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Stones Speaking: Reading Conflicting Discourses in the Urban Environment

By Jana Javakhishvili, Tbilisi

“People in the post-totalitarian societies are exposed to many changes in the external reality which demand new evaluations, new patterns and solutions. These new patterns clash with the old ones, and new external objects impinge on old internal objects. Therefore contemporary post-totalitarian societies in Eastern and Central Europe seek their own democratic organization.”

*Michael Sebek
1996*

Abstract

The urban environment and especially monuments say a lot about a society, particularly its political and cultural values and systems. They could be messengers of a discourse delivering a grand narrative, which supports, or even imposes, a power distribution within society, as happens in totalitarian societies. Alternatively, they could reflect the process of liberating society from totalitarianism and experimenting with different forms, shapes and materials for the sake of finding one's own identity and defining oneself. This article reflects on how the urban environment in Georgia reflects contemporary socio-political developments taking place in the country.

Deconstructing the Totalitarian Environment

Monuments often serve as objects in which society invests considerable emotions¹. Therefore, it is not a surprise that during times of political turbulence and change, some of the monuments gain an extra meaning and significance and become objects symbolizing or externalizing societal dynamics and changes. For example, in the late 1980s, the monument to Sergo Orjonikidze (the Georgian revolutionary who facilitated the re-occupation of the country by the Red Army in 1921) standing on the crossroad of one of the central (Vake-

Saburtalo) districts of Tbilisi was regularly desecrated with eggs, tomatoes or a rainbow of paint colors. Initially, the communist government, which was still in place at that time, tried to clean up the sculpture following each incident (and that was happening almost every day...). But at some point the government just gave up taking care of the sculpture, symbolizing the ongoing developments in the country and the fact that change and, therefore, the release from the Soviet Union and communist regime was inevitable and irreversible.

In parallel and in line with the regaining of independence in the late 1980s–early 1990s, the process of removing totalitarian sculptures started in the country, indicating liberation. Lenin's sculpture was removed from the very centre of Tbilisi. It stood in the so-called Lenin's square which after liberation was renamed again as Freedom Square, the name the square had carried dur-

¹ Monuments also could maintain specific meaning and symbolize grief related to the trauma experienced by society as chosen trauma and/or pride and joy related to the certain victory as chosen glory. Both—chosen trauma and glory—are well described by the psychoanalyst and conflict expert Vamik Volkan.

ing the short period of liberation from Russian Empire in the years 1918–1921.

Alongside Lenin, a large number of totalitarian sculptures, including Orjonikidze's, were removed, but with the multiple—economic, political, social—crises starting in the country, the population entered a survival mode and some totalitarian monuments were left intact. Such monuments serve as messengers of the totalitarian past in the present.

The buildings and sculptures from Stalin's period were grandiose and most often triggered among the Soviet population feelings of insignificance and insecurity (if the viewer identified with the victim) or narcissist pride and superiority (in case of identification with aggressor), or a mixture of those two. (Both identification with victim and aggressor are ego defense strategies first described by Anna Freud). This monumental environmental design was dashed by the aesthetic of the ugly grey stereotypical 4–5 floors buildings with low ceilings introduced by Nikita Khrushchev. The population was so unhappy with the invention that they called the buildings "khrushchobi"—a word, combining Khrushchev's name with the Russian word for "slum". Not much was changed during Brezhnev's period of stagnation.

Co-Habitation of Conflicting Discourses within the Urban Environment

In Georgia the revolutionary changes of the urban environment (and monuments among other things) started together with the Rose Revolution. The United National Movement (UNM) young governmental team tried to change the monumental, detrimental, grey, stereotypical and ugly aspects of Georgia's cities, which they associated with totalitarianism. The most visible things introduced were: a twinkling TV tower (after almost 13 years in darkness—due to the electricity deficit in the country), colorful painting of the houses, both in the capital city and the regions, and big and small fountains installed in almost every place available. The revolutionary period was an era of changes from the grey dull ugly dark environment inherited from the Soviet past into a colorful one. But the society which during the Soviet period had become accustomed to the totalitarian environment met the changes with anxiety and resistance revealing itself mainly in skepticism: the new colors for the buildings often became a matter for mockery, the fountains were considered as reflecting the young government team's childish attitude and desire to play, the twinkling TV tower was seen as the "president's caprice", etc.

