

The Role of the Soviet Past in Contemporary Georgia

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The ambivalence of the Soviet past is not an issue that has been consigned to history – it remains clearly visible in the contemporary post-Soviet space. The past pursues each new generation, creating a fresh narrative in accordance with politics, culture, time, and understandings of “right” and “healthy.” However, the ways in which history is remembered have dramatically changed over the last two decades. National memory and the composite memories of communities are being changed and reformulated under the weight of globalization processes. The purpose of this study is to analyze how the interaction of global and local actors shapes the narrative about the Soviet past in contemporary Georgia. The paper analyzes these processes by looking into the public and academic debates in Georgia. The results of the study show that governments play a leading role in these processes. However, influenced by the phenomenon of globalization, the role of the state is diminishing as new forces enter the stage. Therefore, states are looking for new and creative ways to maintain their control over the memory creation processes.

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Introduction

The ambivalent legacy of the Soviet past is not an issue that has been left behind; it is clearly visible in contemporary Georgia. One of the most vivid examples of the Soviet past playing an important role in present-day Georgia can be seen in Georgia's World War II commemoration ceremony. Every year on the ninth of May, two different events take place. One of them is a commemoration ceremony in which people parade while carrying portraits of their ancestors who were killed in World War II. At first

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glance, the ceremony does not seem to be problematic. However, it has attracted attention because this specific type of commemoration is believed to be supported by Russia and backed by the Kremlin.¹ Therefore, it is not surprising that the younger generation sees this movement as a symbol of loyalty to, and support for, the Russian Federation. These young people hold protests on the same day to remind society about Soviet Russia's first takeover of Georgia in 1921, and modern-day Russia's military presence in Georgia's two breakaway territories, Abkhazia and South Ossetia.² The polarization of Georgian society shows that there is no consensus regarding the role of the Soviet past in contemporary Georgia, with each generation believing that it is on the right side of history. However, with every generation the past is changing and a new narrative is being created in accordance with politics, culture, time and understandings of "right" and "healthy." The impact of transnational mobility and transfers of information via satellite TV and the internet have forced national publics to engage with an increasingly globalized public sphere. National memory and the composite memory of communities are being changed and reformulated under the force of globalization processes.

To research how the interaction of the global and local actors plays out in the creation of memory processes regarding the Soviet past in contemporary Georgia, I will analyze the relationship between three sets of actors: the state, civil society, and the church. In interpreting the past, I am also going to examine whether these

1 Lomsadze, G. (2019), Georgia's World War II commemoration becomes ideological battlefield, *Eurasianet*. May 9, Available at: <https://eurasianet.org/georgias-world-war-ii-commemoration-becomes-ideological-battlefield>, (Accessed: November 15, 2019)

2 *Ibid.*

forces are changing under the impact of globalization processes. Globalization, as a multi-dimensional, multi-level, and historical process, affects every stage of social and political lives. However, it became even more powerful after “Iron curtain” was lifted and global trends and forces entered the post-Soviet space. Since then the power of satellite TV, the Internet, and social media has changed the dynamics of how societies create and recreate their past.³ It has become more challenging for governments to exert power over memory creation processes. Even though these processes do not completely negate the government’s capacity to narrate the past, its power is still diminished as new global and local forces enter the stage. This pattern can be observed in present-day Georgia. At first glance, it seems that the government still seems to play the leading role; however, it can be argued that, with an increasingly empowered civil society, it is becoming more challenging for the Georgian state to keep a grip on its power over the memory creation processes.

Academic Debates about Soviet Past in Contemporary Georgia

It is common for a newly independent country to try to remove all the traces and elements that act as reminders of the colonizer. This process is designed to help the country reimagining itself as a nation. One of the best examples is Sri Lanka, where “symbolic decolonization” of the public space took place. The leading party in Sri Lanka took full responsibility for reshaping the national memory, which led to the elevation of a single interpretation of history and gave the dominant role to the state narrative. It can be argued that a similar process took place in post-Soviet Georgia in 2003. The “Rose Revolution” brought Mikheil Saakashvili’s party to power and that party tried to enforce its vision of history and memory.⁴

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3 Eyerman, R. The Past in the Present: Culture and the Transmission of Identity”, in *The collective memory reader*, ed. Olick, J. K., (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp.304–307.

