

Eurasiatica

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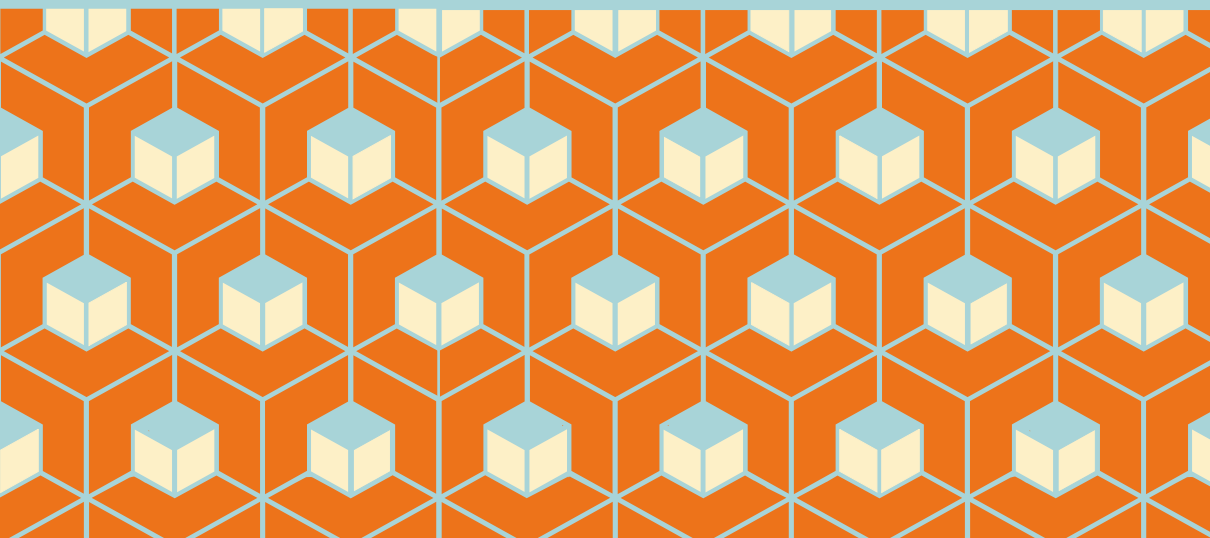
# **Armenia, Caucaso e Asia Centrale**

## Ricerche 2020

a cura di  
Carlo Frappi e Paolo Sorbello



**Edizioni**  
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## **Eurasiatica**

Serie diretta da  
Aldo Ferrari

15



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# Introduzione

**Carlo Frappi**

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Questo nuovo volume della serie «Eurasiatrica. Quaderni di Studi su Balcani, Anatolia, Iran, Caucaso e Asia Centrale» delle Edizioni Ca' Foscari di Venezia raccoglie diversi articoli dedicati allo spazio caucasico e centro-asiatico. Alcuni dei contributi del volume derivano dalle relazioni presentate nel convegno *Ricerche italiane sull'Asia Centrale e sul Caucaso* organizzato dall'Associazione per lo Studio in Italia dell'Asia centrale e del Caucaso (ASIAC) presso l'Università degli Studi Roma Tre il 5-6 dicembre 2019; altri derivano invece dalle relazioni presentate nel corso della *XIII Giornata di Studi Armeni e Caucasici* organizzata il 4 aprile 2019 dal Dipartimento di Studi sull'Asia e sull'Africa Mediterranea dell'Università Ca' Foscari di Venezia in collaborazione con l'Associazione per lo Studio in Italia dell'Asia centrale e del Caucaso (ASIAC).

La presente pubblicazione non ha pertanto natura monografica, ma rispecchia piuttosto le differenti linee di ricerca portate avanti in questi ultimi anni da studiosi italiani e internazionali che si occupano di Caucaso e Asia Centrale. Ne fanno pertanto parte studi di diversa natura e matrice disciplinare, ordinati nel volume secondo un criterio cronologico che muove da contributi di carattere storico e filologico per giungere a studi contemporanei di taglio linguistico, letterario o politologico.

Il volume è aperto dal saggio di Stephanie Pambakian e Lidia Zannetti Domingues, dedicato all'esplorazione delle attività delle prime comunità armenie in Italia e alla loro interazione con l'elemento autoctono. In particolare, le autrici incentrano la propria analisi su due

iscrizioni al Monastero armeno del Santo Spirito, ad Orvieto, e sulla comunità che a partire dal XIII secolo vi crebbe intorno. Attraverso le analisi di documenti latini e del contesto storico di riferimento, le autrici evidenziano la positiva accoglienza riservata alla comunità armena dalle locali autorità laiche e clericali.

Di seguito, il volume presenta due articoli su diversi aspetti culturali e linguistico-culturali che riguardano due lingue del Caucaso meridionale: l'osseto e lo svano. Il saggio di Paolo Ognibene guarda alla rappresentazione letteraria degli spiriti osseti nei racconti popolari, sottolineandone la caratteristica imprevedibilità. In questa prospettiva, l'autore mostra i limiti della conversione al Cristianesimo, avvenuta nell'Oriente europeo nei secoli IX e X, la superficialità dello 'strato cristiano' nel mondo religioso osseto, che trova riscontro nei racconti popolari. L'articolo seguente, di Alessio Giordano, Michele Salvatori e Vittorio Springfield Tomelleri, contribuisce invece al lavoro di traduzione e analisi linguistica della più importante opera del poeta osseto Kosta Chetagurov (1859-1906), *Iron fændyr* (Lira osseta). Il contributo si concentra sulla poesia «Sidzærgæs» (Vedova), contestualizzandone la traduzione e l'analisi linguistica con informazioni di contesto storico, culturale e letterario.

Nel suo articolo, Massimiliano Vaghi guarda alla letteratura francese di fine Ottocento e, in particolare, alla saggistica che, rivolgendosi a un pubblico metropolitano di cultura medio-alta, si incentra sulla costruzione dell'identità culturale dei popoli del Medio oriente e della regione caucasica. Nello specifico, attraverso l'analisi dell'opera di Ernest Chantre (1843-1924), che viaggiò ripetutamente in Russia, nel Caucaso e in Armenia a fine Ottocento e scrisse di quei popoli attraverso un prisma religioso, Vaghi offre uno spaccato delle percezioni delle élite francesi su popolo e cultura armeni, sullo sfondo dell'approccio colonialista ed eurocentrico che dominava la cultura del tempo.

I due articoli successivi affrontano, da una prospettiva di analisi letteraria e storica, eventi messi in moto dalla Prima Guerra mondiale. Nel primo di essi, Sona Haroutyunian guarda alle dinamiche della diaspora armena, proponendo uno studio degli articoli del periodico *Armenia. Eco delle rivendicazioni armene*, pubblicato a Torino nei drammatici anni compresi tra il 1915 e il 1918. La rivista viene inaugurata, dunque, in una peculiare congiuntura storica, caratterizzata dall'inizio del genocidio delle comunità armene in Anatolia, da una parte, e dall'ingresso dell'Italia nella Grande guerra a fianco dell'Intesa, dall'altra. Questa sovrapposizione temporale fa sì che l'analisi degli articoli del periodico permetta all'Autrice di ricostruire e non soltanto esaminare la percezione del Genocidio da parte delle comunità armene d'Italia, ma anche le relazioni che vengono a instaurarsi tra le autorità armene e la stampa e il mondo politico italiano. Il contributo successivo, di Daniel Pommier, si incentra invece sulla missio-

ne della delegazione della Repubblica Democratica dell'Azerbaigian (1918-1920) alla Conferenza di pace di Parigi, nel 1919-20. Il saggio prende in esame il tentativo della delegazione di assicurare alla Repubblica il riconoscimento internazionale, attraverso l'analisi delle comunicazione politica azerbaijana e il suo adattamento allo 'spirito wilsoniano' dei tempi. In questa prospettiva, l'Autore mette in luce come l'azione della delegazione abbia gettato le basi intellettuali del tentativo di smarcamento della Repubblica dall'influenza turca e di 'integrazione a Occidente' che avrebbe caratterizzato la politica estera della fase di indipendenza.

Alle dinamiche proprie della diaspora armena guarda anche il saggio di Francesco Mazzucotelli, che tratta della storia poco esplorata degli Armeni in Libano, ripercorrendone le alterne vicende dall'epoca dell'insediamento nel Paese, dopo la Grande guerra, sino agli anni Novanta del secolo scorso, attraverso il prisma del ruolo svolto dalle istituzioni e dagli alti rappresentanti della Chiesa armena. Il saggio evidenzia come essa, fattore decisivo per la preservazione della cultura armena, abbia finito per assurgere a terreno privilegiato di scontro tra diverse istanze e agende di politica interna ed estera, tra attori locali e internazionali strumentalmente interessati a utilizzarne il potenziale.

I due successivi contributi ospitati dal volume, a firma di Alessio Giordano e di Daniele Artoni e Sabrina Longo, guardano entrambi alle contemporanee politiche linguistiche adottate dalla Georgia, messe in relazione rispettivamente alla lingua svana e a quella russa. Il saggio di Giordano si concentra in particolare sull'effetto prodotto dalle politiche governative sulla tutela e sull'avanzamento degli studi in lingua svana. Il saggio evidenzia come le istanze che provengono dalla comunità svana non trovino riscontro nelle politiche linguistiche di Tbilisi, che appaiono ancora lontane nell'assicurare piena tutela e promozione alle lingue cartveliche diverse dal georgiano. Artoni e Longo propongono invece uno studio sulla diffusione della lingua russa tra le giovani generazioni di georgiani, fondato su un sondaggio controllato tra studenti e docenti. Il saggio, che prende le mosse dalle politiche di de-russificazione linguistica perseguite dopo l'indipendenza dall'Unione sovietica della Georgia, dimostra come la lingua russa ricopra ancora un ruolo significativo per le nuove generazioni e, più in generale, nella società georgiana.

Alle complesse trasformazioni post-sovietiche della Georgia è dedicato anche il saggio di Vincenzo Zenobi, che guarda a esse attraverso il prisma del cambiamento dello spazio urbano della capitale, Tbilisi. Il saggio mette così in luce i processi di rinnovamento urbano nella capitale assieme ai vari modelli architettonici promossi dai diversi governi, tracciando il percorso di modernizzazione della città, evidente nelle nuove forme dell'architettura pubblica e privata.

Alla sorte delle minoranze etniche e linguistiche d'origine cauca-

sica è dedicato il saggio di Fabio Grassi, che, con un esercizio di analisi storica e politica, guarda alla diaspora caucasica in Turchia. Il saggio affronta, in particolare, il tema delle rivendicazioni culturali e politiche dei 'Circassi di Turchia', delineando un quadro aggiornato delle istanze di cui si fa portatrice l'*intelligencija* circassa e degli strumenti impiegati a tal fine.

Gli ultimi due saggi guardano, da prospettive differenti, all'Asia centrale. Nel primo di essi, Dmitry Novokhatskiy offre una panoramica della rappresentazione della regione centro-asiatica nella letteratura russa attraverso un'analisi diacronica che muove dall'immagine prospettata dalla letteratura ottocentesca per giungere a sino a quella post-sovietica. Il saggio mette così in luce origine e portata delle due narrative centrali attorno alle quali ruota l'immagine letteraria dell'Asia centrale: Nuovo Orientalismo e Nostalgia. Nel secondo saggio che guarda all'Asia centrale e che chiude il volume, Lucia Bortolotti analizza le strategie di *nation branding* nel Kazakhstan contemporaneo e come queste si intersechino con le politiche di *nation building*. Il saggio vuole mettere in luce le discrepanze tra la costruzione dell'immagine internazionale del Paese promossa dalle autorità governative e i contorni della costruzione identitaria così come sono percepiti dalla popolazione kazakha, nonché il rapporto di influenza reciproca tra i due livelli d'analisi.

# Armenians on the Via Francigena. Armenian and Latin Sources on the Origins of the Armenian Community of Orvieto (Urbs Vetus)

Stephanie Pambakian

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**Abstract** An Armenian religious community settled in Orvieto in the 13th century and founded the church and hospice of Santo Spirito, where they provided hospitality to pilgrims on the Via Francigena. Archaeological traces of their presence include a travertine gate with a trilingual inscription, reused in the church of San Domenico (Orvieto), the remains of the church of Santo Spirito, and art pieces removed from the latter. Contemporary Latin documents and an analysis of the historical context suggest that the Armenian presence was well-received by the lay and clerical authorities, and even held as prestigious.

**Keywords** Armenian Epigraphy. Latin Epigraphy. Via Francigena. 13th-century Umbria. Monastery of Santo Spirito. San Domenico in Orvieto. Armenian communities in Italy.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Two Inscriptions from the Armenian Monastery of Santo Spirito, Now on the Southern Gate of San Domenico in Orvieto. – 2.1 Inscription I. – 2.2 Inscription II. – 3 The Church of Santo Spirito at Tamburino. – 4 San Domenico in Orvieto. – 5 The Armenians and Orvieto. – 5.1 Latin Sources on the Armenian Community of Orvieto. – 5.2 The Armenians and the Commune. – 5.3 Orvieto as a Strategic Settlement. – 6 Conclusion.



## 1 Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Research on the origins of Armenian communities in late medieval Italy has produced fruitful results, especially since the publication of Msgr Zekiyan's pioneering work on *Le colonie armene del Medio Evo in Italia* (Zekiyan 1978; see also Zekiyan 1996). In addition to collecting information on Armenian communities in the Italian peninsula, most of which originated between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Zekiyan's contribution highlights the broader importance of undertaking such research, whose implications extend beyond the confines of Armenian Studies. Italy, in Zekiyan's words,

fu il ponte attraverso cui nel Medio Evo l'Armenia conservò i suoi legami con l'Europa. (Zekiyan 1978, 804)

was the bridge by which Armenia preserved its links with Europe through the Middle Ages.<sup>2</sup>

And an in-depth understanding of later Italian relations with the Near East requires a knowledge of the first phases of such interactions. Moreover, exploring the little-known history of these colonies might help historians of late medieval Italy gain a greater understanding of Italy's centrality within a Mediterranean context. This would also lead to a more accurate picture of its cultural complexity and of the contributions made by indigenous and non-indigenous communities to the development of the arts, of theological thought, and of manufacturing.<sup>3</sup>

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**1** First of all, we would like to express our gratitude to Prof. Ferrari for inviting us to present our findings at ASIAC 2019, as the timely opportunity has participated in bringing this research together. We must express our gratitude to Marco Prosperini, a most archaeologically-aware hotel porter, for informing coauthor Stephanie Pambakian of the Armenian inscriptions at the gate of San Domenico upon her chance visit to Orvieto. Acquiring research material was made easy by the availability, competence and enthusiasm of the people of this city. In particular, archivist Luca Giuliani provided Pambakian with documents selected on the basis of meticulous yet unpublished research conducted by architect Sabina Bordino, who also kindly accompanied Pambakian to the remains of the monastery at Tamburino. On a second visit, Ten. Col. Silvio Manglaviti and the local military helped record necessary measurements of the door at San Domenico, and archivist Roberta Galli, with an impromptu team of archive personnel and users, was of great assistance in the retrieval of the 1292 Cadastre. Pambakian's reading of the inscriptions was aided by Prof. Orengo's first observations (which he generously shared with the authors before publication) and by the expert eye of Prof. Michael Stone, whom we thank profusely. For their precious help in aiding communication at various stages, we would also like to thank Anna Donatelli Landani, Aldo Lo Presti and Prof. Anna Sirinian.

**2** Unless otherwise indicated all translations are by the Authors.

**3** See for instance Rossetti 1989; Delouis, Mossakowska-Gaubert, Peters-Custot 2019, to name only a few.

In this perspective, the present paper focuses on the Armenian community of Orvieto, based on archaeological evidence in Armenian (Classical and Medieval), Latin and a local vernacular, and on archival material, which has not yet been the subject of detailed discussion.<sup>4</sup> It moreover aims at underlining the importance of a close dialogue between specialists from different fields, such as Armenian and Medieval Studies, promoting interdisciplinary practice to allow mutual enrichment and to better gauge the wealth of material and cultural exchanges across Mediterranean communities in the late Middle Ages.

## 2 Two Inscriptions from the Armenian Monastery of Santo Spirito, Now on the Southern Gate of San Domenico in Orvieto

Two inscriptions occupy a prominent position on the entrance of the Church of San Domenico in Orvieto [fig. 1]: one extends over all three horizontal stones of the architrave, and we shall refer to it as Inscription 1. Inscription 2 is a less regular epigraph on the top left stone of the architrave, on which the lintel rests. This is not the original location of this door, which used to be at the Armenian monastery of Santo Spirito (of the Holy Spirit), at Tamburino, in the nearby countryside of Orvieto.



Figure 1

San Domenico in Orvieto © Beweb  
(<https://www.beweb.chiesacattolica.it/edificidiculto/edificio/87296/Chiesa+di+San+Domenico>)

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<sup>4</sup> See Orenego 2018, 85-6 fn. 2 for an overview of the Orvietan epigraphic evidence and a brief contextualization.

Despite their exposure and visibility, these inscriptions have not been studied until recently. Alessandro Orenco was, to our knowledge, the first Armenologist to notice them in Summer 2017 (pers. comm.), and published a first record of his finding shortly afterwards (Orenco 2018, 85-6 fn. 2). Independently of Orenco's discovery, coauthor Stephanie Pambakian came across this piece of epigraphic evidence while visiting the city in Summer 2018.

## 2.1 Inscription I

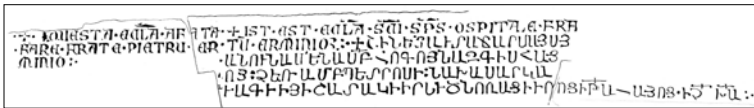


Figure 2 (above, top) Inscription I on the architrave of San Domenico in Orvieto, edited

Figure 3 (just above) Stephanie Pambakian, a drawing of Inscription I from San Domenico, 2018

Inscription I is carved over three blocks of travertine.<sup>5</sup> The central stone tapers in a T-shape, whilst both side stones grow thinner at the centre, to accommodate the 'wings' of the central stone. We number blocks 1 to 3 left to right. Given the position and interconnection of the stones, we allow that measurements may have a certain degree of inaccuracy.

Block 1. Travertine. Measures: H left 26 cm, at the gate opening the flat surface is 23 cm high; W top 83 cm, middle 90 cm, bottom 93 cm; Th 25.5 cm. Writing surface.<sup>6</sup> Margins: L 47.5 cm, top 2.5 cm, bottom 10 cm. Letter size: 3-3.5 cm.

<sup>5</sup> Identification by Ten. Col. Silvio Manglaviti, who also kindly took the measurements of the four inscribed stones with the assistance of Antonio Rossitto and Sandro Zaccariello.

<sup>6</sup> Measurements of margins and letters were taken by Stephanie Pambakian, with the assistance of Manglaviti and Zaccariello. This and the footnote above apply to all blocks.

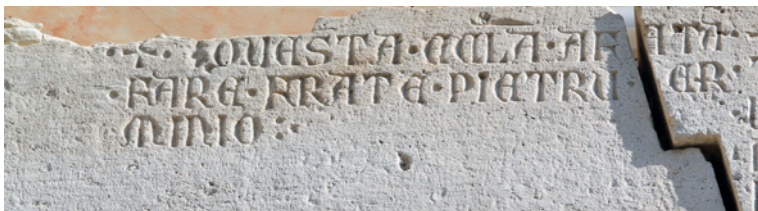


Figure 4 Detail of Block 1, Inscription I on the architrave of San Domenico in Orvieto

Block 2. Travertine. Measures: H flat surface 23 cm; W top 83.5 cm, 78.5 cm middle, bottom 67 cm; Th 25.5 cm. Writing surface. Margins: top 2.5-3 cm, bottom 1.8-2.3 cm. Letter Size: 3-3.5 cm.

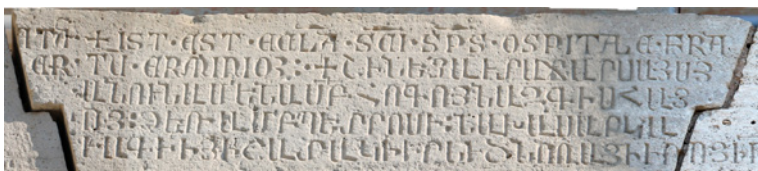


Figure 5 Detail of Block 2, Inscription I on the architrave of San Domenico in Orvieto, edited

Block 3. Travertine. Measures: H right 26 cm, at the gate opening the flat surface measures 22,5 cm; W top 81 cm, 84 cm middle, bottom 91 cm; Th 25,5 cm. Writing surface. Margins: R 49 cm, top 18 cm, bottom 1-1.5 cm. Letter size: 3-3.5 cm.



Figure 6 Detail of Block 3, Inscription I on the architrave of San Domenico in Orvieto

## Inscription I. Transcriptions and Translation

1.+QUESTA. ECL̃A. AFATA + IST. EST. ECL̃	1 (crux) questa ec(c)l(esi)a a fata (crux)
̃A. SC1. SP̃S. OSPITALE. FRA	ist(a) est ec(c)l(esi)a s(an)c(t)i sp(iritu)s
2 FARE. FRATE. PIETRU. ER. TU.	ospitale fra-
ERMINIOԶ. + ՇԻՆԵՑԱԲ ՏԱՃԱՐԱՍ	2 fare frate pietru er- t(r)u(m)
ԱՅԱ Յ	erminio(rum) (crux) շինեցաւ
3 MINIO. ԱՆՈՒՆ ԱՄԵՆԱՍԲ	տաճարս այս յ-
ՀՈԳՈՅՆ ԱԶԳԻՍ ՀԱՅ	3 minio անուն ամենաս(ուր)ք
4 ՈՅ: ՁԵՌԱՍԲ ՊԵՏՐՈՍԻ:	հոգոյն ազգիս հայ-
ՆԱԽԱՍԱՐԿԱ	4 ոց: ձեռամբ Պետրոսի:
5 ԻԱԳԻ Ի ՅԻՇԱՏԱԿ ԻՐ ԵՒ ԵՐԴԱՅ	նախասարկա-
ԵՆՈՂԱՅ ԻՐՈՅՆ Ի ԹՎ ՀԱՅՈՅ. Ի	5 Լագի ի յիշատակ իւր եւ ծնողաց
Չ՝ vacat Խ՝Ա:	իւրոց ի թվ(ին) հայոց. ի չ խա:

In the transcription above, tildes represent signs over abbreviations (either short horizontal lines or small crosses). Dots and other graphic elements are represented as faithfully as possible. Tildes at line 5 do not indicate abbreviations but seem to indicate numerals. Abbreviations are spelt out in the normalised transcription, with integrated letters in brackets.

This inscription presents similar content in a form of Umbrian vernacular, Latin and Armenian.<sup>7</sup> The first is written across the first three lines: “Questa ec(c)l(esi)a a fata/ fare frate Pietru er-/ minio”, ‘This church was commissioned by brother/friar<sup>8</sup> Peter the Armenian’. At line 1, the second Greek cross marks the beginning of the Latin epigraphy (lines 1-2), which reads: Ist(a) est ec(c)l(esi)a s(an)c(t)i sp(iritu)s ospitale fra-/t(r)u(m) erminio(rum)”, ‘This is the church of the Holy Spirit, hospice of the Armenian brothers/friars’. At line 2, after parts of the vernacular and Latin epigraphs, another Greek cross marks the start of the Armenian dedication, which is the most extensive of the three and runs across lines 2-5: “շինեցաւ տաճարս այս յ-/անուն ամենաս(ուր)ք հոգոյն ազգիս հայ-/ոց: ձեռամբ Պետրոսի: նախասարկա-/Լագի ի յիշատակ իւր եւ ծնողաց իւրոց ի թվ(ին) հայոց. ի չ խա” šinec’aw tačars ays y-/anown amenas(owr)b hogoyñ az-gis hay-/oc’: jeřamb Petrosi: naxasarka-/ wagi i yišatak iwr ew cnołac’ iwroc’ i t’v(in) hayoc’ i Č’XA. ‘This temple, dedicated to the Most Holy Spirit, was built, for our Armenian nation, by the hand of archdeacon Petros, in memory of himself and his parents, in the year of the

<sup>7</sup> In the transcription, backslash is used to indicate the next line.

<sup>8</sup> On why we have decided to highlight the ambiguity of the term by using a double translation, see footnote 13.

Armenians 741 [=1292]<sup>9</sup>. At line 5 եւ (ew) presents an incomplete ե, missing the horizontal bar. Apart from this, all languages and both scripts are engraved skilfully and homogeneously, in both letter size and carving depth. No letters present ligatures. Our knowledge of epigraphic practice for multilingual inscriptions in the local context does not allow us to make speculations about the provenance or education of the cutter (or cutters).

## 2.2 Inscription II

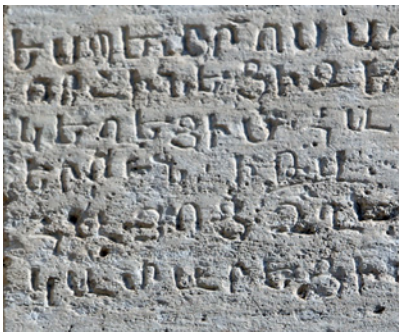


Figure 7 (left) Detail of Inscription II on the architrave of San Domenico in Orvieto

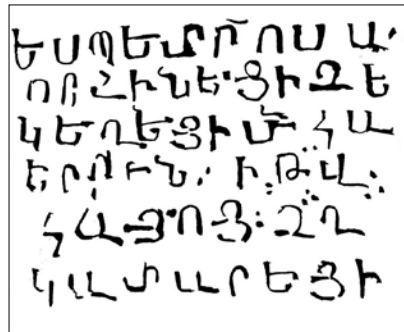


Figure 8 (right) Stephanie Pambakian, drawing of Inscription II, 2018

Single block. Travertine. The block is divided into a part with a flat, partly inscribed surface, and a phytomorphic decorative element to the right. Measures: H 29 cm, W 44 cm; Th 25.5 cm. Writing surface. Margins: L 0.8-2 cm, top 4.5 cm, bottom 7.5 cm. Letter Size: 1.8-2.5 cm with the exception of լ, only 1.2 cm high.

### Inscription II. Transcriptions and Translation

1 ԵՍ ՊԵՏՐՈՍ Վ	1 ես Պետրոս վ(արդապետ)
2 ՈՐ ԾԻՆԵՑԻ ԶԵ	2 որ շինեցի զե-
3 ԿԵՂԵՑԻ ՍԲ ՀԱ	3 կեղեցի ս(ուր)բ հա-
4 [Յ]ԵՐՈՒՆ: Ի ԹՎ:	4 [յ]երուն. ի թվ.
5 ՀԱՅՈՑ ԶՂԻ	5 հայոց չղի
6 ԿԱՏԱՐԵՑԻ	6 կատարեցի

<sup>9</sup> This reading, transcription and a translation into Italian were first published by Orengo 2018, 85-6 fn. 2.

This inscription is written in the Armenian script and it is in Classical Armenian, with one term in a medieval form.<sup>10</sup> Here is a normalised transcription and translation:<sup>11</sup> “Ես Պետրոս վ(արդապետ)/ որ շինեցի զե-/կեղեցիս (ուր)ք հա-/ [յ]երուն. ի թվ.(ին) հայոց չի/ կաաւրեցի” Es Petros v(ardapet)/ or šinec’i ze-/ kelec’ i s(owr)b ha- / [y]erown. i t’v(in)/ hayoc’ č’i/ katarec’i, ‘I, Petros *vardapet*,<sup>12</sup> who built [this] church, holy to the Armenians in the year of the Armenians 795 [=1346], completed [it]’.

The size of the letters is quite irregular (see above) and they appear misaligned and not homogeneously carved. Peculiarities: Line 1, we read Վ as an abbreviation of *vardapet*. Line 3, letters Ս and Բ are joint together and are the abbreviation of սորբ (sowrb) as in line 3 of Inscription I, ամենաս(ուր)բ amenas(owr)b, ‘most holy’. Lines 3-4 հա[յ]երուն հա[y]erown is taken as a medieval form for հայոց hayoc’ (prof. Stone, pers. comm.), ‘of the Armenians’. Curiously, on the very next line we find the correct, Classical form “հայոց” hayoc’. Since this is part of the expression ի թվ(ին) հայոց, i t’v(in) hayoc’, ‘in the year of the Armenians’, we might assume that it was a standard, traditional phrase that would not be altered by vernacular forms. However, it may be observed that the medieval form of the oblique plural at lines 3-4 (հա[յ]երուն հա[y]erown) represents a parallel to the Umbrian vernacular of Inscription I, contiguous to the Latin epigraph. Finally, Inscription II presents a very problematic date at Line 5, which we discuss below.