The main serious argument against the changes was its "façade" character—the society desired and expected sustainable changes—i.e. renovation of the old "Khrushchoba" style buildings not only from outside but from

inside as well. On the one hand, that was an important matter and argument. The UNM government's approach to some extent provoked associations with the well-known Russian empire approach of "Potemkin Villages". On the other hand, the desire of the population to change everything at once (i.e. to repair both the facades and interior of the buildings in parallel) probably was a bit too much to expect. This kind of "magical thinking"—expecting a miracle—is peculiar to societies in crises. The government had its own "portion" of magical thinking and maximalist attitude as well because it was rushing to introduce changes—a good illustration is a Tbilisi airport building: the government gave such a tough deadline to the builder that quality suffered and the roof of the airport building blew away twice after the building was opened, requiring more work to fix the roof.

Alongside with painting old buildings, constructing new modern ones, building roads, installing fountains and setting up children's playgrounds, the removal of the totalitarian monuments (messages of the totalitarian past) developed with such speed and scale that some arts experts began complaining that the "Soviet piece" of Georgian arts history was almost totally lost. From 2003 to 2011 essentially the only two totalitarian monuments left intact in the country were the grandiose figure of the so-called Mother of Georgia standing on top of Tbilisi's Mtatsminda Hill (it is a typical Soviet invention and a similar figure was installed in parallel in Soviet Armenia), and Stalin's monument in the central square of Gori—his home town—provoking an ironic association of a totalitarian mother and father still present in the country.

Exploring Totalitarian Objects in the Urban Environment

The failure to remove Stalin's sculpture resulted from sensitivity about the issue for the Gori population for whom Stalin was, and probably still is, a matter of pride. Though, UNM eventually succeeded in removing it in 2010, under cover of darkness to avoid public unrest. Later developments revealed that such changes introduced in a hidden way, without public participation and transformation, are not sustainable.

Unlike Stalin's sculpture, the Mother of Georgia monument stands stably on its pedestal since 1958. We can think of several alternative explanations here. One explanation could be that this monument could easily be integrated into the national discourse as symbolizing the Georgian nation with wine and sword. Here it was easy to forget or suppress its Soviet origins as a present of the working people to the city of Tbilisi. But, as the United National Movement government was responsive to the

younger, pro-Western generation, which did not have much affection for the wine and sword based national discourse, we can think of other explanations as well.

One such could be populism and/or the fear of public unrest as the mother figure is hyper-important for the Georgian population, which could be attributed to the influence of the mother archetype as it was understood by Carl Gustav Jung. But this hypothesis could be rejected by the fact that the government was not afraid to remove other monuments which were provoking resistance and even struggle from the side of the population. One example is the above mentioned Stalin monument. Another illustration is the case of the King David the Builder's statue: in 2005, after selling the territory where the King's sculpture was standing (the beginning of the Rustaveli Avenue, in front of the Radisson Blu Iveria hotel) the UNM government had to remove it and decided to reinstall it at the entrance of Tbilisi. This provoked a huge wave of dissatisfaction within the population. Many considered this as a sign of giving up national or traditional values. To protest the removal of the sculpture from one part of the town to another, people started to guard it, and even introduced night shifts; to resist the police and stay around the sculpture, many were fastening themselves to the monument with handcuffs. In spite of this resistance, the sculpture was removed outside the town centre.

Another explanation could be based on the ideas of the American psychiatrist Frank Ochberg, author of so-called Stockholm Syndrome, who studied kidnapping and human captivity. In these situations, Ochberg speaks of the ironic attachment and voluntary slavery—phenomena experienced by the captured individuals towards the capturer for the sake of survival. Inertia of these phenomena lasts longer than the actual danger—survivors may still experience them after they are released.

And, one more explanation which could be applied to both the Stalin and Mother of Georgia monuments implies the notion of an internalized totalitarian object, as understood by Michal Sebek, based on Melanie Klein and Anna Freud's works. According to Sebek, to defend one's self from the threatening totalitarian figure in the social surrounding, an individual, as well as an entire society, might identify with and internalize the totalitarian figure, which leads to the internalization of totalitarian values as well as patterns of behavior.

Internalization of the totalitarian object creates conditions for the transmission of the internalized totalitarian object from generation to generation via corresponding patterns of social interactions. This shapes the life of post-totalitarian societies and explains the explicitly observable bonding with the reminders of the totalitar-

ian past, monuments in our case. To overcome it, the society needs to have opportunities to dissociate or distance itself from, discuss and reflect on the totalitarian past and to learn lessons from it, which was and is fully lacking in Georgia, similar to many former Soviet states.