4 Kabachnik, P., Kirvalidze, A., & Gugushvili, A. *Stalin Today: Contending with the Soviet Past in Georgia* (Tbilisi: Ilia State University Press, 2016), p.117

“Europeanness” and democracy. UNM’s regime mostly focused on two central place-making strategies. The first was positioning itself as a European nation. The second was the creation of the “other,” which was done through the victimization of Georgia using the Russo–Georgian war of 2008 and the Soviet occupation of Georgia. The party argued that these processes were a clear and obvious part of memory politics, since the idea of being a European nation was inscribed in the landscape itself. The division of a space between “ours” and theirs” is not something new or unique to Georgia. It is a common process that occurs in newly independent countries that are in search of their own identities.⁵

It can be argued that UNM’s strategy to Europeanize and deSovietize/deRussify the Georgian landscape had a controversial and polarizing influence on Georgian society. The government’s version of an ideal sense of “Georgianness” was not acceptable to everyone because the older generation had had a sense of belonging to the Soviet Union for so long that it was hard for them to accept the change without feeling left out. The sudden change of narrative left these people feeling nostalgic about the Soviet past. However, it should be underlined that nostalgia is not only a longing for the past, it is also a reaction to contemporary memory politics and attempts to create a new identity.⁶

In its attempts to distance Georgia from the label “Soviet Georgia,” the UNM tried to look for alternative interpretations of Georgian history. These processes led to a focus of earlier stages of Georgian history and the declaration of Georgia as a part of the European family. Kabachnik, Kirvalidze, and Gugushvili (2016) point out that similar processes took place in many other countries. They draw parallels with Hungary, which also tried to reconnect with its past to present itself as a European nation.⁷

Alongside the attempts to present Georgia as a democratic European state, the UNM also tried to get rid of symbols related to the Soviet past. It can be argued that the destruction of the Glory Memorial dedicated to World War II became a symbol of the memory wars and heightened the antagonism between the Georgian and Russian political elites. The destruction of the

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ibid.*, p.117

7 Kabachnik, P., Kirvalidze, A., & Gugushvili, A., *op.cit.*, p.117

memorial also caused controversy among civilians since some of them saw it as an insult to those Georgian families whose members died in World War II.⁸

According to Kabachnik, Kirvalidze, and Gugushvili, one of the most memorable moments in recent Georgian history, when the Soviet past entered the political debate again, was the passing of the Freedom Charter. The first attempt to pass the law, in 2007, failed, but in 2011 it was passed unanimously. The law enables the Ministry of Domestic Affairs to create a commission that makes a list of items that may reflect Soviet or Nazi ideology and decide whether they should be removed. The law also has a lustration component, which involves banning former senior members of the Communist Party and former KGB agents from jobs in the public sector. The authors underline that, even though the law received political support, it also caused debates regarding the ideas behind it. In the authors' analysis, the law was even seen as "forced amnesia" imposed on society.⁹

The controversy over the Soviet past became apparent once more when Saakashvili's government was replaced by Georgian Dream in 2012 and Stalin's monuments and busts started reappearing in Georgia. Kabachnik, Kirvalidze, and Gugushvili analyze several cases where Stalin's monuments were re-erected and point out that it is not clear who is behind this process. After research conducted with local citizens, the authors explain that the public is divided into two groups. One group thinks that the reappearance of Stalin's figure is simply related to people's love for his persona. The other group links this phenomenon to vast political interests.¹⁰

The authors conclude that "The landscape, through monuments, public works projects, and through the erasure of old, and creation of new toponyms, is a powerful means through which to construct, inscribe, and reproduce elite-sanctioned Georgian national narratives and hegemonic identity scripts."¹¹ They argue that the Georgian political elite tried to redefine what it means to be Georgian and the redefinition was made through counterposing

8 *Ibid.*

9 *Ibid.*

10 *Ibid.*

11 *Ibid.*, p.57.