## Inscription II. Date and Proposed Emendation

Inscription I informs us that a certain *frate Pietru*, or “Պետրոս նախասարկաւագ, Petros naxasarkawag,<sup>13</sup> ‘archdeacon Peter’ dedicated this church in the year of the Armenians 741, corresponding to 1292 AD, which is at slight discordance with the Latin documents analysed below, but confirms in any case a foundation date in the last quarter of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The second inscription would seem to have been engraved later, by a less skilled cutter, carrying the personal dedication of “Պետրոս վարդապետ”, ‘Petros *vardapet*’, this time not just mentioning the ‘building’ of the church (շինեցաւ, šinec’aw Inscr. I Line 2), but adding “I completed” (կաաւրեցի,

<sup>10</sup> We do not deem one medieval term sufficient to consider this epigraphic group quadrilingual.

<sup>11</sup> The first partial transcription and translation in Orenco 2018, 85-6 fn. 2.

<sup>12</sup> *Vardapet* վարդապետ, lit. ‘doctor, master’ in Classical Armenian, was later used to indicate members of clergy. It translates ‘priest’ in Modern Armenian.

<sup>13</sup> Found in the Gen. Sing. in the epigraph.



katarec'i), suggesting it was engraved at the end of works. One would then expect a date shortly after 741 (=1292 AD), still in a realistic life-span of Petros, holding as true that he commissioned both inscriptions. However, we are faced with the Armenian date of 795, that corresponds to 1346 AD, which might seem too late. It is certainly possible to assume that the construction works took a while, and that Petros was very young when the first stone was laid, or that he was gifted with unusual longevity, but we would like to explore another scenario. It seems sensible to suggest that this was a mistake, perhaps caused by an assonance between two letters. This potential discrepancy has also been noted by Orengo, and the solution proposed below was first advanced by him (2018, 85-6 fn. 2). Lines 4-5 read "h p̄q(hū)/ huṙng ɛh" i t'v(in) hayoc' č'i, 'in the year of the Armenians 795', using the Armenian numerals indicating Է Շ = 700 + Ի Լ = 90 + Ի = 5. We second Orengo's suggestion that the character indicating the tens should be emended into a Խ x = 40, supposing that the misspelling was caused by the two characters' similar sound. One may as well explore other possibilities, but Ի Լ reads clearly and unambiguously, making speculations about a graphic confusion with other letters unlikely, in our opinion. This emendation would bring the previous (seemingly unlikely) date of 795 (=1346 AD) precisely 50 years back, to 745 (=1296 AD), which would be only four years after the date on inscription I, (741 = 1292 AD). Providing conclusive evidence on this is impossible, but we believe this theory to be worthy of consideration

### 3 The Church of Santo Spirito at Tamburino

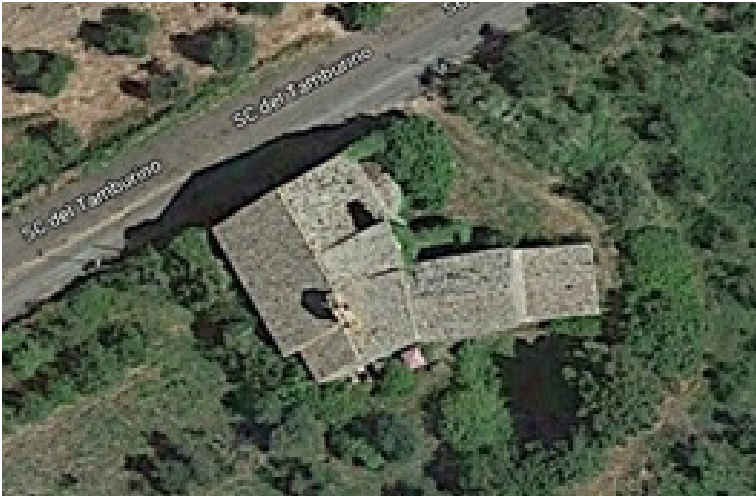
As mentioned above, the inscribed portal is not set in its original context today. In the 1930 s, when the Church of San Domenico in Orvieto underwent a partial demolition, the gate of the Holy Spirit at Tamburino was reused to open a new door on the south façade. The works at San Domenico and the gate's new context shall be explored below, but we shall first try to present what remains of the church of the Holy Spirit at Tamburino. Figure 9 shows a view of Tamburino from Via Volsina, on the S-W edge of Orvieto, looking to the S-E [fig. 9]. The road running straight, cutting the picture in a diagonal is the old way through the village of Petroio, mentioned in the documents below (see § 5), which is now called Tamburino. The red circle indicates the location of the old Armenian monastery, which might seem like any old countryside farm. People in the area, however, identify it without hesitation, and when the vegetation around it is not impenetrably thick, one may see the bellcote [fig. 10], and the outside of a round apse [fig. 11]. Both elements may also be seen in figure 12, a bird's-eye view of the old church. Finally, a close look at the façade





**Figure 9** A view of Tamburino from Orvieto. The Armenian monastery of Santo Spirito in the red circle

**Figure 10** A view of Santo Spirito from S-W



**Figure 11** The apse of Santo Spirito from the East

**Figure 12** A view of Santo Spirito from the satellite © Google



**Figure 13** The front door

**Figure 14** *Annunciation*, detached fresco from Orvieto, church of Santo Spirito at Tamburino. Early 15th century. Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Orvieto

clearly reveals the removal of a gate, bigger than the door that replaced it. Some pieces of travertine stone may still be seen to the sides of the patch in the wall [fig. 12]. This appears to be private property, and we have not been able to gain access to these buildings.

Two pieces of art were removed from the old monastery of the Armenians, and are now kept at the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo of Orvieto.<sup>14</sup> One is an *Annunciation* in perfect conditions (Perali 1919, 111; Lo Presti 2011, 212), and currently visible as part of the permanent exhibition on the ground floor of the Museum [fig. 14], measuring 195 × 116 cm (Garzelli 1972, 16-17). Garzelli ascribes this work to an anonymous Umbrian master.<sup>15</sup> Perali also mentions a second piece, which he describes as a “greatly damaged, although excellent work” (Perali 1919, 111) representing the Virgin child with seraphim between Saint Anne and Joachim. Perhaps due to its damaged condition, this piece is not currently exposed, and one may presume it is held in the Museum store.

#### 4 San Domenico in Orvieto

Our gate with the two inscriptions is currently located on the south façade of San Domenico, and it has been there since 1934 (Paoletti 1958, 45). The church was founded in 1233 by Dominican friars, where St Dominic of Caleruega himself had allegedly laid a small oratory. Its dedication, in 1264, was carried out while St Thomas Aquinas resided there, and it was completed in 1280 (Paoletti 1958, 40), shortly before the Armenians settled down on the Petroio way, just outside Orvieto. San Domenico was heavily damaged by a fire in 1311, and what remained of its original gothic structure was later modified in a great renovation work in the 17th century, when its size was reduced considerably (Paoletti 1958, 40-1). The church was reduced even further when, in 1934, a decision was made to build an Academy of Physical Education for Women. It is at this time that a new door is opened on the south wall, and made into the main entrance to the church. This happened on 25 June 1934, and Paoletti reports that where the new opening was made was “later inserted the splayed, ogival door that belonged to the 13th-century church of the Holy Spirit of the Armenians” (Paoletti 1958, 45). She adds that the door was made 40 cm higher, so that it would fit better in its new position. Paoletti however makes no mention of the Virgin and child wall-painting in the tympanum [fig. 15], right above the architrave.

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<sup>14</sup> We would like to thank the Museum personnel for their kindness and availability.

<sup>15</sup> Garzelli dates it to the last quarter of the 14th century, but the Museum's curators date it to the beginning of the 15th.





**Figure 15** Virgin and Child, fresco, on the tympanum of the church of San Domenico, unknown date, Orvieto

Despite clear signs that its central part of the plaster was fitted in (or perhaps refit), the consistency of all the components and the red pigments seems to indicate that the tympanum was originally conceived and executed as a whole. No evidence is known to us that it is contemporary with the door or with one of the inscriptions, or that it might have already been in place at the time of activity of the Armenian hospice.

## **5 The Armenians and Orvieto**

### **5.1 Latin Sources on the Armenian Community of Orvieto**

The investigation of the trilingual epigraph analysed above is enriched by a comparison with the available Latin sources on the first medieval Armenian settlement in Orvieto, which consist of three parchment documents preserved in the Episcopal Archive of Orvieto. The oldest of these sources is known to the Orvietan scientific community at least from the late 19th century, when it was partially transcribed by the Sienese scholar Piccolomini-Adami in his *Guida storico-artistica della città di Orvieto* (Piccolomini-Adami 1883, 280). This document is in fact the founding act of the Church of the

Holy Spirit of the Armenians (Santo Spirito degli Armeni), dated 10 February 1280. In it, the bishop of Orvieto, Francesco Monaldeschi, consents to the desire of brother (*frater*) Peter of Armenia to found a church located

iuxta viam qua itur ad Montefiasconem in contrata vinearum monasterii Sancti Laurentii. (Archivio Vescovile di Orvieto, henceforth AVO, Codice A, c. 217r)

next to the road through which one goes to Montefiascone, in the district of the vineyards of the monastery of San Lorenzo.

In exchange for the support of the prelate, who according to the document was also charged with laying the foundation stone for the Church of Santo Spirito, Peter committed himself to delivering an annual tribute of two pounds of wax to the bishop and his successors, on the occasion of the feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary of the fifteenth of August. Members of the clergy of the Church of Sant'Andrea in Orvieto and of the monastery of the Monte di Orvieto, two local religious institutions, also participated as witnesses to the foundation deed.

The second document from the Episcopal Archive that deals with the Church of Santo Spirito degli Armeni dates to 3 January 1288, and is testimony of the payment of the two pounds of wax that had been set as an annual tribute to the bishop of Orvieto, who was still Francesco Monaldeschi (AVO, Codice C, c. 97r). It is worth noting that, in this source, another member of the Armenian monastery residing near Santo Spirito is mentioned, namely brother Simon, administrator of the *locus*, or convent, of the Armenians.<sup>16</sup> This indication should probably not be taken as evidence that Peter was no longer alive at this date (which would contradict the information provided by the inscriptions, see section 2 above). Rather, he might have withdrawn to a role of spiritual direction, leaving the more practical functions in the life of the religious community to other brothers, such as Simon. Even richer, and not mentioned so far in any work concerning the Armenian communities of late medieval Italy, is a source written just one year later, and dated 11 January 1289 (AVO, Codice C, c. 113r). This document indicates that in this period of time the

<sup>16</sup> It is worth noting briefly that the vocabulary used by the Latin sources for the birth of the Armenian community of Orvieto (*locus*, *frater*) seems to assimilate the Armenian clergy to the Franciscan Order, probably on account of the itinerant and pauperistic nature of both religious groups in the 13th century. The inscriptions also speak of a *frate Pietru* and of the *fratres Erminii*. On the relevance of the word *locus* to define the first Franciscan settlements, characterised by an impermanent nature and established with the help of local bishops and lay elites, see Pellegrini 1977, in particular page 565.



Figure 16 “Mappa ricostruttiva del territorio del Pleberium Petrori et Petramata seu Sancti Petri in vetere nel 1278” (Satolli 2003)

Armenian community of Santo Spirito had abandoned its first seat, whose location had been described in the founding document discussed above. It further explains that the reason for this relocation lies in the fact that the road that had previously passed next to the first Armenian church, in the area of Petroio, had been moved a few kilometres south, and that with the construction of this “strata nova de Petroio” (new road of Petroio), the decision was taken to build a new church for the Armenian community beside the new thoroughfare (AVO, Codice C, c. 113r; figure 16 shows a modern reconstructive map of this area) [fig. 16]. This indication is confirmed by a document dated February 1286, published in the *Codice Diplomatico* of the commune of Orvieto, which records the decision of the municipal government to create a special commission (*balía*) to be entrusted with the construction of the new road of Petroio (Fiumi 1884, 336, doc. DXII, 20 February 1286). It is very likely that the road was completed during the year 1288, which would explain the relocation of the Armenian community within this time frame. In this same document we find the decision of the bishop of Orvieto to assign the assets abandoned by the Armenian friars to a group of *sorores*, or lay women devoted to religious life, led by Gemma di Bartolomeo Magalotti: these assets consisted of a house provided with a front yard, a vegetable garden and two portions of vineyard (*rasules vinearum*), in

addition to the religious building (AVO, Codice C, c. 113r). This description leads us to think that the community of Armenians of Santo Spirito had managed, in a rather short period of time, to obtain a moderate level of stability and prosperity.

It appears evident that the dates indicated by the inscriptions for the foundation of Santo Spirito (1292 and possibly 1296, if our hypothesis is correct) do not coincide with those provided by the archival sources. The dates of 1280 for the first foundation and of late 1288 for its relocation match with the information available for the construction of the new road of Petroio, and there is no reason to discard them. In order to explain this discrepancy, therefore, one must hypothesize that the dates of 1292 and 1296 refer to further stages of completion of the Church and the *hospitale* of Santo Spirito, which the Armenian community celebrated by having the inscriptions carved.

## 5.2 The Armenians and the Commune

The documents described above allow us to contextualize more precisely the Tamburino epigraphs and the Armenian presence in Orvieto in different ways. First, it should be noted that the upper echelons of the Orvietan clergy seem to have offered their support to the constitution of the new community. In the 1280s Orvieto was one of the main places of residence of the papal court, which was often accompanied by a garrison provided by the Angevin kings of Sicily. The latter's presence was opposed by the *Popolo*, a composite group of merchants and artisans who had taken control of the municipal government and fought to preserve its independence from external powers (Waley 1952, 55-9). The bishops of the city had traditionally been allies of the municipality against papal claims to hegemony over the city, which was situated on the expansion axis of the Popes. At the time when the Armenian community was founded, however, the aristocratic family Monaldeschi, of which the aforementioned bishop Francesco was possibly a member<sup>17</sup> had succeeded in reaching a position of supremacy in the urban landscape. This was made possible thanks to an alliance with the papacy and the Angevin monarchy, the staunchest ally of the Bishops of Rome and a hegemonic power in Italy after its conquest of the Kingdom of Sicily in the 1260s. Bishop Francesco Monaldeschi, a loyal agent of the papacy, was trying to consolidate his position of power within the city, particularly through an ambitious program of foundation and restoration of religious institutions, reflected in the flourishing of spiritual initiatives which characterized late medieval Orvieto, and within which we may

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<sup>17</sup> See however, D'Acunto 2011 and Salonijs 2017 for doubts about this genealogy.



set the foundation of the Church of Santo Spirito (Riccetti 1996, 199 ff.).<sup>18</sup> The support of part of the clergy closer to the municipal government, in addition, can be guessed from the participation of the clergy of Sant'Andrea at the foundation of the church of the Armenians. This institution represented, in this period, the centre of local civic religiosity, on account of the decline experienced by the local cathedral up to its restoration by the same Monaldeschi (Foote 2004, 85, 214 fn. 18; Lansing 1998, 27-8). The sites where the Armenians set up both their original and their second religious institutions certainly helped them to establish their presence within Orvietan society. Although the monastery of Santo Spirito was in theory located beyond the waterways indicating the boundaries of the *tenuta civitatis*, the city's suburbia, at the end of the century the incorporation of the territories of San Lorenzo *in vineis* and of Petroio into the urban fabric was well underway (Carpentier 1986, 51-3). The cadastre of 1292 includes the only landed property described as "in vocabulum Sancti Spiriti", i.e. 'in the proximity of the monastery', in its volume reserved to urban properties, which meant that the only proprietors in the area were endowed with the status of Orvietan citizens (Archivio di Stato di Orvieto, Catasto I, f. 17v: "Heredes Petri Blanci [...] habent vineam in vocabulum Sancti Spiriti usque ecclesiam Sancti Spiriti, viam et Angelutium Jacobi"). All these arguments lead us to assume that the initiative to establish an Armenian community enjoyed a transversal support from the citizenry of Orvieto, something which enabled brother Peter and his companions to develop connections within local society, and to collect donations even from supporters of non-Armenian origin. This is suggested by a list compiled in 1350 and registered in the minutes of the council of Orvieto, of churches which received an annual donation from the city, among which the monastery of Santo Spirito is to be found (Piccolomini-Adami 1883, 184; Carpentier 1986, 53). All these elements may have contributed to creating consensus in favour of the new religious foundation in various sectors of the Orvietan clergy and society, who were in conflict in other respects. The Armenian presence could in fact both have contributed to the role of Orvieto as an "important cultural crossroad", as Carol Lansing (1998, 6) defined it, and to offer vicarious legitimacy to the elites as supporters of such initiatives as assisting pilgrims on their way to Rome (Lansing 1998).<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> On the spiritual fervour of Orvieto in this period see Frank 2002, 296.

<sup>19</sup> For similar cases of elite support concerning other Armenian communities in Italy see also Sirinian 2018.

### 5.3 Orvieto as a Strategic Settlement

Having analysed the Italian and local context, the next question is why a group of Armenian religious would desire to settle and open a hospice in the Umbrian countryside. In fact, Orvieto was a very attractive destination for this community. Although the documents available do not provide us with precise information in this regard, it is reasonable to suppose that they, like many members of the Eastern clergy who settled in Italy during this period, were refugees fleeing from the wars fought between Mongols and Mamluks in the territories of Greater and Lesser Armenia. As a striking coincidence, a Mamluk military campaign against the Mongols and their Armenian allies broke out in 1280, the year brother Peter and his companions arrived in Orvieto (Irwin 1986, 34; Mutaſian 1988, 452). It is not clear whether this particular group of Armenian refugees/pilgrims came from Greater or Lesser Armenia. Recent studies on the colophons of Armenian manuscripts from medieval Rome have shown that most of the Armenians mentioned in these sources as members of Italian communities came from the region of Greater Armenia, which was the most affected by the destruction brought on by warfare in this period (Sirinian 2016, 2018). The Kingdom of Cilicia (an Armenian and Christian kingdom situated in Lesser Armenia, on the coasts of the Eastern Mediterranean), played however a crucial diplomatic role in fostering relationships with the Papacy. The Kingdom of Cilicia had been advocating since its foundation for the rapprochement of the Armenian and the Catholic Churches, which had favoured the resumption of pilgrimages from the East to Rome (Zekiyan 1978, 847); it has to be noted, however, that these pilgrimages had never completely ceased over the course of the Early Middle Ages, as proven among other indications by the cult of the 11th-century Armenian pilgrim Davino in the city of Lucca.<sup>20</sup> Armenian pilgrims normally disembarked in Ancona (where there was another Armenian church dedicated to the Holy Spirit: see Zekiyan 1978, 862) and went through Umbria on their way to Rome. The foundation of new Armenian communities in the Umbrian region is attested in this period also in Perugia (from 1273; Traina 1996, 98) and Gubbio (from 1318; Sezione di Archivio di Stato di Gubbio, Fondo Pesci, b. 4, doc. 97).<sup>21</sup> The position of Orvieto was, moreover, particularly strategic: the most important of the various itineraries of the *Via Francigena* – a set of roads used by northern European and northern Italian pilgrims to reach

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<sup>20</sup> See Orengo 2018, § 12. More generally on Armenian-Italian contacts in the Early Middle Ages see Zekiyan 2000, 95 ff.

<sup>21</sup> We thank Alberto Luongo for this reference, not listed to our knowledge in any publication dealing with Armenian communities in Italy.

Rome – passed right through Montefiascone, the locality in the Orvietan territory on the road to which the Armenian *locus* had been established. This itinerary of the *Via Francigena* was the most popular in the 13th century, and followed the tracks of the ancient Roman *Via Cassia antiqua* (Schmiedt 1974, 585; Stopani 2019). Another ancient Roman road that became especially popular among pilgrims at the time was the *Via Flaminia*, as it allowed a detour to Assisi and other places connected to the flourishing cult of St Francis (Stopani 1991, 19; 1998, 141-2). Armenian foundations in Italy were mostly set up as hospices made available by the Armenian clergy to their fellow countrymen travelling to Rome (Orengo 2018, § 3): the inscription of the Tamburino itself defines Santo Spirito as a *hospitale*, or a place dedicated to hospitality. Along the same road that connected Orvieto to Montefiascone, on which Peter the Armenian had asked to build his own church, there was also a hospital of the Teutonic Order, likewise dedicated to assisting pilgrims (Borchardt 2016, 120). The decision to build the church of Santo Spirito in that precise spot, and then to move it on account of the works to build a new road of Petroio, shows a high degree of planning and awareness of their specific vocation towards charitable hospitality of pilgrims on the part of Peter and his confreres. The rebuilding of the monastery on the new road and the Armenians' long-lasting presence in Orvieto alongside other religious communities is to be taken as evidence of the desirability of such positioning on the way to Rome.

## 6 Conclusion

This article has presented new sources on the Armenian presence in medieval Italy, including a rare instance of a trilingual inscription. Some aspects of them remain unclear, such as the reading of the date provided in Inscription II, and will hopefully be complemented by future studies. The artworks from Santo Spirito described in this contribution also deserve the attention of specialists of Armenian and Italian art, in order to uncover whether they bear the traces of the importation of foreign iconographical models. The Latin sources available for the Armenian community of Orvieto offer useful information about the contexts in which these groups of pilgrims might choose to settle and about the material conditions of their presence in communal Italy. The documents described here may possibly not be exhaustive, and the rich archives of Orvieto might well preserve more sources available for this topic. This case study ultimately offers an example of a small Armenian community, perfectly integrated in the religious and social landscape of an Italian commune. We have tried to substantiate some hypotheses about this successful in-

tegration in the course of this article; however, an in-depth study of ecclesiastical, social and political reactions to the presence of similar communities in Italy has yet to come. The fact that they shared the same faith as the locals, but not their prevalently Latin rite, could have resulted in ambiguous attitudes towards them.<sup>22</sup> Papal support for reunification projects with the Eastern Church can explain why religious elites could support the establishment of Oriental communities; however, it does not shed much light on the reactions of lay governments and lower segments of the population to their presence. We hope that this contribution will encourage new interdisciplinary research bringing together specialists of both medieval Armenia and Italy, in order to clarify the circumstances under which Oriental communities were either welcomed or discriminated against.

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<sup>22</sup> See for instance Quaranta 2004, 638-9, who describes a southern Italian case of persecution of Armenian clergymen as heretics in 1312.

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# Ti proteggo, ti punisco. L'agire imprevedibile dei santi e degli spiriti osseti

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**Abstract** Many spirits of the traditional Ossetian religion had a double role: on the one hand they protected, on the other they punished in case of transgression. Unfortunately these spirits were highly unpredictable. In many cases the punishment for a transgression was a disease: in fact, in the mountain villages no one believed that a disease could be transmitted from person to person: the idea of contagion was absent.

**Keywords** Ossetians. Nart epos. Wacilla. Wastyrgi. Alardy.

Nei secoli IX e X avvengono tre conversioni che estendono notevolmente lo spazio della cristianità nell'Oriente europeo. La prima è la conversione dei Bulgari, seguita da quella degli Alani e poi da quella dei Russi. Il destino di queste conversioni è molto diverso: quella bulgara deraglierà presto dando origine all'eresia bogomila dalla quale con fatica la chiesa di Bulgaria riuscirà ad uscire;<sup>1</sup> quella alana resta a tutti gli effetti incompleta. Gli Alani non diverranno mai veramente cristiani: il cristianesimo si affiancherà alla religione tradizionale creando una forma di sincretismo unica in Europa;<sup>2</sup> non a caso Teodoro alano nel XIII secolo diceva che gli Alani erano cristiani solo

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<sup>1</sup> Per l'eresia bogomila e la sua diffusione dopo la conversione bulgara si veda Detkova 2008, 62-74.

<sup>2</sup> Per l'Alania medioevale e in particolare per la conversione al cristianesimo si vedano Ognibene 2006; 2011, 65-92.



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di nome.<sup>3</sup> Solo la conversione russa, legata ad una discreta stabilità politica, nonostante i ripetuti conflitti fra i principi, sarà abbastanza lineare e il cristianesimo diverrà uno degli elementi di identità nazionale durante i secoli del dominio mongolo.<sup>4</sup>

La superficialità dello strato cristiano nel mondo religioso alano e successivamente osseto affiora chiaramente nell'epos dei Narti (Нартæ) e in molti altri racconti popolari osseti. Protagonisti di questi racconti sono spesso personaggi che portano i nomi di santi cristiani, ma il cui comportamento sembra essere piuttosto lontano da quelli che sono i canoni della santità: sono spesso vendicativi, di dubbia moralità e non sono certo migliori degli altri spiriti precristiani che li circondano superandoli spesso per malvagità, doppiezza e ambiguità. Due di questi santi osseti, Wacilla (Уацилла)<sup>5</sup> e Wastyrgi (Уастырджы),<sup>6</sup> sono particolarmente noti e uno in particolare, Wastyrgi, compare frequentemente nell'epos dei Narti. Wastyrgi, che letteralmente è san Giorgio, compare nel ciclo di Satàna (Сатана), l'unico personaggio femminile di rilievo all'interno dell'epos.

Wastyrgi, che è sempre accompagnato dal suo cavallo a tre zampe e da un cane levriero, esordisce nel ciclo dei Narti nel suo aspetto peggiore: violenta infatti una donna morta. Dzerassæ (Дзэрассæ), la figlia del signore delle acque Donbetyr (Донбеттыр),<sup>7</sup> ha appena perso il marito, che si è suicidato dopo avere ucciso il fratello che ha sospettato ingiustamente.<sup>8</sup> Mentre Dzerassæ si dispera, fa la sua comparsa sulla scena Wastyrgi. I suoi modi sono gentili, è amichevole, disponibile a prestare soccorso, traspare subito però il suo debole per gentil sesso, che porterà Abaev a definirlo *соблазнитель женщин* *soblaznitel' ženščin*,<sup>9</sup> un 'dongiovanni':

<sup>3</sup> Ser. Ep. 24, 409-10: «Χριστιανοί δε μόνον ονόματι Άλανοί» (409); «Christiani nomine tenus sunt Alani» (410).

<sup>4</sup> In particolare durante gli anni più pesanti del 'giogo tartaro', idealmente dalla battaglia sul fiume Kalka (1223) – che in realtà precede di 17 anni la presa di Kiev – alla battaglia di Kulikovo (1380).

<sup>5</sup> Wacilla | Wacelia, Wacella: Abaev 1989, 31-2; Wacella, Wacilla, Elia: DUDz 2003, 501; Ognibene 2012, 124-9; Miller 1881, 119 nota 19; Stackelberg 1888, 416; Pfaf 1872, 121-7; Miller 1882, 240-2; Čibirov 1976, 159-91; Reineggs *Opis. Kav*, 99; Čočišvili 1884; Berzenov 1850; Gassiev 1868; Munkácsi 1932, 132.

<sup>6</sup> Wastyrgi | Wasgergi: Abaev 1989, 55-6; Wasgergi: DUDz 2003, 500; Ognibene 2012, 151-3; Miller 1882, 242-3; Munkácsi 1932, 134; Čibirov 1976, 210-15; Miller 1881, 119; Stackelberg 1888, 416.

<sup>7</sup> Donbetyr | Donbettær: Abaev: «мифическое водяное существо, владыка водяного царства» (Abaev 1958, 367); Donbettær: DUDz 2003, 247.

<sup>8</sup> Dumézil 1969, 13. Si veda anche la nota finale per il confronto con il papiro d'Orbinay.

<sup>9</sup> «в нартовском эпосе выступает нередко как соблазнитель женщин» (Abaev 1989, 56).

