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NATION AND STATE-BUILDING IN GEORGIA BEFORE AND AFTER THE ROSE REVOLUTION

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Summary

In this article, the stages of the nation-building process in Georgia, which gained its independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union, will be discussed. In the article, first of all, the historical elements that contributed to the nation-building process of Georgia will be discussed chronologically. In the following part of the article, the policies and steps taken by Independent Georgia until the Rose Revolution in the name of the nation and state-building will be discussed. Finally, the new understanding of identity that came with the Rose Revolution, a peaceful revolutionary movement, will be discussed. Throughout the article, it will be pointed out to what extent Georgia has achieved such features as providing equality and justice in political life, achieving economic prosperity, and increasing the freedom of civil society and media organizations, which are necessary for being a democratic country.

Key Words: Post-Soviet Georgia, Rose Revolution, Independence, Nation-building, State-building, History, Language, Religion.

Introduction

Every nation is unique. Because each of them consists of different combinations of the history and social-cultural characteristics of different geographies. Until the 18th century, the idea of a “nation” was largely unknown. Primitive tribes, clans, and groups of people lived under the hegemony of various Empires. The people of an empire became subjects of another empire overnight after a new victory, so under the doctrine of patriotism, they had to respect the new leader’s rule

(Barbashin & Aftab, 2007). According to the histories of countries, ethnonational myths generally support the claim of existence as a nation, for centuries.

While a nation is being built, political, economic, and social factors are of great importance. The ethnic composition and diversity of identity in the Caucasus require explanations at an analytical level. For this reason, the efforts of countries in this geography to create a national identity are interesting. The stages of nation-building and state-building were important in these states, which have enjoyed independence after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. But while in the changing world order and the economic and political-institutional transitions between conflicting sociopolitical cultures, the multiple tasks of states, such as nation-state building, have been a daunting task for the post-Soviet multicultural societies.

This article will analyze the nation-building process of Georgia primarily from a historical perspective. Later, the nation-building and state-building processes of Georgia, which gained its independence after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, will be focused on and the contribution of color revolutions to this process will be discussed.

Georgian Identity from a Historical Perspective

Georgia has existed for thousands of years as a people, if not a nation, under various political orders and changing borders. Modern ethno-political problems embodied through conquests, migrations, forced assimilation, and acculturation, as well as ethnic language and cultural fragmentation, made it compulsory for several groups to disintegrate into sub-ethnic groups or to form new ethnicities. Regarding ethnic Georgians as the core ethnic group, symbolization of myths helped Georgians overcome psychological insecurity in a unitary state, political myths such as “Georgians are European”; religious myths such as “Georgia is the first Christian country of Europe” have equipped nationalism with ethnic and religious content (Maksim & Aftab, 2007).

During the great invasions for centuries, Georgia has played the role of a buffer state among other countries. Being among the Muslim states has caused Georgia’s national identity to be carried out through religion. Therefore, Georgia has always sought help from the Christian West (Mirzayeva, 2019). The Orthodox Christian population of this region acquired its own alphabet as early as the fifth century, and later the Georgian language became widely used as a ritual language. Religion was considered an important factor in defining national lands; this situation also led to differentiation in identity construction. The separation between the two Caucasian churches - Armenian and Georgian - at the beginning of the seventh century had serious consequences for the differentiation of collective identities. In 1811, after the annexation of Georgia by Tsarist Russia, Alexander I. removed the autocephaly of the Georgian Church. The church was turned into a sect of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russification policies started (Mirzayeva, 2019).

Since Orthodox Christianity symbolizes a glorious past, it has been accepted as an important part of the national narrative. Religion has been used as an important symbol by various regimes in line with the interests of the state. For the fathers of Georgian nationalism, such as Ilia Chavchavadze (1837–1907), it was language, not a religion, that determined national identity (Mirzayeva, 2019). In 1860, Ilia Chavchavadze proposed a triad that would later form the formula for the Georgian nation: Fatherland, Language, Faith (*mamuli, ena, sartsmunoeba*). So, the modern idea of the Georgian nation began to evolve in the 1860s. Ilia Chavchavadze, one of the leading figures of the Georgian national movement in this process, was called the ‘father of the nation’. The idea of “national awakening” was typically central to the thought of Ilia Chavchavadze. In this

context, the features that unite the members of the nation were determined as a common Georgian language (Nodia, 2009).

