მეგა და მცირე ქვეყნების შფოთი

ANXIETY IN "MEGACOUNTRIES" AND IN "SMALL COUNTRIES"

ნუცა გათიაშვილი

ანთროპოლოგიის პროფესორი, თბილისის თავისუფალი უნივერსიტეტი

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რეზიუმე

ესეიში – „მეგა და მცირე ქვეყნების შფოთი" – ავტორი რუსეთისა და საქართველოს უსაფრთხოების აღქმებზე მოგვითხრობს. მისთვის რუსეთის ქცევა ერთი მიზეზით არ აიხსნება. მნიშვნელოვანია რუსეთის, როგორც მეგაქვეყნის იდენტობა, რომელიც გარდაუვლად მიიღტვის ერი-სახელმწიფოს კონცეფციით სახეცვლილი იმპერიული ამბიციებისაკენ. საქართველოს „სიმცირის" განცდა კი სწორედ ამ მეგაქვეყნის სიახლოვითაა განპირობებული. „შფოთვა" რუსეთში საკუთარი, შეჩვეული თვითაღქმის შელახვიდან მომდინარეობს. საქართველოში „შფოთვას" მეზობელი მეგაქვეყნიდან ბოლო დროს მომდინარე მასობრივი მიგრაციაც ზრდის.

რუსეთის არსებით პრობლემად დანახულია „ერი სახელმწიფოს" და „იმპერიის" იდეათა წინააღმდეგობრიობა. პირველი „კარგ ცხოვრებასთან" ასოცირდება, მეორე კი „ცივილიზატორულ დიდებასთან", ოღონდ, მეორის გამო პირველის მსხვერპლშეწირვაც მისაღები ხდება. რუსეთზე საუბრისას, ავტორი ასევე ეხება ნაციონალიზმის მკვლევართა დაკვირვებებს, რომელთა თანახმად, რუსეთის იდენტობაში დიდი კვალი დატოვა მონღოლთა იმპერიის ქვეშ ცხოვრების გამოცდილებამ. რუსეთის გეოპოლიტიკური შფოთვის უკან იდენტობის თუ კულტურის გამო შფოთვაა. რუსეთის პოლიტიკურ კოსმოლოგიაში საზღვარიც განსხვავებულ მნიშვნელობას იძენს – იგი უცხო კულტურათა და იდეოლოგიათა მოახლოების საფრთხის მატარებელია.

კიდევ ერთი თემა, რომელსაც ავტორი ეხება, სირცხვილის განცდაა. ბევრ რუსს რცხვენია უკრაინაში ომის გამო. შეიძლება ამას მოჰყვეს რაიმე ცვლილება? თუ ეს სირცხვილის განცდა ისევ გარე სამყაროსადმი ეჭვიან რუსულ იდენტობას გაამყარებს? ბუნებრივია, ავტორს არ აქვს პასუხები მომავალზე, მაგრამ იგი ამ მომავლის პროგნოზირებისათვის საინტერესო მოცემულობებზე საუბრობს.

საქართველოს შემთხვევაში კი აქტუალური ისევ ამ იმპერიული მეზობლისგან მომდინარე ნაირფერ აგრესიულ იმპულსებზე რეაქციაა. ამგვარი გამოცდილებიდან მომდინარეობს ის ნეგატიური დამოკიდებულება, რომელსაც საქართველოში თავშესაფრის მაძიებელი რუსი მიგრანტები შეიძლება აწყდებოდნენ. თუმცა ქართული საზოგადოებაც გაორებულია თავის იდენტობაში, როგორც ამას ავტორის მიერ მაგალითად მოყვანილი ინტერვიუ აჩვენებს. გაორება იქიდან მომდინარეობს, რომ როდესაც ერთთათვის რუსული იმპერიალიზმია მიუღებელი და სუვერენიტეტი კი მთავარი ღირებულება, მეო-

რეთათვის მთავარი შიდაქართული დაპირისპირებები და კოლონიური „სუბალტერნის“ მდგომარეობისათვის მზადყოფნაა.

