

# THE SCHOOL OF THE STREET: ORGANISING DIVERSITY AND TRAINING POLYTAXIS IN A (POST-) SOVIET PERIPHERY

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The developments on the political surface of the recent history of what is now the sovereign state of Georgia do not seem to make much sense at first sight.

On the surface the disintegration of the USSR was accompanied by the rise of an influential national movement under the leadership of the former dissidents Merab Kostava and Zviad Gamsakhurdia who later became president. When the national movement finally took over the state and declared independence Georgia found itself challenged by internal ethnic movements also claiming independence – most dramatically the conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Up to this stage the development seems to have been pretty much in line with what has been expected from the downfall of a multinational empire.<sup>1</sup> What happened next, however, hardly fit the expected pattern. Gamsakhurdia's enthusiastically elected nationalist government was forcibly removed from power after only few months by an urban alliance of underworld authorities, scientists, intelligentsia and former Soviet patrons. Even more surprisingly seems the decision taken by the two most powerful leaders of the eclectic opposition – Tengiz Kitovani and Djaba Ioseliani, warlords-to-be and Georgian style big men with a criminal past in the USSR – to invite the high-profile apparatchik Eduard Shevardnadze to return to Tbilisi in order to share power with them. Two peculiar legacies of the USSR were uniting force: one-party-state and underworld.

Shevardnadze against all odds survived not only de facto control of the two warlords Ioseliani and Kitovani and two years of deteriorating state control amid a vivid market of violence but also the loss of two civil wars in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.<sup>2</sup>

The warlords are in jail now and the remaining nationalist followers of the ousted Gamsakhurdia are treated by the government in Tbilisi as if they have a mental illness (i.e. not very seriously). The territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia remain pretty much ethnically cleansed and lost to central state-control. Shevardnadze, having survived two assassination-attempts, has been democratically legitimated by two elections and is leading a relatively peaceful and relatively stable, though economically ruined, country that, according to certain western legal advisers,<sup>3</sup> can take pride in some of the most efficient democratic codices of law in Europe.

These developments are difficult to understand given the following assumptions:

1. national and ethnic identities alone determining the downfall of the USSR and the causes of conflicts thereafter (the Yugoslavia bias);
2. a clear cut break between Soviet and post-Soviet order even in the cases of official rules and institutions changing decisively (the transformationist bias);
3. the somewhat outdated but methodologically still tempting view of the USSR as a society thoroughly determined by centralist and totalitarian state-structures leaving no space for self-organisation of unofficial social sub-systems (the Sovietologist bias).

In the point of view argued in this paper, it is essential for an understanding of the post-Soviet condition to take into focus the informal (or, in Soviet terms, the shadow-) institutions and subcultures with their own normative frames of reference that developed and stabilized under the official surface of the USSR.<sup>4</sup> The interdependencies between the object and its shadow – that is between official order and subculture – seem

promising for investigation.

Only by understanding these interdependencies do we have a chance of grasping the organisational potentials of the intricate Soviet heritage.

During my fieldwork in Georgia, beginning in 1992, I encountered three sophisticated frames of reference in Georgian society that seemed uninterruptedly relevant to people's orientation aside from the rapidly changing official structures:<sup>5</sup>

1. The family. Patron-client networks of relatives in the urban centres and clan structures, vendetta and a notion of shared honour and shame for this we-group defined by kin in the mountain-regions serves as a paramount principle of controlling violence and allocating justice.
2. The *school of the street*. A specific, highly institutionalized street-corner society that has its roots in the larger multiethnic cities of Georgia but since the 70's has spread in one way or other to nearly all parts of the country. In the time of the study, there were hardly any young men in Georgia who did not encounter the normative system, procedures, rituals and action of this "space de passage." In ideological terms for the past three decades, the *school of the street* has been relating itself to the third frame of reference:
3. The *world of the thieves*. A strongly romanticized subculture of the criminal underworld in the USSR that produced its own codex of honour, ranks (or, arguably, even casts<sup>6</sup>) of authority, resource distribution and symbiotic systems (language, songs, tattoos). The authority and influence of the highest cast, the thieves according to the law (*vory v zakone*), extended from the prison-camps far into normal life of ordinary people in Soviet Georgia.

Let us now take a brief look at the second example, the *school of the street* (*k'učis skola*), and trace its development during the Soviet state's fall into agony.

