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Soviet Memory in the Process of National Identity Formation: The Case of Georgia

Conceptual links between identity and memory

Modernity, which divides our lives into segments as a series of independent episodes, requires a self, whose wholeness is created by a united narrative of life. According to Alisdair MacIntyre, "memory wave and identity related vagueness are interrelated events" (MacIntyre 1984, p. 194). He considers any attempt to define personal identity independently from the concept of the narrative as a failure. Pierre Nora also connects discussions around collective memory to issues of identity (Nora, 1998).

It is noteworthy that the growing interest both toward the study of identity as well as memory coincides with and relates to a particular socio-cultural transformation. Memory studies emerged in the late 19th century and relate to such socio-cultural and political events as modernity, nationalism, multiculturalism, postmodernity, the holocaust, etc. It is important to point out two different periods that have stimulated researchers' interests into different directions. Pierre Nora links the rise of memory studies in the late 19th century with the rise of nationalism (which, in its own turn, became a watershed period for the emergence of debates on collective identity), while, in the late 20th century, it is connected with the demise of the latter (Nora, 1989). Since the late 19th century, nation-states engaged in the process of instrumentation of collective memory and identity in order to determine their place and role in the history of mankind. With regard to the 20th century, the instrumentation of socio-cultural forms of memory and identity was mainly dictated by the motives having to do with preserving and legitimizing nation-states.

The conceptual link between identity and memory is relatively well defined in sociology. Many classic sociologists view collective memory as the main source of identity (Olick 2011, p. 42). The first generation of sociology classics, including Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Georg Simmel, paid little attention to studying the issue. These theoreticians believed that modern society was embarking on a path free from tradition (Shils 1981, pp. 8-9). On the other hand, Emile Durkheim though not explicitly using the term collective memory, analyzes collective consciousness based on cultural rituals -

which create an important ground for studying memory from a social dimension (Durkheim, 1961) - and underlines the role of shared memory in the process of formation of group identity (Olick, 2011 p. 177). Forms of group identity – such as family, class, etc. – actualize through solidarity rituals. The latter, in fact, can be considered as the materialization of collective memory. Durkheim's theoretical tradition, collectivist perspective and methodology of scientific research were effectively utilized by his student Maurice Halbwachs, who was the first to theoretically conceptualize memory in sociology. Halbwachs got interested in studying collective memory when he was searching for mechanisms ensuring social solidarity – this was inspired by the theoretical influence of his teacher, Emil Durkheim. Halbwach's works are also influenced by the works of his predecessors and contemporaries, who also actively studied the topic of the past. While focusing on the social dimension, Halbwachs implicitly transformed memory into an important source of collective identity. He paid special attention to the role of family, more specifically to the question of how we construct the past within the family (Halbwachs, 1992). In his paper, "The social frameworks of memory" (1992, first published in 1925) Halbwachs points out the important role narrative plays in the formation of individual or group identity. Stories that individuals tell about the past constitute an important foundation for self-identification. Identity is activated precisely during telling common stories; without this shared narrative of what went before individuals lose the organic link with the past. A shared narrative of a group about its past makes it possible to form a group identity (Olick 2011, p. 177).

George Herbert Mead, whose main legacy within the field of sociology is represented through socio-psychological conceptualization, identifies the self as a locus for memory (Packard 2009, p. 8). The author of symbolic interactionism – George Herbert Mead – is well-known in academic circles for his theory of the self, though his concept on past and memory is less known. According to his interactionism theory, social actors do not evaluate and perceive an action until the action becomes the past. Mead argued that individuals carry the past within themselves in the form of memory and consciousness. He considers memory obtained through conscious experience as essential for the behavior of a rational creature – on one hand in terms of meaning, and, on the other hand, with regard to the idea formation, which to some extent points to the conceptual interrelation between memory and identity (Mead 1959, p. 17).