Thus, the hypothesis about the internalized totalitarian object could be reinforced by the fact that in parallel with the removal of the totalitarian style monuments, the UNM government was erecting similar totalitarian-style monuments, such as the bombastic monument to commemorate those fallen for Georgia in the centre of Heroes' Square; or the Saint George statue on a huge column erected on Freedom square, on the very place where Lenin's sculpture used to stand.

The installation of the Saint George statue was accompanied by protests from the younger generation due to several reasons: they do not respect the sculptor, Russia-based Georgian artist Zurab Tsereteli, a controversial figure who collaborates with Putin's regime; secondly, the sculpture itself was considered to be in an old fashioned imperial style reminiscent of Nelson's Column in Great Britain (not that much of Nelson himself, but definitely his column...); thirdly, the installation of the ecclesiastic figure in the main square of the town somehow reinforced the power of the church, which was and continues to be already beyond the limits of secularism in the country (though, the Church itself did not like Saint George's statue due to its deviation from the canonical norms).

The Saint George statue, provoking associations of an internalized totalitarian object, ironically, titled as "Statue of Freedom", is a personification of the paradox existing nowadays in Georgia, reflecting a power struggle and internal split within the country's society.

Projected Power Struggle

Another landscape of the town indicating the power struggle between the key stakeholders is a triangle created by the three newly-built architectural monuments in the Tbilisi town-centre: Trinity Church built on top of one of the city's hills neighboring the Presidential Palace—again, located on the top of another hill and the house of the head and sponsor of the new political coalition which replaced Saakashvili's government after parliamentary elections in October 2012, on the third hill above Freedom Square. All three landmarks are competing in size and pompousness.

Most interestingly a power struggle between supporters of the former and current government reveals itself in the articulated intention of the new government to deconstruct monuments built by the ex-government: the glass bridge (so called Peace bridge) giving a post-modern eclectic style to the old Tbilisi and the Music Hall—

in the same area of old Tbilisi, an expensive building uniting two wings of phallic shape, which is not appreciated within the society.

However, in parallel with the grandiose monuments, the ex-government was installing small sculptures that were light, full of humor and a humanistic mood, in different parts of Tbilisi, especially in touristy areas. If you walk on Rustaveli Avenue you can easily find these sculptures, creating a flirty, lovely, friendly atmosphere and feeling of safety. A good contrast with the monumental Mother of Georgia is a sculpture of a young lady sitting on the handrails of the Baratashvili Bridge, which once again illustrates the paradoxical co-existence of totalitarian and non-totalitarian discourses in the city, reflecting the internal split within the society.

Co-existence and competition between totalitarian and anti-totalitarian discourses became even more explicit immediately upon the change of the government in October 2012 through the debate around Stalin's sculptures. Interestingly, immediately after the Government was changed, re-installations of Stalin's sculptures began. This happened simultaneously in both urban and rural environments. For example, the sculpture was reinstalled in the village Zemo Alvani of Akhmeta region on December 21, 2012 (Stalin's birthday). Quickly, however, someone painted the monument pink. In January 2013, Stalin's bust was re-erected in another village of Kakheti region of Georgia—Akuri. Again, after a while, an unknown vandal removed it from its base and painted it pink. On 1 September 2013 Stalin's sculpture was reerected in one of the biggest cities of Kakheti region, Telavi. The same night, it was painted red. During the spring of 2014 the first attempts to reinstall Stalin's sculpture in Gori started.

The described debate around Stalin's monument could be explained by a number of political factors, but I prevent myself from political interpretations and again

focus on so-called "Software factors" (as psychological factors are specified by Vamik Volkan).

Conclusions

In the Georgian society (as in any post-totalitarian society), where the internalized totalitarian object plays a role in the societal dynamics, it is not possible to introduce sustainable changes only via changing the external environment. It is not simply possible, as the example of the last decade in Georgia shows, when the removal of totalitarian monuments and the development of a non-totalitarian (funny, flirty, joyful) urban environment was somehow combined with the controversial tendency of invention and the installation of the new totalitarian sculptures.

Catalyzing sustainable changes in the post-totalitarian society requires consistent and congruent democratic governance in all aspects of the societal and political life as well as encouragement of public participation and the creation of corresponding opportunities. The totalitarian object first should be overcome in our own selves, not only in the environment.

