

# FLUCTUATING MEMORY: ROTATING IMAGES OF THE “BIG BROTHER” AND “AGGRESSOR”

**Nino Chikovani, Ketevan Kakitelashvili**

*Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, Georgia*

**Abstract:** The paper deals with some peculiarities of formation of the post-Soviet memory in Georgia. The impact of changeable political reality on this process is discussed in particular. The study focuses on the transformation of image of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Russia in the post-Soviet collective memory. To this end, textual materials as well as other types of *realms of memory* are analyzed.

**Keywords:** realms of memory, Georgia, image of Russia, “Big Brother”, “Aggressor”.

Realms of memory which play an important role in the formation of collective memory shape the images of *enemy* and *ally*. The rotation of these images is tightly connected with political conjuncture. The dynamics of the image of Russia in the post-Soviet Georgia proves this statement.

The representation of Russia has been always controversial in the Georgian public space, with the rotating images of a “saviour” and “aggressor.” They have been layered in the collective memory and have been activated according to the concrete political reality of the time.

The image of Russia as a potential protector has appeared in the Georgian political thought since Russia

declared his claims on the legacy of the Byzantine Empire (Moscow – the Third Rome). This was mainly determined by the shared religious believe, which became significant during centuries long period of the contradictory relations between the Christian Georgia and the Byzantium. Although the orientation towards Russia has always had opponents and supporters, it was seen as the sole way out of the existing deadlock. The rotating images of Russia could be observed from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The writings of the famous Georgian public figures of that period clearly illustrate the contradictory image of Russia.

After the Soviet occupation of Georgia, the above-mentioned image of Russia was maintained, although it was re-shaped with some new accents. At the early stages of the Soviet rule, Russian Empire was presented as a “prison of the peoples”; this concept was used for stressing the new historical mission of the Soviet Russia – to forge the “brotherhood” of all Soviet peoples.

From the 1930s, the narrative on the role of Russia and the Russian people has been radically changed. The Russian people was transformed into “the big brother in the brotherhood of the Soviet Peoples” and was ascribed the task of maintenance of the strength of the Soviet family. The remark of Stalin in his conversation with Lion Feuchtwanger

on 8 January 1937 served as a basis of appearance of the concept of "Great Russian People" in the rhetoric of the party nomenclature of the USSR: "It could not be constantly stressed that once Russians have been the ruling people" (Vladimirov 2013). In addition, after the toast delivered by Stalin at the reception in Kremlin dedicated to the victory over the Nazi Germany on 24 May 1945 (*„I would like to propose a toast to the health of the Soviet people, and first of all, the Russian people. I drink for Russian people's health as this people is the most prominent nation among all nations of the USSR"* (Stalin 1950)) the concept of a "big brother" was also established and maintained till the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Here are several fragments from the public speeches of the Georgian Communist Party leaders:

- "The Georgian people made this progress with support of all peoples of the Soviet Union, and first of all, with that of his elder brother - great Russian people" (*Akaki Mgeladze, Secretary of Central Committee of the Communist Party of Georgia, XIX congress of CPSU, 1952*).
- "Georgian people always remember that he has to thank the Party of Lenin and Stalin, the Great Russian people, comrade Stalin for liberation, for the boom of industry, agriculture and culture" (*delegate V. Tskhovrebashvili, XIX congress of CPSU, 1952*).
- "The real sunrise came to us not from the East but from the North, from Russia, this was a sun of Lenin's ideas... This monument [to Lenin] is a symbol of friendship with our great, powerful and wise brother – the

Russian people" (*Eduard Shevardnadze, First Secretary of Central Committee of the Communist Party of Georgia, Meeting dedicated to the anniversary of the sovietisation of Georgia, 25 February 1976*).