Imperialist Anxieties

"Where does the Russian border end?" Vladimir Putin posed a question to a schoolboy once during one of his public appearances. "The borders of Russia end via Bering Strait with the United States" responded the boy as he stood diligently under the president's arm around his shoulders. In response, Putin moved the microphone toward himself, gazed at his audience with a canny smile, and while energetically patting the boy's shoulder, proclaimed: "The borders of Russia do not end anywhere!"[1]

Russia's relationship to its frontier has been a troubling issue of a widespread contemplation for a long time. From the national elites within the post-Soviet boundaries to international media outside Russia's margins, many have tinkered with the questions on the logic behind Russia's foreign policy in all sorts of manner. The perplexing nature of Russia's role in the region and beyond, can hardly be boiled down to a single truth claim. Like all nation-states, Russia's political logic is itself an opaque terrain rife with contradictions and tensions, perhaps all of which bear the traces of the remaining structures of imperial authority. But it is not just the remainders of imperialism that perpetuate Russian political paradigm, but the insurmountable contradiction right at the heart of the contemporary nationalist order that gnaws at the identity projects of what Dominguez calls the "megacountries" (Dominguez 2017) like Russia.

This paper interrogates anxiety as a political affect (Protevi 2009) that emerges in the confrontation between small countries and "megacountries". In the introduction to their volume "Small Countries" Ulf Hannerz and Andre Gingrich (2017) write:

> Various historical trajectories have led to present conditions of the absolute and relative smallness of countries-colonial, imperial, local, regional… Relative smallness is smallness "from a native's point of view"…It involves an "emic" comparative dimension of the ways important routine practices, standard speech behavior, or other cultural references indicate how people in one way or another refer to their country as somehow smaller than elsewhere. By implication, the relevant "elsewhere" usually involves one country or several countries in one's immediate or wider vicinity (p 6).

Smallness then is almost always a relative notion that gestures toward the geopolitical horizons of a small country – the vicinity within which it strategizes to secure political and economic securities. Not only symbolically, but politically and economically, "elsewhere" as domain of allies, foes, neighbors is a defining counterpoint against which a small country gains (or loses) significance. As Hannerz and Gingrich point out "various metaphorical and symbolic varieties of relative smallness… tend to indicate a relative insignificance with regard to economic success, organizational efficiency, political influence, military potentials, scientific achievements, religious relevance, ethical standing,

1 'The borders of Russia do not end' says Putin at awards ceremony. Euronews. 25 Novemebr, 2016. November 24th Russian Geographic Society ceremony in Moscow. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ou8mI_ce80s (25.01.2023)

artistic creativity, and so forth. In such ways the comparative dimensions are culturally internalized factors" (pp 6-7). The "elsewhere", just as much as the notion of smallness, is a culturally constructed and historically shaped sociopolitical category. In many instances, as is the case with Georgia, smallness is a direct product of not only colonial histories, but of the remaining imperialisms. With that in mind, I address Georgia's smallness, a critical category, that emerges and gains meaning in Russia's close vicinity. I locate anxiety in the confrontation between small countries and megacountries not as a mere sense of danger that emerges at the possibility of military or political threat directed at a small country. Rather, I suggest that anxiety is present both in a small country like Georgia and a big country like Russia, in a form of unstable identity relations (i.e. see "anxious belonging" Middleton, 2013). Anxiety is defined here, then, not as an uncertain anticipation of threat, or vague sense of a possible danger (on politics of anxiety see Eklundh et al., 2018). But at the heart of political anxiety is the disrupted identity image (Batiashvili 2022). I begin by suggesting how the identity project of a megacountry like Russia is inevitably entangled in its imperialist ambition, distorted under the modern predicament of a nation-state and go on to examine how Georgia's anxiety of smallness unravels within the Russian-Georgian encounters in the context of the massive migration waves from Russia following the war in Ukraine.