Reinstallations of the Stalin's sculptures immediately after the change of government, who removed them out of the public view, illustrate and externalize the internal struggle within the society between the old (totalitarian) and new (democratic) discourses.

This could be a starting point for the discussion and rethinking of the totalitarian past which was and is lacking in our society—it is a chance that we need to use. Building democracy requires thinking and reflection by all members of society, not only by the governing elite. Via reflection, ceasing to be afraid of critical thinking and especially the articulation of it, we can dissociate ourselves from the totalitarian object and that's the first and necessary step in overcoming it.

About the Author

Jana Javakhishvili directs the Institute on Addiction Studies at Ilia State University.

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CHRONICLE

26 November 2015 – 16 February 2016

26 November 2015	Georgian Interior Minister Giorgi Mgebrishvili meets with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev in Baku to discuss cooperation on regional security and the fight against organized crime and terrorism
27 November 2015	Village elders call for an investigation into a police raid in the Nardaran settlement in Azerbaijan on 26 November in which two police officers and four suspected militants were killed in an attack against a “criminal gang” planning terrorist acts according to official sources
27 November 2015	Deputy Head of Georgian State Security Service Levan Izoria says that “up to 50 Georgian citizens” are fighting with extremist groups in Syria, but that the flow of fighters from the country to Syria has declined
1 December 2015	Protesters in Armenia’s capital of Yerevan rally against planned constitutional changes that would transform the country into a parliamentary democracy
1 December 2015	The Georgian State Security Service says that four people have been arrested on suspicion of having links to the Islamic State
2 December 2015	Georgian Defense Minister Tina Khidasheli meets Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev in Baku to discuss strategic cooperation, including the security of pipelines running from Azerbaijan to Turkey via Georgia
3 December 2015	Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu says in Baku that Turkey and Azerbaijan have agreed to speed up the Trans-Anatolian Pipeline project (TANAP) in order to complete it before 2018
4 December 2015	Georgian President Giorgi Margvelashvili signs a decree terminating the Georgian citizenship of former President Mikheil Saakashvili, who is now governor of the Odessa region in Ukraine and has been granted Ukrainian citizenship
6 December 2015	A referendum is held in Armenia about a proposal to switch from a presidential to a parliamentary system of government. The referendum passed with 66.2% of the vote.
6 December 2015	Two persons died and 29 workers are declared missing after an oil rig, owned by Azerbaijani state oil company SOCAR, catches fire on 4 December
9 December 2015	A retired military officer is arrested in Armenia on charges of spying for Azerbaijani secret services
10 December 2015	Police in Yerevan prevent demonstrators protesting the results of a referendum on constitutional reforms from putting up a tent in the city’s Liberty Square
10 December 2015	Georgian Economy Minister Dimitri Kumsishvili and China’s International Trade Representative, Deputy Minister of Commerce Zhong Shan, sign a memorandum of understanding to launch negotiations on a free trade agreement between the two countries
11 December 2015	Georgian President Giorgi Margvelashvili visits Ashgabat, Turkmenistan’s capital, to participate in an international conference marking 20 years of the country’s neutrality
13 December 2015	Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili says that the arrival of a first container train from China’s port of Lianyungang to Tbilisi en route to Istanbul is a landmark event for the country
16 December 2015	The Council of Europe launches an official probe into Azerbaijan’s compliance with the European Convention on Human Rights
16 December 2015	The number of prisoners serving life terms in Armenia and on hunger strike to demand that their cases be reviewed reaches 35
17 December 2015	Defense ministers of Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey hold a trilateral meeting in Istanbul to discuss strategic cooperation and regional stability in the Black Sea and Caucasus region
18 December 2015	The European Commission says it will propose to the EU-member states to allow visa-free travel for Georgian citizens since Georgia has fulfilled all the benchmarks of its visa liberalization action plan
19 December 2015	Armenian President Serzh Sarkisian and his Azerbaijani counterpart, Ilham Aliyev, meet in Bern in an attempt to settle the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict
21 December 2015	The central bank in Azerbaijan announces its decision to abandon its currency peg and float the national currency, manat, with the manat falling by nearly 48 percent against the U.S. dollar following the announcement
22 December 2015	The Russian Foreign Ministry announces that visa requirements are eased for Georgian citizens starting from 23 December 2015

