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## The Georgian Press in Regard to the “Postcolonial” Georgian-Abkhazian Conflict

*Keywords: Hybridity, subaltern, binary oppositions of “us” and “other”, the colonizer and the colonized, the centre (metropolis) and the periphery*

“The Georgians’ right to this land and sea should also be protected [...] There is always a place for cultures; only uncultured people are not able to find a place, because the very expression of ethnic hatred is anti-cultural per se.” [Akhmadulina...1999:3]

April 9, 1989, marked the day when Georgian resistance to the bureaucratic ideology of the Soviet empire was nationally declared. Georgia started to assert its own identity in global politics as early as the 1990s. It declared its independence based on the results of the national referendum on March 31, 1991. It changed the rules of the game regarding national identity. The “rules of the game” were changed by the internal weakness of the Communist Party leadership. It was unable to control the processes unleashed during perestroika and unwilling to apply force on a large scale to suppress the accelerated centrifugal processes in the outlying national Soviet republics. The process of the nations’ self-determination in Georgia signaled joining the new world order, i.e. the adversary of the socialist system, the ‘Other’ (the West). However, pre-/postcolonial criticism contributing to the extensive process of decolonization persisted<sup>1</sup> in the Georgian literary/media discourse<sup>2</sup> for over two centuries [Gozalishvili 1935-1970; Treaty of Giorgievsk 1983; Allen 1932; Paichadze 2014].

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1 What is meant is the discontent spurred in Georgian political thought as a result of the violation of the Treaty of Giorgievsk from the 1783s. The provisions concluded in 1801, but here it must be added that the assumption of a continued rejection of the Treaty of Giorgievsk is part of the Georgian national narrative, but it has not been empirically investigated.

2 The loss of national statehood was a major theme already within Georgian Romanticism (the first half of the 19th century), which was marked with pervasive sadness stemming from the tragic contemplation of that loss.

It is impossible to conceptualize a theoretical, [Moore 2001:111-128; Kelertas 2006:11-44; Olofsson 2008; Vadachkoria 1997:96-101; Gugeshashvili 2001: 4; Pruidze, 1999:152-158; Rogava 1997:48-53; Toliashvili 2000:64-68]<sup>3</sup> postcolonial approach towards the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict [Khabeishvili 1995:3] without taking into account the history of Georgia's "accession" to the Russian Empire/the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, whereas the precedent of one country subordinating another by force can safely be described by the term 'colonization' [Moore 2001; Tlostanova 2004:321].<sup>4</sup> The present article singles out certain stereotypes [Media and Stereotypes]<sup>5</sup> that have had their toll [Hunyady 1998] on exacerbating the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict [Kemoklidze 2011; Petersen 2008; Cheterian 2008].

From the very moment Georgia embarked on the path of building an independent state, the newly fledged country came to face a natural need to get to know the world at large and adapt to it. It has been correctly noted that after perestroika was already a relaxation of censorship of the media in the late 1980s, the conjunctural newspapers, previously strictly controlled by the Soviet Government, start to change their names. So, "Communist" (in Georgian) became "The Georgian Republic" (in Georgian, with an interesting shift of meaning from party ideology to national statehood) and "The Young Communist" (in Georgian) was renamed "Young Iverieli" (in Georgian). This process is indicative of "a switch of emphasis not only within the categories of identity, but also within the dominant ideology" [Maisashvili 2010:58].

Frantz Fanon argues [Fanon 1961] that the purpose of decolonization at the global level is to change the world order, but unfortunately, it is not something one can make appear by a magic wand [Fanon 1961]. According to D. Moore, [Moore 2001:128] the postcolonial extraordinariness of the Soviet regions has not yet been properly assessed.

In the process of strengthening political power through seizing freedom by violence, the Georgian and Abkhazian subaltern [Dzidzaria 1982] <sup>6</sup> makes a

3 According to Moore or to the journal "Ab Imperio", there is a scholarly debate about the issue, how far the concept of colonialism can be applied to the Tsarist Empire: revised and reprinted

4 For an understanding of the term "colonization" in the Georgian-Tsarist context and the term "post-colonial" see D. Ch. Moore: "Across the entire zone, however, on both sides of the post-Soviet region's "European-Asian" split, a second factor blocks postcolonial critique: that factor is, indeed, the region's postcoloniality."