Megacountries are ghostly empires camouflaged in the romanticism of the nation-states. Their pragmatic agendas encapsulate the insurmountable contradiction between a "good life" imagined within the national doctrine and the "civilizational greatness" aspired within the imperialist fantasy. "Good life" is essentially a political doctrine that inscribes the image of an ordinary citizen – living a good life – into the pragmatic operations of the political apparatus (Berlant, 1991). It inscribes "ordinary people", such as the young Russian boy above, at the core of the political sovereignty. "Civilizational greatness" (see Wertsch, this volume on Russia's spiritual mission) on the other hand is obstructive to the political aspiration of a "good life". It places the political body above all human life. It is essentially a modality of necropolitics (Mbembe 2019) which classifies life into distinct entities: ones worth living, and others – not. It deems that certain "ordinary people" can be sacrificed in the name of greatness and chases the ambition of the civilizational mission which surpasses territorial boundaries of a single country.

In her book "Five Roads to Modernity" Liah Greenfeld (Greenfeld 1993) has convincingly argued that the modern Russian identity was carved through the civilizational projects like that of Peter the Great's. At the heart of this ambition was to remake Russia into an empire modeled on the European prototypes. But Russian rulers, argues Greenfeld, have failed in turning Russia into the European state. What these projects did instead, was that they planted in Russian national identity, at its inceptive moment, a ressentiment toward the West and the ambiguity about its own civilizational belonging. Russian national identity then, according to Greenfeld, teeters between unstable positions on what Russia is: a legacy of the brute Mongolian culture, or the high cultural matter with spiritual missions upheld through civilizational projects of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. A vulnerability about the corruptibility of Russian spirit often times is materialized in a forceful agenda it imposes on its frontiers and as a result, cultivates frontier anxieties. If we take Greenfeld's argument for granted, we can thus suggest that at the core of the Russian foreign policy and its (geo)political ambition, is the anxiety about its cultural identity. Its ambition to have no borders, but to have an ever-expanding spiritual mission is, arguably, a product of this anxiety.

Benedict Anderson (1983, 50) has famously argued that nations imagine themselves as sovereign and as limited:

> The nation is imagined as limited because even the largest of them, encom- passing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations; No nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind. The most messianic nationalists do not dream of a day when all the members of the human race will join their nation in the way that it was possible, in certain epochs, for, say, Christians to dream of a wholly Christian planet.

If even the largest of the nations have finite boundaries, what makes some mega-nations thrive on the idea of infinite expansion? If beyond the cultural boundaries of a nation-state lie other nations, then why does Russia *have no borders*? Anderson's idea of modern nationalism is rooted in the notion of an imagined community that imagines itself as bounded by irreproducible cultural traits. *Culture* as understood from a nationalist perspective is engrained, immanent and inherently encoded in the minds and bodies of a bounded community. It is indelible and non-replicable in other entities. No Georgian will ever turn into a Mongol, no matter how many generations live their lives outside Georgia. No Georgian has an ambition to export and propagate cultural traits and customs unique to its national space. Culture from this perspective is a vital matter that defines peoplehood and political entity and it can only exist within certain boundaries. This is why Anderson notes that nations are cultural artifacts. They are historical too. The notion of culture as a boundary-maker is an exclusively modern invention. It is at the core of popular sovereignty and at the core of the idea of an ordinary citizen's "good life".

Civilization, however unlike national *culture*, is an expansionist notion. Not only can it be duplicated in other places and among other peoples but it needs to be exported, expanded and established *elsewhere* as a hegemonic order in order for it to prove its civilizational value. It is not random that Anderson mentions Christianity as a counter-notion to the 'national culture'. Christianity is too a civilizational category that gains its force by transgressing cultural and political boundaries. A "megacountry" (Dominguez 2017) like Russia is a conflicted phenomenon that lives between these two contradictory logics of a 'good life' and of 'civilizational greatness' both of which (albeit in different degrees) guide its political agenda as well as the outsiders' interpretations of it, thereof. It not only produces confusion as to Russia's pragmatic interests, but incepts Russia's frontier with identity anxiety, with anxiety about its ontological security.