Georgian identity to Russian and Soviet identity. The authors show that, after Saakashvili left office and his political party was replaced by Georgian Dream, changes in memory politics occurred. However, the transition was slow and did not change the main course, just toning it down.¹²

In a 2017 article, Salome Dundua, Tamar Karaia, and Zviad Abashidze share similar ideas regarding post-Soviet memory creation processes in post-Soviet Georgia. The authors argue that understanding the memory creation processes in Georgia from 1992 to 2003 is a challenging process. During this period Georgia was characterized as a “failed state.” As the authors argue, this was a stage in Georgian history when corrupt/criminal and paramilitary groups were constantly fighting for power. Even though by the end of his presidency Eduard Shevardnadze had managed to stabilize the situation, proper steps to take action and analyze Georgian history and identity had not yet been taken. Therefore, Dundua, Karaia, and Abashidze argue that it is almost impossible to identify any policies that were implemented to construct “historical memory.”¹³

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The authors argue that noticeable changes in memory politics took place in Georgia only after Mikheil Saakashvili took office. They evaluate Saakashvili's attempts to change and redirect Georgian memory politics as a process leading towards nationalism, and point out that one of the most noticeable approaches Saakashvili used was symbolism, which was expressed in the continuous use of commemorative ceremonies. The ceremonies aimed to look to pre-Soviet Georgian history and honor the kings and heroes who fought for Georgian independence.¹⁴

The authors point out that the memory creation strategies became more apparent in 2006, when Saakashvili's government modified its strategy and focused on victimization of the “self.” This change was caused by the mass deportations of Georgians from Russia. One of the results of this policy was the creation of the Museum

¹² *Ibid.*, p.117.

¹³ Dundua, S., Karaia, T. & Abashidze, Z., “National narration and Politics of Memory in post-socialist Georgia,” *Slovak Journal of Political Sciences*, Vol. 17(2), 2017, pp.222–240.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

of Occupation, established in 2006 to commemorate experiences of repression and resistance. The Russo–Georgian war in 2008 marked the point of final destruction of the relationship between the two countries. Dundua, Karaia, and Abashidze argue that after the war the strategy of victimization became even more visible. The authors point out that the discussions regarding the overcoming of the Soviet past became very apparent in 2008. The government thought that one way to deal with the past was to change the narrative regarding Stalin in his birth town of Gori. Since Gori was bombed during the Russo–Georgian war, the government used this case to turn the city from Stalin’s home into the “memory site” of Russian aggression.¹⁵ Another interesting event that took place during Saakashvili’s term of government was the creation of a truth commission that aimed to prepare a narrative on the 200 years of Russian occupation of Georgia. The authors argue that this was an example of how the government tried to construct a hegemonic historical narrative. It is important to note that, during the same period, Russian former president Dmitri Medvedev established a historical commission working against the falsification of Soviet history. It is ironic that, according to the Russian commission, Georgia was one of the sources of the fabrication of Soviet history.¹⁶

It seems fair to assume that memory politics from 2003 to 2012 were heavily influenced by Saakashvili’s government. Memory politics became an indispensable part of national security. Dundua, Karaia and Abashidze (2017) analyze the two main tendencies that took place during Saakashvili’s presidency and sum them up as follows: “Remembering heroic past for restoration of state-building and consolidation of citizens was a general trend until 2006. After the deterioration of the Georgian Russian relations, the experience of resistance became one of the acceptable tendencies.”¹⁷ The authors argue that, even though these processes were not unique to Georgia and took place in most post-Soviet countries, Georgian priorities were different. They further argue that, unlike in Eastern European countries, a proper assessment of the Soviet period did not take place in Georgia. It was limited to the declaration of “Sovietization” as occupation and functioned as a tool in the Georgian government’s hands to

15 *Ibid.*, pp.236–237.