A separate topic for discussion is the relation between identity and memory. The discussion develops into two main directions within the relevant literature and is partially connected to the dichotomy that divides schol-

ars of collective memory into two camps. On the one hand we have "Presentist" and, on the other hand, we have "Essentialist'" approaches to the study of collective memory. According to the Presentists, the past is constructed through the present; therefore, collective memory is manifested according to present identity forms (Olick and Robbins, 1998; Schwarz, 1989). A more radical form of the same paradigm completely reduces the past to the specific aims of political elites (Hobsbawm, 1983). The essentialists represent an opposing position: they claim that the past defines the construction of identity, underlining such characteristics of the past as stability and sustainability in time (Schwarz, 1996, Shils 1981, Shadson 1989).

The theoretical paradigm of the Presentists is mainly supported by the early studies of sociologists. According to the well-known model developed by Halbwachs, memory is determined through identity (collective or individual) – an identity, which is already formed. Historian Allan Megill considers Halbwachs' theory on memory as an attempt to construct memory – either general or historical memory – through identity. Historical memory deals with how identity invents the relevant past (Megill, 1998).

In the study of memory, Presentism focuses on two forms of memory – instrumental and interpretational (Olick and Robbins 1998). Instrumental Presentism underlines the dominance of external aims over the individual while manipulating the past. Therefore, the aforementioned paradigm becomes completely radical since it views collective memory as a manipulation of the past for certain goals (Smith, 1986; Foucault, 1977). On the other hand, according to the interpretational Presentism, in the process of manipulating the past, internal skills of an individual play a leading role in interpreting the past in the present through his experience and in accordance with socio-cultural frameworks (Mead 1959, Mannheim 1956, Hobsbawm, 1983).

As for the essentialists' approach, the latter rejects the idea of memory as a manipulative resource, and points to its more solid cultural foundation. The defender of this position – Bari Schwartz, who is also considered a founder of collective memory studies in American academia – considers memory to be a cultural system (Schwartz 1996) and despite superficial changes, talks about its solidness and sustainability in time. Unlike constructivists – such as Hobsbawm, whose theory on collective memory reflects the positions of Presentism (Robins 1998), Schwartz views memory as a cultural system.

Unlike Halbwachs and his followers, who try to understand social frameworks of memory, Schwarz attempts to analyze the memory itself as a social framework (Schwarz 1996, p. 908). Posing the question in such a way-

gives memory an orientational and deterministic dimension. In Halbwachs' theory memory exists to the extent that it can be socially activated (Halbwachs 1992). Memory always depends on the social dimension, more specifically – on a group that revives it in accordance with external or internal interests. In Schwarz' theory, the shifting of the focus on memory as a social framework turns it into a cultural system that has the ability to determine the interests of a group. "Memory… is a cultural program that orients our intentions, sets our moods, and enables us to act (Schwarz 1996, p. 921).

The link between collective identity and memory appears in discourse on nationalism as well. In this discourse, the majority of authors supports the instrumentalist position when dealing with collective memory and define the latter as a constitutional foundation of identity formation. Nation states utilize the past as an important resource of ensuring their legitimacy and identity. Nationalism scholar, Benedict Anderson does not avoid underlining the importance of the narrative of the past in the process of the formation of collective (national) identity. The spread of printed literature and the development of capitalism on one hand and the weakening of religious ideology on the other hand triggered the growth of interest toward the past and national identity (Anderson, 1991). "Imagining the nation, as such" became possible through a shared narrative of the past (Robbins 1989, p. 116).

Smith (1986) talks about the process of manipulating the past for a reason and points out, that one of the signs of nation formation from a proto-national state is the shifting of the collective memory center from cathedrals and clergy to universities and academic circles. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger try to demonstrate how in the late 19th century the European states have attempted to preserve their legitimacy through reviving the icons of the past and "inventing" useful traditions (Hobsbawm, 1983).

Soviet memory in the process of formation of national identity

When we talk about researching such a complex phenomenon as national identity, one of the routes we can take to approach it is collective memory. Collective memory is defined as common knowledge and experience that is directly intertwined with the process of identity formation and creates solid ground for identification of individuals, both on micro and macro levels. The study of collective memory is especially important within the context of political and societal transformations, when the old narratives are being corrected and replaced with new ones, which also results in changes of identification. In the light of these circumstances, the Post-Soviet experience is of

a particular interest, including the case of Georgia, which could be seen as a laboratory for theories of memory and identity.