Quale sventura è la mia! diceva [Dzerassæ]. Per causa mia due fratelli si sono uccisi! Si strappava le trecce, si straziava il volto con tutti i gesti del lutto. [...] – Che fare adesso? Abbandonarli perché i corvi e le volpi divorino le loro ginocchia potenti, i loro occhi di fuoco, i loro rossi pomelli? Seppellirli? Ma come? In quel momento al galoppo sul suo cavallo a tre zampe, il suo levriero al fianco Uastyrdji apparve davanti a Dzerassæ e le disse: – O sole dei soli e splendore del cielo, o mia luce, beltà del mondo! Da molto tempo ti cerco... Donde viene il tuo dolore? Che cosa ti è accaduto? – Come potrei non essere addolorata? Due fratelli sono morti per causa mia e io non ho la forza di seppellirli. – Li seppellirò io, disse Uastyrdji, ma a condizione che tu sia mia moglie!<sup>10</sup>

Dzerassæ accetta, ma dopo che Wastyrgi ha seppellito i due fratelli si tuffa nelle acque del mare e raggiunge suo padre.

Indispettito, Uastyrdji serbò quell'inganno nel suo cuore: – Sventura alla tua casa! disse. Forse non ti acciufferò in questo mondo, ma nel regno dei morti come potrai sfuggirmi? Rimontò sul suo cavallo a tre zampe e, pieno di collera, se ne andò a caccia col suo levriero sulle rive del mare.<sup>11</sup>

Wastyrgi in realtà non si sognava nemmeno di sposare Dzerassæ, la traduzione francese e quella italiana non rendono fedelmente la parola osseta *xæzgūl*, che non indica la moglie, bensì l'amante<sup>12</sup> (la parola osseta per moglie è *ūs*, di provenienza iranica, attestata anche nell'onomastica scitica).<sup>13</sup> Dunque il nostro santo vuole approfittarsi della condizione di difficoltà in cui incontra Dzerassæ e quando la donna si dimostra più sveglia di lui rimane 'indispettito', se ne va 'pieno di collera' e con una seria minaccia. Minaccia che metterà in atto a distanza di anni:

[Quando Dzerassæ] si ammalò, in punto di morte disse ai suoi figli: – Quando sarò morta non lasciatemi senza protezione duran-

<sup>10</sup> Dumézil 1969, 14; si vedano anche Dumézil 1965, 29-30; Dumézil 1930, 22-4; NĖON 1957, 77-80; TN 2016, 13-14; variante in N 1990, 81; N 1989, 22; NKĖ 1951, 337-8.

<sup>11</sup> Dumézil 1969, 15; si vedano anche Dumézil 1965, 30; TN 2016, 14.

<sup>12</sup> UIDz 1970, 240: *xæzgūl* = 'любовница'; *xæzgūl* | *xæzgol*: Abaev 1989, 194; Miller 1934, 1329-30; *xæzgol*: DUDz 2003, 574.

<sup>13</sup> *ūs* | *osæ*: «женщина после замужества» (Abaev 1989, 20-1); Miller 1934, 1672-3; *wosæ*: DUDz 2003, 519. Per le attestazioni nell'onomastica scitica si vedano Ὀσμάρακος: Abaev 1949, 174-5; Justi 1895, 236; Vasmer 1923, 46; Zgusta 1955, §316; Miller 1886, 257; Ognibene 2019, 139, 366, 368, 383, 412, 418; Ὀσσίγασος: Abaev 1949, 151-2, 175, 193, 235; Ognibene 2019, 345-6, 368, 383, 423; Ὀσσίγασος: Abaev 1949, 151-2, 175; Ognibene 2019, 345-6, 368.

te le prime tre notti. Ho un debito e il mio creditore è malvagio, mi inseguirà anche tra i morti.<sup>14</sup>

Ed è proprio ciò che succede; per le prime due notti l'intervento di Wastyrgi viene neutralizzato dai due figli maggiori, ma la terza notte, quando veglia il figlio più piccolo, Wastyrgi riesce ad entrare nella tomba e violenta la morta. È così che nasce Satàna, l'eroina dei Narti. La versione di Dumézil, che è alla base anche della traduzione italiana, è però notevolmente addolcita. La variante del testo più completa racconta che Wastyrgi non si limita a violentare la morta, ma la fa violentare anche dal suo cavallo e dal suo cane.<sup>15</sup> Non nascerà quindi solo Satàna dalla vendetta del santo, ma la donna darà alla luce anche a un cavallino, Durdur (Дурдур), che diverrà il cavallo di Wryzmæg,<sup>16</sup> e a un cucciolo, Silæm (Силæм), che comparirà ancora nell'epos.<sup>17</sup> Per una volta non è il mondo sovietico che ha traslasciato parti di racconti un po' particolari, come avviene ad esempio nelle traduzioni russe dei racconti yaghnobi curata da Andreev,<sup>18</sup> ma Dumézil, che ha deciso di riportare una versione che urta meno la sensibilità del lettore occidentale. In questa vendetta di Wastyrgi bisogna vedere però non tanto il lato collerico e vendicativo del santo quanto l'adempimento di una delle sue prerogative: punire gli sper-

**14** Dumézil 1969, 21; si vedano anche Dumézil 1965, 34; Dumézil 1930, 24; N 1989, 33; N 1990, 83; «Стæй Сасана куы марди, уæд куырда йæ фырттæй. Хæмыц, Уырызмæг æмæ Созрыхъойæ: - мæнæ, куыд тыхджын лæг мæм æртхъирæн кодта, уый тыххæй уæ курын, мæ фырттæ, æмæ мæ æртæ æхсæвы бахъахъхъæнут ингæны» (Miller 1998, 12). In questa variante, Dzerassæ è chiamata Sasana. In grafia Sjögren-Miller: «Стæй Сасана ку мардй, уæд курда я фырттæй - Хæмц, Урвзмæг æмæ Созрвожæ: Мæнæ, куд тыхдйн лæг мæм æнфæрæн кодта, уытххæй уæ курвн, мæ фырттæ, æмæ мæ æртæхсæвн бафæрæнхъæнут ингæн» (Miller 1981, 50); «У грозного Уастырджы в долгу я | С тех пор, как долю выбрала другую. | Он отомстит захочет мне за гробом. | Три ночи вы на страже будьте оба» (NĖON 1957, 86).

**15** «Стæй Саснамæ Уастырджы æрцыди æмæ фыццаджыдæр йæхæдæг йемæ схуыссиди, стæй йæм йæ уырсы бауагъта, уый фæстæ йæм йæ егары бауагъта æмæ атаhti уæларвмæ» (Miller 1998, 13). In grafia Sjögren-Miller: «Стæй Сасанамæ уастырцй æрцвдй æмæ фытцаидæр яхадæг jemæ схуысвдй, стæй jæm jæ урпс буахта, уйфæстæ jæm jæ йгарв буахта æмæ атаhti уæларвмæ» (Miller 1981, 50). Non presente in Dumézil 1969 e Dumézil 1965. Si veda però la nota a Dumézil 1969, 22 con rimando alle varianti in cui il passo compare.

**16** Wryzmæg | Uruzmag: Abaev 1989, 127.

**17** «Чызг хорз сси, хуынди Сатана. Байраг дæр уыдис Уырызмæджы хъулон Дурдура бæх; куыдзы хъæвдын егары къæбыла уыдис æмæ хорз егар сси» (Miller 1998, 13). In grafia Sjögren-Miller: «Чызг хорс ссй - хундй Сатана. Байрæг дæр удис Урвзмацй цулон Дурдура бæх; кудзв цæвдвн йгарвкæбвл удис æмæ хорз йгар ссй» (Miller 1981, 52).

**18** Nella traduzione russa dei racconti yaghnobi curata da Andreev, Peščereva (1957) alcune parti sono rimosse.

giuri.<sup>19</sup> Dzerassæ ha dato la sua parola, ma non ha mantenuto il patto. E se la punizione per noi rientrerebbe in pieno in un caso da manuale psichiatrico, nella società osseta non era proprio così: il ruolo della donna non era più quello della società scitica, nella quale era più libera e importante di quanto lo fosse nella Grecia antica, era ormai una figura subalterna a tutti gli effetti. Per questo Satàna, più intelligente di tutti i Narti, forse con l'eccezione di Syrdon (Сырдон),<sup>20</sup> stona violentemente nel contesto dell'epos, ma è troppo centrale per essere eliminata ed è giunta sino a noi. Wastyrgi è il più importante fra gli spiriti osseti e in ogni villaggio di montagna c'era un suo santuario.<sup>21</sup> Si dice che sia più vicino all'uomo di Wacilla: è infatti considerato il protettore di uomini e donne (che però non possono pronunciare il suo nome), protettore dei combattenti e dei viandanti. E proprio per la sua qualità di protettore dei combattenti sembra che durante la Prima Guerra Mondiale soldati osseti si siano costruiti un piccolo santuario di Wastyrgi da qualche parte sul fronte russo-austriaco (Kantiev 1931, citato in Čibirov 1976, 214 n. 92). Wastyrgi perseguita i ladri, gli assassini e gli spergiuri. Tutte le preghiere ossete iniziano e finiscono con il suo nome. A parte l'episodio inaudito di Dzerassæ, Wastyrgi è noto come dongiovanni. Secondo gli Osseti tutti i matrimoni che hanno luogo durante la settimana in cui si festeggia Wastyrgi non incontrano problemi.<sup>22</sup>

Wacilla è molto diverso. Dietro questo nome si nasconde Sant'E-lia. Ufficialmente è protettore del raccolto, della fertilità, signore dei fulmini e in generale di tutti i fenomeni atmosferici.<sup>23</sup> Per una società come quella osseta queste caratteristiche lo rendono fondamentale. Numerose sono le invocazioni conservate per convincerlo ad inviare la pioggia: se proprio non ne vuole sapere si cerca un'intercessione attraverso Tyxost (Тыхост), un altro spirito abbastanza irascibile.<sup>24</sup> Wacilla comanda i fulmini. Se qualcosa viene colpito da un fulmine non si deve nemmeno tentare di spegnere l'incendio per non provocare la

**19** «Уастырджы считается бичемъ воровъ, мошенниковъ, клятвopеступниковъ, убійцъ и покровителемъ честныхъ дюдей и домашнихъ животныхъ» (Miller 1882, 242).

**20** Syrdon | Sirdon: Abaev 1979, 207-8. Si veda anche Dumézil 1948, 169.

**21** Il santuario più famoso di Wastyrgi è quello di Rekom (Ognibene 2012, 122-3).

**22** «Свадьбы, совершенные в эти дни недели пользуются особым уважением в народе и не расторгаются так скоро разводом, как это бывает с теми, которые совершаются в прочее время года» (Dubrovín 1871, 307); cit. in Čibirov 1976, 213.

**23** «Будучи древнейшим дохристианским патроном осетин, он известен как божество плодородия, покровитель хлебных злаков и урожая, грома и молитвы» (Čibirov 1976, 159).

**24** Tyxost: Abaev 1979, 346; Miller 1882, 257-8; Kaloev 1971, 261; Čibirov 1976, 153; Dumézil 1980, 68-71; Ognibene 2012, 118-20.

sua ira.<sup>25</sup> Se il fulmine inoltre colpisce una persona e la persona muore non si può piangere, bisogna cantare il *coppaj* (цоппай)<sup>26</sup> attorno al morto e ballare, il tutto con allegria per non adirare Wacilla: infatti se la persona è stata colpita da un fulmine vuol dire che è incorsa nella sua ira e quindi ha ricevuto la punizione che merita. Il morto in questo caso non è nemmeno seppellito vicino agli altri, ma sul posto. Se nel periodo successivo cade pioggia incessante, il morto deve essere dissepellito e spostato. Il morto viene collocato su un *arba* (арба)<sup>27</sup> tirata da buoi e seppellito dove i buoi si fermano. Se si ha la sfortuna di morire colpiti da un fulmine in un periodo di piogge frequenti si rischia di cambiare più volte sede per il riposo eterno prima di trovare quella definitiva. Anche Wacilla ha santuari in molti villaggi. La persona comune non era autorizzata ad entrare nel santuario, solamente il custode poteva farlo.<sup>28</sup> Si noti che generalmente c'era un reale timore nei confronti di questi spiriti e i santuari non avevano bisogno di essere chiusi. A quanto mi è dato sapere il primo furto all'interno di un santuario osseto avvenne solo dopo alcuni anni dall'instaurazione del potere sovietico nella regione, durante la costruzione di quello che i russi chiamano *sanatorij*, realizzato con manodopera non locale.<sup>29</sup> D'altra parte è bene ricordare che nelle regioni di alta montagna è attestato il sacrificio del cavallo quando una persona muore fino agli inizi del XX secolo. Dopo quella data l'animale non veniva più sacrificato, ma semplicemente segnato: si tracciava una croce dietro l'orecchio destro del cavallo. Per questo chi compera cavalli in Ossezia, più che i denti, controlla sempre che il cavallo non sia segnato, ovvero non appartenga ad un morto, perché si ritiene che utilizzare il cavallo dedicato ad un morto porti disgrazia.<sup>30</sup>

**25** «Нельзя тушить загоревшийся от молнии предмет, чтобы не разгневать Уацилла» (Čibirov 1976, 176).

**26** *coppaj*: Abaev: «обрядовая пляска и пение вокруг пораженного громом» (Abaev 1958, 314-16); Abaev 1949, 316, 319.

**27** *arba*: Vasmer: «двухколесная повозка» (Vasmer 1986, 83).

**28** Secondo quanto riferisce Čočišvili (1884) solo lo *zwar læg* era autorizzato ad entrare.

**29** «Приблизительно в 1927 г. в связи со строительством Цейского санатория из Рекома было похищено около двух мешков денег серебром (Сообщено историком Ф.С. Тотоевым)» (Čibirov 1976, 158 n. 176).

**30** «Poiché ritengono che il cavallo consacrato appartenga solo al suo padrone nell'oltretomba, gli Osseti non permettono che sia usato una seconda volta nel rito. Inoltre si cercava di allontanare il prima possibile il cavallo consacrato dalla casa, in modo che non portasse sfortuna alla famiglia. Uno degli autori prerivoluzionari, S.T. Karginov notava che quando gli Osseti compravano un cavallo si sforzavano di guardare: 'il suo orecchio, per sapere se per caso ci sono i segni di coltello che in genere si fanno quando viene consacrato il cavallo'. Scrive Karginov: 'Un osseto non compra un tale cavallo per niente al mondo, infatti vede in esso il fantasma del cavallo e non il cavallo stesso e quindi lo ritiene inutile per sé'» (Kaloiev 1964, citato in Ognibene 2012, 234-40). Il riferimento è a Karginov 1915, 76.

Se l'invocazione a Wacilla per la pioggia non ha successo si ricorre a Tyxost. Tyxost non porta il nome di un santo cristiano, la parola osseta iron significa 'forte'.<sup>31</sup> Tyxost è un eroe che è sempre pronto ad intervenire quando qualcuno è in difficoltà e chiede la sua protezione. Ma una leggenda racconta che una volta sia stato invocato senza motivo solo per vedere se veniva davvero. Tyxost punisce i responsabili pietrificandoli assieme a tutto il gregge.<sup>32</sup> Ancora oggi gli Osseti mostrano il gregge pietrificato lungo le rive del Kazdon. Questa leggenda osseta trova un parallelo perfetto in quella di Čimbulat ceremisso, che si comporta esattamente allo stesso modo a molte migliaia di chilometri di distanza.<sup>33</sup> Tyxost è anche il protettore dei giovani sposi. Gli Osseti per questa funzione si rivolgono a lui così:

Fai che quanti vorranno turbare il loro amore e il loro accordo periscano senza lasciare traccia, a castigo dei loro pensieri e delle loro azioni malvagie. A quanti li guardano con occhio geloso, o Tyxost, acceca l'occhio destro e storpia il piede sinistro. (Ognibene 2012, 119-20)<sup>34</sup>

Gli Osseti non vanno per il sottile con le maledizioni, come ben dimostra un lungo articolo della Chubecova (1977), che ne ha raccolte diverse centinaia, tutte poco rassicuranti.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>31</sup> *tuxwast, tuxast*: 'сильный, сильно, очень' (Abaev 1979, 323); DUDz 2003, 491; Miller 1934, 1231.

<sup>32</sup> Miller 1882, 257; Dumézil 1980, 70. «Oltre ad essere invocato per la pioggia Tyxost svolge anche il ruolo di aiuto per gli Osseti nel momento del bisogno. Tyxost, infatti, si mostra al grido di *fædis*. O meglio si mostrava. Secondo la tradizione, infatti, una volta un giovane fu preso dal desiderio di vederlo e lo invocò senza effettiva necessità. Fu punito in modo atroce. Assieme al suo gregge fu pietrificato sulla riva del Kazdon, ma si pietrificò anche la dimora di Tyxost, che da allora non corre più in aiuto di chi è in difficoltà» (Ognibene 2012, 119).

<sup>33</sup> «Čimbulat [...] nell'ultima sua battaglia contro i nemici era stato sconfitto e ferito ed in seguito era morto. Prima della fine aveva esortato i Ceremissi a non disperarsi, perché il suo aiuto non sarebbe mai mancato e sarebbe temporaneamente risorto in caso di necessità solo se si fossero recati alla sua tomba dicendo semplicemente: 'Čimbulat alzati! I nemici vengono'. I Ceremissi lo avevano sepolto molto solennemente insieme con le sue armi sulla cima di una montagna. Ad ogni attacco dei nemici egli si era puntualmente alzato e aveva annientato gli avversari, per poi sparire ogni volta nella sua tomba. Ma un giorno alcuni bambini, volendo imitare gli adulti, per gioco, lo fecero alzare tre volte dalla tomba: Čimbulat si adirò e divenne un terribile nemico per il suo popolo [...]. L'unica possibilità che i Ceremissi avevano di placarlo era quella di venerarlo come un dio con imponenti sacrifici, tra cui quello del cavallo» (Corradi 1981, 86-7). Krohn 1908, 285-6.

<sup>34</sup> Gli Osseti sono molto diretti nel chiedere punizioni severe per chi trasgredisce alle tradizioni, commette azioni o ha pensieri che possono arrecare danno.

<sup>35</sup> Il lavoro della Chubecova, a quanto mi è dato sapere, è il più completo al momento.

La figura più temuta nei villaggi osseti era però Alardy (Аларды).<sup>36</sup> E infatti la maggior parte delle maledizioni ossete comprende il suo nome: «Alardy dæ adava!» (Аларды дæ адава), 'che ti porti via Alardy' (Chubecova 1977, 68); «Alardy dyn dæ cæst sk'axæd» (Аларды дын дæ цæст ск'ахæд), 'che Alardy ti strappi gli occhi' (Chubecova 1977, 74); «Alardy dæ g<sub>o</sub>ybynu» (Аларды дæ гуыбыны), 'che Alardy ti mandi il vaiolo' (Chubecova 1977, 74.). È proprio il vaiolo il problema. Alardy protegge o manda il vaiolo. Ogni villaggio osseto aveva un albero sacro ad Alardy vicino al quale si invocava lo spirito, tenendo però sempre le debite distanze.<sup>37</sup> Nei villaggi in cui c'era un santuario l'edificio era privo di finestre e con la porta rivolta verso l'esterno del villaggio.<sup>38</sup> Ci si può chiedere perché ci sia un terrore del genere per Alardy che porta le persone a chiamarlo al contrario come 'bello',<sup>39</sup> 'dorato',<sup>40</sup> 'alato',<sup>41</sup> basta che stia lontano. Il problema è che il vaiolo faceva strage nei villaggi osseti. Gli Osseti infatti non avevano alcuna idea di cosa potesse essere il contagio.<sup>42</sup> Non ci si ammalava per contagio, ma per avere commesso qualche mancanza, quindi non è necessario l'isolamento e nemmeno curarsi. Curare l'ammalato è inutile, anzi dannoso: l'ammalato di vaiolo deve stare fra la gente: durante la malattia è un andirivieni continuo nella sua casa e nella sua camera: presso il suo letto siedono sempre persone, pregano e invocano con canzoni Alardy; l'ammalato deve essere attivo, viene portato fuori, deve mangiare come gli altri e assieme agli altri. Tutti i vicini devono passare a trovarlo e associarsi alle preghiere. Bisogna invece far sì che il capofamiglia per tutto il periodo in cui c'è un ammalato in casa si astenga dall'aver rapporti con la moglie e non si

<sup>36</sup> Alardy | Alaurdi: Abaev 1958, 43-4; Abaev 1949, 93; Stackelberg 1888, 418-19; Alborov 1979; Gatiev 1876, 49; Miller 1882, 275-6; Čibirov 1976, 147-51; Stackelberg 1900; Ognibene 2015.

<sup>37</sup> Ci si avvicinava all'albero solo nel giorno della festa di Alardy e in ogni caso era proibito agli uomini avvicinarsi: Alborov 1979, 87-8; Ognibene 2015, 53-4 n. 2.

<sup>38</sup> «Esistevano anche santuari veri e propri. Questi venivano costruiti senza finestre e con la porta rivolta dalla parte opposta al villaggio. Presso di essi si svolgeva la festa che poteva durare un giorno, ma in alcuni casi anche un intero mese. Il santuario più noto è quello di Zgid, nella gola di Alagir. È costruito sulla dorsale montana, di colore bianco e rigorosamente privo di finestre» (Ognibene 2012, 115).

<sup>39</sup> syrх | surx: 'красный': Abaev 1979, 208-10; Miller 1882, 57; Miller 1887, 83; Miller 1903, 26, 31; Hübschmann 1887, 57; Abaev 1949, 21, 46, 183, 283; Miller 1929, 1168; surx: DUDz 2003, 471.

<sup>40</sup> syğzærin | suğzærinæ: 'золото, золотой': Abaev 1979, 190-1; Abaev 1949, 29, 52; Miller 1929, 1158; suğzærinæ: DUDz 2003, 469.

<sup>41</sup> bazyrgin da bazyr | bazur: 'крыло': Abaev 1958, 242-3; Miller 1882, 111; Abaev 1949, 18; Miller 1927, 272; bazur: DUDz 2003, 157.

<sup>42</sup> Presso molte popolazioni fino a tempi recenti non si pensava che una malattia si potesse trasmettere, ovvero era assente l'idea del contagio. Si veda Ognibene in corso di stampa.

può stendere letame sui campi.<sup>43</sup> Date queste premesse è chiaro che il vaiolo faceva stragi nei villaggi osseti, come avveniva anche in altre parti del mondo. Qualche anno fa, durante la Missione etnolinguistica e archeologica italiana in Tajikistan, nella valle dello Yaghnob, abbiamo studiato la peste di Anzob che uccise oltre l'80% degli abitanti del villaggio, i quali, esattamente come gli Osseti, non avevano alcuna idea di cosa fosse il contagio e dissepellirono una morta di peste per paura che mancanze durante il funerale avessero ripercussioni.<sup>44</sup> La malattia è una punizione mandata per una mancanza, non c'è qui nemmeno l'idea del peccato, oppure arriva semplicemente per volontà di uno spirito indipendentemente da tutto il resto. La malattia può arrivare perché le si apre la porta o si commette l'errore di parlarle, non perché si tocca qualcosa di infetto, come spiega bene questo racconto sul colera:

Tempo fa a Sturdigor c'era il colera [in un'altra versione la peste]. A quel tempo uno della famiglia dei Chojmanovy di nome Gimi scendeva per il bosco quando gli venne incontro il colera sotto l'aspetto di un uomo. Gimi lo riconobbe e gli chiese dove andava. Il colera gli disse che andava a casa di Gimi Chojmanov. Allora Gimi tornò a casa per un'altra strada, ordinò di chiudere la porta, chiudere le finestre e non fare entrare nessuno. A casa di Gimi c'era una donna alla quale nessuno parlava. Quando il colera bussò, la donna, che non sapeva niente e non aveva osato chiedere cosa stesse succedendo, aprì la porta e il colera entrò e uccise tutti i presenti. (Miller 1882, 283-4)<sup>45</sup>

**43** «При появлении оспы следовало сохранить нерушимым следующие правила: пока в семействе оспа, муж не имел права даже входить в спальню жены; никто не вывозил на поля навоз; устраивались хороводы и пляски во дворе семейства, страдавшего от оспы; надлежало сидеть возле больного и петь песни в честь Аларды» (Čibirov 1976, 150).

**44** «One of the inhabitants of Anzob, a man called Hassan Rakhimov, persuaded the other villagers that the people died because they forgot some precepts of Šarī'a when Ašur Bibi was buried. And so Ašur Bibi was exhumed, the ritual was adhered to and then she was buried again. Those who took part in this second ceremony, including Hassan Rakhimov, also died in some days» (Basello, Ognibene 2013, 90).

**45** «Давно, неизвестно когда, шла на Стур-дигоръ холера (по запискѣ о. Гатуева жеміна - чума). Въ это время одинъ изъ фамиліи Хоймановыхъ, по имени Гими (по запискѣ о. Гатуева - Гімі былъ сумашедшій), шель внизъ по чернолѣсью и ему повстрѣчалась холера въ образѣ челоѡка. Гими узналъ ее и спросилъ, куда она идетъ. Она сказала, что идетъ въ домъ Гими Хойманова. Тогда Гими вернулся другимъ путемъ домой, велѣлъ запереть двери, заложить всѣ щели въ домъ и никого не пускать. Въ домъ Гими была молодая жена, которой обычай не позволялъ говорить громко. Когда Жеміна постучалась, женщина, не зная ничего и не смѣя никого спросить, отворила дверь и Жеміна вошла, обратилась въ паъ и заразила всѣхъ присутствовавшихъ» (Miller 1882, 283-4).



Puškin, nel suo *Viaggio ad Arzrum* (1978), scrisse che gli Osseti sono il popolo più povero del Caucaso e Potokskij (1880) aggiunse anche molto superstizioso;<sup>46</sup> Puškin, in effetti, passò un brutto quarto d'ora quando in un *aul* osseto, vestito in modo strano, fece dire dal suo interprete che era un diavolo catturato sugli Urali e cresciuto fra le persone: gli Osseti credettero subito al suo racconto e iniziarono a lanciargli pietre. Il gruppo di russi si salvò solamente per l'intervento di un reparto di cosacchi che aveva notato il trambusto.<sup>47</sup>

Dio stesso, nella tradizione osseta, è un personaggio molto particolare. Per prima cosa non è onnipotente e tante cose possono succedere indipendentemente dalla sua volontà. Viene chiamato «Dio degli dei», con una titolatura che ricorda il «re dei re» achemenide.<sup>48</sup> Quando Batraž [Батра́дз] inizia ad uccidere sistematicamente folletti e geni questi si rivolgono a Dio e si sentono dire:

Che cosa posso fare per voi? È nato senza che io l'abbia voluto e la sua morte non dipende da me.<sup>49</sup>

Non sempre però gli spiriti osseti tramano a danno degli uomini. Barastyr [Барастыр],<sup>50</sup> signore dei morti, permette al figlio di Wryzmaæg di uscire dal regno dei morti per convincere il padre a fare l'offerta annuale di cibo sulla sua tomba.<sup>51</sup> E Dio stesso interviene per permettere a Satàna di rivedere per un istante il figlio e di farlo rientrare nel regno dei morti:

Dio degli dei, mio dio, se sai vedere nel cuore di una madre prolunga obliqui sulle montagne gli ultimi raggi del sole! E sulle montagne, il sole morente si attardò.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>46</sup> «Осетины самое бедное племя из народов, обитающих на Кавказе» (Puškin 1978, 438); «Известно, насколько суеверный, дикий горец верит в существование злых духов в Кавказских горах» (Veresaeu 1990, 420); Potokskij 1880, 579.

<sup>47</sup> Veresaeu 1990, 420: «Эта шутка Ал. С-ча могла кончиться для нас очень печально, если бы постовой начальник не поспешил к нам с казаками»; Potokskij 1880, 579.

<sup>48</sup> xšāyaθiya xšāyaθiyānām: DB I, 1-2: Kent 1953, 116, 181; Brandenstein, Mayrhofer 1964, 83.

<sup>49</sup> Dumézil 1969, 235; cf. Dumézil 1965, 233.

<sup>50</sup> Barastyr | Barastær: Abaev 1958, 236; Miller 1882, 245.

<sup>51</sup> «– È da molti anni che sono nel Paese dei morti, egli rispose. Mio padre Uryzmaæg si preoccupa degli estranei, ma non di me. Io non ricevo alcuna offerta funeraria e mi trovo qui più abbandonato degli altri morti. Te ne prego, Barastyr, permettimi di uscire dal Paese dei Morti. Se non mi curo io di me stesso, mio padre continuerà a dimenticarmi. Ti do la mia parola: non appena avrò ottenuto l'offerta annuale che mi spetta, tornerò qui» (Dumézil 1969, 35); Dumézil 1965, 48; NÉON 1957, 288.