5 The concept of the 'stereotype' has been coined in 1922 by the American journalist Walter Lippmann. In his *Public Opinion*, Lippmann defined 'stereotype' as a simplified, preconceived idea, which does not stem from personal experience. "

6 Georgian and Abkhazian people damaged under the colonial oppression of the metropolis are both subaltern (but I would emphasize here that Russian intellectuals suffered colonial administration as much as non-Russian speaking and ethnically non-Russian

renewed use of the available resources in trying to regain the autonomy damaged under colonial oppression. The post-Soviet subjects were intrinsically aggressive to any form of violence, and politically unprepared (given the violence that exploded in Georgia after independence in Tbilisi and in Abkhazia, these two ethnicities became the “post-Soviet subjects”). They both fought with the recent past through the most primitive methods (besides, subordination is not characteristic of empires only, dominant elite groups can also have qualitatively subordinate subjects, just like they are subordinate to dominant institutions) [Chakrabarty 2000:101].

The heightened conflict that escalated into a serious military confrontation affected all ethnic groups living in Abkhazia, including, of course, Georgians and Abkhazians who, although were not numerous, represented [Wikipedia]<sup>7</sup> titular ethnic groups [Begiashvili...2007].. The UN observers came to the conclusion that both sides (Georgia and Abkhazia) were responsible for obvious violations of human rights. In May 1998 however, the war resumed (when Georgian partisans killed 20 Abkhaz policeman.<sup>8</sup> Regular Abkhazian forces retaliated and fought against the partisans) [Coppieters 2002]. This fact, as the political analyst Svante Cornell comments [Cornell 2000], “once again dashed the hope of resolving the conflict in the near future”.

Obviously, the step towards the “metaphysical” [Qolbaia...1999:85] freedom taken by the national government proved to be a step back with respect to civic interests (quite often, the leaders of the struggle for liberation were making public statements that caused negative feelings among ethnic groups enjoying status as a national minority in Georgia. “Anti-Georgian forces” were also taking advantage of the situation). Under ‘Perestroika’, both Georgia and Abkhazia found ways to justify their claims to independence, almost exclusively by relying on ethnic-national justifications.

### **Postcolonial conflict in Georgia**

The Georgian-Abkhazian type of conflict has been defined by a relevant term through the scholarly language of the West as a “postcolonial conflict”

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representatives of the Russian empire).

7 “20,000 to 30,000 ethnic Georgians have been reportedly killed and over 250,000 people have become internally displaced or refugees from Abkhazia as a result of the conflict. Throughout the conflict, numerous atrocities have been committed by both sides including ethnic cleansing against the ethnic Georgian population. 2,500 to 4,000 Abkhaz have been killed and 20,000 Abkhaz have been turned into refugees.”

8 The war resumed in May 1998 in the district of Gali, in the southern part of Abkhazia bordering with Georgia proper.

[Douillet 2010]. The Georgian discourse of the 1990s explicitly points out that the given conflict is essentially a post-Soviet conflict between Russia and Georgia. It does not stem solely from the antagonism between “the Georgian and Abkhazian nationalists”, but rather derives from the two-century-long controversy between Georgia and Russia (from the early nineteenth century until the present) [Wertsch...2012:37-48].

The practice of resorting to ‘icons’ is in general, a strategy directed at maintaining a collective identity; it creates a sense of increased threat, thus even more strongly consolidating the community members. The above technique has been used as a means of information warfare by all three parties (Georgia, Russia, and Abkhazia) [The Media and Stereotypes].<sup>9</sup>

The scrutiny of the materials in the Georgian media of the 1980s and 1990s as well as the 2000s shows the validity of several stereotypes that have to different degrees, been further reinforced by a series of essays such as: “False Legends” [Gasviani1994:6] and “The Abkhazian people and the Abkhaz language” [Mibchvani 1995:5]. The results epitomize the following Abkhazian/Georgian stereotypes:

1. The Georgians are to blame for all problems the Abkhazians have;
2. The Abkhazian people are “Not our own people,” they are the “other” Caucasians;

Some Georgian/Russian stereotypes (that have been largely reinforced by articles such as: “The Russian Cruelty”) [Bregvadze 2002:5]:

1. The Russians are conquerors/aggressors;
2. No one had ever been successful in bringing the Caucasus and Russia together by force;
3. Russia remains to be an “eternal enigma” (mostly for non-Soviet/post-Soviet thinkers. It isThe difficulty for Georgian politicians to determine how rational Russia’s policy is has often been noted by the Georgian media, when Russia abolishes a lot of negotiations as a rule. That’s why Russian policy is ‘outside of the field of prediction’).