Three central theses should be reinforced thereby; all are concerned with the question of how social systems are organising their borders:

1. ethnic and national entrepreneurs were of inferior organisational effectiveness in comparison to the flexible kind of Soviet patrons and apparatchiks;
2. social qualities designed to reach dynamic stability by means of polytaxis and syncretism can dominate over excluding strategies aiming at structural stability;
3. post-Soviet development in Georgia is conditioned less by the legacy of official socialist institutions or imported western models than by the informal institutions that emerged in the shadows of the official structures.

The phenomenon *school of the street* may best be described as a *space de passage*<sup>7</sup> for boys becoming men, boys leaving the protected and protective territory of family and school in order to enter an unknown, uncanny space of autonomous rules, authorities, rituals and procedures defining one's place. It is a market of prestige devoid of the class, the national, ideological and even legal embedding of the gerontocratically organized prestige markets of the adult world (access to resources, including protection, potential spouses, access to education and jobs being controlled by the generation of fathers and grandfathers). Establishing a new embedding of this market is the fundamental learning-experience on the *school of the street*.<sup>8</sup> In systemic terms the *school of the street* is a self referential social subsystem differentiating itself against the two aspects of its environment: family and official (Soviet) society.

The core institution of the *school of the street* are neighbourhood-meeting-points,

called *birži* (trading place). Though essentially defined by direct neighbourhood the *birži*'s of one street or even one *ubani*/quarter they could unite in certain conflicts against other allied unions of boys following a segmentary logic of fission and fusion.<sup>9</sup>

At these hang-outs, different categories of boys and young men are gathering: old lads, black (lads), street lads, good lads and mummies' boys – that is veterans of the street, initiates into the *world of the thieves*, authorities in general, accepted participants and dependants.

In a way the boys are indeed trading at the *birža*: they are dealing with honour and shame; on the street prestige is gained and lost foremost through individual behaviour in potentially violent conflicts, in petit-criminal action and in rituals of checking out one other. Even though the reference to action is omnipresent, the most important tool is the tongue, mastering the semiotic system of the street-culture and exploiting it to one's own benefit.<sup>10</sup>

Four different aspects of communication should be differentiated in the analyses of the *school of the street*:

1. the semiotic system. It is made up by the languages and gestures of honour and the terms for positions and values relevant in the context of the street. In differentiation to the language of honour of the adult world (*kacurad*; speaking manly, true) and the *world of the thieves* (*k'urdulad*; speaking thief) the street developed two variants of a speech of honour: *kai* or *dzveli bičurad* (speaking good or old lad). The semiotic system contributes the symbolic framework to the normative discourses and ritualized action on the street. It marks out the supposedly fixed points of the orientation of young men and manifests itself in the grammar of speaking just and right/true (*scorad ilaparako*).
2. The discourse. Some aspects of the talk on the street in the context of the *birži* is less an accidental, situative gossip than an open ritual. In general it is concerned with what good lads do and do not do (the content of this changing with time and place). Values and norms are reproduced by permanent repetition. But – owing to the openness of the ritual – innovation (e.g. new means of force; new access to resources like drugs) has the chance to be integrated into the *school of the street* by means of discourse.<sup>11</sup> The art of speaking good (*kargad ilaparako*) refers to the mastering of this discourse in emic terms.<sup>12</sup>
3. The procedure. The term procedure<sup>13</sup> in this case refers to a certain kind of regulated action producing legitimate results. The crucial characteristic of the procedure is that according to commonly accepted rules it leads to meaningful decisions that are not presupposed by the rules themselves. Ideally the real power of the conflicting parties must be suspended for time and place of the procedure and for the decisions reached. The procedure has its own inside and outside in terms of time and space. Inside the procedure prestige is intensely negotiated; the outcome is open and much is at stake for the competing parties.<sup>14</sup> The knowledge of the rules, the reputation prescribed in the discourse (or, in other terms, the social weight) and strategic wit are decisive qualities in order to manipulate the procedure to one's own ends.
4. The action. Action<sup>15</sup> is the aspect of communication that has the most intensive power to trigger off innovation. Action is taken by ambitious boys as soon as they realize new chances or sense new needs. Indeed the borders set by the norms and rules can be questioned and crossed. These incidents or patterns of transgression are then

either integrated (embedded) through discourse and procedure or marked with shame and excluded.