<sup>52</sup> Dumézil 1969, 43; cf. Dumézil 1965, 53. In questo caso Satàna non compie una magia, ma prega Dio, che permette al sole di attardarsi sulle cime dei monti. «Коль

Così Satàna può rivedere il volto del figlio mentre entra nel regno dei morti e gettargli il suo anello, per la gioia di chi studia comparazione fra i cicli epici indoeuropei che vede chiaramente un parallelo con Odino che lancia il suo anello sul rogo del figlio Baldr.<sup>53</sup> Il sole si attarda per volontà di Dio, per permettere al defunto di rientrare nel regno di morti, al quale non si può accedere dopo il tramonto. Nessun funerale si può fare al tramonto, anche quando le giornate in inverno sono particolarmente corte, altrimenti l'anima del morto deve vagare per tutta la notte e fra le montagne del Caucaso, dove spiriti non sempre ben intenzionati si aggirano in continuazione, dentro e fuori le case, è una situazione da evitare. Il morto stesso sopravvive in un certo senso nelle case ossete sotto forma di *ilæn*,<sup>54</sup> una specie di manichino che indossa i vestiti del defunto che in occasione di *zaxxæssæn*<sup>55</sup> viene portato sulla tomba dove si consuma un pasto.

La vita nella società tradizionale osseta prima dell'arrivo della modernità non era affatto semplice. L'osseto non aveva molte sicurezze: l'alta montagna non favoriva l'agricoltura, le terre a valle erano dominate da popolazioni più agguerrite. Il raccolto era la preoccupazione principale, ma la siccità o un'alluvione potevano distruggere tutto molto rapidamente. La malattia poteva portare via le persone care e distruggere intere famiglie. I villaggi osseti lontani dai centri culturali del Caucaso meridionale, ma anche dalle città a nord della dorsale erano di fatto isolati, quasi fuori dal mondo. In queste condizioni la mancanza di istruzione, il timore continuo della carestia, della malattia favorivano ogni forma di superstizione e contribuivano a creare nell'immaginario una schiera di spiriti che agivano mosi anche dal capriccio. Chi trasgrediva non rispettando la tradizione legata ad uno spirito era sicuramente punito, chi era osservante in tutto non era però automaticamente al sicuro. L'osseto era in balia delle decisioni e degli umori di spiriti che si muovevano secondo principi a lui incomprensibili. Bisognava dunque essere sottomessi, scrupolosamente seguire quanto la tradizione aveva tramandato. Si

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ты читаешь в материнском сердце, | Верни на миг последний отблеск солнца. | И бледный свет вдруг вспыхнул из-за гор» (NEON 1957, 301).

**53** «Come l'anello che Odhinn butta sul rogo del figlio Baldr e che più tardi, dal mondo dei morti, Baldr gli rimanda» (Dumézil 1969, 45 nota 14).

**54** *ælæt* | *ilæn*: Abaev 1958, 125-6: «обрядовый предмет, связанный с поминками, справляемыми в праздник *Komaxsæn*»; Miller 1882, 272; Miller 1929, 692-3; *ilæn*: DUDz 2003, 290. Secondo Abaev ciò avveniva in occasione di *Komaxsæn*: «Уæлдай кад чьи кодта йæ мардаен, иу арæзта дуджтæ, хъабахъхъытæ, æлæмтæ» (chi voleva particolarmente onorare il proprio defunto, organizzava corse, tiro al bersaglio e *ælæmtæ*): Abaev 1958, 126; *komaxsæn*: Ćibirov 1976, 92; Munkácsi 1932, 127-8; Benveniste 1959, 141.

**55** *zaxxæssæn*: Abaev 1989, 290: «праздник поминовения умерших». Miller 1927, 546; DUDz 2003, 272; Ćibirov 1976, 135-7; Ognibene 2012, 102-3; Miller 1882, 275; Berzenov 1850.

noti che la tradizione in queste regioni è molto forte ancora oggi. Nel 1973 in un santuario di Alardy [Аларды] furono rinvenuti molti oggetti di fabbricazione sovietica risalenti agli ultimi anni e il giorno di Wastyrgi si festeggia ancora oggi persino presso le comunità ossete residenti in altri Paesi.<sup>56</sup>

Gli spiriti osseti agiscono dunque con un duplice ruolo, quello di difendere e quello di punire. La linea di demarcazione purtroppo non è l'agire rettamente: la punizione può arrivare per motivi insospettabili e incomprensibili, insomma la vita per gli Osseti era un po' come attraversare un campo minato dove solo qualche mina è affiancata da una bandierina, la maggior parte è subito sotto il terreno, invisibile e pronta ad esplodere: a volte lo stesso campo minato non è segnalato e la vita può trasformarsi rapidamente nel peggiore degli incubi.

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**56** «Посетив летом 1973 г. святилище и цардаки под ним, мы обнаружили в последних совершенно новый инвентарь и посуду, что свидетельствует о том что у определенной части населения празднование дней Аларды продолжается и по сей день» (Čibirov 1976, 149).

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# «Da qualche parte si veglia ancora...». La poesia «Сидзæргæс» di Kosta Chetagurov

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**Abstract** Among the poems of Kosta Khetagurov included in the collection *Iron Fændyr* (Ossetian Lyre), the one entitled “Sidzærgæс” (‘Widow’, literally ‘Mother of Orphans’) deserves particular attention. Written probably at the end of the 1880s, the text describes a tragic familiar scene with an unhappy end. The portrait of a young woman, cooking a soup, and her five hungry children, sitting around the hearth and eagerly awaiting the dinner, is one of the most tearful and emotional scenes, well-known and beloved by all Ossetians. The present article presents a multi-layered analysis of the text. The introduction provides relevant biographical and historical information on “Sidzærgæс” and its historical, cultural and literary environment. The Italian literal translation is followed by an interlinear gloss: the first line contains a phonetic-phonological transcription of the text; the second features a semantic and morphosyntactic interpretation of the Ossetic text. In the appendices, beside a cognate poem, written by Kosta in Russian (“V burju”), the reader will find two previously unpublished typescript German translations of “Sidzærgæс”, from the archive of Gappo Baev (Berlin State Library).

**Keywords** Ossetian Poetry. Kosta Khetagurov. Iron Fændyr. Gappo Baev. Mother of Orphans (Widow). Italian and German translation. Lexical and morpho-syntactic gloss.

**Sommario** 1 Introduzione. – 1.1 La ‘riscoperta’ di Kosta in epoca sovietica. – 1.2 Kosta e le tradizioni funebri degli osseti. – 1.3 Contenuto della poesia. – 1.4 Una ‘parafrasi’ in lingua russa. – 2 Edizione. – 2.1 Testo osseto e versione inglese di T.A. Guriev. – 2.2 Traduzione italiana e versione letterale di Dzantiev. – 2.3 Trascrizione fonetica e glossa morfosintattica.



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## 1 Introduzione

Il presente contributo si colloca all'interno del lavoro di traduzione e analisi linguistica dell'opera più importante del poeta osseto Kosta Levanovič Chetagurov (15 ottobre 1859-1° aprile 1906), *Iron fændyr* (Lira osseta).<sup>1</sup> Pubblicata per la prima volta nell'anno 1899 'in contumacia', ovvero quando il poeta si trovava a Cherson a scontare la sua seconda condanna al confino (Bigulaeva 2015, 185-99),<sup>2</sup> questa raccolta di poesie si apre con un breve componimento, intitolato programmaticamente *Nystuan* (Testamento), in cui vengono presentati il ruolo e la missione del poeta (Gutiev 1951, 16). Kosta giustifica, scusandosene, il tono triste del suo canto, dovuto principalmente alla consapevolezza dei travagli del popolo osseto e del debito, non ancora estinto, che il poeta sente di aver contratto con i suoi connazionali (Bekoev 1925, 31 = 1982, 34; Tibilov 1936, 9; Gutiev 1951, 6; Salaeva 1959, 77; Abaev 1961, 72):

Æз дзыллæйæ къаддæр куы дарин,  
Куы бафидин искуы мæ хæс,  
Уæд афтæ æнкъардæй нæ зарин,  
Нæ хъуысид мæ кæуын хъæлæс  
[...] (cit. in Chetagurov 1999, 14)<sup>3</sup>

Se minore fosse il mio debito verso il popolo,  
Se io potessi prima o poi pagarlo,  
Non canterei così tristemente,  
Non si sentirebbe la mia voce piangente.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ricordiamo, fra i lavori più recenti, Giordano, Salvatori, Tomelleri 2019; Tomelleri, Giordano 2019 e Tomelleri, Salvatori, Giordano 2020. La versione finale dell'articolo, discussa, rivista e corretta collettivamente, ha visto nella fase preliminare una chiara suddivisione dei compiti: Michele Salvatori ha allestito il testo osseto e le sue diverse traduzioni (§§ 2.1, 2.2 e appendice II), Alessio Giordano ha lavorato alla trascrizione fonetica della poesia (§ 2.3), Vittorio S. Tomelleri ha redatto l'introduzione (§ 1) e curato, oltre alla bibliografia, la glossa morfosintattica (§ 2.3) e la poesia «V burju», edita in appendice I.

<sup>2</sup> Kosta non poté nemmeno controllare le bozze del testo mandato in stampa dal curatore, Georgij (Gappo) Vasil'evič Baev (1870-1939), non senza imperdonabili - agli occhi dell'autore - interventi censori e ingerenze lessicali e ortografiche (Epchiev 1951, 25-6; Totoev 1951, 17-18; Gagkaev 1957, 12; Gabaraev 1959, 181-2; Kravčenko 1961, 291-3; Tedety 2009, 326-32); sulle vicende editoriali del testo si veda il recente lavoro di Bigulaeva (2015, 200-30).

<sup>3</sup> In Bekoev 1925, 31 la quartina è ovviamente citata in alfabeto latino, introdotto ufficialmente in Ossezia due anni prima: «Æз дзыллæйæ khaddær ku darin, | Ku bafidin isku mæ xæs, | Wæd aftæ ænkhardæj næ zarin, | Næ qusid mæ kæiwynqælæs». Sulla latinizzazione della scrittura osseta si vedano Tomelleri 2016 e 2018b; sulla latinizzazione più in generale nel contesto sovietico si rimanda a Tomelleri 2018a e alla bibliografia ivi citata.

<sup>4</sup> Ove non diversamente indicato, tutte le traduzioni sono degli Autori.

Ritornato in patria dopo la non fortunata esperienza all'Accademia delle Belle Arti di San Pietroburgo (Bigulaeva 2015, 35-40), interrotta per mancanza di sussidi, il poeta si scontra con la situazione di estrema miseria in cui versa il Caucaso, e in particolare l'Ossezia. Già Aleksandr Sergeevič Puškin, nel suo viaggio a Arzrum del 1829, aveva avuto modo di constatare che «gli Osseti sono la tribù più povera fra i popoli che risiedono nel Caucaso» (Puškin 2013, 62).<sup>5</sup>

Con un lessico semplice e senza artifici Kosta riesce a farsi interprete sincero e partecipe delle istanze dei popoli montanari, cantando le sofferenze dei deboli e degli oppressi, non senza ricorrere a riferimenti squisitamente autobiografici. L'importanza della sua opera venne colta immediatamente dai suoi contemporanei. Il giornale *Peterburgskie vedomosti* del 1906 (n. 69), per esempio, così commentava la prematura scomparsa del poeta:

Весь осетинский народ буквально зачитывался этими поэмами, и отдельные отрывки из них обратились прямо-таки в народные песни, которые можно услышать в любой осетинской деревушке. Имя Коста каждым осетином произносилось буквально с благоговением. В каждой дружеской осетинской пирушке самый главный тост всегда был за поэта Коста, наиболее лучшие стихотворения которого тут же распевались. Таким образом, в лице умершего Коста Хетагурова осетины понесли тяжелую невознаградимую национальную утрату [...]. (cit. in Salagaeva 1959, 147)<sup>6</sup>

Tutto il popolo osseto si è letteralmente immerso nella lettura di queste poesie, e singole parti di esse si sono addirittura trasformate in canti popolari, che è possibile sentire in un qualsiasi paesino osseto. Il nome di Kosta veniva pronunciato da ogni osseto con vera e propria venerazione. Ad ogni banchetto osseto fra amici il brindisi più importante era sempre dedicato al poeta Kosta, del quale per l'occasione venivano recitate le migliori poesie. Pertanto, con la morte di Kosta Chetagurov gli osseti hanno subito una pesante e incolmabile perdita nazionale.

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<sup>5</sup> «Осетинцы – самое бедное племя из народов, обитающих на Кавказе» (testo russo citato in Abaev 1950, 42; Gabaraev 1959, 204; Chetagurov 1959, 10; Kravčenko 1959, 5).

<sup>6</sup> Questa e altre reazioni della carta stampata dell'epoca alla morte del poeta sono raccolte in Chetagurov 1961, 488-93 e in Kravčenko 2008, 89-90.

## 1.1 La ‘riscoperta’ di Kosta in epoca sovietica

Nonostante i proclami della propaganda sovietica, che a più riprese ha visto nell'Ottobre Rosso il semaforo ‘verde’ per l'ingresso ufficiale di Kosta nel pantheon dei poeti nazionali, con conseguente restituzione al popolo della sua eredità (Avruščenko 1940, 100; Chadarceva 1956, 22), è il 1939 la data che ne sancì il riconoscimento ufficiale da parte delle autorità, suggellando per così dire il trionfo della politica nazionale di Lenin e Stalin (Kulov 1939, 11; Chetagurov 1959, 44). Al 21 luglio di quell'anno, infatti, risale il decreto del Consiglio dei commissari del popolo e del Comitato centrale del Partito comunista, in occasione dell'ottantesimo anniversario della nascita del poeta, che sottolinea la straordinaria importanza politico-culturale della sua opera e i suoi meriti di attivista sociale (Korzun 1954, 55). Il testo, che porta la firma di Vjačeslav Michajlovič Molotov e di Iosif Vissarionovič Stalin, inizia così:

Постановление Совета Народных Комиссаров Союза ССР и Центрального Комитета ВКП(б) о проведении 80-летнего юбилея со дня рождения народного осетинского поэта и общественного деятеля Константина Левановича Хетагурова. (Jubilej 1941, 5-6)<sup>7</sup>

Decreto del Consiglio dei commissari del popolo dell'Unione delle Repubbliche Socialiste Sovietiche e del Comitato centrale del Partito comunista panunionista (bolscevico) sulla celebrazione dell'ottantesimo anniversario della nascita del poeta popolare e attivista osseto Kosta Levanovič Chetagurov.

In quell'occasione, fra le altre cose, si decise di ribattezzare *Georgievsko-Osetinskoe*, situato sulla riva sinistra del fiume Kuban',<sup>8</sup> in *Selo imeni Kosta Chetagurova*, denominazione che questa località, facente parte oggi della Repubblica di Caraciai-Circassia (Federazione Russa), conserva tutt'ora. Nello stesso anno anche il giornale *Pravda*, in un editoriale dedicato a Kosta, scriveva:

Каждый народ рождает героев, поднимавших людей на бой против рабства, за свободу и счастье...Таким героем для

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<sup>7</sup> Il testo del decreto, che si può leggere in un volume celebrativo dedicato a Kosta (Jubilej 1941), è ora disponibile anche in rete: <https://oldvladikavkaz.livejournal.com/195331.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Lo aveva ‘fondato’ nel 1868 il padre del poeta, Levan Elizbarovič Chetagurov, popolandolo con una comunità di coloni osseti senza terra provenienti dalla gola di Nar (Gutiev 1951, 7).

осетинского народа являлся Константин Леванович Хетагуров.  
(cit. in Abaev 1961, 182)

Ogni popolo ha dato alla luce eroi che hanno spronato la gente a combattere contro la servitù, per la libertà e la felicità... questo eroe, per il popolo osseto, è stato Konstantin Levanovič Chetagurov.

Il 1939, infine, registra anche la prima traduzione russa di *Iron fændyr* (Chetagurov 1939), peraltro giudicata non del tutto soddisfacente (Kulov 1947, 11).

Prima di questa canonizzazione ufficiale, che fece di lui un antesignano del comunismo rivoluzionario (Fadeev 1941, 3 = 2009, 26), non erano peraltro mancate, anche in organi autorevoli, voci critiche e perfino accuse di nazionalismo nei confronti di Kosta. Per esempio, nel quinto volume dell'enciclopedia letteraria, alla voce «Kosta» leggiamo le seguenti considerazioni tutt'altro che lusinghiere:

Но поэт-народник не видит, не умеет найти ясного исхода; отсюда — хотя К. для своей эпохи безусловно поэт революционный (в смысле национального освобождения) — националистические и даже мистические нотки в его творчестве. Это — результат известного раздвоения, неустойчивости социального бытия К. Отсюда и воспевание православия, внедрившегося в Осетию вместе с торговым капиталом, отсюда мистицизм и частые отступления от своих же идеалов. Творчество К. в наше время используется реакционными слоями национальной интеллигенции в своих интересах; ударение при этом делается на националистических мотивах поэзии К. (Abaev, Farneev 1931, 506)

Ma il poeta-democratico non vede, non è in grado di trovare una chiara via d'uscita; questo spiega perché, sebbene K. per la sua epoca sia certamente un poeta rivoluzionario (nel senso di liberazione nazionale), si riscontrano nella sua opera note nazionalistiche e persino mistiche. Questa è la conseguenza di un certo dualismo, di una certa instabilità della natura sociale di K. Di qui anche la glorificazione dell'ortodossia, penetrata in Ossezia insieme al capitale mercantile, di qui il misticismo e le frequenti deviazioni dai propri ideali. L'opera di K. viene oggi utilizzata a proprio vantaggio dai gruppi reazionari dell'*intelligencija* nazionale, i quali nel far questo sottolineano i motivi nazionalisti della poesia di K.

## 1.2 Kosta e le tradizioni funebri degli osseti

La poesia qui presa in esame, intitolata «Sidzærgæс», ovvero ‘La vedova’,<sup>9</sup> è ritenuta a buon diritto una perla della produzione poetica di Kosta (Abaev 1950, 39). Caratterizzata da elevatissimo impegno sociale e intensità emotiva (Kulov 1947, 13), essa, come tanti altri componimenti della raccolta *Iron fændyr*, è stata molto probabilmente composta durante il periodo trascorso da Kosta a Vladikavkaz (1885-91), considerato il più prolifico in relazione alla produzione del poeta in lingua osseta (Abaev 1939, 153;<sup>10</sup> Epchiev 1951, 11).

Si tratta inoltre della prima poesia osseta di Kosta tradotta in russo prima della Rivoluzione d'Ottobre (Chadarceva 1956, 21). Pochi anni dopo l'uscita della raccolta, infatti, più precisamente nell'estate del 1902, lo scrittore e pubblicista georgiano Levan Qipiani (1863-1936) inviò da Tbilisi all'autore e amico la propria traduzione russa della poesia:<sup>11</sup>

Коста! Посылаю тебе [мой] перевод твоего чудного  
«Сидзæргæс» – появилось<sup>12</sup> в «Кавказском вестнике» [n. 7].  
(Tedety 2009, 335)<sup>13</sup>

Kosta. Ti mando la [mia] traduzione del tuo meraviglioso  
«Sidzærgæс» – è uscita su *Kavkazskij vestnik* [n. 7].

Il paesaggio montano e l'ambientazione invernale fungono da cornice per una vicenda nella quale una figura priva di tratti persona-

<sup>9</sup> In realtà si tratta di un composto, il cui primo elemento è il sostantivo *sidzær*, che significa orfano, e il secondo un deverbativo tratto dalla radice del verbo *kæsyn* (guardare, accudire), con regolare sonorizzazione della consonante iniziale nel secondo membro del composto (Gagkaev 1957, 88; Abaev 1964, 110); lo stesso Kosta aveva annotato su un quaderno alcuni esempi di formazione delle parole in cui detto fenomeno si verifica (Salagaeva 1959, 137). La traduzione letterale è pertanto ‘madre degli orfani’ (cf. Guriev 2015, 217).

<sup>10</sup> Il testo di questo articolo, rilevante per la collocazione editoriale, per il nome del suo autore ma, soprattutto, per la data di pubblicazione (cf. *supra*), è stato ripubblicato alcuni anni più tardi come parte iniziale di un nuovo contributo (Abaev 1960, 72-6), riproposto in forma molto ridotta, e senza questa parte, nel primo volume dell'*Opera selecta* (Abaev 1990, 552-4). In Abaev 1939 l'intervallo temporale indicato è 1884-90, qui corretto sulla base di altre fonti (Gutiev 1951, 10; Korzun 1954, 65; Gabaraev 1959, 31).

<sup>11</sup> Il testo, che porta il titolo *Mat'* (Madre), è stato ristampato da Dzasochov (1909, 130-2); il frontespizio di questo libro è riprodotto nel secondo volume dell'*Opera omnia* di Kosta (Chetagurov 1951a, 48-9).

<sup>12</sup> In Korzun (1952, 120, nota 1), che riporta il passo, si legge invece «появится», ‘uscirà’.

<sup>13</sup> Si veda anche <http://nslib.tlweb.ru/tvorchestvo/kosta/perepiska/1.php?value=14>.

li diviene simbolo della disperata lotta di una povera vedova in difesa dei propri figli contro un nemico implacabile come la fame. La descrizione, che non rinuncia a dettagli molto realistici e crudi, culmina nella propria drammaticità alla penultima strofa, quando il lettore scopre la triste verità (Korzun 1957, 144); in modo sobrio e sintetico viene dipinto un quadro toccante e indimenticabile della vita grama dei montanari<sup>14</sup> e dell'amore materno. Kosta mette in bocca alla vedova infelice una formula tipica di lamento, che consiste nel rivolgersi al defunto con parole di biasimo (Salagaeva 1959, 104), secondo una pratica che lo stesso poeta aveva descritto nel suo trattato etnografico *Osoba*, ora disponibile anche in traduzione francese integrale (Khétagurov 2005):

Оплакивая покойника, к нему иногда обращаются с проклятием, – судзгæ фæбадай (сидеть тебе в огне), – за то, что он покинул малолетних детей, оставил несчастных стариков без потомства и т. д. (Chetagurov 2012, 50)<sup>15</sup>

Quando si piange un defunto, a volte lo si maledice dicendo *sudzgæ fæbadaj* (resta a bruciare nel fuoco), per aver abbandonato i figli ancora piccoli, aver lasciato dei vecchi infelici senza discendenza ecc.

L'interesse per i riti funebri del popolo osseto, particolarmente son tuosi e solenni per la credenza che la vita nell'aldilà fosse la continuazione della vita terrena (Malinkin 1941, 35-6), marca anche l'inizio dell'attività pubblicistica di Kosta. Questi aveva manifestato la sua vocazione etnografica in un articolo uscito sul giornale *Severnijj Kavkaz* del 1887 (n. 44), dal titolo «Pominki u osetin» (I funerali presso gli Osseti) (Korzun 1957, 43). Nelle *Vladikavkazskie pis'ma* (Lettere da Vladikavkaz), pubblicate sul giornale *Severnijj Kavkaz* (n. 36 del 1896), Kosta sottolineava la necessità di superare le credenze sull'oltretomba e le superstizioni del popolo osseto:

А пока осетин глубоко верит, что каждый покойник на том свете нуждается в пище и питье и что священная обязанность родственников покойного – доставлять им эти предметы потребления в установленном порядке и количестве, до тех пор невозможно сознательное уничтожение в народе «суеверных и разорительных» поминок. (Chetagurov 1951b, 17)

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<sup>14</sup> Kosta è stato per l'appunto definito «cantore della miseria dei montanari osseti» (Gadiev 1926).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. anche Salagaeva 1959, 104-5.

Finché gli osseti continueranno a credere fermamente che ogni defunto nell'aldilà ha bisogno di cibo e bevande e che è dovere sacrosanto dei parenti del defunto procurargli questi beni nel modo e nella quantità stabiliti, non sarà possibile sradicare dal popolo in modo consapevole i riti funebri 'superstiziosi e rovinosi'.

La morte del *pater familias* significava in genere, per una famiglia, il tracollo economico (Tuaev 1941, 212); anche l'organizzazione in grande stile del rito funebre condannava spesso alla rovina le famiglie meno abbienti, come registrava la ricerca etnografica ancora negli anni Venti del secolo scorso (Čursin 1925, 89).

Il poeta impiega il lamento funebre come espediente per dipingere a tinte vivide la miseria del popolo osseto; proprio la donna svolgeva un ruolo di primo piano nelle situazioni di lutto:

До дня похорон покойник оставался на скамье в хадзаре: его окружали исключительно женщины. (Chetagurov 2012, 50)

Fino al giorno delle esequie il corpo del defunto rimaneva nella casa su una panca: gli stavano intorno soltanto donne.

### 1.3 Contenuto della poesia

Protagonista del dramma familiare è una giovane madre, rimasta vedova, la quale, trattenendo a stento il dolore, cerca di far addormentare i propri figli piccoli. Alla richiesta di uno di loro, che vuole mangiare, ella risponde, senza riuscire a trattenere le lacrime, che la cena è quasi pronta e che ci sarà da mangiare per tutti, ma in realtà sta disperatamente mentendo. A poco a poco, spossati, i piccoli si addormentano uno dopo l'altro, e alla fine viene svelato l'arcano mistero della lunga cottura: la pentola non conteneva fagioli, ma pietre, messe a cuocere per tranquillizzare i figli affamati (Ivanov 1941, 123-4 = 1989, 137-9; Korzun 1957, 141-4; Salagaeva 1959, 103-4). La madre, ingannati i cinque orfanelli, piange tutta la notte, aspettando con terrore il mattino seguente, quando i bambini si sveglieranno e si metteranno di nuovo a chiedere da mangiare (Abaev 1961, 21).

L'opera richiama il poemetto *Moroz, Krasnyj nos* (Gelo, naso rosso) di Nikolaj Alekseevič Nekrasov (1821-1878), composto nel 1863 e dedicato alla sorella Anna Alekseevna. Sono stati proposti anche altri possibili modelli che avrebbero ispirato Kosta, fra cui andrebbero menzionati il poema dello scrittore austriaco Moritz Hartmann

(1821-1872), *Der weisse Schleier*<sup>16</sup> (Il velo bianco) e la poesia di Ivan Savvič Nikitin (1824-1861), *Žena jamščika* (La moglie del cocchiere)<sup>17</sup> (Berkov 1969; cf. anche Chetagurov 1999, 456); altri ritengono invece che si debbano prendere in maggiore considerazione motivi orientali, come la fiaba turca del califfo Yemer (Nesin 1979) o anche scenari analoghi della tradizione caucasica daghestana (Kodzati 1999). Interessanti e stimolanti, anche in relazione alla presenza del motivo nelle letterature europee, sono le considerazioni di Dziccojty (2017), il quale ritiene non realistica la condizione di totale solitudine e abbandono in cui versa la donna: per la società osseta del tempo, infatti, l'occorrenza concomitante della situazione descritta – una giovane vedova abbandonata al proprio destino, senza il supporto della famiglia, di lei o del marito defunto, e per di più nel totale disinteresse dei compaesani – costituisce un fatto storicamente inverosimile. Berkov (1969) ha proposto infine un'ardita ma suggestiva interpretazione di «Sidzærgæс» in chiave metaforica e autocritica: Kosta avrebbe voluto rappresentare come bambini affamati il popolo osseto in attesa del proprio nutrimento spirituale, ovvero testi in lingua osseta, mentre il poeta, invece di cucinare loro un pasto delizioso, li cullava con illusorie promesse scrivendo in russo.

La poesia ebbe subito un notevole impatto sul popolo. Come riferisce il giornale *Terskie vedomosti* del 1890 (n. 25), Kosta l'avrebbe recitata il 18 marzo 1890 in occasione di una serata artistico-letteraria di beneficenza, producendo nei presenti una profonda impressione (Ephiev 1951, 36; Korzun 1957, 141, nota 1). Anche lo scrittore osseto Baron Timofeevič Bociev (1901-1944) ricordava l'entusiasmo provocato nella sua famiglia dall'ascolto del testo:

Я помню, когда мой дядя, который был грамотным человеком, принес домой «Ирон фæндыр» и стал читать, то все домашние, а особенно женщины, заплакали, услышав «Мать сирот». Это было так всем знакомо, что никто не мог оставаться равнодушным. Когда я спросил: – А кто такой Коста? Мне ответили: – Это защитник бедняков. Потом я стал сам слагать о нем песни и стихи. (Bociev 1941, 164)<sup>18</sup>

Mi ricordo che quando mio zio, che era una persona di cultura, portò a casa *Iron fændyr* e cominciò a leggere, tutti a casa, in particolare le donne, si misero a piangere dopo aver sentito la poesia «La madre degli orfani». Questo testo era talmente noto a tutti che

<sup>16</sup> Incipit: «Im Kerker liegt in eisernen Banden | beim Henkermahle der Ungargraf» (Hartmann 1874, 140-3).