16 *Ibid.*

17 *Ibid.*, p.238.

legitimize its power and narrate the country's history according to current political needs.¹⁸

The articles analyzed in this section have identified several actors involved in the Georgian memory creation processes. All the authors agree that Saakashvili's party played a leading role in directing the narrative about Georgia's Soviet past. The main goal of the party was to distance Georgia from the Soviet past and re-establish the country as a proud member of the European family. Most of the above-mentioned scholars argue that these patterns are not unique to Georgia, but are common in other post-Soviet countries. However, they fail to mention that this pattern, in general, is familiar to almost every postcolonial state. This silence can be explained by David Chioni Moore's (2001) argument that some post-Soviet countries consider themselves European, so it is difficult for them to see how this pattern can be similar to, for example, an African country. Another reason is mimicry. As Moore points out, some postcolonial countries seem to mimic their colonizer. However, the division in the Soviet Union between "European" and "Asiatic" identities presents different patterns of mimicry. Some countries, instead of obsessing with the fallen Russia, are trying to replicate the progress of Europe and the United States, as seems to be the case for Georgia.¹⁹

Madina Tlostanova (2012) also points out that many post-Soviet countries find it challenging to see themselves as colonies.²⁰ Tlostanova explains that it is apparently more difficult to overcome the complex of being a colony to the Second-World Empire than the complex of being ex-Third World, because Third-World countries have first-hand access to modernity through their postcolonial genealogy and, unlike the ex-Soviet colonies, do not have any grounds for claiming, or intention to claim, a European origin.²¹

Academic debate regarding the Soviet past in Georgia mainly

18 *Ibid.*

19 Moore, D. C., "Is the post-in postcolonial the post-in post-Soviet? Toward a global postcolonial critique," *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 2001, 111–128.

20 Tlostanova, M. "Postsocialist≠ postcolonial? On post-Soviet imaginary and global coloniality," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, Vol. 48(2), 2012, pp.130–142.

21 Tlostanova, M. "The South of the Poor North: Caucasus Subjectivity and the Complex of Secondary 'Australism,'" *The Global South*, Vol.5(1), 2011, pp.66–84.

concentrates on internal actors, such as the Georgian government, and point out that the state is playing the leading role in the memory creation processes. The state narrative seems to be dominant. However, it is also important to see how local forces contribute to the memory creation processes.

Public Debate in Georgia

Academic debate regarding the Soviet past in Georgia has revealed that the Georgian state played the leading role in the memory creation processes. The Georgian state not only tried to change the narrative about the Soviet past, but also introduced a new vision of the entirety of Georgian history. It is interesting to see how the Georgian public reacted to the changes and whether it caused polarization of memories between younger and older generations. Katrine Bendtsen Gotfredsen's article, "Void pasts and marginal presents: On nostalgia and obsolete futures in the Republic of Georgia" (2014), answers most of these questions.²²

At the beginning of her study, Gotfredsen analyzes the celebration of Victory Day in Georgia in 2011. She points out that the ninth of May 1945 was the day of commemoration of the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union celebrated it annually. Even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the post-Soviet republics continued to celebrate it. However, Gotfredsen argues that this day became controversial in some post-Soviet states, bringing up the example of Georgia. She analyzes the events of the celebration of Victory Day in Gori and points out that the state-sponsored events were detached from the origin of the day. She emphasizes that the events were focused on Georgian culture and did not even mention the Soviet past. "Paradoxically, it seemed that a part of the past was being erased through the very process of commemorating it."²³ However, there was a second celebration in which about twenty people gathered in front of the house where Stalin was born. This small group was demanding the reestablishment of Stalin's monument. Gotfredsen argues that the commemoration

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22 Gotfredsen, K. B., "Void pasts and marginal presents: On nostalgia and obsolete futures in the Republic of Georgia", *Slavic Review*, Vol. 73(2). 2014, pp.246–264.

23 Gotfredsen, K. B. *op.cit.*, p.246.

of Victory Day illustrates how the past is being reconstructed and even erased from the memory of Georgian society, and how society is reacting to it.²⁴

Gotfredsen's research is based on twenty-five life-story interviews which she conducted with people between the ages of fifty and seventy-five. Some of her interviewees were members of the Stalin Society and the local Communist Party, while others were not active members of any similar association. Based on her interviews, she argues that the official attempt to represent the past in order to create a specific version of history for the future produced nostalgia because it failed to connect these new visions with images of the past or contemporary experience.²⁵

