

Narrative of the United Caucasus: Political or Historical Project?

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The paper deals with the problem of the narrative of united Caucasus in the prism of interrelation of historical narrative and collective memory. The idea of the Caucasian unity has been existed for centuries. At different times it has got different content and shape. The attempts of creation of the common Caucasian narrative were blown a new breath in the post Soviet period, emerging in different contents, although they were found to be unsuccessful. The experience of the common past, preserved in the collective memory, turned out to be unable to overcome existed grievances, territorial pretenses and mutual allegations preserved by the same memory. The offered analyses of the presented materials point to the narrative of united Caucasus more as a political/ideological myth, rather than a real project, based on a historical reality.

ერთიანი კავკასიის ნარატივი: პოლიტიკური თუ ისტორიული პროექტი?

ნინო ჩიკოვანი

ივანე ჯავახიშვილის სახელობის სახელმწიფო უნივერსიტეტი

ნაშრომში განხილულია ერთიანი კავკასიის ნარატივის საკითხი, კოლექტიური მეხსიერებისა და ისტორიული ნარატივის ურთიერთმიმართების პრობლემის ფონზე. ერთიანი კავკასიის იდეა არსებობის საუკუნეებს ითვლის. სხვადასხვა ისტორიულ პერიოდში იგი სხვადასხვა შინაარსსა და ფორმას იღებდა. პოსტ-საბჭოთა პერიოდში მან ახალი დატვირთვა შეიძინა, თუმცა ერთიანი კავკასიის ნარატივის შექმნის მცდელობანი უშედეგო აღმოჩნდა. კოლექტიურ მეხსიერებაში შემონახულმა საერთო წარსულის გამოცდილებამ ვერ შეძლო გადაეფარა იმავე მეხსიერებაში დალექილი ურთიერთუნდობლობა, წყენა, ტერიტორიული პრეტენზიები. წარმოდგენილი მასალის საფუძველზე, ერთიანი კავკასიის ნარატივი წარმოგვიდგება უფრო როგორც პოლიტიკური/იდეოლოგიური მითი, ვიდრე ისტორიულ რეალობაზე დამყარებული პროექტი.

The issue of the unity of the Caucasus became a topic of the constant debates and discussions since the 90s of the 20th century, when the “total triumph of the memory”, as called by Piere Norra, was fully experienced by the peoples of the Caucasus.

The studies in the collective and historical memory have revealed that the social groups are determining the topics for remembering and forgetting (Burke, 1980) and our memory and our history are being constructed by them according to the contemporary needs. Paper aims to analyze the narrative of the united Caucasus through the political context, which determined its different forms and influenced on its actualization at the different times.

The sole successful attempt of the political unification of the Caucasus was exercised in the 11th-12th centuries. It was the period of the unification of the Georgian political entities. Although the success of the process was not guaranteed yet, the idea of the united Caucasian state was born. The conception of Leonti Mroveli (Leonti Mroveli, 1995) was a successful attempt of the creation of the common Caucasian narrative, which is gradually revealed in the description of the facts of and in their interpretation (the myth on the origins – the common origins of the Caucasian peoples, formation of the Georgian state with participation of the different peoples, relations with the neighbors, formation of the Georgian language and its declaration as a state language, creation of the written language, pagan Gods and Christianization).

It's a well-known fact that the common historical legacy, the common history and the common ancestors play an important role in the formation of the group ethnic identity. The so called ethno-historical myths are the crucial factors in the formation of the identity, enabling the different communities to identify with their ancestors (Smith, 1986). Exactly this function is ascribed to the myth of the common origins of the Caucasian peoples in the work of Leonti Mroveli. In this respect, it is an interesting piece of the formation of historical memory.

The ideological-political conception formed in the 11th century and the attempts of the creation of the common Caucasian narrative (or the one encompassing any part of the Caucasus) were “revitalized” later. For example, during the reign of Erekle II, the idea of the unification of the South Caucasus under the rule of the King Erekle emerged (Tukhashvili, 1972; Macharadze, 1989). In this case the role of the center was ascribed to Georgia as well, although the circumstances were radically different and this idea of unity was determined by the actuality of the foreign orientation.

Caucasian peoples were united in the framework of the Russian Empire. The administrative entities of the South and the North Caucasus became the

parts of the region ruled by governor-general, whereas Tbilisi was ascribed the role of the administrative center. The unification in the common political space contributed to the restoration of the traditional contacts and actualization of the common past and the memory of the historical co-existence between the peoples of the Caucasus, although the imperial principle of *divide et imepa* was a serious problem and challenge in this respect.

Since that period, the name of Shamil is among those which founded the different versions of the common Caucasian narrative. Imamatus – unification of the portion of the Northern Caucasus – became a symbol of the unity of the Caucasian peoples in their struggle against Russia. The official narrative was created during the Soviet time, in which the two stages could be easily discerned, as well as the counter-narrative, being finally shaped in the post-soviet period.