<sup>17</sup> Incipit: «Жгуч мороз трескучий, | на дворе темно» (Nikitin 1915, 20-26).

<sup>18</sup> Cf. anche Salagaeva 1959, 144.



nessuno poteva rimanere indifferente. Quando io chiesi – Ma chi è Kosta? Mi riposero: ‘Il difensore dei poveri’. Dopodiché mi sono messo io stesso a comporre canti e versi su di lui.

#### 1.4 Una ‘parafrasi’ in lingua russa

Analogo tema è stato sviluppato dal poeta nella poesia «V burju» (Durante la tempesta), composta in lingua russa (Malinkin 1941, 25), presumibilmente nel 1889 (Chetagurov 1951a, 350) e qui pubblicata nella prima appendice con una traduzione letterale a fronte (cf. appendice I). La versione russa può essere considerata una sorta di riassunto o parafrasi del testo osseto; lo sviluppo della medesima trama in due lingue dimostra che il poeta voleva garantire maggiore diffusione possibile al tema del dramma femminile e materno (Semënov 1951, 11-12). Kosta fu infatti sempre sensibile al ruolo fondamentale, ma subordinato, della donna nella società caucasica e al suo – il più delle volte triste – destino (Salagaeva 1959, 7; Apresjan 1962, 10-11); emblematiche sono le sue amare parole nella poesia «Na smert’ gorjanki» (Per la morte di una montanara):<sup>19</sup>

Ничего, что она молода!..  
Кроме рабства, борьбы и труда,  
Ни минуты отрадной свободы  
Ей бы жизнь не дала никогда,  
Хорошо умереть в ее годы.  
(Chetagurov 1951a, 16)

Non importa che fosse giovane!..  
Altro che schiavitù, lotta e fatica,  
Nemmeno un momento di gioiosa libertà  
La vita non le avrebbe mai concesso,  
È un bene che sia morta alla sua età.

Oltre a ciò, il poeta, privato molto presto del calore materno, provò sempre un sentimento di particolare affetto verso i bambini (Abaev 1961, 48), come attestano i primi versi della poesia «Tæxudy» (Desiderio) (Bigulaeva 2015, 21; Giordano, Salvatori, Tomelleri 2019, 273); ai bambini sono dedicate alcune delle sue migliori poesie (Avruščenko

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<sup>19</sup> Sul giornale *Severnyj Kavkaz* (n. 30 del 1889), dove la poesia fu pubblicata per la prima volta, nel titolo il sostantivo *gorjanki* era preceduto dall’aggettivo *molodoj*, ‘giovane’ (Chetagurov 1951a, 349-50).

1940, 108).<sup>20</sup> Il carattere socialmente impegnato di questo componimento, inoltre, ne ha fatto oggetto di attenzione musicale, con la creazione di melodie popolari che ne accompagnavano l'esecuzione (Salagaeva 1959, 139).

## 2 Edizione

Il componimento osseto, che comincia con la cupa ambientazione montana di una tempesta di neve, per passare poi alla descrizione di una scena familiare attorno al focolare acceso, rivela la predilezione del poeta per l'asindeto, costruito sintattico che caratterizza il registro colloquiale, conferendo al dettato del testo una maggiore intimità. L'uso di frasi coordinate semplici e brevi (Salagaeva 1959, 135), inoltre, permette di attirare l'attenzione del lettore su singoli particolari, mentre il legame logico-sintattico fra gli eventi viene intuito sulla base del contenuto dell'opera (Gagkaev 1957, 118);<sup>21</sup> in questo caso, peraltro, l'intento di Kosta non è tanto descrivere una sequenza di eventi narrativi, quanto concentrare la propria ispirazione poetica sulla rappresentazione dello stato emotivo di una giovane donna rimasta sola dopo la tragica morte del coniuge (Dziccojty 2017).

Pubblichiamo qui sotto il testo di «Sidzærgæс» secondo l'abituale struttura a più strati: al § 2.1 viene riportato l'originale osseto, in ortografia corrente, preceduto dal facsimile del manoscritto autografo (Chetagurov 2009) e affiancato dalla traduzione letterale inglese ad opera del compianto Tamerlan Aleksandrovič Guriev (2009); segue, al § 2.2, la resa in lingua italiana, cui si aggiunge anche il *podstročnik* di Anatolij Aleksandrovič Dzantiev (2009). La trascrizione fonetica, con glossa lessicale e morfosintattica, intende infine offrire un valido strumento di analisi linguistica (§ 2.3). L'edizione è inoltre arricchita da due appendici: la prima presenta il testo della poesia di Kosta «V burju» con una traduzione italiana il più possibile letterale (appendice I); la seconda, invece, contiene una duplice traduzione tedesca, finora inedita, tratta dall'archivio personale di Gappo Bav (appendice II).

<sup>20</sup> Avruščenko riporta anche, in traduzione russa, un verso della poesia in cui il bambino stanco e affamato viene così descritto: «Уснул у очага самый лучший из людей» (si è addormentato vicino al focolare il migliore di tutti).

<sup>21</sup> A pagina 119 lo studioso riporta, fra gli altri, proprio l'incipit di «Sidzærgæс»; la pregevole monografia di Gagkaev (1957), unica nel suo genere, va letta tenendo presenti alcune critiche sostanziali di Tokazov 1959.

## Сидзæргæс.

алон барзæвсий сундæн...  
Уад тæнцæ хæсст...  
Сау айнæдæн рундæн  
Нарт дæу хусст...

Дарæ хæсæв фæтæнæдæ,  
Цард удæн хуздæр..  
Рукс цæуæ карæнæдæ; –  
Бадтæн ма кæмдæр.

Цу зарæнæ æхсæнæ,  
Тæс дæуæн хæсдæдæ,  
Алсæдæ фæсæдæдæ  
Æнæ бæстæнæдæ! –

Figura 1 Chetagurov 2009, 56

Ма дæтæ æ бадтæ!-  
Иуагмадæ уæлдæ  
Архæг æ армæ  
Иу сæударæг æ.

Армæдæтæ карæтæ,  
Фæтæтæ æтæтæ  
Бадтæ сæтæтæтæ,-  
И бæтæ, и тæтæ...

Уæтæ æтæ сæтæгæ  
Бæтæ-дæтæ тæтæ,-  
Итæтæ æтæтæгæ  
Арæтæтæ тæтæ...

- Ма кæтæ, ма кæтæ,  
Дæтæтæ æтæ тæтæ,-  
Арæтæгæ дæтæтæтæ.  
Бадтæтæ æтæтæ!..

Мæтæгæтæ æтæтæ  
Мæтæ тæтæтæгæ.  
Итæтæтæ æтæтæ  
Æтæтæ сæтæгæ.

Figura 2 Chetagurov 2009, 58

Дуррисæ сæдзæ дарæг:  
„Дурдæ рæбада  
„Зæгъ бун нæ дарæг,  
„Мах гæ прæсæдда!..

„Фондæгъ зæ нгъæдда  
„Гæ нгъæрæгæм, –  
„Мавъ зæрæ сæхтæдæ –  
„Нæрæхтæдæ рæдæм!..

„Зондæгъ мæ прæхтæдæ,  
„О, мæ мæдæ хæг, –  
„Сидзæргæгъ прæхтæдæ  
„Ингæммæ мæргæгъ!

„Бун, дæбун дæм дæурæ, –  
„Сæммæхтæ дæгъ гæ мæд...  
„Мæхæм-дæгъ дæ хæурæ  
„Сæхтæтæ кæ бунæм!

Нæхтæхтæ æзæм  
Агæм сæхтæгъ:  
Митæгъдæгъ æхæм  
Мæгъ рæдæгъгъ:

Figura 3 Chetagurov 2009, 60

Багæмæд кæйтæй,  
Бæнæнтæ кæстæр,-  
Кæмæнтæ æррæтæй,  
Æдæмтæ хуызæр!-

Цытæдæр дæ адæм  
Фыццæгæдæ, фæмæй!-  
Сæмæтæ фæмæдæм  
Фыццæгæдæ кæмæй!..

- О, цæдæ, кæд цæдæ?  
Рæгæ-мæ кæй дæ аг!..  
-Æдæмтæ! Фæдæмтæ  
Æмæдæр дæ фæг!..

Аг кæм дæ бæтæй,-  
„Æдæмтæ“ фæдæмтæ..  
Æмæдæмтæ фæдæмтæй,  
Сæдæмтæ хуызæмтæ..

Сæмæтæ кæйтæй,  
Лæг кæй сæмæмæмтæ,  
Фæдæмтæ дæ фæдæмтæй,-  
Мæмтæ æм кæм дæмтæ.

Figura 4 Chetagurov 2009, 62

Лæстæм ма сæ хаси́нда  
Мад жæ гæбу́мт,  
Адæрсæ сæ нæгæрзæнда  
Алæ бæззæрмт...

Скадда сæ рæбгæй;  
Дæмгæдтæм æрæдт...  
Най-да-ка! Кæйгæй  
Нам авæстæ сæ мад!

Сидзæргæм гæдуртæ  
Сæхсæвæр ху́дда,  
Артæмæй сæм дуртæ  
Нæгæмæдæн гæхтæда, –

Артæм æвæстæ  
Бæрæхтæ сæ хæрд...  
Сæмæн сæмæд нæ зонг,  
Иу сæдтæм æвæст!..

Figura 5 Chetagurov 2009, 64

## 2.1 Testo osseto e versione inglese di T.A. Guriev

### Сидзæргæс

Халон баргъæвст сындзыл...  
Уад тымыгъ хæссы...  
Сау айнæджы рындзыл  
Нары хъæу хуыссы...

Даргъ æхсæв фыдбонæй  
Цард удæн – хуыздæр...  
Рухс цæуы кæронæй, –  
Бадынц ма кæмдæр...

Иу зæронд æскъæты, –  
Гас хъæуы уæлдай,  
Аззæди фæсвæды<sup>1</sup>  
Ацы бæстыхай, –

Ма дис кæн<sup>2</sup> йæ бадтыл! –  
Цуайнаджы уæлхъус  
Архайы йæ артыл  
Иу саударæг ус.

Артдзæсты кæрæтты,  
Фæныкмæ æнгом  
Бадынц сывæллæттæ, –  
Чи бæгънæг, чи гом...

Уазал æмæ стонгæй  
Бирæгъ дæр тæрсы, –  
Удхæссæг æввонгæй  
Ахæмты хæссы...

– Ма кæут, мæ хуртæ, –  
Дзуры сæм сæ мад, –  
Афыцой хъæдуртæ...  
Абадут æнцад!..

Митæйдзаг æхсæлы  
Мары фæздæгæй...  
Цæстысыг æзгъæлы  
Агмæ сусæгæй...

Хурхмæ схæццæ<sup>3</sup> хъарæг:  
«Дудгæ фæбада  
Зæйы бын нæ дарæг,  
Мах чи фæсайда!..

Фондзæй уæ ныуагъта  
Иу ныййарæгæн, –  
Мады зæрдæ скъахта, –  
Царæфтыд фæдæн!..

### Widow

A raven is frozen on a sloe...  
Snow-storm is awful.  
On the edge of a rock  
Nar-aul is sleeping...

A long night is better  
Than a painful day...  
There is light somewhere, –  
Someone isn't sleeping yet.

In one cattle-shed  
On the edge of the aul  
This house  
Is quite lonely...

You must not be surprised  
At this late sitting!.. –  
A widow in black  
Is busy at (over) cauldron.

Round the fire  
Close to the ashes  
Children are sitting, –  
Some in rags, some naked...

Even a wolf is afraid  
Of cold and hunger.  
Death willingly  
Takes such poor.

– You don't cry, my darlings, –  
Their mother is saying, –  
Sit still for a while,  
We'll have beans for supper!

The smoke of juniper  
Is biting the eyes.  
The tears are falling  
Into the cauldron.

She starts her lamentation.  
“Let our broad-winner [*sic*]  
Suffer under the avalanche,  
The one who deceived us!..

Five of you he left  
To the care of mother,  
And now this burden  
Is tearing my heart to pieces!..



Зондæй мыл фæтых дæ, О, мæ лæджы хай, – Сидзæртæй фæлыгътæ Ингæнмæ тæргай!..	You turned out a clever man, Oh, my husband, You ran to your grave From five orphans!..
Буц хъæбул дæм дзуры, – Сфæлмæст <sup>4</sup> дзы йæ мад, – Махæн дæр дæ цуры Сцæттæ кæ бынат!»	Your loving baby is calling you, – His mother can't stand it any longer – You better make a room for us By your side!”
Цæстысыг æзгъæлы Агмæ сусæгæй... Митæйдзаг æхсæлы Мары фæздæгæй...	The tears of mother Are dipping into the cauldron... The smoke of juniper Is biting the eyes.
Бафæллад кæуынæй Бинонты кæстæр, – Къонайыл æрфынæй Адæмы хуыздæр! –	The youngest of the family Is tired of weeping, And the best of the people Has fallen asleep at a hearth.
Иууылдæр дæ адыл <sup>5</sup> Тулдзысты, фæлæу! – Стонг æмæ фæлладыл Тых хуыссæг кæм нæу!..	Now the rest Will fall asleep, – Hunger and fatigue Will overcome.
– О гыцци <sup>6</sup> кæд уыздæн? – Райс–ма, цæй, дæ аг!.. – Абадут!.. Фæуыздæн Алкæй дæр йæ фаг...	– Oh, ma, isn't it time? Will you take the cauldron down! – Sit for a while!.. Everyone will have enough.
Аг кæлы йæ былтæй, – «Хъæдуртæ» фыцынц... Алы ран тымбылтæй Сидзæртæ хуыссынц...	The cauldron is full, – ‘The beans’ will soon be ready... The orphans are sleeping Here and there.
Стонг æмæ кæуынæй Лæг куы сфæлмæцы, Тарф ууæд йæ фынæй, – Маст æм нал хъуысы.	When one is tired Of hunger and weeping, His sleep is sound, He'll not feel bitterness.
Лыстæнмæ сæ хаста Мад йæ хъæбулты, Адæрсгæ сæ нуæрста Алы бызгъуырты...	Mother took her children To their ‘bed’ – the straw. And carefully covered them With sundry rags.
Скодта сæ рæбынæй, Дæлфæдтæм æрбадт... Гъай–да–гъа! Кæуынæй Нал æфсæст сæ мад!..	Now she is sitting At her little dears... And ... She couldn't stop Her weeping.

Сидзæртæн хъæдуртæ Се 'хсæвæр хуыдта, Афтæмæй сын дуртæ Цуайнаджы фыхта:	She promised the orphans To give them beans for supper. But ... there were only stones In the cauldron:
Афыцын æфсоны Байрох уа сæ хæрд... Стонг æмгъуыд нæ зоны, – Иу сайд ын æггъæд!.. (Chetagurov 1999, 64-71)	Waiting they'd forget Their hunger (supper, meal)... But hunger doesn't acknowledge postponement Next time it won't be deceived... (Guriev 2009, 25-7)

- 1 Nel manoscritto autografo фæсфæды.
- 2 Nel manoscritto autografo дис-кæ.
- 3 Nel manoscritto autografo схæддзæ. Nell'*editio princeps* di *Iron fændyr* (1899) il testo recita: «Хъуырмæ [in gola] схæццæ» (Chetagurov 1999, 305).
- 4 Nel manoscritto autografo сфæлмæцвт.
- 5 Nell'*editio princeps* di *Iron fændyr* (1899) il testo recita: «Иууылдæрдæ фæдыл» (Chetagurov 1999, 305).
- 6 Nel manoscritto autografo гвддзи.

## 2.2 Traduzione italiana e versione letterale di Dzantiev

### La vedova

Il corvo sul prugnolo sente freddo...  
la tormenta porta una tempesta di neve...  
sulla sporgenza di una roccia nera  
riposa il villaggio di Nar...

Per un'anima viva una lunga notte  
è meglio del brutto tempo...  
dalla periferia arriva della luce, –  
da qualche parte si veglia ancora...

In una vecchia stalla, –  
all'estremità del villaggio,  
è rimasta del tutto isolata  
questa abitazione, –

Non meravigliarti di questa veglia! –  
intorno alla pentola  
armeggia sul fuoco  
una donna vestita a lutto.

Alle estremità del focolare  
vicino alla cenere  
siedono dei bambini, –  
chi nudo, chi vestito di stracci...

### Сидзæргæс – мать сирот

Ворон озяб на колючем кустарнике...  
Буря несет метель...  
На черной скале, над пропастью,  
Спит аул Нар...

Долгая ночь для живой души  
Лучше мрачного дня...  
Где-то на окраине виден огонек  
– Там еще не спят...

В одном старом хлеву, –  
На самом краю аула,  
На отшибе осталось  
Это жилище, –

Не удивляйся, что здесь бодрствуют! –  
Над котелком  
Возится у очага  
Вдова в траурном одеянии.

Вокруг очага  
Рядышком с золой  
Сидят дети. –  
Кто в лохмотьях, кто гол...

Del freddo e della fame  
anche il lupo ha paura, –  
l'angelo della morte prontamente  
porta via simili persone...

Non piangete, miei soli, –  
– dice loro la madre, –  
i fagioli si devono cuocere...  
state tranquilli!..

Il ginepro coperto di neve  
punge (gli occhi) con il fumo...  
una lacrima finisce  
furtivamente nella pentola...

In gola si è mescolato il canto:  
«Se ne stia a soffrire  
sotto la lavina il nostro capofamiglia  
che ci ha ingannato!..

In cinque vi ha lasciato  
a me sola genitrice, –  
della madre il cuore ha lacerato, –  
ora sono rovinata!..

Mi hai superato quanto a sapere,  
oh, mio caro marito<sup>1</sup>, –  
sei scappato dagli orfani  
nella tomba, con nostro scorno!..

Il tenero bimbo ti chiama,  
sua madre è sposata...  
Prepara anche a noi  
una dimora vicino a te!»

Una lacrima finisce  
furtivamente nella pentola...  
il ginepro coperto di neve  
punge (gli occhi) con il fumo...

Si è stancato di piangere  
il più piccolo della famiglia, –  
presso il focolare si addormenta,  
il migliore di tutti.

Ognuno crollerà  
come te, fermati!  
Affamato e stanco  
come non lo supererà il sonno!..

Холода и голода  
Бойтся даже волк, –  
Костлявая подобных  
Уносит без труда...

– Не плачьте, мои солнышки, –  
– Говорит им мать, –  
Сварится фасоль...  
Посидите тихо!..

Заснеженный можжевельник  
Дымом ест глаза...  
Слезы (матери) катятся  
Украдкой в котелок...

Рыдания душат горло:  
«Да постигнут муки  
Нашего кормильца, накрытого обвалом,  
Того, кто обманул нас!..

Пятерых оставил он  
Мне одной, –  
Истерзал (исковеркал) сердце матери, –  
Разрушен мой очаг!..

Умом ты меня одолел,  
О, моя мужнина доля, –  
От сирот сбежал ты  
В могилу, в обиду на нас!..

Любимое чадо зовет тебя,  
Измучил он свою мать...  
И для нас рядом с собой  
Приготовь местечко!»

Слезы скатываются  
Украдкой в котелок...  
Заснеженный можжевельник  
Дымом ест глаза...

Утомился от плача  
Младший из семьи,  
У очага засыпает тихо,  
Лучший из людей.

Подобно тебе, и все остальные  
Вскоре повалятся спать, погоди!  
Голодного и усталого  
Не одолеет ли сон!..

Oh, mamma, quando è pronto?  
su, tira fuori il tuo pentolone!..  
– State seduti! Ce ne sarà  
a sufficienza per tutti...

Il pentolone ribolle ai lati,  
‘i fagioli’ cuociono...  
Rannicchiati in vari posti  
gli orfani dormono...

Quando si è sopraffatti  
dal sonno e dal pianto,  
allora il sonno è profondo, –  
non si prova più dolore.

La madre ha coricato  
i piccoli sulla paglia,  
con premura li ha coperti  
di vari stracci...

Li ha messi in un angolo,  
si è seduta ai loro piedi...  
Deh! Del pianto  
non si è potuta saziare la madre.

Agli orfani fagioli  
aveva promesso per cena,  
ma per loro pietre  
nel pentolone cuoceva;

Con la scusa del cuocere  
che dimentichino la fame...  
la fame non conosce termini, –  
un inganno gli basta.

– О, гыцци, когда же...  
Ну, сними свой котелок!  
– Подождите, достанется  
Вдоволь каждому...

Котелок закипает через край,  
Варится «фасоль»...  
То там, то здесь, свернувшись,  
Сироты спят...

Когда с голоду и от плача  
Утомится человек,  
Тогда сон у него глубок, –  
Горе он уже не замечает.

Мать укладывала  
Своих детей на солому,  
Заботливо укрывала их  
Разными лохмотьями...

Уложив в углу,  
Присела у их ног...  
И ну, давай! Рыданьем  
Не могла уж насытиться мать.

Сиротам она говорила,  
Что варит к ужину фасоль,  
А сама в котелке  
Варила для них камни;

Чтобы убаюканные надеждой,  
Они забыли о голоде...  
Голодный не знает срока, –  
Для него и простого обмана достаточно!..  
(Dzantiev 2009, 314-17)

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1 Letteralmente ‘mia parte di marito’.

## 2.3 Trascrizione fonetica e glossa morfosintattica

ʃizərgəʃ  
widow

'χalɒn	ba-r̥k̥ɛʏʃt	ʃən'z-əɫ
crow.NOM(S)	PFV-frozen.PAST.3SG.INTR	thornbush-ADES

'waʃ	təməʁ	χeʃʃ:-ə
storm.NOM(S)	blizzard.NOM(DO)	to_bring.PRS-3SG

'ʃaɯ	ʔaɪnɛdʒ-ə	rən'z-əɫ
ADJ.black	cliff-GEN	edge-ADES

'nar-ə	q'ɛɯ	χʷəʃʃ:-ə
Nar(proper_name)-GEN	village.NOM(S)	to_sleep.PRS-3SG

'darʁ	ɛχʃɛʏ	fəd'bon-ɛɫ
long	night.NOM(S)	unlucky_day-ABL

'sard	ud-en	χwəz'dɛr
ADJ.alive	soul-DAT	good.COMP

'ruχʃ	sɛw-ə	kɛ'ron-ɛɫ
light.NOM(S)	to_go.PRS-3SG	border-ABL

'bad-ənts	ma	kɛm'dɛr
to_sit.PRS-3PL	CONJ.still	ADV.somewhere

'ʔiɯ	ʒɛrɒŋd	əʃ'kʔɛt-ə
NUM.one	old	cowshed-INES

'gaʃ	q'ɛw-ə	wɛl'daɪ
whole	village-GEN	different.NOM(S)

'ʔa-ʒ:ad-i	fɛʃ'fɛdə
PFV-to_remain.PAST-3SG.INTR	ADV.apart

'ʔasə	ʔɛʃtə'χaɪ
DEM.this	building.NOM(S)

'ma	dɪʃ	ʔkɛ	ʒɛ	'baʔt:-əɫ
PROH	to_wonder.	AUX(to_do).IMP.2SG	CL.3SG.GEN	sitting-ADES

'swajnadʒ-ə	wel'qʷuf		
pot-GEN	POSTP.near		
'ʔarχaj-ə	je	'ʔart-əl	
to_work_hard.PRS-3SG	CL.3SG.GEN	fire-ADES	
'ʔiʷ	ʃaʷ-dar-e'ǵ	uʃ	
NUM.one	black-wear-PTCP	woman.NOM(S)	
'ʔartzeʃt-ə	ke'reʰ-t:-ə		
hearth-GEN	edge-PL-INES		
fe'nək-me	eŋ'gom		
ash-ALL	ADV.near		
'bad-ənts	ʃəve'l:eʰ-t:-e		
to_sit.PRS-3PL	young-PL-NOM		
tʃi	'beʷneǵ	tʃi	'gom
INT.AN.NOM(S)	ADJ.bare	INT.AN.NOM(S)	ADJ.naked
'wazəl	eme	'ʃtong-eǵ	
cold.ABL	CONJ.and	hunger-ABL	
'biɾeʷ	der	teɾ'f-ə	
wolf.NOM(S)	CONJ.also	to_be_afraid.PRS-3SG	
'ʔuǵ-χeʃ:-eǵ		e'v:ong-eǵ	
soul-to_carry_away-PTCP.NOM(S)		easy-ABL	
'ʔəχem-t-ə	χeʃ:-ə		
such-PL-GEN(DO)	to_carry_away.PRS-3SG		
'ma	ke-ʷt	me	'χur-t-e
PROH	to_cry-IMP.2PL	CL.1SG.GEN	son-PL-VOC
'zur-ə	sem	ʃe	'maǵ
to_speak.PRS-3SG	CL.3PL.ALL	CL.3PL.GEN	mother.NOM(S)
'ʔa-fəs-oǵ		qʷe'dur-t-ə	
PFV-to_cook-SBJV.FUT.3PL		bean-PL-NOM(S)	
'ʔa-bad-ut	en'saǵ		
PFV-to_sit-IMP.2PL	ADJ.quiet		

'mit-ej-zağ	exʃelə		
snow-ABL-covered	juniper_shrub.NOM(S)		
'mar-ə	fəz'deg-ej		
to_kill.PRS-3SG	smoke-ABL		
sej-'t-ə	ʃəğ	əz'vəl-ə	
eye-PL-GEN	tear.NOM(S)	to_roll_down.PRS-3SG	
'ʔag-me	ʃufeg-ej		
pot-ALL	secret-ABL		
'qʷər-me	f-ʃets:e	'qʷareğ	
throat-ALL	PFV-to_mix.PAST.3SG	weeping.NOM(S)	
'dud-ge	fə-'bad-a		
to_itch-GER	PFV-to_sit-SBJV.FUT.3SG		
'zəj-ə	bən	nə	'dar-eğ
avalanche-GEN	POSTP.under	CL.1PL.GEN	hold-PTCP.NOM(S)
'maχ	tʃi	fə-'ʃajʔt:-a	
1.PL.GEN	REL.AN.NOM	PFV-to_cheat.PAST-3SG.TR	
'fonz-ej	we	nə-'w:əɣt-a	
NUM.five-ABL	CL.2PL.GEN	PFV-to_abandon.PAST-3SG.TR	
'ʔiɣ	nə'j:areg-en		
NUM.one	parent-DAT		
'mad-ə	zərde	ʃ-kʷəxt-a	
mother-GEN	heart.NOM(DO)	PFV-to_rip_out.PAST-3SG.TR	
'sareftəɖ	fə-'den		
unfortunate	PFV-to_be.PRS.1SG		
'zond-ej	məl	fə-'təχ	de
cleverness-ABL	CL.1SG.ADES	PFV-to_defeat	AUX(to_be).PRS.2SG
'ho	me	ləɖz-ə	'χaj
INTERJ.oh	CL.1SG.GEN	man-GEN	part.VOC
ʃizer-t-ej	fə-'ləɣt-e		
orphan-PL-ABL	PFV-to_run_away.PAST-2SG.INTR		