The crucial criteria generating prestige is not strength or brutality, but the image of the sovereign and righteous:<sup>16</sup> to withstand the threat of violence by sticking to the accepted codes of speaking true and just. Thus individual honour is created.<sup>17</sup> The *school of the street* reacts to chances, resources and change of the environment but the procedures distributing honour do not allow participants to draw authority from outside the street: differences of nationality, class, education, urbanisation and the like are not eliminated, but they cannot be used for the creation of honour in the procedures of the street.

There is one exception to this rule: drawing on the authority and codices of the *world of the thieves* gained growing prominence among some street-authorities in the 80's and early 90's. Here is an illustration:<sup>18</sup>

When Ačiko (in 1994 21 years old) was fourteen years old, he had a friend on the birži who was a year younger than him. This friend, Goga, anticipated a career in the criminal world. His young age notwithstanding, he had already achieved the prestige of a fearless k'učis biči (street boy), more than anything else owing to his success in "collecting" the jackets of other boys.<sup>19</sup> His image was decisively reinforced by a certain style of his: he left his business-card with the victims, indicating his address. His friends admired him for his strenuous ways of convincing the victims and sometimes even their parents of him acting honourably and taking into account the shameful cowardice of his victims; his speaking true and right according to the laws of the street (drawing increasingly on the often coinciding codex of the world of the thieves) proved highly successful.

One day Goga gathered Ačiko and another friend and declared that he had a new victim. A young student of the academy of arts that he considered a mummy's boy. They waited for the student on the street. When he came, only Goga approached him, ordering to hand over his jacket. When the student refused, Goga explained that there was no sense in arguing, for a good lad always dominates over a mummy's boy. The student resisted. Goga drew an old Mauser and declared, pointing to his friends, that he also had automatic firearms at his disposal. The offender recharged the weapon, the live cartridge jumping out demonstrated that the gun was loaded. When the student still refused to back down Goga recharged a second time and delivered the weapon to his victim, noting: "If you believe you can resist me then prove it."<sup>20</sup>

The student took the pistol turning pale. He answered: "How old are you?." Goga told his age. The student declared he was seventeen and asked, whether the boy loved someone. Goga denied that he did. The student continued: "I love a girl. Her name is Nino [...]. Tell her that I love her and that I beg her pardon. But I cannot shoot at children." He then pointed the pistol at his own head and pulled the trigger. No round went off. Goga only possessed two cartridges to fit the obsolete weapon.

After the student thus dramatically had proven his honour, the boys hugged him and honoured him ever since as morally superior to them.

In contrast to the street-corner societies of western cities,<sup>21</sup> in Georgia the prestige and social competence autonomously gained or lost on the street has direct influence on a further career as an adult: the high prestige of being just and the ability of taking key-positions in informal networks of trust had an impact on everything from finding a wife from a suitable family to support in official and unofficial careers in the administrative market or the second economy.

This influence is fourfold:

1. flow of information crossing ordinary social borders. On the street, networks are established that cross relevant borders of the social environment: the we-groups of family/clan, class, ethnic group, urban-provincial, and last but not least the border markers of legal and devout citizen are blurred and breached by the networks of the street. These networks can be activated at all times during an adult career and sensitive information may be exchanged relying on the trust developed on the street.
2. Mobile Reputation. The high reputation of deciding or mediating conflicts in a sovereign, true and just way is taken along into the adult world. On the other hand it is just as difficult to get rid of the low reputation of being a coward, a traitor or simply dependent. Migration or seeking a career solely in official state institutions may decisively lower the relevancy of this reputation, though.
3. The know-how of procedures and rituals set up to contain violent conflicts and to establish legitimacy outside from the official institutions proved to be functional in the vast illegal spheres of the USSR: in the administrative market, the second economy, the *world of the thieves*, even the *dedovščina*<sup>22</sup> of the army trust and predictability were a crucial deficit.

A second example shall briefly illustrate the continuity of semiotic competence and concrete networks of trust in the official world. In June 1995 I met the Georgian ambassador to Germany, Kote Gabašvili, at a symposium in Bonn. We spoke about the turbulent time when he was mayor of Tbilisi (1992/3). When he learned of my interest in the school of the street, he enthusiastically told me the following story:

In 1993 the State Museum of Arts was broken into and a famous work of Kandinski was stolen. Gabašvili is concerned. Making use of his high reputation and good contacts with the street<sup>23</sup> he finds out that the son of a family close to him is involved. Exercising pressure on the mother of the boy and promising amnesty to those involved and co-operating, contact is established to the thieves via mutually respected mediators. Gabašvili, exercising his moral weight, agrees with the criminals on the return of the painting under the following conditions: the mayor is to drive to a certain open, deserted place in Tbilisi. There the painting will be delivered to him. He does not agree to show up unarmed, not expecting the other side to be unarmed either. In short: The meeting succeeds under dramatic circumstances and a woman delivers the painting. Asking Kote Gabašvili about his motives for agreeing with the dangerous deal and the reasons for the thieves to trust a vague and in effect illegal promise of amnesty he replied that both sides had no reason to distrust each other since the negotiations revealed that both obeyed to the same code of honour, spoke the same language.