James Wertsch has long argued (2002) that a schematic narrative template which not only guides Russian political logic, but its perception of the outside world, pivots on the idea of ever-encroaching expansion aimed at the annihilation of Russia. The key to the Russian national narrative is that it envisions threat not necessarily as a physical force coming to eradicate the Russian state, but it sees danger in the ideational and ideological expansion of powers that threaten to corrupt Russia as a spiritual matter. In that sense, self-defense in Russian cultural understanding involves being alert to how threatening ideas and political orders advance on its frontiers. The frontiers gain different meaning, then, in the Russian political cosmology as points of vulnerability for both its spiritual integrity and its geopolitical longevity. Again, at the core of its national narrative is a tension and a contradiction in how Russia, unlike a modular nation-state, thinks about the borders, about the neighbors and about the region as such. Russian militarism in that context becomes not a mechanism for strengthening

and solidifying the borders of the nation-state, but a hybrid force aimed at monitoring and disciplining the frontier. "The borders of Russia do not end anywhere!" is an over-extension of this contradictory logic. Unexpected as it was for many, the 2022 invasion of Ukraine was the culmination and breakage of this over-extended cultural conviction that the Russian territorial borders are not sealed off geographic domains.

While nationalism, just about anywhere, encapsulates the ever-present sensibility toward outside dangers, threatening political sovereignty and border integrity (Greenfeld and Wu 2020), the Russian notion of "derzhava" is far more profoundly fixated on its perimeter than its center. Russia's relationship to its margins and frontiers is a gravitational field that defines both Russia's vigilant and "banal" (Billig 1995) nationalisms. The notion of "derzhava", then, is in a way cemented upon the idea of a nation-state with bracketed ambitions of neo-imperialist character; the ambitions which nevertheless have mostly been coated in the idioms of *friendship, patronage, neighborly relations, brotherhood, familiar ties, kinship* and so forth among the condominium of Slav and post-Soviet nations.

But the blatant aggression in Ukraine in 2022 produced a major breakage in not only the common sensical understanding of what Russia is and can be to its friends and neighbors, but in the identity template of many ordinary Russian citizens as well. The breakage, the rupture that this act of aggression caused is revealed in the following statement by a young Russian man, recently relocated to Georgia:

> I have many friends and acquaintances from Ukraine and I do not want to be ashamed, looking into their eyes. It is a devastating experience for a person to feel shame because of their nationality. I don't want to be scared to say I am a Russian. Don't get me wrong, even though [throughout this entire conversation] I didn't say one good thing about Russia, I still love my country with its shortcomings, but I will simply never support the imperialist ideas of our government. We, me and people my age just want these constant hostilities and incursions into the territory of our neighbors to stop. The only thing we get from this is a constant hatred toward Russians. If no one in the world likes you [meaning Russians], maybe you should start looking for the problems inside yourself. But our government, its chief propagandists and their victims have never heard of this concept (Igor, 24 years from Roslavl, migrated to Georgia in 2022).[2]

How do you love something that you simultaneously feel ashamed for? How do you harness a sense of belonging to something that you flee, denounce and condemn? How do you identify with the abstract notion of the homeland, when its tangible version offers no cause for fulfilling attachment? In her exploration of the social and political shame among Muslim Georgians, Tamta Khalvashi (2015) has convincingly argued that shame can be a politically and geopolitically entrenched state of the affectively glued collectives. Khalvashi demonstrates the potential of the negative affects like shame for "generating specific communal attachments and temporal experiences" (Khalvashi 2015, 15) in peripheral publics. At the core of such attachments which, Khalvashi argues, "both splits and assembles publics in relation to the national" (Ibid, 21) is the abjection – a repeated and constant self-ablation

2 Courtesy to Nino Gavashvili and the students of the Free University of Tbilisi who recorded oral accounts in Spring of 2022 from above 150 respondents, including Russians, Ukrainians and Georgians.

which takes form and acquires meaning through various discursive and practical instantiations of visceral and social shame.

Shame in that sense, as an emergent feeling of abjection involves both erasure of meaning and the repeated, unfinished reassembling of identities. Khalvashi's work offers a powerful description of how affective experience of the historicized shame forges and sculpts marginal publics in relation to the nation's hegemonic center. But what does shame do to non-peripheral publics? what does it do to the identity schemas cemented in the notion of "derzhava" as described above?