But the real “enigma” for Georgians and Abkhazians, is the *Homo Sovieticus* [Saradze 1999], whose individual freedom and responsibility is absolutely devoid of a substantive value refusing to take certain security from the state. I would like to change this one with the term “Homo-ex-Sovieticus,” because in my opinion, the Georgian and Abkhazian subaltern was significantly different from the previous one even with its “illusion” of personal freedom since

9 “The media standardizes information in order to bring it closer to a stereotype. The performance played out by the media often leads people to becoming susceptible to a hidden system of ideological domination, i.e. does not allow the object to elaborate its own position.”

1989. “Homo-ex-Sovieticus” creates a reality that attempts to replace the Soviet Union with the virtual post-Soviet Union. However, it is not directed at overcoming Soviet stereotypes/myths within itself, as it sees the paradigms established in the Soviet era in absolute terms.

### **The Georgian-Abkhazian Media Narrative in 1980-1990s**

The situation in the state becomes complicated when one nation perceives another group as ‘the other’ or ‘not belonging to us’ while the relatedness to others often has a markedly negative or confrontational nature. Subsequently, we come across clear indications of the bipolarity of Russian politics in periodical discussions. Unfortunately, the historical reality of Georgia against the background of the dissolution of the (Soviet) Union has turned into a major source of “ethnic” conflicts ever since the 1990s, as the Soviet ethno-politics were on par with the common goals of the metropolis in managing the peripheries with “time bombs” governed by the Divide Et Impera [trans. Divide and conquer] principle.<sup>10</sup> We can see different modes of impacting the imperial power as active and continuous ever since colonization. The resistance discourse and interaction are what factor the most in the sustainability theory. The mutually beneficial relationship established between the governments of the metropolis and the peripheries is evident enough. As highlighted by Edward Said [Said 1995]: Scholars, whether consciously or unconsciously, were creating a new ideological mechanism enabling the conquerors to exercise control and exonerate their actions.

A rather brusque political language had been forcing its way into the background of the ongoing global and national self-determination and vis-à-vis by a “balanced” political discussion. The Georgian print media, perhaps editors, let us assume academics, and some political figures of the 1990s, full of national rhetoric [Wertsch 2008], apparently did not or could not take into account how Abkhazia (Ossetia) would act after Georgia attained independence. Unwittingly, the figures bearing a new national identity started to resemble “tiny” orientalists” [Janelidze 2007:11].<sup>11</sup>

It has been justly asserted that “scientific assumptions” have totally destroyed the historical consciousness of Georgian-Abkhazian unity [Freimut ...2001]. An exaggerated national self-esteem is a certain reflex on the Geor-

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10 Let us recall the agent Sitin’s letter: “the separation of Abkhazia should take place gradually, step by step, first by using ideological influence, and then, if need be, resorting to arms.”

11 By introducing the “Georgian nationalism” theory into the Western scientific and journalistic literature “the Russophile approach acquires a certain ideological legitimacy”.

gian side to compensate for losing the war in Abkhazia. The myth of “Georgian nationalism”, an attempt to “forcefully Georgianize” minorities, the so-called “Georgianization Theory”, “discriminating” ethnic minorities - this is how some Western authors characterize the Georgian policy towards national minorities pursued until the beginning of the 21st century [Janelidze 2007:7].

Thus, there are at least two reasons:

a) The placement of Abkhazians in an ethnic territory not of Georgian provenance;

b) The scientific denotation of the Abkhazian subject as “the other” - due to which the Abkhazian intellectual elite quite logically casts the Georgian subject out of the physical territory perceived as “its own”, just like the Georgian ethnic subject itself throws out the colonists (assignees of the Russian Empire), especially considering that the Georgian subject is better informed and, subsequently, carries a greater responsibility; the Abkhaz subject, on the other hand, as stated in certain Georgian circles, is “misinformed” [Papaskiri 1994:8] about the real historical processes and its information policy is also under imperialist rule.