- "After two years we will celebrate the two hundred anniversary of becoming related with Russia... Russia dispersed the mist and became an ever-burning light. Together with Russia, guided by Russia and the Great Russian people, other people-brothers also dispersed the mist" (*Eduard Shevardnadze, First Secretary of Central Committee of the Communist Party of Georgia, XXVI Congress of CPSU, 1981*).
- "Internationalism, friendship and brotherhood, aspiration for mutual spiritual enrichment – this is the inherent need of the Soviet peoples. We fully feel this while celebrating the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Georgievsk Treaty which intimately related us with Russia... Today we have to strengthen this friendship, take care of it (*Dzumber Patiashvili, First Secretary of Central Committee of the Communist Party of Georgia, XXVII Congress of CPSU, 1986*) (Vladimirov 2013).

As a compromise between the two above-mentioned images – oppressor and saviour – the concept of the "least misfortune" was proposed: notwithstanding the fact that the choice in favour of Russia led to the abolishment of the statehood and the colonial oppression, Georgians still managed to avoid the threat of the physical extinction.

The next stage – salvation and survival: unity with Russia was not the misfortune at all, but the only chance of survival for Georgia. “The Way towards the Salvation and Survival” – that was a name of the book published in 1983 by one of the Georgian historians (Asatiani 1983). On the same year, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Georgia commemorated the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Georgievsk Treaty between Georgia and Russia, although it was unable to celebrate it according to the scale as planned initially. This desire was realized also in the shape of a feature film, which had a meaningful title like the above-mentioned book – “The Book of Oath”; it was a story of the Georgian-Russian relations culminated with the Georgievsk Treaty.

The image of Russia, reflected in the dominant narrative of this period, was unilaterally positive. It is not only the case of the Russian state but that of the Russian people and its concrete representatives, who were presented through positive images in any sphere of formation of memory.

After the Perestroika, re-evaluation of the past came under the focus. On the wave of uprising of the national movement, the terms *occupation* and *annexation* first appeared in the non-formal periodicals, at the demonstrations, claiming independence of the Georgian state, and in various literary texts for the description of the process of imposition of the Soviet rule in Georgia.

In the post-Soviet period, the rotation of images of “Big Brother”/“Saviour” and “Aggressor” was sharply expressed. In the first years after independence, the desire of detaching from the Soviet past shared with Russia was apparent. The negative moments of the Soviet past (1921 – Sovietisation, 1924 – bloody crush of the anti-Soviet rebellion, the Soviet repressions, deportations, attempts

of planting the Russian language in the educational sphere, etc.) were underlined.

There is no anti-Russian mode in the rhetoric of the first president of Georgia – Zviad Gamsakhurdia; he was talking on imperial forces and “agents of Kremlin,” although these were the Soviet imperial forces (Gamsakhurdia 1991) and the Soviet Kremlin. Zviad Gamsakhurdia’s declaration on 23 March 1991, after the meeting with the President of the Russian Federation Boris Yeltsin, is an example of appeal to the positive experience of the past: “We have been waiting for this day for a long time. And now, it is symbolic that we meet at the place where Pushkin left his footprints on the Georgian soil on the very first time. The things went smoothly and poetically and we are thankful to the fait for this” (Gamsakhurdia 1991).

In the rhetoric of Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the anti-Western pathos superseded the anti-Russian one: “I think that the contemporary role of Russia in the Caucasus does not correspond to its own interests and it is imposed on it from the other side of the ocean ... I had aspired to firm connections with Russia and had been dreaming to find a natural ally of Georgia in this big eastern neighbour. But this was not convenient for the West and for the government of Russia, which obeyed to her... I hope for the wisdom of the people found in conflict, and that of the Russian people first and foremost... Only the West will benefit from the new war,” Gamsakhurdia mentioned in his interview with the Russian newspaper “Narodnaya Pravda” in 1992 (Gamsakhurdia 1992).