The point I am trying to make is not so much concerned with the observation that in Soviet Georgia it was possible for an independent street-culture to define itself aside from state and family rules. Rather, for the developments in Soviet and post-Soviet Georgia it seems decisive that the competence, prestige and networks developed in this *space de passage* directly influenced the career-options of the adult world.

In order to exploit the opportunities and organisational deficits of the USSR in its peripheries, neither a complete devotion to the gerontocratic and ethnocentric order of the family/clan, nor a narrow minded submission to the official Soviet order proved successful. To realize the potentials of Soviet order in legal and illegal terms one had to

leave the family/clan and confront Soviet interrelations. On the other hand it proved to be functional to remain rooted in the local moral systems and to keep up with the dominant local discourses. They were useful in the establishment of future networks of trust. The point is that ambitious people in the peripheries of the USSR often had all-union consciousness without being devout communists and without losing sight of local demands (drawing on family, clan, ethnic group, local clients and the like).<sup>24</sup>

The ability to have command of various social languages and orders we call polytaxis. The phenomena of combining various social languages into a new, hybrid form can be called syncretism.<sup>25</sup> Both abilities were taught by the *school of the street* and were especially useful for careers in the second economy or the local administrative markets. Career-communists relying for their options on the logic of power in Moscow or nationalist dissident believers saw no use in the complicated middle-world of polytaxis. To them, this world seemed criminal or treacherous.<sup>26</sup>

The disintegration of the broad market of chances of the Soviet state put considerable pressure on the informal institutions that had developed in its shadow. With the final disappearance of functional state structures and the creation of a newly elected government – which became merely one armed interest group among others – the street turned into an exceedingly violent place. People like Djaba Ioseliani and Tengiz Kitovani exploited their reputation on and know-how of the *school of the street* to recruit their paramilitary units. These veterans of underworld and street culture found it much easier to convince (multiethnic) street authorities of their cause than nationalist agitators with no experience or social weight in the terms of the street. According to some veterans of the street, this first phase of the civil war was a clash between *good lads* and *mummies boys* with no knowledge of real life. In a way Zviad Gamsakhurdia reinforced this line of interpretation by describing the conflict as hooligans and criminals against pure patriots.<sup>27</sup>

As we know the armed “hooligans/street boys” under the leadership of the big men Kitovani and Ioseliani won and the “pure patriots /mummies’ boys” (ever since called Zviadists) were forced to flee.

At this time the men standing on top of the rubble of their victory decided (surprising most western observers) to invite Eduard Shevardnadze, former minister of foreign affairs of the USSR and head of the communist party of Georgia in the 70’s and early 80’s, to return to Georgia as head of state.<sup>28</sup> Westerners did not understand that the image of Shevardnadze had always been twofold among Georgians: apparatchik on the one hand and awarded big man, courageous and sensible to local needs on highly symbolic occasions on the other. By the urban majority, he was respected as a representative big man, not as former party-chief.<sup>29</sup>

The alliance between the masters of Soviet markets of chances (patrons, artists, intellectuals with all-union orientation), the big boys of the street and the criminal world proved capable to win a street fight fought with military means of destruction; it proved utterly incompetent in organising any kind of state building. On the contrary:

- the procedures and rules limiting violence were unable to stand the temptation of gaining prestige directly by unlimited application of violence instead by honourably mastering violence.
- Any convincing claim to a monopoly of force evaporated with two competing warlords de facto running the state

- The armed gangs proving utterly hopeless in fighting a well-organized, highly-motivated (by fear and ethno-nationalist propaganda) adversary in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This had to do with a) only few of the fighters having any military training whatsoever (professional soldiers reportedly left the scene repelled by the chaos and looting they saw on the side of their unprofessional comrades), b) the values and prestige of the street used by the warlords to mobilize followers proved counterproductive to encouraging devotion to a national cause.