'ŋiŋgen-me	ter'gai		
grave-ALL	ADJ.offended		
'buts	q <sup>7</sup> e'buł	dem	'zur-ə
soft	kid.NOM(S)	CL.2SG.ALL	to_speak.PRS-3SG
f-fel'mesəɖ		je	'maɖ
PFV-to_tire.PAST.3SG.INTR		CL.3SG.GEN	mother.NOM(S)
'maxen	der	de	'surə
1PL.DAT	CONJ.also	CL.2SG.GEN	POSTP.near
f-se't:e	ke		bə'nat
PFV-ready	AUX(to_do).IMP.2SG		square.NOM(DO)
'sef-t-ə	fəɖ	əz'vɛl-ə	
eye-PL-GEN	tear.NOM(S)	to_drop.PRS-3SG	
'ʔag-me	'fufeg-ej		
pot-ALL	secret-ABL		
'mit-ej-zaɖ	eχ'felə		
snow-ABL-covered	juniper_bush.NOM(S)		
'mar-ə	fez'deg-ej		
to_kill.PRS-3SG	smoke-ABL		
'ba-fel:aɖ		ke'w-ən-ej	
PFV-to_tire.PAST.3SG.INTR		to_cry-INF-ABL	
'binont-ə	kef'ter		
family-GEN	younger.NOM(S)		
'k'onaj-əł	er-'fəneɪ		
fireplace-ADES	PFV-to_fall_asleep		
'ʔadem-ə	χ <sup>w</sup> əz'der		
people-GEN	good.COMP.NOM(S)		
'ʔiw:əlder	de	'ʔad-əł	
INDEF.all	CL.2SG.GEN	taste-ADES	
'tul-zə-ftə	fe-'leu		
to_roll-FUT-3PL	PFV-to_stay.IMP.2SG		



'ʃtɒŋɡ	eme	fe'l:ad-əl			
hungry(.ADES)	CONJ.and	tired-ADES			
təχ	'χʷəʃ:ɐ̌	kem	'ne-ʊ		
to_defeat	sleep.NOM(S)	ADV.where	NEG-AUX(be).PRS.3SG		
'ho	gəts:i	kəɟ	'wə-zen		
INTERJ.oh	mama.VOC	CONJ.when	to_be-FUT.3SG		
'ra-ij		ma	səj	de	'ʔaɟ
PFV-to_bring_down.IMP.2SG		PTCL.now	PTCL.finally	CL.2SG.GEN	pot.NOM(DO)
'ʔa-bad-ut		fe-'wə-zen			
PFV-to_sit-IMP.2PL		PFV-to_be-FUT.3SG			
'ʔalkej	der	je	'faɟ		
INDEF.AN.GEN	CONJ.also	CL.3SG.GEN	enough		
'ʔaɟ	kəl-ə	je	'bəl-t-ɐj		
pot.NOM(S)	to_pour/spill.PRS-3SG	CL.3SG.GEN	edge-PL-ABL		
q'e'dur-t-ɐ	fə's-ənts				
bean-PL-NOM	to_cook.PRS-3PL				
'ʔalə	ran	təm'bəl-t-ɐj			
INDEF.everyone	place.NOM	round-PL-ABL			
'ʃizer-t-æ	χʷəʃ:-ənts				
orphan-PL-NOM	to_sleep.PRS-3PL				
'ʃtɒŋɡ	eme	ke'w-ən-ɐj			
hunger.ABL	CONJ.and	to_cry-INF-ABL			
'leɟ	kʷə	ʃ-fel'mes-ə			
man.NOM	CONJ.if/when	PFV-to_tire.PRS-3SG			
'tarf	u	wəɟ	je	'fəneɟ	
deep	to_be.PRS.3SG	CONJ.then	CL.3SG.GEN	sleep.NOM(S)	
'maft	em	naɭ	'qʷəʃ-ə		
bitterness.NOM(S)	CL.3SG.ALL	NEG.no_longer	to_reach.PRS-3SG		
ləʃten-me	sə	'χaft-a			
bed_of_grass-ALL	CL.3PL.GEN(DO)	to_carry.PAST-3SG.TR			

'maɖ mother.NOM(S)	je CL.3SG.GEN	q'e'bul-t-ə kid-PL-GEN	
ʔe'derʃge without_fear	sə CL.3PL.GEN(DO)	'n- <sup>w</sup> erʃt-a PFV-to_cover.PAST-3SG.TR	
'ʔalə INDEF.each	bəʒ <sup>w</sup> ər-t-ə rag-PL-INES		
'ʃ-ko <sup>d</sup> t:-a PFV-to_make.PAST-3SG.TR	sə CL.3PL.GEN(DO)	re'bən-ej corner-ABL	
del'feɖt:em ADV.at_the_feet	er-'ba <sup>d</sup> t: PFV-to_sit.PAST.3SG.INTR		
'haji-da-ha INTERJ.oh	ke'w-ən-ej to_cry-INF-ABL		
'naɭ NEG.no longer	effeʃt to_satiate.PAST.3SG.INTR	ʃe CL.3PL.GEN	'maɖ mother.NOM(S)
'ʃizer-t-en orphan-PL-DAT	q'e'dur-t-e bean-PL-NOM(DO)		
'ʃe CL.3PL.GEN	χʃever dinner	χ <sup>w</sup> ə <sup>d</sup> t:-a to_promise.PAST-3SG.TR	
'ʔafteməj CONJ.while	sən CL.3PL.DAT	'dur-t-e stone-PL-NOM(DO)	
's <sup>w</sup> aɪnadʒ-ə pot-INES	fəχ't-a to_cook.PAST-3SG.TR		
'ʔa-fəs-ən PFV-to_cook-INF	ef'ʃon-ə pretence-INES		
'ba-iroχ PFV-to_forget	wa AUX(to_be).SBJV.FUT.3SG	ʃe CL.3PL.GEN	'χerɖ food.NOM(DO)
'ʃtonɔ̌ hunger.NOM(S)	em <sup>w</sup> əɖ term.NOM(DO)	ne NEG.not	'ʒon-ə to_know.PRS-3SG
'ʔiɯ NUM.one	ʃaɪɖ deception.NOM(S)	ən CL.3SG.DAT	ə'ɛ:əɖ enough

## Abbreviazioni

ABL	Ablative
ADES	Adessive
ADJ	Adjective
ADV	Adverb
ALL	Allative
AN	Animate
AUX	Auxiliary
CL	Clitic
COMP	Comparative
CONJ	Conjunction
DAT	Dative
DEM	Demonstrative
DO	Direct Object
FUT	Future
GEN	Genitive
GER	Gerund
IMP	Imperative
INDEF	Indefinite
INES	Inessive
INF	Infinitive
INT	Interrogative
INTERJ	Interjection
INTR	Intransitive
NEG	Negation
NOM	Nominative
NUM	Numeral
PAST	Past
PFV	Perfective
PL	Plural
POSTP	Postposition
PROH	Prohibitive
PRS	Present
PTCT	Participle
REL	Relative
S	Subject
SG	Singular
SBJV	Subjunctive
TR	Transitive
VOC	Vocative

## Appendice I – Kosta Chetagurov: «В бурю»

Pubblichiamo qui sotto il testo russo della poesia «V burju», accompagnato da una traduzione letterale per permettere un più agile confronto con il corrispondente testo osseto.

### **В бурю**

Буря по ущелью  
Облака несет,  
Вихрем и метелью,  
Кружится, ревет...  
  
Снегом забивает  
Щели между скал.  
Стонет, завывает,  
Плачет, как шакал.  
  
В каменной постели,  
В ледяной коре,  
Мрет, как в подземелье,  
Как в глухой норе,  
  
Горного потока  
Неумолчный шум...  
На скале высоко  
Замер и аул.  
  
Сакли, словно гробы  
Из гранитных плит,  
Прячутся в сугробы...  
Сон везде царит.  
  
Только над дорогой,  
Под карнизом скал,  
В сакельке убогой  
Свет не угасал...  
  
Дети полукругом  
У огня сидят...  
Ссорятся друг с другом, –  
Есть давно хотят.  
  
Мать их унимает, –  
Бедная вдова! – –  
Знай, – все раздувает  
Мерзлые дрова.  
  
Дети терпеливо  
Смотрят на таган...

### **Durante la tempesta**

La tempesta lungo la gola  
trasporta le nubi,  
con vortice e tormenta,  
gira intorno, infuria.  
  
Riempie di neve  
le crepe fra le rocce.  
Geme, ulula.  
piange come uno sciaccallo.  
  
Nel letto di pietra,  
in una crosta di ghiaccio,  
si affievolisce, come in un sotterraneo,  
come in un buco morto,  
  
di un torrente montano  
il rumore incessante...  
In cima alla roccia  
si è fermato anche il villaggio.  
  
I casolari sono letteralmente delle tombe  
di lastre di granito,  
si nascondono fra i cumuli di neve...  
ovunque regna il sonno.  
  
Solo sopra la via,  
sotto la grondaia delle rocce,  
in un piccolo tugurio  
la luce non si è spenta...  
  
Dei bambini in semicerchio  
siedono di fronte al focolare...  
bisticciano fra loro, –  
da tempo hanno fame.  
  
La madre li rimprovera, –  
povera vedova!  
Sappi(lo), – continua a soffiare  
sulla legna congelata.  
  
I bambini pazientemente  
guardano il treppiede...

Вот зевнул лениво	ecco che pigramente ha sbadigliato
Младший мальчуган...	il ragazzino più piccolo...
Холод проникает,	Il freddo è penetrante,
А дрема долит...	ma la sonnolenza prevale...
Ежится...зеваает...	si rannicchia... sbadiglia...
Повалился...спит...	crolla a terra... dorme...
Щепки разгорелись...	I tizzoni hanno preso fuoco...
Котелок кипел...	la pentola bolliva (già)...
Дети не дождались, –	I bambini non ce l'hanno fatta, –
Сон их одолел...	Il sonno li ha sopraffatti...
Мать их уложила	La madre li ha coricati
На тахту рядом,	vicini sul divano,
Бережно прикрыла	li ha coperti piano piano
Их своим платком...	con il proprio scialle...
И легко им стало	E si sono tranquillizzati
В мире светлых грез...	nel mondo dei dolci sogni...
Мать лишь не сдержала	Solo la madre non è riuscita
Затаенных слез...	a trattenere le lacrime nascoste...
Твердость изменила,	La durezza l'ha tradita,
Страшно стало ей, –	Si è terrorizzata, –
Ведь она варила	poiché stava cuocendo
Камни для детей.	pietre per i figli.
(Chetagurov 1951a, 20-2)	

## Appendice II – Dall'archivio di Gappo Baev<sup>22</sup>

L'ultima sezione contiene l'edizione sinottica di materiale finora inedito: si tratta di due versioni in lingua tedesca della poesia «Sidzærgæс», scritte originariamente a macchina. Entrambe si trovano nell'archivio personale di Gappo Baev, oggi conservato alla *Staatsbibliothek* di Berlino (Ziesche 2002, 9),<sup>23</sup> più precisamente nel quarto di otto grossi faldoni (Nachlaß Georg Gappo Baiews, Abteilung IV, 16 – Übersetzungen aus dem Ossetischen). La prima traduzione (f. 6r, su due colonne), di servizio, è verosimilmente dello stesso Gappo Baev, la seconda (f. 34 r/v), più libera e poetica, della scrittrice

<sup>22</sup> Nel commento (Chetagurov 1951a, 350-1) vengono riportate tre quartine, che si leggono nella versione pubblicata su *Severnyj Kavkaz* (nr. 50 del 1889) dopo i versi 16, 24 e 40, e sono invece assenti nel manoscritto su cui si basa l'edizione.

<sup>23</sup> Baiew, Georg Gappo (1869-1939). *Sprachforscher, 1926-1938 Dozent der Ossetischen Sprache an der Auslandshochschule in Berlin*.

Gertrud von Wenckstern (1870-1936), moglie del linguista (iranista) tedesco Karl Hadank (1882-1945). Quest'ultimo, che seguì le lezioni di lingua osseta tenute da Gappo Baev all'Istituto di Orientalistica di Berlino,<sup>24</sup> fu fra l'altro impiegato dalla *Wehrmacht* in qualità di istruttore su lingua, vita e costumi dei curdi nell'ambito di un'operazione militare da svolgere nell'Iraq settentrionale nel 1943 (Lemke, Rosbeiani 2018, 18-29). Il materiale testuale, che arricchisce ulteriormente lo spettro di traduzioni dell'opera di Kosta, è preceduto da un brevissimo schizzo biografico del deuteragonista.

Georgij (Gappo) Vasil'evič Baev (1870-1939), in osseto Bajaty Gappo, è un importante esponente della vita politica e culturale osseta nell'ultimo quarto del XIX secolo e nel primo di quello successivo. In virtù della sua indefessa attività in vari settori della vita pubblica, egli è passato alla storia come poliedrico rappresentante dell'*intelligencija* osseta prerivoluzionaria: avvocato, pubblicista, politico, economista, amministratore, critico letterario, scrittore, folklorista, insegnante e traduttore, fu sindaco di Vladikavkaz (Dzalaeva 2016, 154) e partecipò attivamente all'organizzazione dell'editoria, fondando la rinomata casa editrice Ir (Darčieva 2015, 54), e dell'istruzione in lingua osseta. Come abbiamo visto, egli fu anche responsabile, nel bene e nel male, della prima edizione di *Iron fændyr* e ne curò anche la quarta, quando già si trovava da emigrato in Germania, sua seconda patria (Chetagurov 1922). In un breve schizzo autobiografico, redatto in tedesco fra la primavera del 1930 e l'inverno del 1934, egli si presenta così: Georg-Gappo, Università di Odessa, avvocato, sindaco di Vladikavkaz, scrittore, difensore degli interessi del popolo, attualmente docente presso l'Istituto di Orientalistica di Berlino, membro dell'Unione accademica russa (Darčieva, Darčiev 2019, 176, 178). Dopo aver accolto con animo sereno la rivoluzione di febbraio, in seguito al colpo di mano bolscevico passò apertamente dalla parte dei bianchi, emigrando al termine della guerra civile prima a Tbilisi e quindi, in seguito all'occupazione della Georgia da parte dell'Armata Rossa, a Istanbul; da lì si trasferì poi in Germania, dove visse e lavorò fino alla morte, senza poter rivedere il suolo patrio. In epoca sovietica la sua figura, per ragioni ideologiche, fu oggetto di giudizi estremamente negativi e la sua opera di fatto dimenticata (Magometov, Čedžemov 2014, 45); oggi invece si cerca, *sine ira* ma non *sine studio*, di recuperare e rivalutare la sua eredità. In questo senso il suo archivio costituisce una preziosa e piuttosto ricca miniera che senza dubbio merita di essere sfruttata (Uarziati 1997, 28 = 2007,

**24** Nella prefazione ad un lavoro di dialettologia curda, Hadank, al quale, fra l'altro, dobbiamo anche la descrizione del contenuto del *Nachlaß*, menziona il proprio debito di riconoscenza al maestro di un tempo (Hadank 1930, xvi).

470).<sup>25</sup> Il materiale qui pubblicato è solo un piccolissimo esempio dei tesori nascosti che attendono ancora di essere riportati alla luce.

<b>Aus dem Diwan des Ossetischen Dichters Kosta Chetaguroffs [6a] Die Waisenhüterin</b>	<b>[34r] Die Weisenmutter Aus dem DIWAN des OSSETISCHEN DICTERS Kosta Chetaguroffs (1859-1906) «Iron fandyr»</b>
Der Rabe erstarrte auf dem Dornbusche. Der Sturm häuft Schneeestöber. Auf dem Gipfel des schwarzen Felsens. Tief schlummert Dorf Nar.	Frierend im Dornstrauch birgt sich der Rabe. Wirbelnder Schnee deckt alle Gehege. Hoch in dem schwarzen Felsengebirge Schlummert Dorf Nar am steinigem Stege.
Für die Seele ist eine lange Nacht, Besser als übles Leben. Es scheint ein Lichtchen am Rande, Man sitzt noch irgendwo.	
Bei einem alten Viehstall, Außerhalb des ganzen Dorfes Liegt abseits dieses Gehöft	Abseits vom Dorfe liegt – wie vergessen – Dicht bei dem Stall das Hüttlein, das kleine; Dort eine Frau, im Trauergewande Müht sich am Herd bei glimmendem Scheine.
Wundre Dich nicht, daß sie noch sitzt..... Bei dem Kessel, nahe eine Trauertragende Frau Bemüht sich über dem Feuer.	
Am Rande des Herdes, dicht an der Feuerasche, Sitzen die Kinder, Einige barfuß, einige nackt.	Neben dem Herde, nah bei der Asche Hungernde Kinder: all ihre Röckchen Dünn und zerrissen. Eines der Kleinen Hat keine Schuhe, eines kein Söckchen!
Vor Kälte und Hunger fürchtet sich auch der Wolf, Der Todesgeist mühelos, Führt solche mit.	Hunger und Kälte: starke Gewalten, Können den Wolf, den wildesten zwingen. Stehen im Bunde treu mit dem Tode, Dem sie sein Opfer mühelos bringen.
Weinet nicht, meine Sonnen, – Spricht zu ihnen ihre Mutter, – “– Die Bohnen werden schon kochen, Sitzt doch noch ein wenig stille[?]”.	Sagt zu den Kindern tröstend die Mutter: “Ihr meine Sonnen! müsst doch nicht weinen! Glaubt mir, die Bohnen werden gleich kochen; Habt doch Geduld! seid stille, ihr Kleinen!
Teufelskirsche, voll von Schnee, Qualmt mit ihrem Rauch. Die Tränen fließen Geheim in den Kessel nieder.	Schnee-nasser Dornstrauch kann ja nicht brennen! Flämmlein ersticken im Rauche wieder ---- Heimliche Tränen fallen und rinne, Rinnen am Kessel leise hernieder.

<sup>25</sup> Lo studioso esprime l’auspicio che, dopo le ceneri di Gappo Baev, oggi conservate nel cimitero che cinge la chiesa della Natività di Maria, sulla collina di Vladikavkaz, anche il suo archivio possa tornare in patria, almeno in forma di copia.

Ein Klageseufzen stieg bis an die Kehle.... – “Möge unser Pfleger Mit Qualen sitzen unter der Lawine, Der uns hat getäuscht	Da stöhnt die Mutter zornige Klage: “Unser Ernährer – er ist gegangen! Hat uns verlassen, hat uns betrogen! Mag die Lawine kalt ihn umfassen!
Er hat euch fünf hinterlassen, Eure Mutter, damit hat er Mutters Herz ausgerissen... Ich bin doch obdachlos geworden.	Klüger wie ich hast Rat du gefunden! Lieb! Alle Sorgen trugst du zum Grabe! Ich soll allein die Waisen ernähren, Ob ich mein Herz zerrissen auch habe.
Mit Deinem Verstand hast Du mich überwältigt, O, mein lieber Mann, Du bist von den Waisen entflohen, Ins Grab entledigt!	Hör, deinen Liebling, wie er dir wimmert Von seiner Mutter, ach von der matten! Rüste nun, rüste unsere Ruhstatt Nahe bei dir im eisigen Schatten!”
[6b] Dein Lieblingskind ruft zu Dir: “Daß seine Mutti ist schon übermüdet Und mache einen Platz neben Dir, Auch für uns fertig[”].	
Es fließen die Tränen Geheim an dem Kessel nieder, Schneevolle Teufelskirsche Qualmt mit ihrem Rauch.	Heimliche Tränen fallen und rinne, Rinnen am Kessel leise hernieder --: [34v] Schnee-nasser Dornstrauch kann ja nicht brennen! Flämmlein ersticken im Rauche wieder!
Er ist müde geworden Vom Weinen, der Jüngste von der Familie, An dem Herde ist er eingeschlafen, Der Beste der Leute.	Müde vom Weinen schläft nun der Jüngste. Liebling und Herzblatt ist er von allen. Schlafe nur! Bald sind deine Geschwister Kraftlos wie du in Schlummer gefallen.
Nach Dir alle werden Ins Schlafen hineinrollen, Warte doch. Über Hungernden und Müden, Wo hat nicht Kraft der Schlaf?	Schlaf hat Gewalt. Die Hungernden, Müden Zwingt er zur Ruh und lässt sie nicht wieder ---- “Hört nur, ihr Kinder, Wasser im Kessel Summt euch beim Kochen Märchen und Lieder.”
[“]O, Mutti, wann wird es doch sein, Nimm doch Deinen Kessel! [”] – – “Setzt euch noch ein wenig, Wird jeder seine Portion doch haben [”].	””Nimm doch vom Feuer, Mutter den Kessel Nimm ihn vom Feuer! Gib uns zu essen!” “Wartet ein wenig, wartet noch Kinder, Werdet bald allen Hunger vergessen!”
Den Waisenkindern die Bohnen Nannte sie ihr Abendessen, – Dabei aber kochte sie Ihnen im Kessel kleine Steinchen.	Steinchen im Kessel kochte die Mutter. Sagte den Kindern: “Bohnen, die süssen, Geb ich euch bald! ihr sollt ja nur warten, Weil sie ein Weilchen kochen noch müssen!”
Damit des Kochens wegen Könnten sie ihr Essen vergessen. Der Hunger kennt doch keine Zeit, Ein Betrug ist ihm genug.	“Bohnen sind gar”! Das Wasser im Kessel Hat es den Waisen siedend gesungen --- Sang, bis sie schiefen, tief, wie die Menschen, Wenn sie von Leid und Tränen bezwungen.
Der Kessel läuft über, – “Die Bohnen kochen!” An verschiedenen Winkeln gekrümmt, Schlafen die Waisenkinder.	Es kann die Mutter sie betten, Betten aus Stroh, mit Lumpen sie decken: Alle die harten Qualen des Lebens Können die Schläfer jetzt nicht erschrecken.



Wenn der Mensch wird Vom Hunger und Weinen übermüdet, Dann ist sein Schlaf tief, Er hört nichts mehr von den Bitternissen des Lebens.	Bei ihren Kindern wacht nun die Mutter --- Könnte die Arme schlummernd doch liegen --- Aber die heissen Tränen sie strömen – Strömen und wollen nimmer versiegen -----. Übersetzt von Gertrud von Wenckstern (Frau Dr. Hadank).
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# La divulgazione orientalista francese di fine Ottocento e lo sviluppo sociale dei popoli d'Oriente: gli Armeni di Ernest Chantre

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**Abstract** An accurate analysis of the works of Ernest Chantre (1843-1924), often published under the auspices of the French Ministry of Public Education, shows a particular interest for civilisations of the Middle East, in particular for the Armenian people and culture. Chantre is influenced by the racial view that dominates in Europe in the late 19th century but, in the same time, he participates in the dissemination of knowledge of cultures and society of the Middle East, more and more integrated into the European world. In this context, French educated elites think they can find a happy balance with the Other only through the relentless spread of Catholicism, a powerful way to transform the thought of the Armenian people and to propagate the European civilisation.

**Keywords** France. Armenia. Orientalism. Imperialism. Public opinion (late 19th century).

**Sommario** 1 Introduzione. – 2 L'alta divulgazione orientalista. – 3 Ernest Chantre e gli Armeni. – 4 Alcune considerazioni conclusive.

## 1 Introduzione

Il XIX secolo rappresenta un momento di svolta per l'interesse delle *élites* francesi acculturate per l'Asia, in cui la conoscenza dell'Altro, sia per quanto riguarda i costumi e le tradizioni politiche, sia per le società e le religioni, deve fondarsi su un'esperienza diretta *in loco*, e non esclusivamente – e neppure prevalente-



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mente – sull'erudizione filologica e letteraria. Si favorisce l'avvio, così, di una sorta di metodologia di indagine più pratica e meno teorica, la missione scientifica, elaborata e praticata dagli orientalisti *lato sensu* – non solo linguisti, ma anche studiosi di archeologia, religioni, etnografia e storia – e fatta circolare nella metropoli da intellettuali spesso favorevoli, quando non collegati più o meno direttamente, ai rinnovati interessi ultramarini della Francia del Secondo Impero e della Terza Repubblica.<sup>1</sup> La costruzione dell'immagine dell'Altro, in questo contesto, avviene sia attraverso l'applicazione alla realtà di rappresentazioni preesistenti, spesso derivanti dallo studio della letteratura classica, sia per mezzo della loro verifica nel concreto dell'esperienza.

Alla fine dell'Ottocento, anche nella saggistica che si rivolge ad un pubblico metropolitano di cultura medio-alta, ma non agli specialisti, emerge un interesse per la costruzione dell'identità culturale dei popoli del Medio Oriente e della regione caucasica. Se è vero che l'Europeo resta un grande produttore di immagini – la riconfigurazione delle relazioni tra i Paesi europei e le loro colonie, la crescente e impetuosa industrializzazione, ma anche la rivoluzione dei trasporti e della mobilità degli uomini garantiscono una dimensione globale all'Europa *fin de siècle* – grazie ai lavori di divulgazione l'Oriente diventa sempre più riconoscibile e, in qualche modo, integrato nel contesto della cultura e dell'immaginario europei. Analogamente, i popoli d'Oriente conobbero meglio e interagirono con gli Europei, a volte in reazione ad una presenza coloniale e culturale europea via via più costante e invasiva.<sup>2</sup>

A questo proposito, a partire dalla metà dell'Ottocento, le pubblicazioni francesi, patrocinate o legate in qualche maniera alle istituzioni pubbliche, rappresentano il punto di vista delle *élites* colte, pur offrendo sovente – agli occhi dei lettori di oggi – una spiegazione semplicistica delle dinamiche socio-culturali che analizzano. Queste testimonianze, infatti, ricorrono abitualmente ad un'immagine stereotipata dei popoli del Medio Oriente e della regione caucasica – tanto nella sua componente musulmana e dominante, quanto nelle sue molteplici e composite minoranze, in particolare quelle cristiane – presentati spesso come ostili alla 'modernità' e alla *civilisation* europea.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In generale, sul rapporto fra scienza, cultura e potere politico nella Francia dell'Ottocento, si veda Fox 2012; sugli interessi storico-archeologici prevalenti fra le *élites* francesi del tempo Le Goff, Giry 2016; sul rapporto fra l'orientalistica e le rivalità delle potenze coloniali Jarsaillon 2017. Circa l'idea di *mission civilisatrice* francese si veda, in italiano, Vaghi 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Sulle dinamiche dei complessi rapporti fra i Paesi europei e la regione del Medio Oriente si veda, fra altri, Solnon 2009 e Şiviloğlu 2018. Più in generale, sul tema della percezione-autopercezione, in italiano, Pizzetti 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Sull'incerto percorso di 'modernizzazione' dei popoli del Medio Oriente e della regione caucasica si vedano Dumont 1989 e Laurens 2015; sulla costruzione delle iden-

Partendo da questo contesto culturale, razzialmente connotato e palesemente discriminatorio nei confronti delle popolazioni d'Oriente, in questo articolo si tenterà di dare un contributo all'analisi dell'interazione culturale fra Oriente e Occidente, osservando come tale rapporto venisse presentato e come circolasse in Francia alla fine del XIX secolo, considerando in particolare l'attività dell'antropologo e archeologo Ernest Chantre (1843-1924) – professore all'università di Lione e membro dell'*Académie des sciences, belles-lettres et arts* della medesima città – e le sue 'pittoresche' ma ricche e articolate considerazioni sul popolo, la società e la cultura degli Armeni.

Quello fornitoci da Chantre è un esempio che ci permette di osservare come, in Francia, la costruzione e la circolazione delle immagini dei popoli d'Oriente si configurasse come opera di una ristretta *élite* che, nella seconda metà del XIX secolo, contribuì a farne circolare le rappresentazioni in spazi pubblici più ampi e precedentemente esclusi. Tali rappresentazioni concorsero a creare stereotipi, ovvero un'immagine 'pubblica' consolidata di una civiltà, di un popolo o di una nazione: il carattere, le usanze, le attività degli abitanti, filtrati attraverso le norme, le categorie intellettuali e i pregiudizi dell'osservatore, furono spesso gli elementi decisivi che determinarono la nascita e il consolidamento dell'idea complessiva che un popolo si formava di un altro popolo.

Tutto ciò, in ogni caso, non ha necessariamente una ricaduta politica e pratica immediata, ovvero un'analisi della percezione della rappresentazione del significato degli scopi altrui da parte delle *élites* di potere. Tale impianto ideologico – figlio, nei fatti, della teoria dell'orientalismo di Edward Said<sup>4</sup> e che avvalorava l'esistenza degli studi orientalisti come una creazione intellettuale dell'Occidente 'imperialista' – che propone una lettura dei rapporti fra Europa e Oriente che oggi ispira il filone dei cosiddetti *Postcolonial Studies*, non è, a parere di chi scrive, sempre corroborato dal risultato delle

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tità nazionali nella seconda metà dell'Ottocento si veda Bourmaud 2009 e Provence 2017, 9-146.