From the 20s of the 20th century Shamil was the hero of the struggle for independence from the *Tsarist* rule and colonialism. Although the above-described portrait did not fit in its entirety to the interests of the Soviet historiography as the name of Shamil was associated with the anti-Russian and anti-soviet movements. His name became even more contradictory from the 1950s, when Shamil was officially declared as “the reactioner” and “the agent of the Ottoman Turkey and England.” The Soviet historiography tried to find a compromised variant for the created dilemma: Shamil himself was the leader of the “progressive”, “popular”, “anti-colonial” and “national-independent” movement, but later on “anti-popular” feudal and clerical elements took the leadership and the movement got a reactionary nature (Gammer, 1999). The version was in effect till the end of the Soviet Union.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union Shamil became a national hero for Chechnya and Dagestan. The different political camps were trying to use him for their purposes. As a reaction to the Soviet narrative, the different versions of narratives on Shamil were formed. The Dagestan-Avar narrative is among them, in which the fact that Shamil was originally Avar played an important role and it was the element of the national identity and collective memory of Avars. A kind of compromised nature of the above-mentioned narrative should be stressed: the victories of Shamil are a matter of pride, whereas the enemy is not mentioned at all (Gammer, 1999).

The different narrative has been created in Chechnya. In this case the main element of the formation of the collective identity and memory was the three centuries long struggle against Russia in which Shamil was the main figure and symbol. Although other figures also appear, among them Imam Mansur should be mentioned first and foremost, with Chechen origins and

the first leader of the struggle against Russia. He called for the unity of the Caucasian peoples.

Another version of the narrative was created in the center – in Moscow. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Shamil – previously tabooed topic – appeared in the center of the interest of professional historians, as well as journalists and publicists. But after the beginning of the first Russian-Chechen War (1994) the number of books and articles on the topic of the Caucasian history declined and the issue of Shamil became the subject of media covering (Gammer, 1999). Until the second war of Chechnya (1999) Moscow changed the memory politics and from 1997 she was actively involved in the arrangements dedicated to the 200 anniversary of Shamil. Shamil was placed in the pantheon of the official heroes of Russia. The new official narrative was created: mostly it is identical of the Dagestan-Avar narrative, although with one difference: the period after 1859 is stressed in particular: Shamil influenced on the process of reconciliation with the former enemy and he became an admirer of Russia and its culture. He bequeathed to the Dagestan peoples (and to Chechens as well) an eternal peaceful coexistence with Russians. This narrative of Moscow was an attempt to contradict with an effort of using the legacy of Shamil against Moscow. This aspiration coincided with those of the local Dagestan-Avar elites and other North Caucasian ones, as well as with the interests of the North Caucasians, represented in the central government, as all other narratives could be used by the alternative elites.

Since the establishment of the soviet rule in the Caucasus the two versions of the narrative of the united Caucasus are formed. One of them was created in the Soviet historical science and it was based on the ideology of the brotherhood and friendship of the soviet peoples. It should be mentioned that the roots of the “brotherhood” did not traced far in the historical past, rather it was based on the new Soviet ideology through the overcoming of the old hatreds and enmity.

The plan of the forming of the “new soviet men” implied the erosion of the differences between the peoples. Correspondingly, the substitution of the ethnic identity with the common Soviet identity was accented, which should be much deeper and stronger than any other identity. Although the official rhetoric of brotherhood and unity had a real impact on the thinking of the *Soviet* citizens (Cornell, 2001), but the Soviet identity did not manage to substitute the ethnic, religious or some other group identities, rather it came to coexist with them. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union the unifying Soviet identity disappeared and the inefficiency of the narrative, based on the ideology, became obvious. The fact influenced on the Caucasian peoples and it was painfully reflected in their lives, which was expressed in the Caucasian conflicts first and foremost.

Since the 20s of the 20th century the issue of the creation of the Caucasian Confederation was actively discussed in the emigrant circles. The past referred for the arguments. In this respect, the letters of Dimitri Vachnadze, Nikoloz Inasaridze, Samson Firtskhalava, as well as the Armenian politician A. Jamalian, are quite interesting (Sharadze, 2004). Although quite often rational arguments were overshadowed with emotion and pathetic, but these letters in the emigrant periodicals, as well as the attempts of the creation of the Caucasian confederation in the 30s of the 20th century are interesting as the attempts of the overcoming of conflicting memory.

In the post-Soviet period the narrative of the united Caucasus was loaded again and it got a new content. It is interesting that it was formed in parallel with the empowerment of ethno nationalism.

In the beginning of the 90s of the 20th century, when the Caucasus was the scene of the several conflicts, the conception of the "Common Caucasian House" was born, which was determined by the new circumstances, created after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and by the pathos of the confrontation with Russia. The idea was realized in the form of the Confederation of the Caucasian Peoples, which was supported by the governmental officials of the Russian Federation.