Attitude towards the *realms of memory* attests that during the last years of the Soviet Union and the first years of the post-Soviet era, the image of Russia was not clearly shaped; the main attention was paid

to the overcoming the legacy of the Soviet past. After the tragedy of 9 April 1989 (when the anti-Soviet demonstration in the centre of Tbilisi, crushed by the Soviet Army with spades and poisoning gas, ended up with death of the peaceful population), the sculpture in front of the Palace of the government which symbolized the union of workers and peasants was demolished. This was followed by destroying the monument of Sergo Ordzonikidze – the Georgian communist whose name was connected with the Sovietisation of Georgia, and that of Sergei Kirov – a famous Russian Bolshevik. The monument of Lenin was torn down in 1991; a year before, the square named after him, which hosted his monument, was renamed back into the *Freedom Square* – the name which was given in 1918-1921, whereas the street named after Lenin was given the name of Merab Kostava – one of the leaders of the national-liberation movement who died tragically in 1989. In 1990-1991, monuments of the Communist Party leaders (Lado Ketskaveli, Boris Dzeladze, Kamo, Dzerzhinsky, 26 Commissars from Baku) were also demolished. It is visible that the ethnic belonging did not play any role in this process. Unfortunately, alongside with the communist monuments, which did not have any artistic and aesthetic value, the building of the Institute of Marxism-Leninism (later on - the seat of the Parliament of Georgia and the house of the Constitutional Court), and the bas-reliefs on its facade by the renowned Georgian sculptors Tamar Abakelia and Jacob Nikoladze became the targets of the monument hunters (in 1990).

The titles of streets named after the revolutionaries and the Communist party figures (Shaumyan, Makharadze, Ordzonikidze, Plekhanov, Perovskaya, Kamo, Luxemburg, street of 1 May, etc.)

were changed in Tbilisi and other main cities. These streets were named after the famous Georgian public figures, kings, historical personalities or remarkable events. The names of the Metro stations, connected with the Soviet past, were changed as well: "26 Commissars" was renamed into Avlabari, "October" was named as Nadzaladevi (the both of the new names are historical toponyms of Tbilisi). It should be mentioned that changes did not affect streets and squares named after the Russian writers and famous figures (Pushkin, Lermontov, Gogol, Griboyedov, Turgenev, Tolstoy, Glinka, Dekabrists, Tchaikovsky, Esenin, Mayakovsky, Muchurin, Yuri Gagarin, etc.).

The names of the towns and villages were also changed – the old names were brought back instead of revolutionaries and Soviet leaders: Makharadze – Ozurgeti, Gegechkori – Martvili, Tskhakaia – Senaki. The village named after the Russian Soviet poet Vladimir Mayakovsky (as it was the place of his birth) was renamed to its old historical Name Bagdati, however, his museum still exists in the village, as well as his monument in Tbilisi.

One more *place of memory* affected by the first wave of overcoming the Soviet legacy, was the Mtatsminda pantheon of writers and public figures in Tbilisi. In the 1990s, the well-known Communist leaders – Philipe Makharadze, Silibistro Todria, Mikha Tskhakaya – were reburied from Mtatsminda to different cemeteries. It should be mentioned that nobody touched the grave of the famous Russian writer Alexander Griboyedov on Mtatsminda and his monument in the central part of Tbilisi. We think that these steps could be considered as the attempts of construction of the new memory through dismantling and erasing the old one (Shatirishvili 2010: 112).

The conflicts of the 1990s played particularly important role in the transformation of the image

of Russia. Exactly from 1990s, the image of the Soviet Union was gradually overlapped with that of Russia as a main opponent on the way to the construction of an independent state. Two images of Russia confronted each other: on the one hand – coreligionist, trustworthy supporter, strategic ally, who played an important role in the survival of the Georgian people and whose democratic development now is endangered by reactionary forces; on the other hand - modified Empire which does not let any former part to go.

The rhetoric of Eduard Shevardnadze regarding Russia was not consistent. In September 1993, when the fate of the war in Abkhazia was at stake and there was a civil war in Georgia, Shevardnadze published "The Appeal to all Friends of my Motherland!" This was the very first time when he expressed his disappointment with the policy of Russia: "Currently, when activities of the anti-popular forces are bounded into one stream even in Georgia ...the activities of some high-rank Russian militaries and that of the Parliament of Russia enables us to argue that we are facing a coordinated and synchronized attack on Georgia... I want the World to understand: Abkhazia is a battleground of the bloody revenge of the Empire... This is the third time that we trusted the Russian peacekeeping forces as the guarantors and mediators and signed the agreement on 27 July 1993. But we still were betrayed. The guarantor of the implementation of the agreement did not wish, or was not able, to be a guarantor" (Shevardnadze 1993: 1).