Education and accessibility to it, played an important role in the formation of national identity in general. The “Spreading of Literacy among Georgians” was established in 1879 to open schools in different regions and provide funding for them. It served to create a common national self-consciousness that ultimately brought to the fore the consolidation of the nation. At this point, attention was paid to the use of the Georgian language while developing the literary language. For similar purposes, the use of the Georgian language initiated by Chavchavadze has gained momentum (Dundua, 2018).

The triad became one of the main slogans in the late 1980s, with the emergence of the mass Georgian national movement. The difference was that the Church as a national heritage was also used as an important element. Religion is placed at the center of national identity in contemporary Georgian nationalism, as it was restructured in the 1970s and 1980s (Serrano, 2014).

Accordingly, in the 1980-1990s the idea that “real Georgians were only orthodox Christian Georgians” was dominant. Of course, this has been a big problem for Muslim Georgians living in Adjara. Chavchavadze was expelled from the Orthodox Church in 1887, but ironically his concepts of “fatherland, language and faith” were adopted as the slogan of the nationalist movement in the 1980s. Since then, the church has begun to gain the upper hand by subordinating national identity to itself (Mirzayeva, 2019).

Zviad Gamsahurdia, the first elected President of Georgia, played a special role in the reconstruction of this “fatherland, language and faith” idea and the recall of Georgian legends during 1990-1991. Chavchavadze’s secular project has been transformed into a religious project based on the policies of Zviad Gamsahurdia. It is evident from Gamsahurdia’s speeches that the main reason for his progress in this direction was that at that time the Georgian Orthodox Church was seen as the only element capable of preserving the unity of the Georgian territory (Mirzayeva, 2019). Despite efforts to unite this entire nation under the roof of religion, under the leadership of Gamsahurdia, 1991 was a year of internal repression, economic chaos, and ethnic conflicts with minorities (Abkhaz, Ossetians). The indifference of the Gamsahurdia government to the solution of political and social problems prevented the establishment of a national state in Georgia. Religious fundamentalism had led to the deepening of extremism. This caused conflicts between minorities. The opponents of his chauvinism called Gamsahurdia a dictator and fascist. In December 1991, Gamsahurdia ordered the arrest of these opponents, but as a result of an armed conflict in front of the government building, he was forced to leave the presidency (Mirzayeva, 2019). After the overthrow of Gamsahurdia in 1992, references to the “Georgian gene” stand out during the nation-building process by the new president.

Nation-State Building Process in Post-Soviet Georgia Before The Rose Revolution

The road to Georgia’s independence started in the late 1980s in parallel with the perestroika policy of the Soviet Union. During this period, national sentiment spread rapidly among Georgians, and from 1988 tens of thousands of people protested in front of the Parliament building in Tbilisi to support the independence of Georgia. In the following period, Georgia gained its independence with the collapse of the Soviet Union.

In the first years following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the issue of turning to democracy, which represents the “transition process” that would transform existing political systems

from dictatorships to parliamentary democracies and planned economies, had been on the agenda (Cheterian, 2008).

Gamsakhurdia, the first president of independent Georgia, was terminated in January 1992 after a violent coup. At that time, the Georgian population saw Eduard Shevardnadze as a great hope and stabilizing factor in a country where chaos prevailed and industrial production almost stopped. When Shevardnadze arrived, he implemented many practices during the transition to democracy. By mobilizing against various non-state violent actors in Georgian society, he maintained a certain level of public order, physical security, and stability, but his administration was unable to stop the country's progressive political and cultural fragmentation. With the adoption of the Constitution of 1995, although the formal requirements of being a democratic state were brought under its presidency, these norms were manipulated and could not be implemented properly. The political, economic, and legal reforms that were the cornerstones of a democratic consolidation were undermined by corruption and economic recession. Shevardnadze's administration faced a decline in its authority due to the emergence of internal divisions and opposition; as a result, he had to take authoritarian measures to stay in power (Jawad, 2006).