<sup>4</sup> Said, com'è noto, propone una definizione fortemente critica delle relazioni Europa-Asia e Asia-Europa, secondo cui per orientalismo si intende «l'insieme delle istituzioni create dall'Occidente al fine di gestire le proprie relazioni con l'Oriente», e intervengono polemicamente nell'analisi del controverso rapporto fra conoscenza – dell'Europeo sull'Oriente – e potere, ovvero sul lungo dominio coloniale, formale o meno, dell'Europa su larga parte dell'Asia: le relazioni, o meglio la gestione delle relazioni, fra Occidente e Oriente si basano, secondo questa linea interpretativa, «oltre che sui rapporti di forza economici, politici e militari, anche su fattori culturali, cioè su un insieme di nozioni veritiere o fittizie sull'Oriente» (Said 1999, 13). Evidentemente non bisogna dimenticare che, come ricorda anche Robert Irwin con una punta polemica nei confronti di Said, con il termine orientalismo si indicano generalmente gli studi di asiaticistica (Irwin 2008, XIII). Per una presentazione di Said e della sua opera, si veda, in italiano, Mellino 2009.

analisi delle fonti, nemmeno da quelle letterarie.<sup>5</sup> Le ricerche condotte seguendo il punto di vista di Said, infatti, rischiano di ricadere, magari involontariamente, in un atteggiamento determinista ed eurocentrico, speculare a quello che si ripropongono di criticare e di confutare. Il determinismo sta nel non percepire, né distinguere, le differenze esistenti fra gli asiatici occidentali, ben diversi tra loro quanto a provenienza geografica, a formazione politica e religiosa, nonché nel formulare talvolta argomentazioni eccessivamente generalizzate, che non contestualizzano e non storicizzano il complesso delle dinamiche delle relazioni euroasiatiche; l'eurocentrismo, invece, sta nel fatto che gli studi eseguiti secondo le categorie elaborate da Said impediscono di fatto, dietro il paravento di una difesa dalle 'distorsioni' dell'Occidente, qualsiasi discorso critico – nel senso più ampio del termine – sull'Oriente, presentato inevitabilmente come eterna vittima dell'Occidente.<sup>6</sup>

Ai fini di questo lavoro, dunque, più che parlare di 'orientalismo' come costruzione sostanzialmente eurocentrica e imperialista à la Said, conviene maggiormente prestare attenzione sia ad un'analisi che si intreccia agli aspetti legati alla formazione e agli interessi personali dello studioso sia, più in generale, al problema della diffusione dei valori e della cultura europei – compreso il *liberale* cristianesimo europeo – in un contesto dominato da tradizioni culturali e religiose legate all'islam e alle chiese cristiano-orientali, di cui gli Armeni studiati da Ernest Chantre durante i suoi viaggi sono certamente una componente importante.

<sup>5</sup> «Il discorso postcoloniale prende le mosse dalla considerazione che un certo colonialismo sia ancora in corso; tale modello di dominazione, infatti, non avrebbe semplicemente provocato un impoverimento materiale dei paesi ad esso soggetti, ma ne avrebbe intaccato la coscienza, distorcendo la loro stessa autopercezione tramite l'egemonia culturale, l'imposizione linguistica, la supremazia economica, tecnologica e militare. I *Postcolonial Studies*, nella varietà degli ambiti, delle discipline e delle loro diramazioni, mirano a produrre descrizioni del sistema mondo che esplicitino i rapporti di forza tra paesi, culture, strati sociali, generi, partecipando così al processo di ricostruzione identitaria, di riscatto dei soggetti subalterni e di indipendenza non solo politica. Essi esplorano pertanto le esperienze di oppressione e resistenza; le procedure di violenza simbolica e fattuale; il tema dell'identità culturale, etnica, religiosa, di genere; le dinamiche di immaginazione e rappresentazione dell'alterità, come quelle di appartenenza o di decentramento di sé; stabilendo un saldo connubio tra cultura e potere» (Federico Squarcini e Clelia Bartoli, citati in Vaghi 2012, 155). Per qualche lettura introduttiva al tema si veda, in italiano, Chambers Curti Quadraro 2018; Capuzzo et al. 2012; Bassi, Sirotti 2010; Mezzadra 2008; Guha, Spivak 2002.

<sup>6</sup> Sull'argomento mi sono recentemente espresso in Vaghi 2019, 8-13.

## 2 L'alta divulgazione orientalista

Interrogarsi sull'interesse dimostrato, nel XIX secolo, dalle *élites* francesi per lo spazio geopolitico del Medio Oriente e della regione caucasica consiste anche, indirettamente, nel riflettere più in generale sul cambiamento degli atteggiamenti dei Francesi di media cultura circa queste regioni e i popoli che le abitano; ma è anche un modo per soffermarsi sulla questione della copertura mediatica dei viaggi di studio e di ricerca, sulla loro importanza e sul ruolo che hanno svolto nell'immaginario del tempo. Questo periodo è caratterizzato da importanti cambiamenti nella costruzione identitaria dei popoli, in cui l'Oriente è sicuramente riconosciuto come parte dello stesso tempo e della stessa storia dell'Europa, ma in cui le civiltà e le religioni orientali sono ancora, agli occhi del Francese medio, sostanzialmente aliene. La stampa di massa e le riviste accademiche possono essere considerate come i principali mezzi di questa ricezione dell'Oriente e la mediazione espressa dai viaggiatori-eruditi spesso si traduce nella pubblicazione di articoli e di relazioni che fanno trasparire le reti di persone e di istituzioni 'scientifiche' che hanno contribuito alla loro realizzazione (si veda, ad esempio, Fox 1980).

In Europa, l'idea che la scienza potesse diventare l'elemento centrale del progresso delle popolazioni d'Oriente si è sviluppata nel tempo, costruita dagli intellettuali e dalla parte maggioritaria delle *élites* politiche. È sufficiente ricordare che la filosofia dell'Illuminismo e più ancora il Positivismo hanno contribuito a diffondere e a far radicare l'idea che i progressi del sapere tecnico-scientifico possano migliorare la società.<sup>7</sup> Per questo motivo, all'inizio del XIX secolo, grandi istituzioni come le Accademie – che si erano diffuse in Europa fra il XVII e il XVIII secolo – si trasformano, o si affiancano, ad una nuova forma di associazione, la *société savante*, la cui azione ha come fine ultimo lo sviluppo e la diffusione delle scienze (anche delle nuove 'scienze umane'), più che la promozione delle arti o della cultura letteraria.<sup>8</sup> Questa rete sociale erudita, per quanto riguarda la Francia, è stata studiata da Daniel Roche, che ha evidenziato il ruolo importante svolto – non solo a Parigi, ma anche nella provincia francese – dalle accademie e dagli accademici durante l'Antico regime (Roche 1978, 9 ss.) e da Jean-Pierre Chaline che, invece, si è dedicato alle *sociétés savantes* del XIX e del XX secolo (Chaline 1995, in particolare 197 ss.).

<sup>7</sup> Su un argomento molto dibattuto dalla storiografia, un recente esempio in italiano è Vaghi 2019, 153-70. Di estremo interesse il ricco e articolato lavoro di Osterhammel (2018, in particolare 1-33 e 480-517).

<sup>8</sup> In proposito anche il meccanismo delle premiazioni pubbliche aveva un ruolo non secondario: si veda Crawford 1980.

Intorno alla metà del XIX secolo, insomma, in Francia la circolazione delle idee avviene attraverso il fiorire di opere di divulgazione culturale, indirizzate ai lettori non specialisti e ad un pubblico di cultura medio-alta. Accanto a quelle legate alle *sociétés savantes* e alle accademie, troviamo le pubblicazioni ufficiali emanazione delle istituzioni che organizzano e finanziano i viaggi di ricerca, fra cui spiccano quelle patrocinate dal Ministère de l'instruction publique, ad esempio tramite il *Service des missions*, o da altri ministeri o dipartimenti pubblici.<sup>9</sup>

Lo studio di queste fonti ci dà risultati invero non sorprendenti: pur testimoniando un marcato interesse il Medio Oriente e la regione caucasica – l'antichità classica innanzitutto, ma anche le lingue, le culture, le religioni e i 'modelli' di vita – in esse domina una visione chiaramente eurocentrica e paternalistica e, in ultima analisi, razzista, in linea con quella che pervade la cultura francese, e di altri Paesi europei, nel pieno XIX secolo e che propone spesso l'islam e il cristianesimo orientale come fondamentali, e a volte principali, fattori di decadenza di regioni che, durante l'antichità e i primi secoli dell'era cristiana, erano state al centro di un importante sviluppo sociale e culturale.

### 3 Ernest Chantre e gli Armeni

Nato a Lione nel 1843, Ernest Chantre, dopo aver dimostrato in gioventù un precoce interesse per le scienze naturali e per l'archeologia, nel 1871 inizia a collaborare con il museo di storia naturale della sua città natale, divenendone vicedirettore nel 1877, probabilmente anche grazie alla sua amicizia con il direttore, Louis-Charles-Émile Lortet (1836-1909), medico e zoologo, esponente di punta della vita culturale del museo e della città (Perrin 2008). È proprio da Lortet che Chantre viene presto iniziato al viaggio di studio, spesso vere e proprie missioni ufficiali di esplorazione per conto del Ministère de l'instruction publique<sup>10</sup> che lo faranno diventare un viaggiatore di lungo corso: basti pensare, per citare solo i viaggi nell'area geopolitica qui considerata, alle missioni in Russia, nel Caucaso e in Armenia – 1879, 1881, 1890, 1893 e 1894, sovente accompagnato dalla mo-

<sup>9</sup> Per la ricerca orientalista francese all'estero il Service des missions – nato nel 1842 all'interno della Division des sciences et lettres del Ministère de l'instruction publique – ha giocato, nella seconda metà dell'Ottocento, un ruolo fondamentale. In proposito si vedano Antoine 1977 e Fox 1973.

<sup>10</sup> Parigi, Archives nationales (AN), Ministère de l'instruction publique, «Service des missions, Missions archéologiques en Grèce et en Asie Mineure», F/17/2985/B, n. 2 (1873: mission en Grèce, Syrie, Cyclades, de Louis Lortet avec Ernest Chantre).

glie, che *con cura* partecipa alle sue ricerche<sup>11</sup> – in cui dimostra un interesse sempre più indirizzato verso gli studi antropologici.<sup>12</sup> Come scrisse il suo amico e collega Eugène Pittard (1867-1962),

*l'amour des voyages sollicitait sans cesse le savant lyonnais et le désir d'apporter un peu de couleur à des cartes anthropologiques presque complètement blanches, avait pour lui un tel attrait, que Chantre ne prit, pour ainsi dire, jamais un jour de repos.* (Pittard 1926, 155)

Chantre morì nel 1924, mentre lavorava ad un'opera antropologica dedicata ai popoli del Mediterraneo.<sup>13</sup>

Verso la fine del XIX secolo, nei suoi scritti collegati all'attività svolta per conto del Ministère de l'instruction publique, Chantre propone uno schema interpretativo che si muove su una linea del tutto analoga a quella espressa da molti intellettuali suoi contemporanei, pur manifestando spesso un'acuta capacità di analisi e un'empatia per i popoli studiati, e in particolare per gli Armeni, non comune per l'epoca:

*Il est peu de peuples qui dans leur orgueil national n'aient fait remonter leurs origines à une antiquité perdue dans la nuit des temps [...]. Les Arméniens sont assurément dans ce cas, mais ils ont droit, plus que beaucoup d'autres, à revendiquer une haute antiquité.* (Chantre 1895, 1)<sup>14</sup>

**11** «Chargé de nouveau en 1890 d'une mission scientifique, je parcourais, accompagné de M.me Chantre, l'Arménie russe ou Transcaucasie et je reprenais le cours de mes études ethnologiques et anthropologiques que l'état de ma santé, ébranlée par mes précédentes expéditions, m'avait fait abandonner temporairement» (Chantre 1895, II). Sulla stima di Chantre per l'attività svolta dalla moglie a sostegno dei suoi studi, si vedano Chantre 1895, V-VI e AN, Ministère de l'instruction publique, «Service des missions, Missions archéologiques au Proche-Orient», F/17/2946/C, n. 7 (1889-92: mission gratuite dans le Caucase et en Turquie d'Asie avec M.me Chantre); n. 8 (1892: mission en Russie méridionale et en Turquie avec Mme Chantre); sui viaggi del 1893-4 in Cappadocia si vedano Chantre 1899a e Chantre 1896b. Si veda anche Chantre 1889, riferito al viaggio del 1881 e particolarmente interessante per l'apparato iconografico e per le mappe.

**12** «Après avoir visité la plus grande partie de l'Europe dans le but de compléter [...] les recherches paléo-ethnologiques entreprises dans notre pays, il me restait encore l'année dernière à parcourir la Russie et spécialement le Caucase» (Chantre 1881, 5). Si veda anche Chantre 1883 e, sull'Armenia russa, Chantre 1893.

**13** Si veda Broc 1992, 83-6 e AN, LH/481/59, f. 1, decreto di nomina di Ernest Chantre a Cavaliere della Legione d'onore, 31 marzo 1896. Nel medesimo dossier, f. 4, si veda anche l'interessante nota informativa autobiografica di Chantre «Titres et travaux scientifiques de M. Ernest Chantre». Infine, per una rassegna completa della ricca e variegata attività di ricerca e pubblicistica di Chantre sino alla fine del XIX secolo, si veda Chantre 1899b.

**14** Sull'antichità della storia e della tradizione armena e sul loro rapporto con lo spirito identitario del popolo si vedano Traina 2004 e Ferrari 2019, 33-9.

I riferimenti agli Armeni che fa Chantre, d'altronde, sono esemplari tanto della sua ammirazione per questo popolo, per la sua cultura e le sue tradizioni, quanto della sua formazione intellettuale, che non può non risentire né dei preconcezioni eurocentrici tipici dell'epoca né dell'influenza del Positivismo francese. In ogni caso negli studi di Chantre l'esperienza diretta è fondamentale e

pour bien connaître les Arméniens [...] il faut avoir vécu parmi eux, dans leur propre pays, ou du moins y avoir fait de nombreux séjours. Il faut également étudier leur histoire depuis la plus haute antiquité jusqu'à nos jours. (Chantre 1895, 13)<sup>15</sup>

Solo grazie alla conoscenza diretta e allo studio sul posto, continua, possiamo disvelare l'Armenia, e più in generale tutta la regione caucasica, storicamente

un pays moins ouvert que l'Asie mineure, la Syrie, l'Arabie, la Mésopotamie et la Perse. Tandis que ces contrées livraient peu à peu leurs secrets à leurs nombreux explorateurs, l'âpre plateau arménien et les puissants massifs qui le dominent au Nord ne s'étaient révélés que d'une façon sommaire [...] aux armées byzantines et aux quelques marchands génois qui, à des longs intervalles, avaient abordé à la côte pontique. Il a fallu l'entrée en scène de la Russie et sa prodigieuse extension asiatique pour rendre à ces rudes montagnes toute leur importance et donner au monde occidental des notions à peu près exactes sur leur structure et sur leurs habitants. (Chantre 1885-87, 1: XXI)

Chantre riconosce un passato glorioso all'Armenia e ai suoi abitanti. Tuttavia la fierezza dell'antica Armenia cristiana indipendente si è affievolita, sino quasi a scomparire, con la conquista musulmana e il carattere della popolazione e della sua nobiltà ha assunto i classici connotati dell'*arrendevolezza* orientale e del *fatalismo* musulmano:

Les désastres qui ont frappé à tant de reprises différentes la nation arménienne l'ont atteinte aussi dans son état social. Jadis, ensermée dans une organisation en quelque sorte féodale, avec une hiérarchie forte et tyrannique, elle ne manquait ni de grandeur ni de puissance. Mais, avec le morcellement de la monarchie, une transformation s'est opérée, lentement il est vrai, mais d'autant plus sûrement que ce qui manquait à cette organisation c'était la cohésion et un pouvoir central. Si fière et si puissante autrefois, la

<sup>15</sup> In italiano, per una chiara introduzione storica al 'mondo' armeno, si veda Uluho-  
gian 2009.

noblesse arménienne s'est éteinte peu à peu, et ils sont rares les débris de ces anciennes familles qui possédaient leurs châteaux forts et leurs petites armées. Fiers et arrogants durant la prospérité, envers leurs subordonnés, ils subissent la mauvaise fortune avec une résignation qui n'a d'égale que le fatalisme des musulmans qui les entourent. (Chantre 1895, 13)<sup>16</sup>

Persa la coesione sociale e la libertà politica, orientalizzati per colpa, come scrive Chantre, principalmente degli Arabi, gli Armeni hanno tuttavia faticosamente mantenuto il loro orgoglioso legame con il cristianesimo, che la dominazione musulmana non ha potuto sradicare:

Lorsque la lutte [...] entre les deux empires byzantin et persan fut terminée, de nouveaux envahisseurs vinrent achever de ruiner l'Arménie, mais en même temps réveiller [...] son ardeur nationale. C'étaient les Arabes, qui venaient la dévaster au nom du Koran [...]. Mais ce peuple, qui avait souffert, presque sans murmurer, la tyrannie des Sassanides, qui avait vu sans regret les Grecs lui imposer leurs volontés à différentes reprises, ce peuple qui avait accepté sans colère la perte de sa liberté se leva tout entier pour conserver sa foi, désormais le seul lien qui lui assurât une existence propre. (Chantre 1885-87, 1: 24)

Grazie a ciò, ma anche in virtù della loro *innata* intelligenza, nonostante siano decaduti rispetto ad un passato lontano e mitico, gli Armeni – cristiani, e di lingua e ‘razza’ indoeuropea – mantengono un'idea di nazione e uno spirito unitario sconosciuto ai loro vicini, tanto quelli di religione musulmana, quanto quelli di religione ebraica:

Quelque opinion que l'on ait des Arméniens, il est un point sur lequel tout le monde est d'accord, c'est qu'ils sont, de tous les peuples de l'Orient, le plus intelligent, le plus laborieux, le plus économe et le plus instruit. Gens de tous métiers, pourvu qu'ils soient rémunérateurs, les Arméniens ont la réputation, justifiée du reste, d'avoir une vocation marquée pour le négoce et la banque. Cette particularité les rapproche assurément des Juifs, mais ils en diffèrent beaucoup à certains égards, notamment en ce qui concerne leur esprit de nationalité. (Chantre 1895, 13)<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Si veda anche, dello stesso autore, Chantre 1896a, in particolare le pagine 10-15. Sulla religione e sulla cultura degli Armeni si veda Uluhogian 2009, 77-176 e, sui fasti dell'Armenia cristiana e sulla sua decadenza, Ferrari 2011, 43-77.

<sup>17</sup> Chantre torna sulle caratteristiche *intrinseche* della nazione armena anche nel suo *Les Arméniens* (Chantre 1896a, 15-21). In italiano, sul problema dell'identità nazionale armena moderna, si veda Ferrari 2018 e, per quanto riguarda il periodo a partire dal 1890, Ter Minassian 1997.



La 'contaminazione' con gli Ebrei, ipotizza l'autore, sarebbe particolarmente evidente nel caso della comunità armena di Van:

On regarde, à tort ou à raison, les Arméniens de Van comme des descendants des captifs hébreux ramenés de Palestine par Tigrane le Grand, roi d'Arménie. Cette descendance serait justifiée, d'ailleurs, par des caractères propres à la race juive, que l'on retrouve fréquemment chez la population actuelle. Médiocres agriculteurs, les Arméniens de Van brillent surtout dans le commerce, où ils se montrent d'une remarquable habileté. (Chantre 1895, 25)

Generalmente poco propensi a praticare un'agricoltura moderna, proprio come gli Ebrei, gli Armeni coltivano dunque l'arte del commercio ai livelli più alti, forti di un considerevole spirito imprenditoriale:

Les Arméniens dont les destinées ont été, à plusieurs égards, les mêmes que celles des Juifs, sont, comme ces derniers, intelligents et doués d'un génie commercial remarquable. Ces qualités jointes à la ténacité et à l'activité qu'ils déploient dans toutes leurs entreprises, les ont placés à la tête des affaires au Caucase, soit dans le commerce, soit dans les hautes fonctions civiles et militaires. (Chantre 1885-87, 4: 261)

È per questa loro tenacità – prosegue Chantre – nonché per la loro *tipica* intelligenza che, nonostante le somiglianze con gli Ebrei, gli Armeni si distinguono dagli altri popoli d'Oriente. Le loro caratteristiche, dunque, sono uniche e peculiari e, allo stesso tempo, un vero punto di forza, che consente loro di raggiungere posizioni di prestigio negli imperi multietnici ottomano e russo:

Un autre fait que l'on constate sans peine dans certains milieux, c'est l'influence considérable qu'ils exercent en Russie et en Turquie. Cette influence, ils l'exercent d'abord par leur intelligence, ensuite par leur goût pour la science, par la pratique des langues, par leurs aptitudes si diverses, leur souplesse et le talent qu'ils ont de pénétrer dans le monde des fonctionnaires. (Chantre 1895, 14)

Gli Armeni, insomma, hanno alcune specificità civili e morali che parzialmente li fanno avvicinare agli Europei:

Les Arméniens sont des gens d'ordre, sont pacifiques et s'accommodent volontiers de tous les gouvernements. Ils se montrent fidèles sujets, et ne demandent que la liberté de faire leurs affaires et d'élever honorablement leurs enfants. Cette nation présente en somme des qualités plus solides que brillantes. (Chantre 1895, 14)

È per questa ragione che il popolo armeno, non disponendo di un proprio Stato, preferisce la 'protezione' imperiale russa piuttosto che quella ottomana, percepita come dispotica e più distante dai loro interessi e dalla loro cultura:

A défaut d'autonomie ou de liberté politique, la Russie a offert aux Arméniens la sécurité. Aussi nombre d'entre eux ont-ils émigré des États du sultan dans ceux du tsar, préférant l'ordre russe au désordre ottoman. (Chantre 1895, 36)<sup>18</sup>

Tuttavia, in ultima analisi, nel quadro proposto da Chantre, i 'caratteri orientali' degli Armeni emergono comunque e l'esplosione di sentimento e di passioni, rispetto alla *razionalità* occidentale, li caratterizza come Altro rispetto ai popoli europei:

Une des notions les plus fausses qui ont cours sur les Arméniens est celle qui les montre comme exclusivement attachés au pays qui les fait vivre. Il n'est pas de sentiment, au contraire, qui fasse vibrer plus profondément le cœur d'un Arménien, que le souvenir de la patrie absente. C'est plutôt l'exagération de ce sentiment qu'on pourrait leur reprocher, mais non l'oubli. Il éclate à chaque page de leurs poésies modernes, comme dans celles de leurs ancêtres. C'est avec une passion toujours vivace qu'ils entretiennent dans leur cœur, comme une consolation à leurs malheurs passés, l'espoir du réveil prochain de leur nation. (Chantre 1895, 14-15)

La 'questione razziale', dunque, è sempre sottesa al discorso impostato da Chantre, toccando financo il ruolo sociale della religione. Se, da un lato, il cattolicesimo promuove la cultura e lo studio, il cristianesimo orientale resta legato ad una ritualità sterile, che non favorisce l'educazione dei proseliti:

On doit reconnaître cependant que beaucoup de membres du clergé, les popes des villages, et même des hommes occupant un rang plus élevé méritent encore ce reproche [ovvero di una sostanziale assenza di istruzione]. Nous avons rencontré des évêques, gardiens de monastères plus ou moins anciens et connus, qui ne savaient absolument rien de leurs origines ni même de leur histoire. (Chantre 1895, 19)

<sup>18</sup> Sui rapporti russo-turco-armeni, si veda Ferrari 2011, 207-34 e, più nel dettaglio, Ferrari 2000. Si veda anche Georgeon 1989, 558-64. Sul 'dispotismo' degli imperi d'Oriente, mi limito a citare il grande classico di Venturi (1960) e il recente Osterhammel 2018, 334-83.

Sul rapporto fra religione e sviluppo sociale, dunque, l'idea che passa, in modo piuttosto palese, è che l'unico cristianesimo modernizzante e liberale sia il cattolicesimo. In quest'ottica, in un 'mondo' musulmano, le minoranze cristiano-orientali – inclusi gli Armeni, considerati fra i popoli più occidentalizzati dell'Asia, cioè, altrimenti detto, fra i meno 'incivili' – non sono nient'altro che una parte integrata di una realtà percepita come distante da quella europea, anche nel caso tali minoranze si configurino come *élites* in ambito politico o intellettuale negli imperi multietnici di appartenenza. Un punto di vista eurocentrico e razzialmente connotato che non entra in contraddizione, come spesso testimonia Chantre, con una sincera empatia per le tristi condizioni in cui vivono gli Armeni – in particolare quelli soggetti al sultano ottomano – e per il rispetto dovuto alla loro antica tradizione cristiana:

Au moment où l'attention du monde civilisé est appelée de nouveau sur les Arméniens de Turquie si odieusement massacrés par leurs oppresseurs séculaires, il m'a semblé utile de répandre dans le public des notions exactes sur l'histoire et l'ethnographie de ces malheureux chrétiens orientaux, encore si peu connus en Europe. Il est temps de rétablir la vérité sur cette race qui est certainement la plus instruite et la plus laborieuse de l'Asie. (Chantre 1896a, III)

#### 4 Alcune considerazioni conclusive

Preliminarmente, leggendo il vasto e variegato *corpus* delle opere di Chantre – come si è detto, spesso legate alle iniziative culturali promosse dal Ministère de l'instruction publique – è doveroso constatare che l'attenzione al tema del rapporto fra sviluppo civile, cultura e religione è piuttosto modesta, in particolare se paragonata allo spazio dedicato ad altre aree di interesse, segnatamente le antichità classiche, l'archeologia e l'etnografia.

Ciononostante è possibile servirsene per tracciare un quadro, certo non definitivo ma sufficientemente delineato, dell'imperialismo culturale e religioso della Francia nel Medio Oriente e nella regione caucasica, individuando sia gli aspetti legati alla polemica relativa alla pretesa superiorità del cristianesimo cattolico-romano su quello orientale sia, più in generale, i problemi connessi alla promozione e alla diffusione dei valori del cristianesimo in opposizione all'islam. Tale quadro si inserisce – in maniera invero non inaspettata – in un discorso più ampio, fatto di considerazioni legate all'approccio colonialista e

marcatamente eurocentrico che domina la cultura francese del tempo.<sup>19</sup>

Dall'analisi degli scritti di Chantre un dato appare chiaro: spesso le *élites* colte francesi (e i lettori di Chantre sono certamente uomini colti, anche se non studiosi specialisti di Oriente) pensavano che si potesse trovare una felice conciliazione con l'Altro solo attraverso la propagazione del cattolicesimo, ritenuto un potente mezzo per trasformare il pensiero dei popoli orientali e per diffondere la civiltà europea – considerata l'unica civiltà pienamente degna, moderna e liberale – anche presso i cristiani d'Oriente.

Sulla rapidità con cui si sarebbe dovuta realizzare questa auspicata trasformazione del pensiero orientale si innestano sia le riflessioni circa l'utilità dell'apparato coloniale francese, sia quelle relative agli aspetti più culturali, legati alla contaminazione fra *civilisations* differenti.<sup>20</sup> Lo scopo, nemmeno troppo velato, è quello di far comprendere ai lettori della metropoli che i cristiani-orientali e, nello specifico, gli Armeni, si trovano certo in uno stato di miseria, di barbarie e di sostanziale assenza di civiltà ma, allo stesso tempo, di trasmettere l'idea che essi possono avere comunque una possibilità di crescita e di sviluppo, una speranza di uscire dal *torpeur* e dalla *superstition*. Si tenta di dimostrare, insomma, come il perfezionamento, civile e morale, di questi popoli sia necessariamente legato alla loro soggezione – se non dal punto di vista propriamente politico, certamente almeno da quello ideologico e culturale – ad un 'razionale' Paese europeo, come fortunatamente, a parere di Chantre, cominciano a capire anche alcuni Armeni:

Des familles plus fortunées envoient fréquemment en Europe leurs fils, voire même leurs filles, pour y faire des études complètes. Certaines jeunes Arméniennes sont de brillantes élèves de nos facultés, et emportent dans leurs pays perdus et dénués de lumière une riche moisson de connaissances utiles bien faites pour secouer le reste de torpeur et de superstition dans lequel sommeillent leurs compatriotes. (Chantre 1895, 19)

<sup>19</sup> Interessante, in proposito, Fox 2012, 227-73. Sulla visione coloniale francese durante la Terza repubblica rimando al classico Duchêne 1928; in italiano, i recenti e ben articolati Pinchetti 2014 e 2018. Contemporaneo a Chantre, ed esemplare circa il comune sentire sugli interessi coloniali francesi in Medio Oriente, è Alfred Martineau (1902); su questo personaggio si veda Vaghi 2016.

