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Towards New National Identity of Georgia

The Georgian constitution defines three types of collective identities based on ethnicity, those are: national, ethnic and provincial – ეროვნული, ეთნიკური, კუთხური (*Constitution of Georgia*, 23, 3). But, what is the difference among those identities is not defined. The Georgian Constitution was approved by the Parliament of Georgia on August 24, 1995. Before and even after the approval of the Georgian Constitution, identity cards included the special field – “Nationality” – where the nationality of the citizens of Georgia was indicated.¹

On June 27, 1996 the new law – “on the Procedure for Registering Citizens of Georgia and Aliens Residing in Georgia, for Issuing an Identity (Residence) Card and a Passport of a Citizen of Georgia” („საქართველოს მოქალაქეთა და საქართველოში მცხოვრებ უცხოელთა რეგისტრაციის, პირადობის (ბინადრობის) მონმობისა და საქართველოს მოქალაქის პასპორტის გაცემის წესის შესახებ“) was approved by the Georgian Parliament (*Parliamentary Gazette*, 19-20, 30/07/1996; see matsne.gov.ge for consolidated version). According to this law, the special field “Nationality” was removed from Identity (Residence) Cards, at least such a field was not mentioned in it. Some amendments were made later in this law. Despite some attempts to recover the above-mentioned field by a few members of Parliament, all these efforts proved to be in vain.

¹ The paper was presented at Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University Faculty of Humanities Institute of Georgian History International Scientific Conference “Thirty Years in the United Nations”, May 21, 2022. See the program of this conference.

The Field of Nationality was completely omitted from the Identity (Residence) Cards and the Passports. This very moment was the starting point for the changes in the Georgian National Idea. Since that moment, citizenship has been closely linked with nationality. The very idea of the Georgian nation is linked with Georgian citizenship, hence those who bear citizenship are, in many cases, reckoned as Georgian by nationality, while the term “ethnicity” is preserved for those who live in Georgia with a different cultural background.

Hence, we have numerous ethnicities among the citizens of Georgia, but one nation. The term “Georgian” has a double meaning, one implies a nation that unites every citizen of Georgia and another denotes a cultural group known as the Georgian ethnicity. One more collective identity mentioned in the Georgian Constitution, “Provincial” (კუთხური) identity, denotes different groups within the Georgian ethnicity who live in different Georgian provinces or in historical regions. These groups could be rendered as subethnic groups of the Georgians.

Despite this clear notion of these new collective identities, most people in Georgia and even many Georgian state officials never had a clear understanding of the difference between “nation” and “ethnicity”. Thus, the clear essence of these terms – “Georgian Nation”, “Georgian Ethnicity” –in many cases are confused, mixed and misunderstood.

The main reason for this confusion and misunderstanding is the relatively new concept of the Georgian Nation, which builds a national identity based on citizenship and civil rights. This new concept is “new” just as it defers from the previous model used during the Soviet times. Friendship among nations was one of the key elements of the Soviet idea in nation-building and the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic was seen as multinational entity of the USSR. The nations that lived in Soviet Georgia were seen as friendly nations. Hence, several nations were building one multinational state of the USSR. The times have changed. The modern reality requires engagement of all groups of people in the nation-building of Georgia.

The large group of people called “ethnic minorities” (sometimes wrongly referred as “national minorities”) are citizens of Georgia and part of the Georgian state. Hence, their national identity and nationality is Georgian even though they have preserved their unique ethnic identity. This process of reshaping the Georgian national identity is still underway. The process definitely includes many factors, but, I think, there is no need to speak about all

these issues in detail just as it presents the ongoing process of nation-building. Nation-building is common for every stage of Georgia's development. The Georgian nation persists, but some of its core elements that serve as a pillar for this construction vary. Citizenship is definitely an important pillar for the construction of this new national identity. The latter could be seen as a new innovation in the nation-building process of Georgia. The proper understanding of the concepts of "Georgian nation" and "Georgian ethnicity" is vital. Such a concept is not new in Georgian reality.

The Medieval Georgian reality knows a similar concept, wherein "nation" existed separately from "ethnicity". I will discuss only one example from the history of the 14th century Georgia, which, I think, clearly illustrates that Georgian/Kartvelian identity was separate on the one hand, but, on the other hand, it comprised other ethnic groups, including Georgian/Kartvelian in a more narrow ethnic sense. Armenian historian Thomas of Metsoph (the 15th c.) when writing on the events of 1386, mentions the land of Georgia that was inhabited by people who spoke in eight languages. Those were: Dvals (Dral), Ossetians (Osed), Imeretians (Imerel), Mengrelians (Mekrel), Abkhazians (Ap'xaz), Svanians (Sonk'), Kartvelians (Vrats'i, i.e. Georgians) and Meskhetians (Mesx) (*The History of Tamerlane and His Successors by Vardapet T'ovma Metsobets'i*, trans. by R. Bedrosian, New York, 1987, 11-12). All these people are part of Georgia and the Georgian nation. Nevertheless, they are presented as separate people with distinct languages, including "Vrats'i" i.e. Kartvelians, commonly translated as "Georgians" in English. It is clear that "Vrats'i" refers to Eastern Georgians, the rest were people that inhabited different areas of Georgia. Of course, Thomas of Metsoph does not mention all the people that lived in the 14th century Georgia (including Armenians, who lived there and some of them were included in the Georgian nation. Thomas is against Georgianization of Armenians. However, he was forced to admit that many Armenians were integrated into Georgian society. *ibid*, 98-99. Regardless of this, he tries not to associate Armenians with Georgia), they were more than the above-mentioned eight "languages", but they all shared common culture, religion, and political affiliation. Moreover, they all wrote in Georgian, were integrated in the Georgian social system, attended the Georgian Church and were under the suzerainty of the Georgian rulers.