During this period, there were armed conflicts for independence in Abkhazia. After months of fighting in the autumn of 1993, Georgian government troops suffered constant military casualties. In the Georgian view, this strikingly rapid military success of the Abkhaz troops was due to the support of Russian military equipment and Chechen free fighters. At the end of the process, Tbilisi lost Abkhazia. President Shevardnadze hardened his policies by declaring a state of emergency as ethnopolitical conflicts were in danger of escalating in other parts of Georgia. A similar turmoil had also occurred in the South Ossetia region. In such events, Russia's involvement in the role of a peacekeeper and having a voice in the domestic affairs of Georgia was also a factor that weakened the authority of the state (Krohg-Sørensen, 2011). It was very difficult to build a common culture and identity in this environment. Because it is important to build common values that people can gather around during the nation-building process. However, this unstable situation in Georgia also undermined the nation-building process.

Shevardnadze began to see Georgian history as the history of the Great Silk Road. The main thing on the basis of this idea was that Georgian culture was at the crossroads of Eastern and Western culture. Apart from that, religion continued to have an important place in the construction of national identity. For example, the patriarch had called for the abolition of non-historic religious sects because, according to the patriarch's opinion, they were threatening Georgia's identity. In October 2002, Shevardnadze and Ilia II. signed a consortium securing the privileges of the Apostolic Church in Georgia (Mirzayeva, 2019). On that day, a constitutional agreement was signed between the Church and the Georgian state "defining the relations between the Georgian state and the Georgian Orthodox Apostolic Church". This treaty behaved Orthodox Christianity as the official religion and created an obvious inequality of rights with other religions (Serrano, 2014).

After a while, as the authority of the church increased, state officials who sought to use normative means to limit the Church's influence were also encouraging trends towards de-secularization. The church was getting more and more money from the state budget (Serrano, 2014). The reaction of the public against this situation was growing. In this atmosphere, the president announced a treaty on freedom of worship would be signed between the Vatican and Georgia. The Orthodox Church criticized the agreement, pointing out that all church-state relations would be under the control of the church. Some monks and senior officials started protesting in front of the state building to prevent the signing of this agreement. The main slogans were "Leave Georgia!" and "Georgia without the Vatican" (Mirzayeva, 2019). These actions occupied an important place on the

way to the Rose Revolution.

As a result, when an assessment of the country's pre-Rose Revolution situation is made, it is seen that there were many administrative failures in the Georgian state. Firstly, the excess of criminal activities and weak law enforcement brought political and economic corruption. Secondly, the gap in the political, economic, and legal spheres had completely destroyed public trust in the political system, neutralized accountability mechanisms, and undermined the legitimacy of the leadership. Thirdly, economic benefits were monopolized across clan structures, and corruption significantly reduces government revenue (Huber, 2004). In addition to all these, conflicts in some regions of the country continued to feed internal turmoil and endanger territorial integrity.

Shevardnadze's public support decreased significantly with all these events. In 2003, the government budget deficit was so high that half of Georgia's population lived below the poverty level. Dissatisfaction with Shevardnadze's administration was at a higher level. Regarding the parliamentary elections held on 2 November 2003, Mikhail Saakashvili claimed that the elections were fraudulent and this was supported by independent international organizations. Then, peaceful demonstrations against the government started to be held in Tbilisi. Almost all democratic opposition forces participated in these demonstrations. As a result of this, the events are known as the "Rose Revolution" reached its climax on 23 November 2003. This revolution concluded with the end of the Shevardnadze era.

New Dynamics Coming With The Rose Revolution

After the collapse of the USSR, although the transition to Western-style democracies was expected, it did not happen. While the few states that had gained their independence chose authoritarian, dictatorial regimes, others sought to find a different balance that was neither identical to Western democracies nor resembling the former Soviet totalitarian or authoritarian model. Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan had multiparty systems, media diversity, and a reasonably developing NGO sector. These societies are also called "gray zones". Those had become "hybrid regimes" with the weak state administration, corrupted bureaucracies, and weak political opposition. Color Revolutions had created new hopes for those countries, including Georgia. The revolutions overthrow not only the old and corrupted regimes but also revived the theories of transition (Cheterian, 2008).

