just anyone to trample it. This is it, a true civic commitment. This is it, demonstration of a dignity of a member of a society of people¹³.

This story is reminiscent of a scene from *Widow of Otarashvili*, one of Ilia’s most popular literary works, where the widow reaches out to the

11. Ilia Chavchavadze, *Works*, vol. 9, Tbilisi, «Ilia Foundation», 2007, p. 441.

12. *Ibid.* p. 443.

13. *Ibid.*

governor to sue a low level official. The widow is willing to put on “iron shoes”, arm herself with an “iron cane” and find justice not for the sake of personal interests, but civic values. Ilia introduces a new term, a “manly man”, in his writings, to identify a “free citizen” / “a dignified man” by it.

Ilia’s ideal characters – the widow, Giorgi, the preacher and others – give citizens of the 19th century Georgia examples of civic awareness¹⁴, as well as examples of impeccable citizenship. They are countered by ideology of Luarsab and his entourage, or the ideology of the residents of the widow’s village, holdovers of the previous social system. They do not form a society. They are not members of a new social environment. Ilia questions their value as citizens.

Ilia talks extensively about a notion of a “manly man” in one of his articles¹⁵. He refers to both men and women by this term and places them on the same level. Ilia believes, that when it comes to the value of each and every citizen, the issue of a gender is losing its relevance. The fact that the widow of Otarashvili does work of both, a man and a woman, speaks volumes of her dignity. Ilia paints the image of a dignified citizen. He tells us that a woman is a full fledged member of the community and that she’s free to hold her own views and she’s independent and strong, both psychologically and physically.

The foundations of a modern Georgian state were laid in the 19th century. It was back then that the citizens of Georgia realized and evaluated the dangers that their country faced under the colonial rule of Russia. The book that firmly imprinted western political values in Georgia’s public and political discourse is *Letters of a Traveller* by Ilia Chavchavadze, a book described by historians as a document stating the aims and the principles of Ilia’s life and work. Moreover, the book became a manifesto that promoted the idea of state independence in a country that had its statehood lost. Whenever someone writes about Ilia, he quotes Lelt Ghunia saying: “[when] we were the owners of our destiny”. *Letters of a Traveller* has placed Ilia in the vanguard of a national liberation movement.

Ilia was almost certainly sacrificed to the idea of Georgian statehood. First it was Ilia who was killed and in 1921 independent Georgia was also executed. But Ilia’s ideas and his public and literary contributions continue

14. Dodona Kiziria, «The Widow of the Fourth – The Woman’s Moral Ideal for Georgian Women», in *Gas. Literary Georgia*, November 27, 1992.

15. *Ibid.*

to provide consolation to the Georgian people, giving the hope for the future.

Ilia was buried at the Mtatsminda Pantheon. In 1987, the Georgian Orthodox Apostolic Church canonized him in a clear acknowledgement of his services to his country. He was called Saint Ilia the Righteous. This was the first instance of canonization under the Soviets. The first liturgy dedicated to Saint Ilia the Righteous was conducted on August 2, 1987, on the day of the Holy Prophet Elias.

His death was hardly a death. It was more of a crucifixion and quick ascension. It was his transformation, his penetration in each and every Georgian's soul and his rise as an object of love for the entire nation. The tenant of heavenly Georgia, Ilia's inseparable from earthly Georgia, as his immortal soul watches over us from above.

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