However, in the same Appeal, the well-known idea regarding "Two Russias" was repeated by Shevardnadze. This had determined the attitude and rhetoric towards Russia during the entire period of his rule: "Abkhazia... is a barrel of gunpowder

which is wanted to be used for blowing up not only Shevardnadze's Georgia but Yeltsin's Russia as well... There is no doubt that the president of Russia is sincerely interested in the peaceful resolution of the conflict, but he is blocked by the same forces which are aimed to crash us... Still, I would like to appeal to Boris Eltsin: You have done a lot for Georgia during its hardest days... Probably, it is the right moment for you to raise a word for its protection, for the protection of your Russia, as our peoples always shared the common fate" (Shevardnadze 1993: 1). The year before, on 7 October 1992, there was the same rhetoric by the Deputy Minister of the foreign affairs Tedo Dzaparidze during his speech at the UN Security Council (Dzaparidze 2013).

The statement regarding "Two Russias" – one of them being democratic and progressive, and the other one authoritarian and reactionary – was systematically repeated by the governing elite and its supportive intelligentsia in 1993-2003.

The Georgian Orthodox church played an important role in the popularization of the idea of "Two Russias"; the church stressed its contribution to the Georgian nation and Georgian state while at the same time tried to strengthen the above-mentioned idea through highlighting the shared faith with Russia and presenting the Russian Orthodox Church as a part of the "first", progressive Russia. In October 1992, the Catholicos-Patriarch of Georgia Ilia II addressed the Patriarch of Russia Aleksey II with a beg to use his authority for stopping bloodshed in Abkhazia (Vardosanidze 2008). During the following years, he continuously stressed that the Russian church had never officially recognized ecclesiastical separation of the conflicting regions from Georgia.

In autumn 1993, after the military defeat in

Abkhazia, Shevardnadze made a statement on joining the Commonwealth of Independent States. Later on, in 1994, Georgia officially became a member of CIS. At the meeting of the "Union of Citizens of Georgia" Shevardnadze declared that "the way towards the CIS is the one towards Russia... Will we manage to get back Abkhazia? We should bear in mind that Russia is interested exactly in the united Georgia" (Tsamalashvili 2013).

The second image of Russia was the opposite of this one. It was mainly distributed via printed press and televised during pre-election periods. In spite of the fact that the first narrative was the dominant one, the counter-narrative was no less influential. These are the fragments reflecting the second image of Russia ("aggressor", "conqueror") from the interviews and essays of those days renowned public figure Akaki Bakradze:

- "There do not exist good and evil Russias in politics. There is only one Russia and it will never be a friend of Georgia in political terms. It has always been and will be an enemy of Georgia" (Bakradze 2005: 538).
- "Referring our enemy as "father" will not make him a friend. He will never take care of us as a father" (September 1993) (Bakradze 2005: 540).
- "If we have a look at the history of the Georgia-Russia relations, it becomes evident that Russia has always cheated Georgia. He will do the same in the future as well... For 200 years period, different governments have been ruling over Russia, but the attitude towards Georgia has never been changed" (Bakradze 2005: 541).

- "Obviously, occupant cannot serve as a mediator" (Bakradze 2005: 617).