Djaba Ioseliani had a point when he stated, before re-taking Zugdidi with his boys from the hands of Zviadis formations in autumn 1993, that the main cause of the fighting is about a redistribution of wealth between the generations [rather than an ethnic or national war].<sup>30</sup>

In short: a market of violence developed in which economic effectiveness devoid of moral embedding turned out to be the most important control for the use of violence.<sup>31</sup>

The final stage of this *school of the street gone state* began in 1994 with the head of State, Eduard Shevardnadze, finally managed to tighten his grip on power. Firstly he brought Soviet patrons back into influential positions and drove the representatives of the warlords out, then tightened his grip on executive power and finally arrested the most powerful warlords in 1995.

Were the masters of Soviet markets of chances to stay in power, it could well be that the *school of the street* reappeared as a gymnasium to train boys for the exploitation of state resources. But – as a Georgian joke has it – with the “great colony” USSR lost for the ambitions of the Georgian good lads and big men, there is hardly anything grand left to exploit (except from the economically ruined new state and the assets it is able to mobilize from the outside, like humanitarian aid, state loans and investments). The parasitic Soviet approach to state resources might be a hint on why the idea of decisive earnings to redistribute from oil transit as a congenial replacement of the “Soviet colony” is of such popularity among some Georgian patrons nowadays.

On the other hand there seems to be a tendency in present day Georgia to exchange old Soviet internationalist patriots for young internationalist patriots.<sup>32</sup> This tendency has not proven too successful yet. Despite young ministers and police chiefs and despite the reformed books of law hailed in the west, most key-resources (including essentials like trust and reliance) are again controlled by the old networks of trust developed in the shady areas of the Soviet order.

## Conclusions

Two general conclusions and an open endnote, I would like to draw from this sketch of a particular version of the post-Soviet puzzle of Georgia:

1. In order to understand the decisions and behaviour of people in post-Soviet political conflicts it is not sufficient to take into consideration only the normative discourses on identity. Media and especially the entrepreneurs of communitarian identities (be it cultural, national, ethnical or the like) are selling this excluding story of Us and Them. In situations governed by violence and fear the war-mongers may succeed in officially turning the normative identity into a total identity, not only subordinating, but denying other strategies of orientation for individuals and groups inside the we-group.<sup>33</sup>

A general problem ethnography faces is the turning point marked by an informant

leaving the normative story (the world it should be) behind and turning to the more complicated story of every-day-life. In terms of identity in potentially violent contexts, this seems to be the decisive borderline of insight

To understand why nationalism (or normative reformulation of society as community in general) is not always successful, one has to turn ones focus to the cultural potentials of organising diversity; institutions capable of syncretism, of dealing with innovation and producing polytaxis. Institutions finally, whose function in the larger context of society is defined by adding dynamic, inclusive stability to institutions engaged with structural, exclusive stability.

2. In the case of Soviet Georgia, inside the socialist state existed three social subsystems that portrayed themselves as indifferent to the claim of the state to a monopoly of justice and force, namely the *school of the street*, the *world of the thieves* and to various extends the *family* or *clan*.

It may be banal to observe that people are trying their best to exploit or cover the vulnerabilities and deficits of an authoritarian state by cautious self organisation. It may be less banal, though, to realize that a) the Soviet state in some cases proved to be flexible enough to arrange a stable *modus vivendi* between institutionalized local alternatives dealing with justice and controlled violence as a resource and b) that the alternative subsystems in the evolving situation of legal pluralism may depend upon the state in its function to control ultimate means of violence. The *school of the street*, the *world of the thieves* and the *cosa nostra* approach of the clan proved much more stable while the state, whose order they neglected or contested, was still in existence. At least for the former two subcultures (street and criminal world), the downfall of the Soviet state proved to be a Pyrrhic victory even in a case like Georgia, where they were overwhelmed with the task of running a state by their own rules.

With the new institutional corset modelled in accordance to western democracies and market economy, the tension between state and its shadow is still to a large extent, governed by the former Soviet rules of the game but the outcome is undecided yet. Either the state will bring into being a new social order that respects the monopoly of the state on violence and legitimacy and will empower anonymous technical skills and competence over the rules of networking; or the masters of post-Soviet chances will succeed in taming the democratic beast of the *Rechtsstaat* and colonizing it by running their thin informal networks through the vulnerabilities of the new official order.