The theoretical framework of the study

One of the key conceptual instruments, when analyzing identity formed through collective memory is the memory of generations (Olick and Robbins 1998, p. 123). Karl Mannheim's theory on generations is especially interesting in this regard (Mannheim, 1952). According to the theory, each generation's character is shaped by a political or social event, which shapes the generation from the early years of personal formation. This is a form of the collective memory of the past. Experiences of a certain generation during its socialization period that are linked with important political or social changes and create an important foundation for shaping its character and collective identity. In his study, Mannheim (1952) points out the orientational power of collective memory when he underlines the role of live historic events in the process of defining contemporaneity (Schwartz 1989).

Mannheim defines a generation as a social construction with a "similar location". First of all, this means that the representatives of the generation are at the same phase of the collective process. However, being in the same age group is not enough for the existence of a "similar generational location". The latter is created through engagement in similar historic and social circumstances and through the common experience of shared events (Mannheim, 1952). It should also be noted that Mannheim (1952) identifies similar generational location as a decisive factor in the process of interpreting events. Each particular experience is shaped by a set of preceding experiences, therefore, the interpretation of each event and the determination of its importance depends on the "similar location of the generation". According to Mannheim, representatives of the older generation interpret an event through their initial, well-developed perspective. Therefore, the youth interprets events based on the perspective shaped by its own experiences (Schuman and Scott 1989).

According to Mannheim only "knowledge acquired individually in real situations" is solid. Sometimes, even very important political events and changes can be vaguely remembered (Mannheim 1952, p. 296). The early youth and young adulthood plays a decisive role in the development of the character of a generation, which is directly linked to critical and reflexive evaluation of events. Mannheim underlines a specific age – "the age of 17, sometimes a little earlier and sometimes a little later" (Mannheim 1952). He

also specifies 25 years as the threshold in the process of the formation of a generation (Schuman and Scott 1989).

In the present study, generations will be identified based on the above mentioned age criteria. For the definition of collective memory, the study will use the one developed by Halbwachs – a group memory of the common past that its members have links with through direct or indirect experiences (Halbwachs, 1950).

Based on the theoretical approaches discussed above, the study aims to find out how the memory of the Soviet period is being manifested in different age groups following the replacement of the old narrative about the period with a new one. What type of specific forms does the Soviet narrative take in the memory of different age groups? What impact does this narrative of the past have on national identity? The aim of the study is not only to find out the memory structures of Soviet events in different age groups, but also to understand the interpretational content of the memory. The hypothesis of the study is that the meaning of political events of the Soviet period will vary in different age groups as well as the interpretation and significance of those events – which creates a modern patchwork of national identity.

Methods and data

Due to the complex nature of the research topic, the study is qualitative. This creates an opportunity for multidimensional and intensive study of the topic. Fieldwork for the study was done during Spring 2013, in Tbilisi and other regions of Georgia. In total, 70 in-depth interviews were recorded (including biographical-narrative interviews) and 5 focus groups were conducted. The respondents were selected from three different age categories. The first age group included respondents that were born, went through the process of socialization and self-realization during the Soviet period. The second age group comprised those, who were born and went through the process of socialization during the Soviet period, but self-realized mostly in post-Soviet period. The third age group included those respondents, who were born, went through the process of socialization and are now self-realizing in the post-Soviet period.

When analyzing the results of the research, we found that the memory of the Soviet past among the respondents of the first age group is very rich and based on personal experiences. Their memory of certain historic events greatly influences the ideological stances characteristic for the Soviet context. Besides, they demonstrate emotional and nostalgic attitude toward the

past. In most cases, this lacks any reasonable explanation, in certain cases it mostly correlates with economic issues. On the question – "How would you evaluate the Soviet past" – one of the respondents gave the following answer:

> *"We lived in dignity, had jobs and I did not worry about feeding my kids"* (Alexander, 75 years old).

It should also be noted that in certain cases the respondents display a certain rigidness and reject any objective evaluation of historic events.