The Georgian World was always multiethnic, however, in many circumstances, it was also mononational, which somehow resembles the political system of the Eastern Roman Empire. The Byzantines called their state

the Roman Empire and their nation was called – the Roman Nation. But this “Romans” were multiethnic as there were dozens of people who lived in one state under one “Roman” superethnic identity and single Emperor. Their Roman identity was not based on ethnicity, rather it was based on political, cultural and religious features. In contrast, the Georgians had a strong ethnic Georgian presence within a Georgian World, which dominated through the ages. However, their national/supereethnic identity was constructed on cultural, religious and political unity wherein different ethnicities had the common Georgian affiliation. This could be compared to the Roman i.e. Byzantine concept of nation.

This mononational and multiethnic medieval Georgia could be a role model for the nation-building of modern Georgia in the reshaping of national identity. Despite close similarities that could be observed, we have some differences between the nation-building of medieval Georgia and modern Georgia. The former was more religious driven while latter is more secular and tends to build its national identity based on civil values. But the process of absorbing different ethnicities into one nation is common in case of medieval Georgia and modern Georgia. The methods are different, but the goals and objectives are the same. We can observe more similarities in nation-building between medieval Georgia and modern Georgia. Another very common feature is the cosmopolitan character.

The cosmopolitan character of medieval Georgia was purely religious in its design. The country was seen as a part of the global Christian World. Through several centuries, this Christian World was dominated by the Byzantine Emperor who was seen as a protector of the Christians. The World of righteous adherence, otherwise known as the Orthodox World, was seen as political, cultural, religious entity where the Georgians had their unique place while some Georgian monarchs from the 12th century claimed the leadership in this World (L. Tavadze, *Byzantine Imperial Titulature in Georgia*, a dissertation, Tbilisi, 2012, 182-224. In Georgian). The modern Georgian nation tends to build its cosmopolitan identity through integration in European institutions.

Europe is seen as a place of economic prosperity, hence the aspiration towards integration in European institutions is stimulated by economic factors. The economy is the main motivator towards integration in this Paneuropean space, which is represented by the European Union (EU). Europe is also seen as

a place of special moral values, where democracy flourishes and human rights are protected. Some even point on the common cultural links between Georgia and Europe. There could be a long list of motives why the Georgians have the aspiration to be a part of the European family. Whether all these are true or not, the main motive for integration in Europe is economic. The aspiration towards the integration of Georgia into the Christian World where the Byzantine i.e. Roman Emperor was seen as the supreme leader was primarily religious, but the objective to be a part of the EU, which inspires the acceptance of European standards, is mainly economic.

Integration in cosmopolitan system, as we see from above-mentioned example, is not a modern phenomenon, but motives and circumstances differ. Due to the integration into the Christian Orthodox World, the medieval Georgians were seen as a Christian nation, while today, because of European aspirations, the Georgians are seen as European nation. The Georgian nation as European nation is a new phenomenon and originated in the 1990s. Everything that was before (relations with European monarchies, civil activities of Ilya Chavchavadze and his contemporaries, social-democratic movement, communism etc.) could be understood as a search for new identity or internationalism in case of social-democratic movement and communism, which originates in Europe, but are more global in scope rather than European.

The 1990s were essential. Aspiration towards the integration in common European institutions started from this decade. The most memorable speech of the Georgian Prime-Minister Zurab Zhvania (*"I am Georgian, and therefore I am European"*) and Georgia joining the Council of Europe took place in 1999. The official narrative that we hear from members of government and state officials, the Georgian nation is a part of the family of European nations. Zhvania's speech is probably the first vivid statement towards this aspiration. The 2017 constitutional amendment, which was formulated in Article 78, declares that *"The constitutional bodies (of Georgia) shall take all measures within the scope of their authority to ensure the full integration of Georgia in the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization"* (Constitution of Georgia, 78). This presents an official stance of the nation towards Euro-Atlantic integration, which itself is a key aspect of the Paneuropean affiliation of the Georgian nation.

In conclusion, these fresh tendencies drive the Georgian nation to a new national identity, which unites the civil Georgian nation within the European institutions, thus paving the way in creation of a civil Georgian nation with

European identity. The Georgians are constantly told that this is a right pass and that they need to move in this direction towards European integration to satisfy their economic needs and democratic aspirations. But is it a sufficient ambition for the nation, who tended to lead the Christian World after the decline of Byzantium, who pretended the construction of the first social-democratic state in the World and begot a leader in charge of global communism for three decades, we do not know for sure.