In a sense the informally interwoven post-socialist state and society<sup>34</sup> can be viewed as one potential role model for the future of a world after the decline of sovereign national states as the principle framework for the political organization of society (the so-called “end of Westphalia”). Despite this commonly observed trend, the export of outdated western models to the post-socialist world continues. This export is advertised in the naive transformationalist believe according to which the stages of western development can be repeated elsewhere at an accelerated pace simply by implementing institutions that proved functional in a Fordist-Keynesian capitalism embedded in the order of democratically legitimized nation-states.<sup>35</sup>

The future is not to be predicted here; it is hard to see, though, how this model will survive globalisation at the pace of the information age. It seems even harder to imagine how it will solve the problems of post-socialist societies.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The “steam-pot-theorem” of violence in general (for a critical account see Trotha 1997: 16-20) and ethnic violence in particular has been prominent among journalists, politicians and some scholars in trying to make sense of the conflicts accompanying the break-down of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. In this view ethnic tension is seen as a permanent force that has only been suppressed by a even greater force for some time.

<sup>2</sup> For a well informed overview of the political developments in Georgia over the past decade see Nodia 1997, 1996 and Gachechiladze 1996: 24-36.

<sup>3</sup> See Brandt 1997 and Knieper 1995 who were at different stages advisers to the Georgian ministry of justice in Tbilisi.

<sup>4</sup> In his critique of Western bias towards the Soviet societies, fixated on the perspectives of intellectual dissidents and clutched to an ethnocentric understanding of civil society Christopher Hann notes: „[...] Havel argues that ‘communism brought history, and with it all natural development, to halt.... National and cultural differences were kept on ice.’ Here again are metaphors that have been widely used since 1989, but can one really accept that East European societies were placed in some kind of deep freeze over forty years? It seems to me that there was in fact continuous movement and great diversity among and within each of the East European countries.” (Hann 1997: 7).

<sup>5</sup> For a first account of the fieldwork and a more detailed version of the arguments presented here see Koehler 1999.

<sup>6</sup> See Abramkin and Čižov 1992: 90-107.

<sup>7</sup> Following the classic work of van Gennep and the recent contribution of Bloch 1992 this space is understood as a complex of rites de passage guidelining the initiant from one set of order via a liminal phase into a new set of order. The liminal phase is characterized both by following its own rules somewhat detached of both the former and coming moral system and by equipping the initiant through ritualised violence with a new kind of vitality crucial for mastering the world ahead (the logic of this process Bloch sums up as “prey into hunter”).

<sup>8</sup> The notion of economic rationality implied by the term “market” has to be adjusted to the various moral embeddings of the market (see Elwert 1987; Granoveter 1992). This adjustment to economic theory holds true not only for markets of commodities but also for markets of prestige: the ways of earning, trading and exchanging prestige are decisively dependent upon the moral embedding of this particular economy.

<sup>9</sup> This model of segmentary societies was developed by Sir Evans-Prichard in his classic study of the hierarchical loyalties of the lineage-system of the Nuer (Evans-Prichard 1940). A Bedouin proverb has it as follows: me against my brother. Me and my brother against our cousin. Me, my brother and my cousin against our neighbours. All of us together against the stranger (see Chatwin 1990: 273).

<sup>10</sup> The informant Goga summed up: “In Russia a strong boy is somebody with a heavy fist; in Georgia a strong boy has foremost a good tongue.” This differentiation may hold true for the rules of the street: if the Russian proverb *posle draka ne makhai rukami* (do not wave your hands after the fistfight) is mostly observed in Georgia violence is much more spoken; you wave your hands before, during and after the fight. The codex of honour of the *world of the thieves* considers speaking just and right in the idioms of the thieves (*fenya*; *blatnaya muzyka*) as a precondition for the righteous use of force.

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<sup>11</sup> In contrast to what Bloch described as an extreme form of authority of certain religious rituals the open ritual allows controlled, negotiated change; a challenge to a certain part of the ritual in this case does not question the system as such. See Bloch 1989: 19 ff.

<sup>12</sup> It is a peculiar norm both on the street and among the righteous criminals (*blatnye*, thieves of the law) that an authority is supposed to know the relevant personal qualities of a potential victim – that he ought to check him out before taking action. There are various procedures and rituals in order to check someone out but the question of the knowledge of discourse (speaking good) is always decisive.

<sup>13</sup> The term is used following the work of Luhmann 1983 on this matter.