> *"Today they say a lot of abominations, but in reality we – the people – served the truth and the good, we served the common ideas"* (Sergi, 78 years old).

In such cases we can talk about the rigid and resilient nature of the memory. In conclusion, we can say that this age category displays irrational determined forms of memory toward the Soviet past.

The memory of the Soviet past among the respondents of the second age group – like the first age group – is also very rich and more or less based on personal experiences.

> *"I was born during that period, I graduated from school during that period. There was a subject taught about the Soviet Union in secondary school – History of the Soviet Union. We did not know about any other formation. Even the Voice of America's coverage was limited and we did not know what was going on in other countries. We only heard negative stories. The fourth page of the newspaper Communist was covered with news of this and that happening abroad – all the stories were negative and we thought that we lived in the best country and in the best formation. But, as we saw in the end, this was false"* (Tamaz, 60 years old).

Though in certain cases the respondent's answers lacked a specific knowledge of historic events, it can be said that their memory about the Soviet past is rather ambivalent: on one hand, the respondents that socialized and self-actualized during the Soviet period now acknowledge the need to objectively evaluate certain significant historic and political events; however, on the other hand, they still demonstrate emotionally charged attitudes. One respondent's answer demonstrates this point very clearly:

"Today's youth portrays the Soviet Union very badly. The Soviet Union had many negative traits, but many positive as well. My generation can recall a lot of good times. There was no unemployment – one could get arrested for being unemployed. No man should have been unemployed and the Soviet Union had the ability to employ people. The present has this big flaw" (Levan, 43 years old).

Another respondent put it this way:

"Of course, this regime was a big evil and should have collapsed way earlier as it had caused a lot of disasters. However, there was no financial need, we lived carelessly" (Davit, 51 years old).

At the end we can conclude that events of the Soviet past are reflected in their memories in fragments and lack objective evaluation of their place in history. Important dates and holidays of the Soviet period provoke positive emotional attitudes in almost the majority of the respondents, because such events are activated at the local and familiar level. With such a background the real historic meaning of the events is beyond evaluation.

"May 9 was a very important date for my parents, because their relatives, their parents took part in the war. This date was more or less celebrated in our family. I personally have a feeling of happiness toward the victory and pity all those people, who did not come back from the war" (Tamar, 45 years old).

In the third age group, which comprises the respondents born in post-Soviet Georgia, the memory of the period and the events associated with the time is scarce. In this case we can refer to the stereotypical nature of the memory. Most respondents recall the Soviet Union negatively, but fail to provide arguments to support their position.

"It was an authoritarian regime; it is not pleasant when someone rules you and takes your personal freedom away" (Nia, 22 years old).

Only a handful of respondents demonstrate knowledge of important events, dates and figures of the Soviet period. In most cases, education, and then media are named as the sources of information, the familiar environment being mentioned last. In this age group the family serves as a very significant source of information about the Soviet period and competes with im-

portant educational institutions. To the question "Where or from whom do you get information about the Soviet Union and the important events related to the Soviet Union", the respondents answered the following:

> *"It is not surprising that I know all of this from my 80 year old grand-mother, who lived in the Soviet period"* (Gio, 19 years old).

"I know many things about the period from my family members, especially my grandfather and my father who tell the stories at home… also from school" (Nino, 21 years old).

> *"I mostly heard from my parents, also media… at school as well."* (Nika, 18 years old).

Unlike the first and the second age groups, in whose case important events, holidays and figures of the Soviet period mostly activate on a micro level of their memory, the respondents of the third age group clearly discuss those on a macro level and demonstrate a distance and a certain alienation from the historical past. On the question "Which important Soviet events, dates and holidays would you recall", some of the respondents answered the following:

> *"I can recall several important events. For example, World War II, col-lapse of the Soviet Union… probably, I won't be able to name exact dates. I cannot say anything about holidays"* (Liza, 22 years old).