At the same time, Akaki Bakradze was stressing the need of settling relations with Russia. Responding to the accusations from the side of the supporters of the government on flaming up anti-Russian mood, he mentioned: „Nobody goes to belittle the power of Russian state, nor its cultural importance or its role in the life of mankind or that of Georgia in particular. But it does not mean that Georgia has to follow the only way offered by Russia... We will never manage to set relations as independent states if we wag the tail and flatter with Russia considering him as a protector and saviour (Bakradze 2005: 470).“

It could be assumed that images of Russia as "saviour" and "aggressor" were rotating during 1990s. The problems faced by Georgia were not solved through the relations with Russia and through joining CIS; this fact seriously harmed the image of Russia as "trustworthy ally". From the second half of 1990s, the Euro-Atlantic vector of the foreign policy has become sharply expressed. On 27 January 1999, those times Chair of the Parliament Zurab Zhvania stated at the session of the General Assembly of the European Union: "I am Georgian, therefore, I am European!"

After the "Rose revolution" (2003), this phrase expressed the foreign political course of Georgia, on the one hand, while laid the foundation to the oppositional images of the "Supportive West" and "Aggressive Russia", on the other hand. The image of Russia has been gradually losing its ambivalence and was transformed into the main opponent of the independence of Georgia. This image was finally formed after the Georgia-Russia war of August 2008.

All *realms of memory* were used for strengthening the new political course. Correspondingly, every



sphere of social life became involved in this process. The actuality of Russian language considerably decreased. It has become one of the foreign languages and has occupied the modest place among English, German and French. Its position in the school curriculum has been diminished. The demand on Russian sectors in kindergartens and schools has decreased considerably, whereas Russian language education has disappeared from the higher education institutions except of the departments of Russian philology. The national minorities which comprised the majority on the Russian sectors, has preferred the Georgian language education. From 2011, the special programs were created for the national minorities, which were aimed at their involvement in the Georgian educational system and facilitating their study at the Georgian language programs. The Russian language has lost its function as a mediator between different ethnic groups. Introduction of teaching social sciences in Georgian at the non-Georgian schools (from 2007) has assisted to this process. The number of Russian language pointers (inscriptions on the markets, road directions, hotels, etc.) has disappeared in the main urban centres and has decreased in the regions with the compact non-Georgian population. According to the Law on broadcasting from 1 September 2009, "the movie produced in non-state language should be dubbed into Georgian" or transmitted into the original language of production with the sub-titles in the state language" (The Law of Georgia on Public Broadcasting 2004: Article 511). From 1 January 2011, the cinemas have to follow to the above-mentioned regulation.

The new *realms of memory* were created. In 2005, Kaikhosro Cholakashvili – one of the heroes of the anti-Soviet rebellion of 1924 – was reburied

from France to the pantheon of Mtatsminda; on the same year, a well-known Georgian scientist Ekvtime Takhaishvili, who emigrated to France together with the government of the Georgian Democratic Republic in 1921 and was severely oppressed by the Soviet KGB after his return to the motherland, was reburied from Didube pantheon to Mtatsminda; in 2007, the remains of Zviad Gamsakhurdia were moved from Grozno to the Mtatsminda pantheon as well.

In 2006, the Museum of the Soviet Occupation was established in Tbilisi. It keeps the materials related with the occupation and annexation of Georgia by the Soviet Russia (1921) and the national liberation movement. Notoriously, the museum was opened on 26 May – the day of independence of Georgia.

In 2010, according to the decree of the president of Georgia, the "State commission on establishing historical truth" was formed. It was no coincidence that the president announced this decision on 9 April, from the Museum of the Soviet Occupation. The commission had to provide judicial and historical assessment to the two centuries long aggressive activities of Russia in Georgia, including the developments of August 2008.

On 7 August 2009, the internet-group "Reaction" initiated the exhibition on Rustaveli Avenue in Tbilisi, under the name "The way from the Treaty to the Occupation". The organizers of the event reconstructed the two hundred years long history of aggression from the Treaty of Georgievsk to the War of August 2008. The photos, videos and documentaries reflecting the different periods of the aggression were presented.

In 2010, the Ministry of Education and Science conducted the competition for the I-VI grades pupils

"The Russian Aggression as Seen by Me" which reflected the memory of the August War.