When asked how they envision their individual and Russia's collective future, young people like Igor would find themselves at loss trying to foresee the tangible prospect for the Russian polity. According to Bryant and Knight (2019) ethnographic landscapes of the future can be glanced at anthropologically through the forms of collective anticipation and expectation, modes of speculation and hope, socio-politically determined notions of destiny and potentiality. They examine ethnographic landscapes where futures are imagined, pressed upon or imposed on the disturbing, anxious presents. There is always some kind of trajectory of the present that can be envisioned not necessarily based on the socioculturally engrained ideas or teleological notions about the future, but based on the scripts of the past and collective memory narratives. Past and future are mutually constitutive realms, interchangeably pressed upon each other to produce a graspable image of the present[3].

The breakage in the collective future cognition (Topcu and Hirst 2022) signals the kind of disruption in the collective identity narrative where the autobiographical scripts begin to shift. Shame in their narratives marks the deflating sense of privilege and power upon which the Russian identity narratives are (or had been) founded. Shame in the face the "constant hatred toward Russians", as Igor exclaims, signals not only the breakage in the ability for positive self-construal, but the form of identity anxiety that breaches the scripts and schemas through which temporality can be experienced and envisioned. This disruption in the identity narrative however unravels not as something entirely new, germinated solely under the novel circumstances. Rather identity anxiety, as is always the case, spins off of the deeply seeded tensions about the nature of peoplehood. Igor's reference to "imperialism" and his wording on the "constant hostilities and incursions into the territory of our neighbors" gives away the deep-seated nature of these identity tensions. To be sure, Igor's shame references and to an extent describes the very contradiction, outlined at the start of this paper, that drives geopolitical and civilizational agendas of the megacountries like Russia; agendas that enable imperialism bracketed in the idea of a nation-state that "has no borders".

Frontier Anxieties

In their 2014 paper "The Empire Strikes Back" on the Russian interventions in Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, Elizabeth Cullen Dunn and Michael Bobick (2014) explore "the techniques Putin is

3 In certain instances, though, future seizes to exist as a narrative, as a clear, visible trajectory. Rather it becomes a "timespace rooted in the materialities of everyday life" (Bryant and Knight 2019, 3) revealed in seemingly insignificant orientations toward objects around us. When asked how they packed their luggage when fleeing for Georgia, Russians described the process of picking and choosing objects in a way that indicated indeterminacy of their journey. Unlike Ukrainians who packed their things with a strong belief that they would return to their homeland (while also allowing for the possibility that their homes could be destroyed) Russians' choices signaled a paradoxical sense of determinacy toward indeterminate future.

using throughout the region to establish Russia's resurgent empire" (p 405)[4]. Part of his toolkit is what they refer to as the "occupation without occupation" which among other things involves disenfranchising the national state by "blurring of the boundaries between the legal and the illegal and between the legitimate use of force and random violence" (410-411). Russia's reception on its frontier is fundamentally shaped by this dualistic geopolitical stance positioned both as a friendly neighbor and as a militarist supervisor. Its militarism, camouflaged in what ordinary people in Georgia refer to as "the so-called peace mission", "the so-called friendship" or "the so-called neighborly relations", produces anxiety not only because it poses threat to the sovereignty of a small country, but it cultivates ambivalence about the nature of the relationship between the peoples of the respective states.

The confusion that encapsulates both familiarity and estrangement, colonial subjectivity and postcolonial aspirations, is palpably present in the Russian-Georgian encounters against the backdrop of the 2022 war in Ukraine. Many Georgians have felt the need to resist the influx of the Russian citizens fearing that the demographic shift could eventually be used in Putin's ongoing attempts to infringe upon Georgia's sovereignty. This particular fear is well founded on the previous experiences not only in Georgia, but in Ukraine and Moldova as well (see Dunn and Bobick 2014). However, such fears are countered with the moral and ethical obligation to rely upon the Georgian custom of hospitality and to treat Russians as guests, with the culturally appropriate measure of respect and dignity (Grant and Yalçın-Heckmann 2007; Mühlfried 2005). Apart from the ideational contradictions where cultural ethics and patriotic sentiments are pitted against one another, there are socioeconomic incentives that compel Georgians to treat these familiar aliens amicably. In an economic context where people are increasingly capitalizing on the tourist economy, relocated Russians create new market opportunities for property owners, service industries and retail businesses.