Attitudes toward the events of the period are somehow stereotypical, which is reflected in the unconscious and groundless statements. Most of the statements lack specific content or detailed knowledge. In this age category we come across a tendency toward objective evaluation of the past events, though, at the same time, there is a lack of specific knowledge of the events. One of the reasons clearly appears in the answers of the respondents of this age group to the question on where or from whom they had learned about the Soviet Union. As noted above, family and media are named as the main sources of information; educational institutions are almost an afterthought in this regard (Tevzadze, 2009).

The questions of the study were meant to determine what place the Soviet past occupies in today's construction of national identity. The respondents were asked to identify the most important and decisive events from the recent past that shaped the history of the country. It should be noted

that in this regard the answers from the youth and older generations differed significantly. The older respondents mostly remembered the events from the Soviet times as the key events, while the youth mainly recalls the collapse of the Soviet Union, alongside with the events such as the August 2008 War, joining the Council of Europe and events related to Euro-Atlantic integration and other global issues. The memory capital and the national narrative of the youth clearly lacks identification with and demonstrates distance from the Soviet period.

One variable that provokes differences in the contents of the narrative as well as the evaluation of the contents is also geographic location. Content-wise this is especially interesting among the respondents of the second and the third age groups. The respondents from these age groups in regions of Georgia demonstrate a less objective evaluation of the events. The narrative of the past among the respondents of the second age group is mostly connected to the micro, familiar environment, which is mostly linked to positive emotions. In turn, such an attitude hinders the process of critical analysis of the past.

Conclusion

Today, there is a lot of discussion about the process of the formation of national identity in Georgia. The topic gained importance once the country broke off from the Soviet Union and started developing as an independent state. However, the past, which for 70 years represented the primary source of identity, is also an important resource for identifying the current identity issues as well. Data analysis shows that the memory of the Soviet past manifests differently among the respondents of the three age groups. As expected, the generations that comprise individuals with similar locations, demonstrate different structures of collective memory and evaluate the Soviet past differently. At present these varying forms of memory create an important constitutional foundation for national identity. As mentioned in the beginning, identification of generational differences was not the main aim of the study. These differences emerge in light of particularly interesting large-scale, socio-political transformations, which results in the correction, re-thinking and re-evaluation of the narrative of the past. As demonstrated by the results of the survey, correlation between the Soviet past and socio-political transformation takes significantly different forms among the three age groups. The respondents, who were born, socialized and self-actualized during the Soviet period and therefore have a living connection to the Soviet past, demonstrate a form

of memory where the Soviet past is mostly preserved and unchanged. We may conclude that for this generation national identity is mostly constructed through memory colored with the perspective and ideology of the Soviet past.

The respondents, who were born and socialized during the Soviet period, but self-realized mainly in the post-Soviet Georgia, demonstrate an ambivalent attitude toward the past. On the one hand they acknowledge the need to objectively evaluate certain historic and important political events; however, on the other hand, they display an emotional attitude towards these same events. Their collective identification with the Soviet past is to a certain extent solidified by the controversial narrative of the latter.

The third generation, which is going through the formation process in the post-Soviet period, clearly displays a certain alienation from the Soviet past. For the majority, their narrative of the past lacks specific knowledge about important events. They view historic events on a macro level and demonstrate certain alienation from them. Attitudes toward the events of the period are stereotypical, which is reflected in factually groundless statements. Most of the statements lack specific content or detailed knowledge. In this age category we come across a tendency toward an objective evaluation of past events, though, at the same time, there is a lack of specific knowledge of the events. The memory capital and national narrative of the youth clearly lacks identification with and demonstrates distance from the Soviet period. As a result, it becomes impossible to talk about a collective identification with the Soviet past among the young generation.

As mentioned above, the structure of national identity very much depends on the collective content of the past; therefore, the process of formation of national identity that started in Georgia following the collapse of the Soviet Union is very much dependent on an objective reevaluation of the past. The study demonstrates that in this regard we face different attitudes among the three generations. What is more or less common for all three generations is that the Soviet past is more or less perceived in fragments in their consciousness and objective evaluation of the place of the Soviet past in Georgian history lacks specific and substantive knowledge. This reality poses interesting accents in terms of shaping the education policy of the State in the future.

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