23 December 2015	Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili announces his resignation on live television, but does not give a specific reason to explain his decision
23 December 2015	Armenia, Georgia, Iran and Russia agree to work on the development of a power transmission system to foster electricity trading between the four countries during a meeting of energy ministers of Armenia, Georgia and Iran with the chief executive of Russia's power distribution grids company, Rosseti, in Yerevan
24 December 2015	The National Bank of Georgia (NBG) sells 20 million US dollars at a foreign currency auction to support the national currency lari in its ninth intervention this year
29 December 2015	Russian presidential aide Vladislav Surkov meets with leaders of the breakaway region of Abkhazia and discusses Abkhazia's relations with Turkey
30 December 2015	The Georgian Parliament confirms Giorgi Kvirikashvili as the new Prime Minister, replacing Irakli Garibashvili and becoming Georgia's third Prime Minister since the Georgian Dream coalition took power in 2012
2 January 2016	The Georgian Interior Ministry says that visits to Georgia by foreign citizens reached 5.89 million in 2015, a 6.9 percent increase from the previous year
4 January 2016	The Georgian Ministry of Energy says that talks have been initiated with Iran over possible gas supplies via Armenia, but there is no concrete agreement yet
8 January 2016	Georgian President Giorgi Margvelashvili signs a bill on the redistricting of single-mandate constituencies into law
11 January 2016	Georgian Energy Minister Kakha Kaladze says that ongoing talks with Russian gas company Gazprom focus on the monetization of transit fees that Georgia receives on Russian gas being imported to Armenia via Georgian territory
13 January 2016	Scores of demonstrators are detained in Azerbaijan amid countrywide protests over worsening economic conditions in the country, including price hikes on flour and bread
13 January 2016	President of the Azerbaijani state energy company SOCAR, Rovnag Abdullayev, holds talks with Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili and Energy Minister Kakha Kaladze in Tbilisi to discuss gas supplies from Azerbaijan to Georgia amid ongoing talks between Georgia and Russian state company Gazprom
14 January 2016	Azerbaijani authorities withdraw licenses from independent currency exchange booths
15 January 2016	The National Bank of Georgia releases figures showing a decline of 25% in remittances to Georgia, mainly due to a sharp drop in transfers from Russia
19 January 2016	The Azerbaijani parliament approves a package of measures aimed at addressing the economic and financial crisis in the country caused by low oil prices
20 January 2016	Azerbaijan commemorates "Black January" when 137 anti-Kremlin protesters were killed in Baku and several more wounded and arrested during a crackdown by Soviet troops on 20 January 1990
22 January 2016	Georgian Energy Minister Kakha Kaladze says that no deal has been reached yet on transit terms of Russian gas following a meeting with Russian company Gazprom's executives in Vienna on 20 January
26 January 2016	Georgian state arms manufacturer Delta says that it has won a contract to supply armored vehicles to Saudi Arabia
27 January 2016	The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank discuss a possible emergency loan package to Azerbaijan to alleviate the country's economic hardships as a result of a steep drop in oil prices
29 January 2016	The credit rating agency Standard and Poor's downgrades Azerbaijan's debt rating to "junk", making it more expensive for the government to borrow funds by issuing government bonds
30 January 2016	Georgian President Giorgi Margvelashvili visits Pankisi gorge, together with the U.S. and EU ambassadors to Georgia, and meets with local residents of the village of Duisi
1 February 2016	Georgian Defense Minister Tina Khidasheli meets with her Armenian counterpart Seyran Ohanyan during a visit to Yerevan and stresses that Georgia's goal is to contribute to peace and security in the Caucasus region
5 February 2016	Amnesty International says that a bill currently discussed by the Georgian Parliament which makes "insulting religious feelings" an administrative offense undermines freedom of expression

9 February 2016	The Georgian Foreign Ministry says that Georgia will reintroduce 45-day visa-free travel for Iranian citizens starting from 15 February
12 February 2016	Georgian Foreign Minister Mikheil Janelidze meets with his Iranian counterpart Mohammad Javad Zarif on the sidelines of the Munich security conference to discuss Georgia's transit potential and other opportunities for further cooperation between the two countries
15 February 2016	Georgian Energy Minister Kakha Kaladze starts a visit to Iran to discuss possibilities for importing Iranian gas to Georgia as well as other energy projects
16 February 2016	Low-cost airline Wizz Air says that it will open a new base at Kutaisi airport, a large town in Western Georgia

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