The Rose Revolution that took place in November 2003 was the result of the Georgian people's striving for the development of a democratic society and the improvement of human rights, reducing corruption, improving the economy, and improving social conditions. As a result of the Rose Revolution, Mikhail Saakashvili became the president of Georgia. Mikhail Saakashvili, an educated politician from Columbia University who emerged as the country's leader after the Rose Revolution, appointed influential actors to the ministries as soon as he took the office. After Saakashvili starting the presidency, he tended to economic reforms. Accordingly, economic reforms were divided into three categories: bureaucratization, privatization, and liberalization. On June 24, 2004, with the initiative of President Saakashvili, parliament accepted the Organized Crime and Extortion Act (Lawson, 2014). Georgia had been dealing with organized crime since independence. Saakashvili gave the people great hope. However, reform policies slowed down after a while, and the administration began to approach the pre-revolutionary style.

After the Rose Revolution, Georgia began its journey of building a new nation. Accordingly, a comprehensive democratic nation-building process was initiated in Georgia by the Saakashvili administration. Three points were determined in order for the democratic nation-building process to

be successful in Georgia after the Rose Revolution. The first was the protection of territorial integrity. As a matter of fact, this had been achieved in Adjara. The second was the operations against corruption and organized crime in public institutions. Third, improvements in public infrastructure were achieved through the restoration of roads, repainting of the facades of buildings in major cities across the country, and re-provision of free medical emergency services.

The importance emphasized on the unifying role of religion is also seen in the Saakashvili period. All three presidents of independent Georgia took an oath on the Bible. Mikhail Saakashvili also received the approval of the Catholicos-Patriarch at the opening ceremony in 2004. Parliament adopted the country's new flag after the Rose Revolution. The new flag has five crosses on it, which symbolizes Christian associations. The state emblem, adopted on 1 October 2004, describes a depiction of Saint George, Georgia's patron saint, and its slogan was "In Unity, Strength".

Ensuring the unitary structure of Georgia was the primary target of the Saakashvili administration. It aimed to solve the problems with mutual dialogue and economic incentives in order to ensure the integration of problematic regions with Georgia. With the new synergy brought by the color revolutions, the Saakashvili administration planned to bring the people of the separatist regions to its side by realizing democracy in Georgia. As a result of these efforts, the victory of the central government of Georgia in Adjara has been a significant success. Therefore, Saakashvili concluded that this success could also be experienced in Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Atıcı Köktaş, 2015). However, this was not as easy as he thought.

A painful situation had also happened with higher education reforms during the state-building process. The new higher education law had limited the duration of professorships and stated that new professorships would be filled through public competition. This reform caused an intergenerational struggle in Georgian universities. A group was known as "protesting professors" merged by taking the support of some opposition politicians, and a series of protests took place in the spring and summer of 2007 (Aprasidze, 2008). Such conflicts between the state and society destabilize the possibility of a democratic system in Georgia. In this context, the transition to democracy, which was expected with great desire and hope after the Rose Revolution, did not materialize as expected.

In this environment, Georgia had a unified leadership and a political monopoly for a period of four years. After the tragic death of Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania on February 3, 2005, President Saakashvili took full control over Georgia's political scene. Between 2003-2013, the United National Movement (UNM) and its leader, Mikhail Saakashvili, did not have considerable opposition. In this process, although there were several attempts by the opposition to challenge the UNM, no significant results were achieved. Public support to the opposition political parties was also very low (Markozashvili, 2014). Because the public's trust in political life was completely reduced. They believed that even if they supported the opposition, they could not prevail. Clearly, this political situation was not compatible with a democratic structure.

One of the most important points that distinguish Saakashvili from Shevardnadze is that he had received western support. In addition, the drive for change and modernization created a rift in Georgian society between the Westernized, English-speaking segment, and the educated and Russian-speaking segment that still preserve the old values of the society. This led to a division in society (Cheterian, 2008). Unfinished state and nation-building processes have also been an obstacle to the further democratic consolidation of Georgia. It can be argued that promoting democracy contributes to nation-building. To create a common identity, equal rights to participate in political life should be created for all communities in Georgia. It has become increasingly difficult for Georgia to build a nation on solid ground, as a weak state enables the maintenance of the shadow economy

and smuggling. On the other hand, Georgia had to prove to the West that it was a democratic nation -at least it had to show its effort to be democratized- because it sought to establish its national identity on being European, and wanted to join western alliances such as the EU and NATO. In this context, in Georgia, civil society and the press were freer than autocratic regimes. However, it would be wrong to say that this is a complete democracy.