Givi[5], a young man in his thirties from the highland region of Kazbegi who lives just minutes away from the Larsi check point at the Russian-Georgian border, drives newly arrived Russian citizens from Stepantsminda to Tbilisi. "Well, I don't know…I have relations with Russian people and that's why I am saying, I haven't seen anything bad from them…I don't know (ra vitsi), why would not I prefer Russians over Armenians or Turks?!" He responded almost combatively to Mari's questions about his dispositions toward Russians. "Why do you prefer [Russians]?" Mari a young student from Tbilisi baffled at the sentiment that radically contradicts hers, asked surprised:

> *Givi: I prefer because Turks fought with us for centuries and massacred Georgian nation.*
>
> *Mari: But didn't Russians fight us as well? Even today 20% of our territories are in Russian hands, does not this mean anything?*
>
> *Givi: Then you have to behave well, you have to settle relations (daalago) in a way to return those lands instead of being aggressive. What will you – 2 million people – accomplish against 170 million, tell me?*

4 By arguing that Putinism is "form of what Clifford Geertz (1981) called the "theater state"—that is, a state that focuses on the produc- tion of spectacle rather than on economic development or the provision of social welfare" (2014, p 406), Dunn and Bobick have essentially predicted what in eight years would become obvious to the rest of the world.

5 Interview recorded in November 2022 by Mari Marsagishvili. Courtesy to the Free University students Mari Marsagishvili, Erekle Nasidze, Nino Bitsadze, Salome Inashvili, Anuka Khutsishvili, Nano Kvaratskhelia for sharing their ethnographic data with me obtained as part of the mini ethnographic project for the 2022 fall semester Sociocultural Anthropology course. I refer to the respondent with a pseudonym Givi.

Mari: and what do you mean by behaving well? What are we supposed to do?

Givi: As I said we should negotiate and I think everything will be settled.

Set in the context of the migration waves that took place as a result of the Russian-Ukrainian war, this exchange captures the sociopolitical disturbance within the Georgian public following the massive influx of the Russian citizens. The sense of disturbance was not only intensified due to the periceived threat associated with the Russians, but also due to the ambivalence about how these visitors should be treated: as tourists, as victims, as aggressors, as new citizens or as guests. Mari's bafflement at what seems to her to be a contradictory logic only prompts Givi to push his argument further. But his logic hinges not only on the nonchalant positivity toward Russians in general, but on the critical stance toward radical anti-Russian policies and rhetoric. Coded in his reference to "aggression" is an allegation against Georgia's previous government led by Mikheil Saakashvili hinting at its role in instigating the 2008 Russian-Georgian war. Behind their conflicting views on what the proper political "behavior" is for Georgia, the affective rift between Mari and Givi implicates the overlapping but diverging notions of statehood. One that tolerates subaltern position under a a powerful empire – a form of inevitable captivity; another that does not accept impaired sovereignty and rejects resignation in the face of the established geopolitical hierarchy.

Silently hidden in Givi's outright positivity, is in fact, an angst in the form of caution; a specific kind of carefulness that defines colonial subjectivity in a small country on the edge of a voracious empire. "What will you – 2 million people – accomplish against 170 million, tell me?" he says and while Mari may be too staggered at Givi's affection for Russians, his positivity is not a product of fondness, but of a well-disguised fright for a powerful foe.

"When you treat them negatively, no one will return your lands and no negotiation will take place…" The logic behind Givi's claim involves a very specific principle of the political – particularly predatory – reciprocity (Graeber 2012; Mauss 1990) through which gifts and captives are exchanged (Grant and Yalçın-Heckmann 2007). As a captive Georgia gets back what it rightfully owns in return for the self-appeasing and moderate subjugation. Virginia Dominguez in her essay "On Chutzpah Countries and 'Shitty Little Countries'" (2017) makes a point that small countries become problematic when they breach the established hierarchy by violating their dependent status. Her point reverberates the principles that govern relationships between captive and predatory states, between what she calls "megacountires" and what Dunn and Bobick refer to as "no man's land" – countries destined for geopolitical ambiguity. Givi's understanding of "settling relations" is premised on the acceptance of that principle and is buttressed by the orientalist distaste for the Muslims, the historicized animosity toward Ottoman descendants or the ethnocentric mistrust and rivalry against Armenians.

