

“At the crossroads of European and Asian Cultures”: How identity construct was transformed into a geopolitical constant

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- The notion of the crossroad of cultures is an important one in Georgian cultural and intellectual identification and self-identification;
- The clear indication of the importance of the notion of the “crossroad consciousness” is the theme of this conference;
- Nevertheless, the origin of this construction can make clear the phenomenology of this solid layer in the discourse on Georgia and self-interpretation of Georgians.

- The most interesting fact is that no one from European travelers – from the XIII century to the first half of the XIX – are using even slightly similar description of Georgia as a crossroad of European and Asian cultures;
- In medieval times and even in XVII-XVIII century map discourses “Europe” was circled by the territory which surprisingly coincides with Central European map of the Cold War times of 20th century, not including even Serbian, Polish and Hungarian territories (George H.T. Kimble “Geography in the middle ages” London 1937.).

- Consequently, for European “non-traveling” intellectuals, Georgia was an oriental country (e.g. Immanuel Kant in his lectures on Geography speaks about Georgia in the Chapter entitled “Turkish Asia” (Kants Werke. Band IX. Physishe Geographie. Pp. 405-406. Leipzig. 1923))
- If we can speak about imaginary Georgia before 20th century, it was fully oriental – the imaginary construction created from Marco Polo adventures to Alexander Dumas traveling in the Caucasus.

- Thus, out of these observations a question arises: when and why this notion about Georgia as a “crossroad of cultures” appeared?
- The possible answers are three:
 1. The notion was created by Georgian intellectuals in the short period of independence from 1917 to 1921 and was aimed at creating strong nation-state identity;

2. The notion was created in Soviet times as part of exceptionalism project of the Soviet Union's government;

- The notion was created after 70ies in Soviet Georgia – as a complementary process of construction of contemporary national identity;

Let's consider all three possible versions:

1. 1917-21 creation of notion by Georgian intellectuals:

- The debate on Georgia's identity started in the late 10th century and strengthened parallel to the weakening of Russian Empire from 1905 on;
- But the discussion was more about the question of belonging to Europe or to Asia. Very few intellectuals (e.g. Grigol Robakidze) were talking about crossroad and fusion of cultures as identity axis of Georgia.
- In that times the main question was not the description of Georgia's identity, but defining the main "roadmap for development";
- Two roadmaps prevailed in that time's discourse: Georgia belongs to Europe (headed by Geronti Kikodze) and Georgia belong to the East (headed by Vakhtang Kotetishvili).

(see: "Europe or Asia" Leonidze State Museum of Literature. Tbilisi 1997. collection of essays from 1916 to 1924)

2. As a part of soviet exceptionalism theory:

- Exceptionalism theory of the Soviet Union was created mostly by Stalin. Important part of it was the Georgian Renaissance theory (proving that European Renaissance in the middle ages occurred first in Georgia and then – in Central Asia);
- The important notion of it also was “Euraziiistvo”, heritage of Russian religious nationalists of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century;
- But, both these trends were developed without inclusion of the “crossroad theory” into it (no trace of this theory neither in Big Soviet Encyclopedia (all three editions – in 30ies, 50ies and 70ies), nor in discussions;
- Only few Georgian intellectuals between 1921 and 1937 years discussing possibility of mirroring ‘euraziiistvo’ as defining construction of Georgian identity (e.g. Nikolo Mitsishvili, Akaki Papava).

3. Part of national identity created from 70ies of XX century in Soviet Georgia among Georgian Intellectuals

- In 70ies - while soviet ideological mechanisms were being weakened – the cultural nationalism has emerged in Georgia;
- Only in these times the crossroad theory emerges as dominant theory of self-identification and penetrates into textbooks of Georgian history and literature and into the discourse about Georgia.
- Moreover, it became part of Georgia's definition for researchers involved in Georgian Studies (e.g. Luigi Magarotto – “Georgia as a bridge between Europe and Asia”. “L'avanguardia a Tifliss”. Venice. 1982).

- Thus, the crossroad theory is a late creation as a part of contemporary cultural identity of Georgia; Re-discovery of Grigol Robakidze's writings played a major role – in 80ies he was presented to the Georgian public as one of best European writers.
- Thus, his idea on fusion of eastern and western cultures in Georgia which generates exceptionalism of Georgians and its culture went hand by hand with growing nationalism and identity construction process;

- In the 90ies, after the fall of the Soviet Union, the idea was actively promulgated by Eduard Shevardnadze: he promoted the idea of the history of Georgia as silk road (description of the past) and pipelines (description of the future).
- Eduard Shevardnadze succeed in transforming cultural identity (mostly created in the time he was a Communist Party boss in Georgia:1971-1985) in geo-political construction for presenting Georgia on the world's everyday political life;

- Despite of the fact that new politicians after the Rose Revolution neglect and negated Shevardnadze's heritage, they did not touch the most important idea he has left - crossroad theory as axis of Georgian identity;
- Georgian politics still finds itself discussing possibilities of developing and benefiting from crossroad theory: All Georgian politicians grew up with crossroad identity and for them this theory is natural and self-evident;

- The crossroad point between East and West nowadays can be identified as the place where western technologies meet with eastern resources (human and natural).
- The other and important question is how far the social and political reality of Georgia coincides with crossroad identity.
- In contemporary Georgia we cannot find neither the first, nor the second factors: In the Caucasus these definitions are more applicable to Azerbaijan.

- Due to the fact of crossroad identity, Georgian political development planning is still circled by the crossroad identity and the political will is still strong to represent Georgia on international scene as the best investment climate (i.e. best place where expensive technologies can meet cheap resources) etc.
- Thus, till nowadays, foreign investments in Georgia did not exceed “privatization level” and economical growth depends more on income from privatization and liberalization than from inputs in technology and science development.

- And now Georgia is on the “identity choosing crossroad”:
- Either to continue with the old one – created by Robakidze-Soviet Intelligentsia-Shevardnadze, which day by day becomes out-of-date and will result in the stagnation of economic growth and of development of the liberal society;
- Or to choose creation of new identity axis – more adequate to the possibilities existing in Georgia and around it.