Gotfredsen presents the same idea as Kabachnik, Kirvalidze, and Gugushvili's (2016) study regarding the role of the newly adopted pro-Western foreign policy of Georgia. One of the main goals of Saakashvili's government was to establish a closer relationship with the European Union and NATO. This strategy aimed to legitimize both the recent and distant past. Gotfredsen argues that linking Georgia to Europe and distancing it from the Soviet past was the main focus of the UNM. Saakashvili's party was trying to connect Georgian economic growth and development to its European roots and the fact that Georgia was finally free from the Soviet terror. Gotfredsen names several practices that Saakashvili's government used to depict the Soviet Union as a colonial occupier. Examples include the establishment of the Museum of Soviet Occupation and a permanent exhibition at the Georgian National Museum in Tbilisi; attempts to change the narrative according to which Stalin and the Soviet era were presented in Stalin's museum in Gori; the removal of Stalin's monument in Kutaisi; the creation of the Liberty Charter; and so on. Gotfredsen argues that these processes put middle-aged and elderly people in an extremely marginalized situation. As she explains, "a significant part of the older population's memories, life experiences, and achievements are located in the context of a Georgia that was part of the Soviet Union, [a] time and space renounced and silenced in government discourse and practice."²⁶

24 *Ibid.*

25 *Ibid.*

26 *Ibid.*, p.252

Gotfredsen argues that the nostalgia that elderly people are experiencing in Gori is the result of the government's political rhetoric and its attempts to reject the Soviet past. She points out that this situation left middle-aged and elderly people in a situation described as a "struggle for recognition."²⁷ The attempts of this group to find a place for themselves have become extremely difficult because the government has marginalized their former social statuses and experiences.

Academic debate regarding the Soviet past in Georgia has also revealed that, even though the government is playing a leading role in memory creation processes, several other organizations in Georgia actively contribute to public debates regarding the Soviet past. The scope of my project will not allow me to research all of them. Therefore, I am going to concentrate on the leading organization that focuses on the reexamination and rehabilitation of the Soviet past – the Soviet Past Research Laboratory (SovLab). As the name of the organization indicates, its main goal is to explore the Soviet past and evaluate its legacy. SovLab also tries to create a safe environment in which to reflect and debate on such a complicated issue. The idea for the creation of SovLab came during the conference "Terror Topography – Rethinking Soviet Georgian History," organized by the International Cooperation of German Public Universities Association (DVV International) and Heinrich Böll Stiftung. The participants took the initiative to start working on the topics of Stalinism, terror, and repression in Georgia. The objective of the organization is to rethink the Soviet past in a way that will increase society's responsibility towards the victims of totalitarian regimes. SovLab is making the role of the individual in history central and trying to incorporate personal memories in society's common memory.

One of the most notable projects of SovLab is "Topography of the red terror."²⁸ This is an educational project taking place in four Georgian cities. The project aims to locate and map the precise sites connected to Stalinism, terror, and repression. The project offers to take individuals who are interested in Soviet history on a tour around these places. A similar project was started in 2013, in which SovLab tried to locate the mass graves of the victims of

27 *Ibid.*, p.246.

28 SovLab.ge (2018), *Topography of terror*, 1 February, Available at: <http://sovlab.ge/en/project/15>, (Accessed November 15, 2019)

Soviet terror.

SovLab seems to have a different approach to representing the Soviet past from that of the Georgian state. The organization mainly focuses on the repression of the Stalin era. This part of history is mostly omitted from the state narrative. Despite changes of government, none of them seems willing to bring up the issue of repression. It can be argued that the repression is overshadowed by the victory in World War II. It is hard to praise the person who inspired the victory and see him as a mass murderer at the same time. It seems that the controversy over the portrayal of Stalin is affecting the state narrative. SovLab, as part of Georgian civil society, is playing an important role in the memory creation processes. However, it cannot be seen solely as a Georgian actor. The organization has close ties with German think-tanks. SovLab is a combination of local and global forces, actors that are helping to create a more diverse narrative about the Soviet past.

Role of Georgian Orthodox Church in Current Memory Politics

The Georgian government, particularly during Saakashvili's term of office, has played a vital role in the memory creation processes in post-revolutionary Georgia. However, the government has not been alone in its attempts to appropriate the past. Another powerful agency, the Georgian Orthodox Church, also played an interesting role.