<sup>14</sup> Institutionalized procedures are sometimes governed by independent authorities (e.g. minor thieves or former old lads). Involving mediating or even judging authorities not directly entangled in the conflict itself is always viewed as a critical measure; it lays proof to the fact that the boys were not able to decide their own problems and it exposes the boys busy with sorting out their individual prestige to the authority of others. Therefore this kind of conflict management comes into effect only if a conflict could not be handled in an other, more direct way and basically had got already out of hand.

<sup>15</sup> For a broader view on the role of action for youth-culture in general see Goffman 1971: 164-292; for a challenging account of violence as action (from the point of view of street gangs in Berlin) see Sutterlüty 1998.

<sup>16</sup> *t'avisup'ali* is usually translated as “free”; in the given context I consider a translation as “sovereign” more appropriate. Literally it translates as “being ones own head/lord.” *Gageba* on the other hand refers to the right understanding/attitude, a quality that tames the ideal of complete, detached *t'avisup'leba* (sovereignty/freedom).

<sup>17</sup> Similar to the differentiation in the Turkish language between *namus* and *şeref* (see Schiffauer 1983: 70; also Geertz 1993: 187 ff.), the Georgian understanding of honour divides into a static, generalized, collective dignity of a group defined by shared honour (e.g. the *riseba* / compare *dignity*, *namusi/sindisi* / comp. *conscience* or *sakheli* / comp. *name*, *reputation* of a patrilinear clan) and the mobile, achievable individual honour (the *patiosneba* / comp. *decency* or *sakheli* of an individual).

<sup>18</sup> The following story was told by the informant Ačiko (21 years; all names have been changed) in 1996 partly in Russian and partly in Georgian language and recorded on tape; the “truth value” of the actual content is of inferior importance to our argument than the structures of relevance and plausibility the informant lays open. The content of the story can be considered typical for a normative tale of the street.

<sup>19</sup> Russian: *razdevat'*, literally meaning “to undress.” This term is used all over the former USSR as an euphemism for street-robbery. In the context of the *school of the street*, though, it is less the value of the jacket that matters but the game of scoring or loosing prestige-points.

<sup>20</sup> This way of acting is part of a general strategy popular in Georgia in order to allocate, produce or question honour: I call it inversion. In various situations – starting with reconciliation of blood-feuds (see Koehler 1999), police-raids or street-mugging – men are asked by other men to exchange positions (imaginary or, as in the present case, quite concretely). The man who started the game then checks his own behaviour with the behaviour of the inverted adversary, usually in order to find proof that he is at least as honourable as the other. In connection with the exchange of weapons in ritualised conflicts the game compares to Officers Roulette (Russian Roulette), while the contingency of the situation is limited by

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the knowledge of human nature on the side of the offender turning potential victim. There is no guarantee, though, for the offender that the game will work out for him: Ačikos neighbour lost his eyesight from his own shotgun and another informant was shot in the leg with his own pistol.

<sup>21</sup> Comp. Foot-White 1943 for local exploitation of prestige gained on the street. Also Sutterlüty 1998 for a topical case-study (see above) in which the long-term imagination of a petit-bourgeois career is in opposition to the behaviour creating prestige among street-gangs in Berlin.

<sup>22</sup> The strict and often extremely brutal hierarchy amongst the drafted servicemen of the Soviet Army called *dedovščina* divides recruits in *dukhi* (selective service), *molodye* (rest of first year of service) and *dedy* (second year of service). A competing and sometimes combined system of informal loyalty and exclusive trust is the *zemliačestvo* (ethnic, cultural or local associations). More extensively see Lewada 1993: 126 ff.; also Koehler 1999: 14/76.

<sup>23</sup> Notwithstanding the fact that his authority on the street as a youth is not unquestioned by some of his former peers he reportedly has been making use of his reputation in order to pressure young men into being recruited for the war in Abkhazia; one of the volunteer-formations of Tbilisi was temporally supervised by Gabašvili.

<sup>24</sup> According to Zürchers account of various conflicts in the Caucasus, the successful replacement of those multilingual Soviet elites with monolingual local ones (nationalist dissidents for example) is a crucial indicator for radicalisation and violent escalation of conflicts (Zürcher 1999). One has to be cautious with oversimplifying conclusions from this model: networks of Soviet patrons may prove functional for basic stability in the face of impending civil wars; on the other hand this stability certainly proves to be quite exposed to corruption and state-criminality and utterly reluctant to democratic reforms following western concepts of a market economy embedded in a *Rechtsstaat*.