It is seen that Saakashvili frequently made arbitrary changes in the government and prevented a stable administration from occurring. The most obvious example of this situation is that the names with whom he collaborated immediately after the Rose Revolution broke away from Saakashvili and turned to the opposition. With the strengthening of the opposition, anti-Saakashvili groups started to take to the streets in 2007, albeit slowly. Saakashvili's reaction to the events was the decision to hold early elections for the presidency in January of 2008. Although Saakashvili had not encountered a strong opponent, the huge drop in the rate of votes he received was remarkable. The foreign policy followed by the unstable and authoritarian rule dragged the country to the Russia-Georgia War in August 2008 (Çelikpala, 2014). Considering the foreign policy of the Saakashvili period, EU and NATO memberships constituted the main agenda of Saakashvili in the context of getting closer to the Western world. This has been an issue that strained relations with Russia.

The Russian-Georgian War, which started at midnight on August 7–8, means the beginning of a new political era for Georgia, with the recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia on August 26 by the Russian Federation. The war fundamentally shook the Saakashvili administration because it put the country in a difficult position when it comes to territorial integrity. Saakashvili, in the post-war period, displayed a similar management style to the previous period. Within the framework of the approach to strengthen the central government, the understanding of decision-making continued far from democracy.

Conclusion

As a result, in order to explain the main historical lines of Georgia on the path to becoming a nation-state, in this paper the nation-building processes used to unite the Georgian people before they came under the auspices of the Soviet Union were evaluated. During the Soviet Union, Georgia abandoned the idea of becoming a nation as a result of various assimilation policies. However, in the 1980s, nationalist sentiments re-emerged with the perestroika policy. As the first president of the new post-Soviet republic, Zviad Gamsakhurdia's only successful effort was to establish an independent Georgia as a nation-state. When Shevardnadze became president, the emphasis was placed on state-building rather than the nation-building process. In this context, the West was seen as a role model for the Georgian state. However, conflicts with Russia and the minorities remained unresolved, and this period has to come to an end with the Rose Revolution. Saakashvili embraced nation-building as the main endeavor and rapidly recreated Georgia's national identity signs filled with national symbols and intense national awareness.

Transition to democracy and the construction of national identity has an important place in the establishment of post-Soviet order in Georgia. In this context, it is understandable that the nation-building tools such as religion and language, which have been the main lines of Georgian identity for hundreds of years, were not sufficient after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the realization of the Rose Revolution. In order to keep the nation together in the new order established after these events and to have an effective nation-identity model, an environment of welfare and trust should be provided. Establishing equality and justice in political life, increasing economic prosperity, and reducing the pressure of civil society and media organizations, which are the main

veins of democracy, have an important place while building a nation.

However, democracy, especially for a nation in transition, can be subjected to significant pressure from various actors and can be regarded as a confusing concept. In this direction, some states that gained their independence as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union had an autocratic orientation rather than democracy. As a result of this, the Rose Revolution and the November 2007 crisis occurred in Georgia because of the pressure implemented by the state which provoked civil society. This situation made most of the Georgian population consider that the leaders such as Shevardnadze and Saakashvili could be illegitimate democratic leaders, further reducing trust in the state. Besides, when conflicts and problems in foreign relations were added to all this internal chaos, Saakashvili's legitimacy gradually diminished.

Considering in general, the first and fundamental problem of Georgia regarding national unity and national identity building lies in sovereignty. The official jurisdiction of Georgia does not actually extend to the regions and people as declared in the constitution. The second problem arises as a result of the first. According to this, Georgian governments made serious political mistakes from the very beginning in dealing with the institutionalization of the bureaucratic legacy of the occupied regions. Third, the wrong policies of Saakashvili's government made the country even more complicated and unstable. Because he had a political superiority that lacked popular support. When all these factors are taken into consideration, an unstable and de-democratizing Georgian picture is formed.

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