In fact, Givi's understanding, as that of many Georgians, of how politics work is infused, through and through, with the acceptance of the self-disciplining inferiority that the established global order dictates. Further in the conversation Givi said what more palpably betrayed the true nature of his sentiment and the logic of reciprocity behind his views:

Mari: To be sure, are Georgians supposed to have good disposition toward the population coming in from Russia?

Givi: neither bad nor too good. You must have a neutral disposition. You should not let them grow emboldened (Georgian: ar unda gaatamamo).

Mari: what is meant in growing emboldened?

> *Givi: That we should not give them lands (meaning sell land) and we should not sell our houses to them. Let them rent, let them live. There's going to be little income and so forth. They'll live here for a little while and then they will leave. What is dangerous about it, I can't understand.*
>
> *Mari: Do you know what other people in the valley think about Russian population, and in particular about the Russians who came in during the second wave*[6]*?*
>
> *Givi: No one has harmed us here and personally we don't feel hurt and do not have bad disposition toward Russians. No one I know is negatively disposed. When you treat them negatively, no one will return your lands and no negotiation will take place…*
>
> The possibility of Russians becoming Georgian citizens disturbs Givi just as much as it scares Mari, even if how they imagine the potentiality of Russians to impinge upon the sovereignty of a small country is rooted in distinct variants of national threat. "You must have a neutral disposition. You should not let them grow emboldened" For Givi too Russians bear the potential of getting "emboldened", of overtaking what they are not entitled to, of overpowering a "country of two million".

Mari's and Givi's overlapping but conflicting fears stem from two countervailing political discourses. Conservative and populist groups in Georgia have, over the last years, problematized immigration, in particular of Middle Eastern and Chinese nationalities, in terms of the rights to property, agricultural land use, and demographic shift. The radical groups (Gozalishvili 2022) framed the threat of immigration using memory narratives on "genetic enemies" to capitalize on Georgia's religious, cultural and genetic purity. These same groups, borrowing from the Russian anti-Western propaganda, have criticized (to put it mildly) Georgia's European aspirations as well, marching against feminist and anti-homophobic movements. The liberal groups on the other hand, have pushed forward Georgia's Euro-integration agenda as part of the ongoing effort in strengthening statehood and securing sovereignty vis-à-vis Russia's expansionist agenda. The possibility of ethnic Russians becoming voting citizens of the country and outnumbering Georgians endangers Georgia's aspirations in that regard as well. There is an echo of these campaigns in Givi's and Mari's combative conversation. The comment Givi made later in the conversation on *preferring* "a Christian to someone of a different faith" along with the claim "that we should not give them lands" reiterates the rhetoric voiced by the radical conservative groups.

Yet at the heart of Givi's utterances is a well-hidden dread of a colonized subjectivity who not only tolerates imperial domination, but accepts it as a normative order. "When you treat them negatively, no one will return your lands and no negotiation will take place". What is revealed in this remark goes beyond Givi's *preference for Christians* over non-Christians, Slavs over Armenians and so forth. It encapsulates anxiety of smallness as a subjective experience that orients preferences and affective relations of the ordinary citizens. Mari's angst on the hand, even as it is revealed as radically contradicting Givi's attitude, is steeped in the distinct but related political sensibilities that stem from Georgia's smallness, from the felt proximity of Russia's imperialism and anti-Europeanism, not only as

6 The second wave refers to the migrations that took place after the nation-wide call for mobilization. Many Russians have fled the country to avoid being sent to war. Mari specifically focused on the second wave, because these Russians have been perceived by Georgians as "deserters" rather than citizens who left Russia because they were critical of war or of Putin's regime.

a state agenda, but as a cultural phenomenon that dampens Russianness both as a form of citizenship and as a form of subjectivity.

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