Specific *realms of memory* were formed by the settlements of refugees constructed after the August War on the bordering areas of the conflict zone. They became the symbols of the new Russian occupation of Georgia.

During this period, a new generation has been grown up, which does not know the Russian language and does not keep the memory of the shared Soviet past; instead, the image of Russia as an enemy and aggressor is deeply rooted in their consciousness. At the same time, there is also another portion of population which does not hold the radical attitude towards Russia and maintains the idea of "Two Russias". The third part of the society remains loyal to the image of Russia as a saviour. This part was marginalized for about a decade, but re-emerged immediately after the elections of October 2012, when the new government reformulated relations with Russia.

Less than a year passed after the above-mentioned change, although, the new rotation of the image of Russia becomes obvious. The very first statements regarding normalization of relations with Russia was followed by the declaration of the one of the experts that "People want the Russian language", while the Minister of education and science argued that "decision on taking away Russian from the school curriculum was not justified" (Margvelashvili 2013). This led to the rise of demand on Russian sectors in kindergartens and schools. Handmade Russian language pointers appeared in some touristic centres. This tendency culminated in the handicraft souvenir jug with the inscription "I love Russia" which caused a serious dissatisfaction in the part of the society. Social media connected this

fact with the government's rhetoric: "In parallel with the capitulatory politics of [the Prime Minister] Ivanishvili, the jug with the inscription "I love Russia" is available for tourists on the Rikoti pass, near the village Shrosha" (newsport.ge 2013).

An important role in the change of public opinion is still played by the Church and the Catholicos-Patriarch whose authority is unquestionable. In his interview with one of the Russian editions, Patriarch stated: "I believe that we were brothers and remain brothers... I love Russia. I was educated there – at the Theological Seminary and the Academy in Zagorsk ... We are united not only by our religion, not only by Orthodoxy, but by our culture. Georgia loves Russian culture. Georgians read and love Russian literature and philosophy" (Kavkazskaja Politika: 29.07.2013).

Such kind of statements set the tone for other Church hierarchs. One of them appealed to believers: "You should prefer Russia as a master, as he will not deprave you... You should prefer physical slavery than the moral one. The West tries to portray Russia as an enemy for Georgians, thus bringing them into his Sodom and Gomorrah" (newposts.ge 2013).

Obviously, such declarations, together with the rhetoric of the government, do have influence on the public opinion. Although, according to David Zurabishvili, one of the representatives of the governmental party, „the Patriarch has a high rating, but it has mainly aesthetic importance... The fact that Patriarch and great majority of clergy do present Russian imperialistic policy as a great good whereas portraying the West as a source of evil, looks like the appearance of the Georgian patriotism in the Soviet sense". As for the image of Russia, according to the same politician, "the politics of Russia towards Georgia remains unchangeable for centuries... Russia does not accept powerful,



sovereign Georgia which pursues an independent policy... Russia has no perspective in Georgia. Russia could not be presented as an alternative of the West” (Liberali 2013).

The above mentioned vision no longer represents the dominant narrative; however, it is still the influential one. From the non-political circles, this position was sharply expressed by the historian Lasha Bakradze: “Today the only enemy of Georgia is Russia... The church openly advocates pro-Russian and anti-Western spirit” (netgazeti.ge 2013).

The same image of Russia was stressed in August 2013 – fifth anniversary of the August War – when the banner with the motto “Russia is an occupant” was placed on one of the buildings under construction in the centre of Tbilisi (palitratv.ge 2013).

The study reveals that at least the three rotations of the image of Russia could be found in the collective memory of post-Soviet period. After the August War 2008, the perception of Russia as an aggressor seemed to be strongly fixed. However, the contours of this image are becoming blurred as a result of current changes of the political elite. The part of the society, which is oriented towards the past, experiences a kind of nostalgia towards the image of the “Big Brother”, and is even enthusiastic for this change. Although, the post-Soviet generation holds in its collective memory the overlapping images of “aggressive” and “conqueror” Russian Empire and that of the Soviet Russia; supposedly, they could be hardly demolished.

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