From the rationalist scientific position, the discourse of the post-colonial subjects (those who pioneer to resolve the conflict), has always understood that the endless clamor regarding aboriginal roots would not lead anywhere, but instead deepen the rift. Any version regarding the source of the conflict was equally irritating for the disoriented ethnic unity serving the purpose imposed on it by the Soviet Union. Permanent violence characteristic of the colonial world was immanently repeated in the former Soviet Union, at a time when the indigenous social construct/everyday life had already been destroyed. The Abaz, Apsua, or Apsar, in defending Georgia, were alienated from the concept of Georgian nationhood by scholars or intellectual elite that had shaped the so-called “Abkhazian separatism”. The irritation of the Abaz consciousness reached its extremes, “their existence was ejected from Georgianhood” and the remaining vacuum was filled in return with the “brotherly” friendship of the Russians.

According to the researcher U. Gruska (Gruska 2005:3), the conflict in Abkhazia comes mainly as a result of the confrontation between the Georgian and Abkhazian nationalists. In our opinion, this is just one factor that kindled the conflict. The key role in the Abkhazian conflict goes to Russia’s desire to retain political influence in the “near abroad” and also a standard Georgian position preventing a reflection on the intrinsic reasons of the Abkhazian-Georgian conflict. Russia/the Soviet Union alone cannot be a sufficient reason to cause the strife [Shnirelman 2001:199-350; Cheterian 2008:37-85; Reisner 2010:157-179].

### **Media discourse and the collective performances of the 2000s**

In creating a resistant anti-colonial discourse, the contemporary (2000s) Georgian print media tenaciously tries to prove its truth in the controversy with a metropolitan subject. Both sides, the Georgian and the Abkhazian, know perfectly well that the only way to get rid of a colonist is to expel him from the world he has colonized. This is a certain representation of Manichaeism [Kirwan 2000] at the secular level. As F. Fanon notes [Fanon 1961], “not only is a colonist content with the physical space due to its totalitarian nature, but achieves the quintessential by declaring the colonized society devoid of value. The native is declared unethical, the one that denies values; it is an enemy of meanings, i. e. the absolute evil” [Fanon 1961:6]. Thus, the Abkhazian identity was expressed for the Georgians through an unusual name - Apsua [Cornell 2014], while a successful experiment, that of the russification of their cultural codes, was carried out on the Abkhaz ethnicity.

In our opinion, the Georgian nominal discourse inadvertently reinforced the resistance persisting at the unconscious level, “transferring” all possible guilt onto Russia (with the Abkhaz, in their turn, blaming Georgians), under the pretext that a “virginal nature” cannot be blamed. The responsibility for the evil committed is placed on a masculine image bearing some experience: “Russia’s deception and treachery is not surprising to anyone. For half of the world, it is not a reliable partner [...] Russia cannot be trusted, of course [Imedashvili 1993:4].

The collective perceptions of Abkhazians having an anti-Georgian orientation did not coincide with our own perceptions. During the period of self-determination (1988-1989), the legitimate paradigm of “being Georgian, speaking Georgian and building an independent state” is illegitimate for elite and public Abkhazian circles. “My own” of the Georgian academic historical discourse – “the Georgians and Abkhaz had a common misfortune in the face of Russian colonialism in the 19th century” [Nikoleishvili 2002:116-121] – becomes “Other”. It becomes alien to the Georgian context because its standardized national language has in fact and legally long been Russian. Language in the post-colonial philosophy<sup>12</sup> is synonymous to thought; being part of culture, it is used as a tool of oppression by the metropolis in the same way as any other method is. “Language has always been a weapon of spiritual enslavement” [Thiong’o 2004:1130].

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12 Under the legislation of the Republic of Georgia, the Georgian language was awarded the status of the sole state language. The constitution however, granted the same status to Abkhaz, which was native only to 1/6 of the population of the Republic.

There is no denying that the Soviet empire prioritized the promotion of the development of art and culture as well as various fields of science [Maghradze 1991:125-149], but in Georgia, where a new identity was being created, what had been installed by force could not be eradicated by the same force. It is exactly this type of force that ethnic minorities have been underscoring (this view has been permanently rejected by Georgian objects of discussion).