<sup>25</sup> After the successful deconstruction of an essentialist understanding of race, nation and ethnos, there have been some attempts to save the notion of essential difference in an adapted concept of culture (eg. Huntington 1993; for a critical account on this tendency see Stolke 1995). Contrary to this tendency some scholars defining culture have shifted emphasis from the structural stability of society (high culture, traditions, preconscious habits and preferences) to dynamic stability: culture is then characterised as typical fields of a certain society that are not thoroughly organised by rules and where innovation is created and different social orders can be integrated into the social system (see Elwert 1996, Çaglar 1990 and 1995).

<sup>26</sup> A somewhat astonishing compilation of this position from nationalist point of view in English language can be found in the reader of Leitzinger 1997 and at the zviadist homepages published from Finland (see *zviadist homepages*).

<sup>27</sup> At an international press conference in the fall 1992 president Gamsakhurdia answered the question of a British journalist on the harsh treatment of opposition demonstrators according to the informant Nino Sakariadze: "They are not demonstrators; they are hooligans." See accordingly Gerber 1997: 222.

<sup>28</sup> See for example NZZ 08.01.1992, p. 3: "Ein Mitwirken des früheren sowjetischen Außenministers *Schewardnadse* am politischen Prozess schloss Ioseliani nicht aus – was erstaunt, gibt es doch in Georgien kaum einen in allen Lagern dermassen verhassten Politiker."

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<sup>29</sup> For some examples of this contradictory image see Koehler 1999: 82/68 on Georgian conception of big men (*kacuri kaci*) and great men (*važkaci*).

<sup>30</sup> Reported by the journalist Medea of the newspaper Svobodnaia Gruzia in personal conversation, July 1996.

<sup>31</sup> For this concept of a market of violence developing in the absence of effective control of the means of violence (that is in the absence of what Elias 1976 described as gewaltfreie Räume / spaces without violence in the process of civilisation) see Elwert 1997; compare also the comparative work of Waldmann 1995, 1997 on contemporary zones of civil wars.

<sup>32</sup> The following positions were replaced with young functionaries: Minister of Finance 1997 (Mikheil Čkuaseli 27 years of age; resigned in November 1998); Chief of Police since 1997 (Soso Alavidze, 35 years); party Whip of the Citizen Union Party since 1998 (Mikheil Saakašvili, 31 years); minister of justice since 1998 (Vladimer Čanturia, 35 years). Concerning the resignation of the government dominated by Soviet cadres in July 1998 see RFE/RL 14. July 1998 and 28. July 1998.

<sup>33</sup> Scheffler 1995 convincingly makes the point that this strategy of unifying by force is always ambivalent: a violent claim to total identification with a group always creates lines of division, uncompromisingly separating others outside and inside (like traitors, unbelievers, dissidents and the like) the thus defined group. In situations where expectations for decisive gains (e.g. in the case of administrative privileges) or losses (e.g. in the case of administrative discrimination or even suppression) are not formally connected to the way a person defines his identity, people do not seem to care too much about a limiting definiteness in defining their belonging. Choice is radically limited as soon as people are being convinced that they will not be able to master their every-day-life if they will not unambiguously define their identity.

<sup>34</sup> Christophe 1999 defines this relationship adequately as the “neopatrimonial” legacy of post-Stalinist socialism. See also her criticism of the neo-classic bias of market rationality as determining factor of economical transformation in the former socialist countries (Christophe 1998). Her concept could be pictured as a market of resources embedded in neopatrimonial networks of (post-)socialist society. This approach to post-Soviet economical peculiarities is also well reflected in Gaddy and Ickes model of Russia’s virtual economy: “We call the new system Russia’s ‘Virtual Economy,’ because it is based on illusion, or pretense, about almost every important parameter of the economy: prices, sales, wages, taxes, and budgets. At its heart is the ultimate pretense that the Russian economy is larger than it really is. It is this pretense that allows for larger government, and larger expenditures, than Russia can afford. It is the cause of the web of non-payments and fiscal crisis from which Russia seemingly cannot emerge” (Gaddy und Ickes 1998: 1).

<sup>35</sup> According to some analysts, it was exactly the dire crisis of this capitalist model of accumulation that triggered off the changes in western societies (flexible accumulation, information technology revolution, network society, deterritorialisation) which finally lead to the downfall of the statism of socialist countries. See Castells 1998, 2: 7; also Harvey 1989: 121-182.