Confederation played not only the negative role in the conflicts of the Caucasus, but the experience was also layered in the collective memory of the Caucasian peoples in spite of its short-term existence. In the later period the attitude towards the idea of the unity of the Caucasus became more cautious and skeptical. Although the supporters of the idea of confederation were striving for its reanimation from time to time but it did not gain any response.

Another attempt of the creation of the united Caucasian narrative in the post soviet period came from the official political circles. In the 90s of the 20th century, as a response to the conception of S. Huntington and in the form of its alternative the idea of the "Peaceful Caucasus" was offered by the President of Georgia and the President of Azerbaijan. Different from the "Caucasian House" it was aimed not at the unity of any form, but rather it was looking for the common interests and for the creation of the conditions for the peaceful co-existence through negotiations and agreement.

In terms of creation of the common narrative several international conferences held in Tbilisi, in 1997-1998 under the initiatives of politicians should be taken into consideration. A particular attention was paid to the search for the historical-cultural foundations of the unity of the Caucasian peoples. The speeches delivered at these conferences by the Georgian politicians could serve as an example of the effort of creation of the new narrative. In these cases the attempts of revitalization of the myth of kinship of the Cau-

casian peoples and the creation of the common Caucasian narrative, which would reflect the influence of the political conjuncture and aspiration towards introducing some changes in the existing situation of the Caucasus is obvious. Obviously the Caucasian peoples share too much, but these common characteristics were shadowed in the post-soviet period and they were substituted with conflicts and contradictions, part of it being the result of the soviet legacy, the soviet national politics (mass deportations, exiles, artificial demarcations of boundaries between the union republics and autonomous structures, purposeful change of the demographic balance, etc.) while others have got much more deeper roots.

Historical textbooks are another type of narratives which have a strong influence on the formation of the collective memory. "Historical textbooks are considered as one of the important sources of the formation of the national identity and historical consciousness. On their basis pupils get the impression on their nation and on its place in history, as well as they are provided with perception of their neighbors" (Stojanovic, 2001). In the soviet era history teaching was conducted according to the Union program, by the textbooks written in Moscow first and later translated into the titular languages of the soviet republics. The main subject was "History of the Soviet Union". It was the united soviet historical narrative on which the collective memory based on the common past of the Soviet people should be formed. In reality, "*The History of the Soviet Union*" was the history of Russia with minor additions of the historical sketches from the history of the Soviet peoples. Its starting point was not the victory of the Revolution and the establishment of the Soviet rule, but it covered the period from the ancient times till the modern era. The Soviet textbooks were the testimony of the statement that the selection of the information for the secondary schools and their systematization were an ideological process, being in service of the interests of the concrete class and social group (Podeh, 2001).

Several cases of the failure of the creation of the common Caucasian narrative for the formation of the collective memory in the post-Soviet period clearly point to the serious hindrances in this respect. For example, in 1997, the project called as the "Tbilisi Initiative," was financed by the Council of Europe aimed at the creation of the common history textbook of the Caucasus with participation of historians from Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia and the Russian Federation. The working process lasted for several years with no results: interpretation of histories were too diverse and different; the experience of the common past, preserved in the collective memory, did not manage to overlap the historical grievances, territorial pretenses and mutual allegations, accumulated in the memory. Forgetting the relativity of the historical

verity each part stood as a guard of its own truth. Each of them created their "own" histories of the Caucasus. It worth's to mention that as more distant past was the matter of discussion, the more severe debates followed and mutual agreement was impossible.

As R. Karagiozov mentions, in this case the collective memory won over the representation of the history in that form, which was envisaged under the project. The same is much true for the case, when collective memory won on the Soviet version of the history of the Soviet Peoples, looking for the establishment of the brotherhood and unity (Garagozov, 2005). The attempt of the actualization of the common Caucasian narrative did not succeed.

The creation of the common Caucasian narrative is seriously hindered by the tradition of ideologization and mythologization of the national histories. Overcoming of this experience is met with the serious resistance of the collective memory, i.e. stereotypes, beliefs, etc. (Исмаилов, 2005). Besides, until nowadays the Marxist formational methodological frame maintains its dominant positions, with an accent on the economic and political development. It has not vacated the place for the methodological pluralism yet; although quite often neglected verbally it often appears in the form of mixture alongside with the other approaches (mostly with local-civilizational one). The strong political determination of history is one of the main obstacles to the overcoming of the collective memory and creation of the common narrative. And the third obstacle serves to be the "schematic narrative templates" offered by J.Wertch, called "matrix" by Mark Ferro. The Georgian, Azerbaijani and Armenian types of the templates were studied and analyzed by R.Karagiozov. Not surprisingly, they are essentially different from one-another. Alongside with other factors, the collective memories of these peoples were also reflected in them, complicating the process of creation of the common schema during the attempt of creation of the common narrative.

Thus, the creation of the common Caucasian narrative remains to be an unfulfilled aim so far. As for the idea of the united Caucasus, it serves to be the so called "useful myth", historians serving as its guardians, as Karl Beker mentioned (Becker, 1932).

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