It might be true that the new ethnicity had lost touch with its old homeland and now referred to as Apsua, did not have any other homeland (in contrast to the Ossetians), but the derogative terms only intensified the hatred between participants of the dialogue, prolonging reconciliation for an uncertain amount of time and reinforcing the status of “the frozen conflict” all the more.<sup>13</sup>

In the narratives of the 1980s and 90s, the Abkhaz subaltern perceived itself for the most part as a victim, just like the Georgian counterpart did in its turn. This “Martyrological Paradigm” [Andronikashvili 2007:73–113] implies primarily a political idea<sup>14</sup>. S. Chervonnaya classifies the Georgian-Abkhazian “ethnicity” as a “myth”:

[...] Ни ‘добровольного,’ ни ‘прогрессивного,’ ни ‘независимого от Грузии’ присоединения Абхазии к России не было [...] Российское самодержавие, действительно, постепенно продвигается в Закавказье, по кускам, по частям аннексируя страны и порабощая его народы, постоянно чередуя при этом кровавое население с посулами, обещаниями. “ (There has been neither a “voluntary”, nor “progressive”, nor “independent from Georgia” merger of Abkhazia with Russia [...] Russian autocracy is indeed gradually moving forward in the Caucasus, annexing countries piece by piece, part by part, and enslaving their peoples by constantly supplying the blood-spattered people with alternative promises) [Червонная 1993:35; Layton 2005].

The separation of Georgia from the general Soviet space did not occur without a loss to the state. Disintegration of territorial integrity and legal equality are the key problems that have emerged as soon as Georgia began to break away from the uniform Soviet body. In regard to Europe, in whom excessive hopes might have been placed as a mediator in the Georgian political discourse, as D. Chakrabarty [Chakrabarty 2000:28] justly observed, it acted as “a silent reviewer of historical knowledge.”

13 The necessity of bringing the truth to the Abkhazian population poisoned by information, has remained a concern of Georgian scholars with the book, *A Manual in the History of Abkhazia* being in circulation since 1991.

14 The role of the sacrificial lamb frees the object of torture from any responsibility whatsoever, as it has already brought sacrifice through its own torture, i.e. it has already been redeemed from sin.



The subject of the post-Soviet Georgian ethnos, the “homo ex-Sovieticus,” creates a reality that attempts to replace the Soviet Union with the virtual post-Soviet Union. However, it is not directed at overcoming Soviet myths within itself, as it sees the paradigms established in the Soviet era in absolute terms. Models of thought from the subordination period come back in the form of obsessive ideas and actions showing resistance to the attempts of unshackling oneself from the past. In the article “The Cultural/Socio-Cultural Conflict in a Transitional Society” [Tsipuria 2010:239–251], B. Tsipuria notes that, surprising as it might seem, “the post-Soviet, traumatic, but nonetheless stagnant situation in Georgia has not resulted in a conflict between cultural spaces” since the 1990s. Probably, because of the indestructible Soviet identity until now, cultural spaces are still strong and deep or are simply non-prevailing [Chikovani 2006].

The analysis of journalistic materials pertaining to the period of the 2000s shows the need to overcome prevailing stereotypes [Hunyadi 1998] and bring ethnic relations to the cultural wing in order to secure a genuine peace without violence, provided this is really grounded on sincere repentance and forgetfulness. The principles of a peaceful coexistence without territorial/human losses are relevant to all three parties.

### Conclusion

Thus the strategies of colonization – assimilation and hybridization through language, the creation of historical myth, cultivation of an exaggerated view of one’s past and russification of the origins of Abkhazian cultural codes – were at the same time successful experiments employed by the metropolis against Abkhazia.

The creator of a resistant anti-colonial discourse, the modern (2000s) Georgian press is still stubbornly trying to justify the historical truth of a metropolitan entity in its polemics. So, the cardinal difference between the discourses of the 1980s, the 1990s, and the 2000s is that a requirement to break the stereotypes emerged in the 2000s. This change can be achieved through a cultural dialogue, since culture is a function and source of identity. Consequently, over the course of three decades (from the 1980s up to the 2000s), the character of the Georgian print media can be defined as a postcolonial “anti-imperialist discourse”. The subject of the post-Soviet Georgian ethnos creates a reality that attempts to replace the Soviet Union with the virtual post-Soviet Union. However, it is not directed at overcoming the Soviet stereotypes/myths within itself, as it sees the paradigms established in the Soviet era in

absolute terms. Models of thought from the subordination period come back in the form of obsessive ideas and actions showing resistance to the attempts of unshackling oneself from the past. The subject of the post-Soviet Georgian ethnos creates a reality that attempts to replace the Soviet Union with the virtual post-Soviet Union. However, it is not directed at overcoming the Soviet stereotypes/myths within itself, as it sees the paradigms established in the Soviet era in absolute terms.

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