One of the most interesting topics Dundua, Karaia, and Abashidze bring up in their 2017 article "National narration and Politics of Memory in post-socialist Georgia" is the role of the Georgian Orthodox Church in the creation of the Georgian post-Soviet identity. The authors argue that even though in many democratic states the spheres of politics and religion are clearly independent of each other, in some cases religion still plays a vital role in a country's political life. According to the authors, Georgia is one of the latter. They argue that the Georgian public seems to give more weight to the church's views than those of the government. The level of skepticism towards the church is very low, close to zero. Dundua, Karaia, and Abashidze point out that even if the church is criticized, which happens very rarely, the majority of the public will still support it and denounce its critics. "According

to the survey of 2012 by German-based sociological and research institution ...‘Forsa’ 89% of respondent[s] believe in [the] Georgian Orthodox Church, 74% ... in [the] Georgian Army and only 30% in the Court system.”²⁹ Therefore, it is crucially important to see what role the Georgian Orthodox Church plays in remembering the Soviet past.

The statistics indicate that the Georgian Orthodox Church has great power over people’s hearts and minds. It is interesting to analyze how the leader of the church, Ilia II, remembers and presents the Soviet past to contemporary Georgia. One of his interviews with Russia Today clarifies his attitude towards the leading Soviet figure, J.Stalin. Ilia II argues that Stalin was “an outstanding person” who “understood the worldwide significance of Russia” and underlines that Stalin was both Russian and Georgian. According to Ilia II, Stalin played a positive role in opening churches, seminaries, and clerical schools.³⁰

Ilia II’s comment regarding Stalin and the Soviet past sparked public debate in Georgia. Some NGOs even responded with their own major concerns. These included the Tolerance and Diversity Institute (TDI) and the Soviet Past Research Laboratory (SovLab). In their responses, these NGOs condemned the patriarch’s statement. They underlined that the feeling of admiration for Stalin is disrespectful to the victims of Stalin’s repression, antithetical to Christian and democratic values, and does not accurately represent historical facts.³¹

As suggested earlier, the Georgian Orthodox Church plays an important role in the memory creation processes. As statistical analysis shows, Georgians seem to believe in the church more than any other structure. Therefore, it is surprising to see how the younger generation, raised with the idea that the Soviet Union was a solely negative experience, still believes in a structure that portrays Stalin as a positive figure.

Conclusion

29 Dundua, S, Karaia, T, &Abashidze, Z, *op.cit.*, pp.222–240.

30 Kevorkova, N. “Patriarch of Georgia: Our church and people never cut ties with Russia,” RT.com 22 July, 2013, Available at: <https://www.rt.com/op-ed/patriarch-georgia-russia-ties-438> (Accessed: November 1, 2019)

31 Kabachnik, P, Kirvalidze, A., & Gugushvili, A., *op.cit.*, p.117

In this paper, I have explored how the interaction of global and local forces shapes the narrative about the Soviet past in contemporary Georgia. The analysis of relations between the state, civil society, and academics revealed the different methods and tools that these actors use to interpret the Soviet past. One interesting observation that is not discussed in academic and public debates is the role of scholars, who are actively involved in memory creation processes. Even though academics mostly take the role of observers, they still have the choice of what to observe and how to interpret what they see. In the texts discussed above, the authors reveal the methods and tools governments are using to stay in charge of the memory creation processes. The academics also underline the role of civil society and show that in less democratic countries the role of non-governmental organizations is limited. By describing these situations, scholars create and contribute to the ongoing debate regarding the construction and rehabilitation of the Soviet past. Their role is vital to maintain a healthy level of objectivity in the memory creation processes.

As the study has revealed, the role of history and memory is still a very active and popular topic in Georgia. Ongoing academic research shows that the state still plays a dominant role in the memory creation processes, using history to legitimize its power. However, even though the state is trying to monopolize the memory creation processes, civil society is still actively trying to engage in the reproduction of history and memory.

The role of the Orthodox Church seem to have great influence on the memory creation processes in Georgia. It can be observed that the church seems to use parts of the country's history selectively, appropriating them according to their current agenda.

In conclusion, it worth underlining that even though the state and the Orthodox Church have great power over the memory creation processes in Georgia, under the processes of globalization their role is still diminishing. Civil society is becoming more and more active, and, with the help of international organizations, local forces seem to be more prepared to challenge the state or church-sponsored narratives.