<sup>20</sup> Durante la Terza repubblica si pensi anche all'emblematica figura di Gabriel Hanotaux (1853-1944), capo di Gabinetto di Jules Ferry e di Léon Gambetta, e in seguito per due volte Ministro degli affari esteri (1894-5 e 1895-8). Egli sostenne con forza l'idea della stretta connessione esistente fra l'espansione ultramarina francese e l'estensione della 'morale cristiana', considerata la base di ogni *civilisation* moderna (Hanotaux 1929).

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# Armenian Press in Turin. 1915-18

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**Abstract** 1915 marked the start of a bloodier phase of the Armenian tragedy. 1915 was also the year in which Italy interrupted its diplomatic presence in Anatolia and entered the war against the Ottoman Empire. For the few Armenians then resident in Italy this coincidence of circumstances constituted a mobilising factor: being in many cases citizens of the Ottoman Empire, on the one hand, they had to demonstrate their diversity with respect to the Turks, and on the other hand, the assumption of active behaviour towards the host country aimed at enhancing their belonging and cultural prerogatives. With the aim to investigate how the Genocide was experienced by the Armenian community in Italy, the paper will focus on the magazine *Armenia. Eco delle rivendicazioni armene* (Armenia. Echo of Armenian Claims) born in Turin and published between 1915-18.

**Keywords** Armenia Magazine Torino. Armenian-Italian Community. Armenian Genocide. Armenian Press. Italian Press.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Press Coverage of the Armenian Genocide. – 3 Concluding Remarks.

## 1 Introduction

The Armenian population of Italy had a multilayered configuration over the centuries. Different sources testify the arrival of Armenians as pilgrims and merchants, priests or skilled financiers, students, literary men and artists.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> There is a large bibliography on the presence of Armenians in Italy. I shall note here only a few key works as a guide to further bibliography: Manoukian 2014; Comneno 2012; Zekiyan 1978, 1996, 2006; Zekiyan, Ferrari 2004; Hermet, Cogni Ratti di Desio 1993; Adalian 1992; Bardakjian 1976.



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In parallel to permanent settlements, there were numerous temporary Armenian presences who considered Italy as a first landing place to then leave for somewhere else, or the place where to perfect one's professional and religious formation, or the best country to move to trade (Manoukian 2014, 21). This composite structure of the Armenian diaspora in Italy can also be found in 1915. According to a note in the Milan-based Italian daily newspaper *Corriere della Sera* (Evening Courier), there were about 7,000 Ottoman subjects of non-Turkish nationality present in Italy. Most were

Armenians already residing here before the European war and, in part, refugees following Turkish persecutions. The largest number of Armenians in Italy live in Naples, Genoa, Milan, Turin and Rome, where there is also an Armenian college for religious propaganda.<sup>2</sup> The Armenians are mostly engaged in trade although, following the interruption of communications with the eastern ports, they have had to reduce their business considerably. Before, they imported cloth, tableware, rugs, drugs, dyeing materials, exporting cereals and grains in exchange. (*Corriere della Sera*, 13 March 1916, cited in Manoukian 2014, 22)

Strangely the note didn't mention Venice, with its sixteen centuries-long Armenian traces, with a number of Armenian families residing there and finally with the Mekhitarist Congregation on Saint Lazarus island and Armenian Moorat Raphael College in the Venetian Ca' Zenobio historical palazzo.<sup>3</sup>

The organized presence of Armenians in modern Italy began in 1912 with the establishment of the section of the international organization *The Armenian General Benevolent Union* (AGBU) in Milan and with the further birth in 1915 of the *Comitato armeno d'Italia* (Armenian Committee of Italy) and the *Unione degli Armeni d'Italia* (Union of Armenians of Italy), which acted as the *de facto* representative of the Armenian residents in this country (Manoukian 2014, 24).

With the aim to investigate how the Genocide was experienced by the Armenian community in Italy, the paper will focus on the magazine *Armenia. Eco delle rivendicazioni armene* (Armenia. Echo of Armenian Claims) born in Turin and published between 1915-18. It will first briefly analyse the presence of Armenians in Italy in the period of World War I. It will further consider how the Italian press reported

<sup>2</sup> The author intends *Pontificio Collegio Armeno*, the institution built in 1883 by the pope Leo XIII for the formation of Armenian Catholic religious.

<sup>3</sup> On Mekhitar's life and work see Nurikhan 1914; Zekiyani 1977. On the order, its history and spirituality, see Sargisean 1905, 1936; Leo 1966-89; Bardakjian 1976; Adalian 1992; Zekiyani, Ferrari 2004. Some significant tokens of the general esteem among Armenians for Mekhitar and his work are quoted by Zekiyani 1993.

the massacres and deportation of the Armenians. Finally, the paper will focus on the Turin-based magazine *Armenia*. As it is not possible to consider all the issues of the magazine within the limits of a single article, this paper will mainly concentrate on the reports of 1915.

Special thanks to Dr. Edi Perino of the Library of the National Museum of the Italian Risorgimento for having made the issues of the magazine *Armenia* available for the present research.

## 2 Press Coverage of the Armenian Genocide

1915 was also the year which marked the start of a bloodier phase of the Armenian tragedy. On 12 February 1915 the Armenian conscripts in the Ottoman Army were forcibly disarmed by the order of the Minister of War of Ottoman Empire and were either killed outright or worked to death in labour and cargo transportation battalions. On 24 April another of the early phases of the Armenian deportations and massacres began with the mass arrest and later murder of several hundred Armenian leaders in Constantinople (now Istanbul). These included clergy, educators, authors, professionals and political figures.<sup>4</sup>

1915 was also the year in which Italy resigned from the Triple Alliance, declared war on Austria-Hungary, further interrupted its diplomatic presence in Anatolia and entered the war against the Ottoman Empire.

The almost contemporaneous superimposition of all these circumstances was a determining factor in creating a particular attention towards the Armenians in Italy: the massacres, the violence and the deportations of the Armenians was attributable to Ottomans who, at that time were the enemy of Italy and could be condemned without any diplomatic reticence, possibly using this circumstance as one of the arguments in support of their war's 'just cause'. The Italian press reported extensively on the massacres of the Armenians under the Young Turk dictatorship. Terms and phrases in Italian news articles describing the massacre and deportation included the following: "massacres", "slaughter", "unbelievable atrocities", "terrible tortures", "kidnapping of attractive young girls, "rape", "unparalleled savagery", "acts of horror", "great deportation", "completely depopulated", "wholesale deportations", "systematically uprooted",

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<sup>4</sup> For stages of Genocide consider among others Stanton 2009; Whitehorn 2010, for Armenian Genocide scholarship consider among others Dadrian 1993, 1995, 1996, 1999; Dadrian, Akçam 2011; Lewy 2007; De Waal 2015. Among multiple sources on Armenian Diaspora for a first approach see Hovannisian 1997; Myers, Hovannisian 1999; Libaridian 1999; Jendian 2008.

and the like.<sup>5</sup> Italian journalists used words that conveyed the magnitude of heinous acts and deeds, comparable to the language used when discussing the death toll in Europe. However, as events were developing in Europe during the First World War, the international press, unfortunately, was trying to analyse the Armenian massacres in the light of the war. The tragic events were often interpreted according to criteria, influenced by the political direction of the newspaper and recurring stereotypes such as the “bloodthirsty Turk”. In various newspaper headlines, we read “Unprecedented Turkish Ferocity” (*L’Ora*, 26 July); “The Orgies of Turkish Ferocity. Thousands of Murdered Armenians” (*Il Secolo XIX*, 18 August); “New Turkish Tortures against the Armenian Population” (*Il Mattino*, 12 September); “The Appalling Turkish Atrocities against the Armenians” (*Il Secolo*, 26 September); “The Nefarious Atrocities against the Armenians” (*Il Giornale d’Italia*, 13 October), etc.

In the summer of 1915, public interest was particularly affected by direct reports and often eyewitness accounts that began to arrive in Europe. The Italian press became attentive to the Armenian crisis, often publishing news of the massacre on the front pages of Italian newspapers. This was the case of the interview of the consul Gorrini in *Il Messaggero*, a radical-democratic newspaper:

The Armenians were treated differently in the different vilayets. [...] From 24 June onwards, the Armenians were all ‘interned’ – that is, ejected by force from their various residences and dispatched under the guard of the gendarmerie to distant, unknown destinations, which for a few will mean the interior of Mesopotamia, but for four-fifths of them has meant already a death accompanied by unheard-of cruelties. It was a real massacre and carnage of innocent people, something unheard-of, black page, with the flagrant violation of the most sacrosanct rights of humanity, of Christianity and nationality.<sup>6</sup>

Statistically, the articles on Armenians quadrupled when the crisis of Italo-Turkish relations reached its peak with Italy’s declaration of war on the Ottoman Empire on 21 August 1915. The Armenian argument was an opportunity to discredit the opponent and to legitimize the intervention. According to public opinion, the 1915 massacres do not represent a novelty in the history of the Ottoman Empire. The re-

<sup>5</sup> On Armenian Genocide in Italian press, see Aliprandi 2015; Martelli 2015a, 2015b; Haroutyunian 2018. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by the Author.

<sup>6</sup> “La tragica situazione interna della Turchia, orrendi episodi della ferocia musulmana contro gli armeni. Intervista al Console Generale Commendatore Gorrini” (*Il Messaggero*, 25 August 1915).



Figura 1  
The first issue of Armenia, 15 October 1915

current persecutions of Christians have always characterized Turkish domestic affairs: this assumption in European knowledge constitutes a consolidated stereotype that sees the Turkish as a barbarous and bloody subject. This interpretative key presides over most of the analyses presented on the press of the time. Nothing has changed in the Ottoman Empire and as Martelli notes:

on this level undoubtedly some specific aspects of the genocide are not captured: among these is the modern imprint of a nationalistic homogenization project that can be grasped behind the design of the perpetrated extermination. (Martelli 2015a, 223)

In October 1915, only a couple of months after Italy's declaration of war on the Ottoman Empire, the first issue of the magazine *Armenia*. *Eco delle rivendicazioni armene* (hereinafter referred to as *Armenia*) was published in Turin.<sup>7</sup> The protagonists were largely anonymous, but an important position was undoubtedly held by Nishan Der Stepanian, who probably was also the founder. Der Stepanian, born in Erzinjan in 1889, at the end of his higher education as a doctor, settled

<sup>7</sup> The pages are usually 12, in respect of the maximum limit imposed by the Italian censorship, while in 1918 some numbers come together and the pages appear to be of a higher number, since it was possible to recover the pages not used in the previous months and therefore combine them into a single number (Longo 2017, 102).

Figura 2  
Der Stepanian's yogurt laboratory poster

**PRODOTTI**

**Dr. DER STEPANIAN**

**YOGHURT - KEFIR**

**Creme ai fermenti lattici**  
(Cinque tipi: Semplice, all'arancio, alla fragola, al miele, al succo d'uva).

**FERMENTI LATTICI**  
Per la preparazione in casa del yoghurt e del kefir.

I fermenti lattici più potenti nel loro ambiente naturale: in alimenti lattici predigeriti dotati di grande potere nutritivo.

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Corso Reg. Margherita, 73 - Telefono 41.096

in Turin. He devoted himself to the study of the therapeutic merits of yogurt and became, perhaps, the first yogurt maker in Turin.

The magazine was completely in Italian and its aim was to defend Armenian interests in Italy during the First World War. Many editorial contributions are signed with pseudonyms, some of which are revealed in the course of publications, such as 'Doctor'. Of the other pseudonyms such as 'Suren', 'Careckin', 'Armenius', 'D.', 'Aramais', 'Kurren', instead, the identity is not known. These editorials not only commented on the events that took place in the Ottoman Empire, but were also an opportunity to expose the real desires and ambitions of the Armenian people. There was certainly no lack of ferocious accusations against the Young Turks, accompanied by reproaches against the Germans. For example, the article "An Organized Extermination. The Bloody Madness of the Turkish-Germans in Armenia" reads:

The tragic fate once again falls on the unhappy Armenia. Armenian blood flows again. The Turks who gorged themselves on the German culture, trained and instigated by German instructors, a few months ago started the execution of a frightening plan: the extermination of the Armenian race living in their homeland for forty centuries... Immediately after the European conflagration the Turks openly declared that the fate of the Armenians was already decided: the extermination of the Armenians was decided in the

Turkish-German programme. The Turks no longer needed to seek or invent pretexts. Germans' motion "Necessity knows no laws" was enough for them.<sup>8</sup> (Doctor 1915, 9)

Some of the analytical articles of political content were written by Italian journalists, others were signed by pen names, as the mentioned article, published under the nickname Doctor. Generally, Italian newspapers also tended to emphasize the complicity of the German authorities. In an article in *Il Mattino* on 31 July 1915, we read:

Zurich, 29 [July], night - the news of new massacres of Armenians by the Turks arrives in Zurich only today and causes considerable impression. The news coming from Petrograd is confirmed in a Turkish release reported by the unofficial Wolff agency on 16 July. It is strange the fact that although the release bears the date of 16 July, it has not been published in any newspaper so far. We see Germany's intention to hide the new acts of cruelty and barbarism committed by its ally from the civilized world.

Some Italians collaborated with *Armenia*, such as the director, Corrado Corradino, professor of letters at the University of Turin, Carlo Margaria, Terenzio Grandi, professor of geography of the University of Turin, Ettore Cozzani, head of the magazine *L'Eroica*, Domenico Cimapoli, professor of Italian and Slavic language and Adriano Gimorri, poet and professor, whose several essays will be published in the magazine.

The front page of all issues includes the Italian translation of British Prime Minister William Gladstone's words: "To serve Armenia is to serve civilization".<sup>9</sup> The first issue opens with an editorial, which is not signed but it is probably the work of Der Stepanian himself. The editorial presents the aims and reasons for which it has been decided to start publishing the magazine and concludes with an appeal to the king of Italy, Vittorio Emanuele III:

We have faith that such a crime will not be committed. Italy's declaration of war on Turkey has strengthened our faith because Italy has always been that generous and noble homeland that has felt and supported all the holy causes of the oppressed peoples. Italy [...] will not be able to forget Armenia on the day of the su-

<sup>8</sup> The principle of necessity was already known in Roman law, and was expressed in the brocard *Necessitas non habet legem, sed ipsa sibi facit legem* (necessity knows no laws, but becomes itself law) (Publius Syrus).

<sup>9</sup> Payaslian 2010, 117. For further details on British policy and politics on the Armenian massacres see, among others, Kirakossian 2004, 2008; Tusan 2017.

preme decisions. Its heroic and noble King is the descendant of those Savoy, who bore the title of King of Armenia. They went up to the throne of Italy and abandoned it. But the Armenians continue to praise the Savoy in their songs and would like to say if their voice – suffocated by the infernal iron and Turkish-German fire – could reach Vittorio Emanuele III: *Majesty, remember us...*<sup>10</sup>

The second piece that appears on this issue and which will be present in almost all editions, is the column called “The Armenian Tragedy”. It includes news on the Genocide taken from the Italian and foreign newspapers and news agencies, especially that of the Stefani agency. The magazine also devoted ample space to the testimonies of Italians, such as the aforementioned interview of the consul Gorini, or the interview with N. Lemi, director of the Van branch of the French tobacco company Régie:

Until 4 April, I knew nothing about what was going to happen, says Lemi in his interview. That day, the governor of Van, Cevdet Bey called me and the Ottoman Bank manager. In disguised words he made us understand not to spend the night in our apartments in the Armenian neighbourhood, but to stay in our offices adjacent to government buildings. He did not want to explain the meaning of what he was saying, being content to say he had done his duty, warning us as Europeans in a timely manner, and if we thought not to obey, he would disclaim all responsibility. The situation was tense, it felt like a storm was about to start [...]. It is not possible to predict the future, but one thing is clear: those who caused this tragedy of the Armenians will not go unpunished, concluded Lemi his interview.<sup>11</sup>

In the December 1915 issue, *Armenia* published the appeal-letter of an Italian lady entitled “What Can the Italian Woman do for Her Armenian Sisters”:

At this fateful moment, women of almost all European nations are grieving for their sons, husbands, brothers fallen in the bloody fields for the Homeland. But it is sublime, magnificent and sacred to sacrifice existence for one’s own land. The woman who mourns her relative in the Valley of Honour has a deep sense of sacred pride in her soul, which eases her bitter sadness. But at this fatal moment there is a creature of God that sheds a tear of sorrow for quite another suffering. There is a poor creature who has become a victim of the ferocious hatred of the beast, a suffering, demor-

<sup>10</sup> “Il diritto dell’Armenia attraverso le vicende della sua storia”. *Armenia*, 1, 1915, 3.

<sup>11</sup> “L’insurrezione di Van: una testimonianza italiana”. *Armenia*, 1, 1915, 6.

alized one, whom no consolation is capable of releasing from the clutches of her terrible nightmare. This is the Armenian woman.

This innocent victim has been subjected to horrific atrocities for many years, only to have her people claim the sacred right to exist. It is impossible to remain indifferent to such a constant martyrdom. Any woman who has a sense of humanity and principles of justice must rebel against such a massacre. It would be quite selfish to say “now we have to think about ourselves, we cannot waste our energy on someone who does not belong to us”. If there is a human being who is suffering, everyone, who has a slightly better condition is obliged to reach out. This is what I say to my sisters in Italy. Countries like France and England, which are currently at war and are bravely fighting, are setting up committees to help Armenia. Italy should not be insensitive. The homeland of freedom knights Garibaldi and Mazzini cannot ignore Armenia’s sacred problem. I received a letter from a woman from this oppressed and bleeding nation. The letter was delayed by the current difficulties of international mail. Unfortunately, the letter repeats what we learned from the press. It is not easy to advise in case of such great misfortune. We have nothing else to do but complain, shout against barbarism, and join the sister states in uniting the whole of European civilization in this wartime moment for the sake of the noble cause of justice. (Piccini 1915, 8)

As it is clear from the content of the message, this appeal, written on 4 November 1915, has a prehistory. Vanna Piccini receives a letter from her Armenian friend named N. Vartian: “Dear friend”, begins Mrs. Vartian’s letter, “the grief has made me mad. I lost my head in misery. You, who are at peace, be kind to offer me healing. For the sake of God, please advise me” (Vartian 1916, 9). Then Mrs. Vartian goes on detailing the difficult situation of the Armenian people:

It is a satanic slaughter, a long organized hellish extermination, which has been consistently carried out against my unhappy compatriots. The Turk fears the valiant. Its secular system is to attack women, the old and children. The helpless, in short, the defenceless. He makes war as a ferocious coward, there is no other word: 10,000 women thrown into the Euphrates River... 5,000 children gathered in boats and thrown on the high seas. (Vartian 1916, 9)

Continuing the letter, Vartian seeks to answer the question of why these barbaric persecutions of the Turks are actually against the Armenians:

Do you know the fairy tale of the firefly? A firefly that glowed quietly at night was bitten by a snake. The firefly naively asks its per-



secutor the reason for the punishment inflicted on it; the snake simply replied “because you shone”. I can’t find any other reason for the persecutions inflicted on my people [...]. Please give me some advice; suggest me an immediate remedy. The hours of the Armenian population of Turkey are counted! Later it will be too late. (Vartian 1916, 9)

Deeply influenced by the letter, Vanna Piccini decides to come up with a message. Because of insufficient space to publish both letters, *Armenia* chooses Piccini’s message for the December issue while Mrs. Vartian’s letter will be included in the issue of January 1916, thus allowing a chronological change.

From an announcement in the magazine we learn that:

When Italy declared war on Austria, the Armenian community of Paris immediately collected 3,000 liras from its members for the Italian Red Cross. The money was handed over to the Italian Ambassador to Paris.<sup>12</sup>

Another announcement underlines that “The most effective manifestation of your interest in the Armenian cause will be subscribing to *Armenia Magazine*”<sup>13</sup>

The magazine also placed a great deal of pedagogical and cultural material in order to present Armenian culture in the most complete way. In fact, “The Literary Page” is always present in all the numbers except in the first, as announced in the October 1915 issue:

*Armenia* will also have a literary page. Our readers will be better able to feel the cause of Armenia by loving it also through the manifestations of his thought and feelings. We are sorry to have been forced to give up almost completely this page for this first issue, due to the inexuberance of writings of another kind. (*Armenia*, 1915, 1, 5)

In fact, in subsequent numbers, *Armenia* will have references to the Armenian culture by publishing materials on Armenian history, art and architecture. The literary page is usually very rich and extensive and has an important propagandistic role within *Armenia*. It deals with many Armenian authors, presenting different extracts of their works. Almost all the issues include Armenian writers or literary critics, including Siamanto, Aharonyan, Alishan, Abovyan, Duryan, Zardaryan, Chopanyan, Varuzhan, etc.

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<sup>12</sup> “Tre mila lire della colonia armena di Parigi alla Croce Rossa Italiana”. *Armenia*, 1, 1915, 9.

<sup>13</sup> *Armenia*, 1, 1915, 6.

In October 1918, the publication of the magazine *Armenia* ceased. The reasons why Nishan Der Stepanian stopped the publication of *Armenia* is not known. The encyclopedic volume *I periodici di Torino*, dedicated to the periodicals of Turin published in 1860-1915, in the paragraph on *Armenia* merely indicates the names of the publisher (Tipografia Centrale Eynard Edoardo di Torino), the honorary editor (Corrado Corradino), the director and editor (N. Der Stepanian), the responsible (Carlo Margaria), the format (39 × 29cm) and the price (2.5 liras per year, 0.25 cents per issue). It also mentions that *Armenia* was a monthly magazine. The note finishes with the following statement:

The magazine was created to support the cause of the Armenian people during the war against Turkey. Alongside articles on the situation of Armenians, it contained historical notes, short stories, verses of protagonists of the Armenian Risorgimento and news on solidarity initiatives in favour of Armenia. (Manunta 1995, 52-3, nota 152)

Most probably Der Stepanian had to cease his activity because of his appointment as Secretary General of the Central Armenian Committee of Italy. In this role he took part at the Paris Peace Conference as a member of Armenian National Delegation, chaired by Boghos Nubar Pasha.<sup>14</sup> Months later, in September 1919 he was in Armenia “to try to relieve the misery” of his people (Yeretzian 1963, cited in Longo 2017, 74). In that mission he was together with the writer Vahan Tekeyan and Samson Harutyunian who later became the Minister of Justice of the First Republic of Armenia (Hovannisian 1974, 470; Ghazarian 2016; Longo 2017, 90).

### 3 Concluding Remarks

*Armenia* magazine became an ideal vehicle for showing how, in the state of suffering imposed by the Ottoman Empire, Armenians had always been able to reaffirm their civilization, rising to the level of

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<sup>14</sup> The Republic of Armenia was not officially invited to this conference, although the Armenian people had suffered more casualties during the First World War than many of the major warring states. However, in February 1919 the two Armenian delegations in Paris (the National Delegation headed by Poghos Nubar and the Delegation of the Republic of Armenia headed by Avetis Aharonyan) presented their allies with a request to recognize the national demands of the Armenians. See the text of the statement in “Papers relating to the foreign relations of the United States, the Paris Peace Conference”, vol. IV, 1919, 139 (<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1919Parisv04/d8>).

the most advanced nations. *Armenia* created a link between the Armenian authorities, the political world and even the Italian press, which sometimes took some articles that *Armenia* reported into its columns. With the main aim to demonstrate to Italians, but above all to the Italian political class, that Armenia was morally and administratively capable to be autonomous, the Magazine presented the propaganda work that the Armenians, individually or in connection with the Italians, carried out during the massacres. It also showed how the Genocide was experienced by the Armenian community in Italy.

*Armenia* not only represented a reference point for the Armenian community of Italy, but it also aroused various appreciations both in the Italian political and literary world. Antonio Gramsci published an article on the Armenian massacres in the Italian political weekly *Il grido del popolo* where he stated that

[s]omething has been done in Turin. A review entitled *Armenia* has just been published for a few months. With serious intentions and variety of collaboration it says what it is, what it wants and what the Armenian people would like to become. From the magazine should start the initiative of a series of books that with more effective persuasion and demonstration would give Italy a picture of what the language, the history, the culture, the poetry of the Armenian people is. (Gramsci 1916, 607)

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# The Wilsonian Moment of the Azerbaijani Delegation in Paris (1919-20)

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**Abstract** The delegation of the Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan to the 1919 Paris Peace Conference fought for the international recognition of its country and for admission to the League of Nations. The analysis of mostly unpublished archival documents from the personal archives of head of delegation Əlimərdan Ələkbər oğlu sheds new light on the history of Azerbaijani diplomacy. Topçubaşov could rely above all on the tools of influence of public opinion, such as books, publications and magazines which were written in large numbers in Paris. The adoption, in Azerbaijani political communication, of languages and contents adapted to the Wilsonian culture was meant to justify the aspiration to self-determination, as other anti-colonial non-European elites attempted to do during the Paris Peace Conference.

**Keywords** Azerbaijan. Wilsonianism. Self-determination. Paris Peace Conference.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 An Anti-Colonial Struggle. – 3 The Road to Public Diplomacy. – 4 Armenia and Azerbaijan Between Confrontation and Cooperation. – 5 Conclusion.



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## 1 Introduction

The year 1919 marked a revolutionary short-lived moment for many nationalities once subject to the multinational empires dissolved as result of World War I, as well as for colonized territories by the victors of the Great War. As the term 'revolutionary' should be understood as a nationalistic and anticolonial upheaval aimed to obtain national self-determination, find a place within the future international order and establish links of solidarity with other emerging national communities. Historian Eretz Manela focused on the Asian perspective (India, China, Korea) noting that the consequences of the Great War propelled an unprecedented political mobilization towards the principles embodied by Woodrow Wilson's fourteen points:

[t]hese [mobilisations] were all propelled by the accumulated material and ideological transformations of the years of war, transformation that imbued the moment with revolutionary potential and gave contemporaries a sense that the international order, its power structures and its norms of legitimacy were uniquely malleable, amenable to concerted action. (Manela 2019, 409)

The main hypothesis of this article is that this analytical framework could be adapted to the ephemeral experience of the Azerbaijani Democratic Republic lasting from 1918 to 1920 and built on the ashes of the Russian Empire. Acting as an independent state – although not recognised by the Great Powers nor by the international community – the Azerbaijani Republic was able to dispatch a diplomatic mission to the Paris Peace Conference, seeking international recognition, admission to the League of Nations and military protection by the factions fighting in the Russian civil war. The outcome of the Paris mission was mixed: after months of relentless pressures the Azerbaijanis were able to obtain a *de facto* recognition on January 1920, whilst failed to achieve full *de jure* recognition of sovereignty before the invasion of the Red Army in April that same year. After the Bolshevik takeover of 27 April 1920, the Republic ceased to exist and Azerbaijan was incorporated within the Soviet Union. As noted by prominent historian Jamil Hasanli (2016) the main cause of the collapse of Azerbaijani independence should be found in external rather than internal factors. The victors of World War I were ambiguous towards the fate of the former Russian Empire and were not ready to recognize the new republics which emerged from the ruins of the Tsarist state. Woodrow Wilson, the US president and architect of the postwar concept of national self-determination, was very cautious towards the claims of non-Russian groups from the former empire. Nevertheless, the small group of amateur diplomats who represented Azerbaijan in Paris in 1919-20 counted on Wilson's message

as a tool of legitimacy. Azerbaijan did not only sought recognition but represented itself as a flourishing liberal democracy. The claims to self-determination were remarked with a political narrative representing Azerbaijan like a modern, secular, multi-ethnic state eager to integrate within the international community and to strengthen its ties with Western powers. Hasanli's judgement on the Azerbaijani foreign policy could be partially agreed-upon:

Taking into consideration the complicated historical conditions of the time, the builders of the Azerbaijani republic who originated its foreign policy and defined the place of Azerbaijanis in world politics and geography, strove to create a modern republic based on democratic principles and the values of a secular state. Not did they manage to reshape the world outlook of their countrymen, they managed to change the opinion of the world about Azerbaijan. (Hasanli 2016, 3)

This emphatic perspective should be contextualized. The partial recognition of January 1920 by Western powers was due more to the impending victory of Bolsheviks in Russian civil war – and the need to counteract Soviet Russia with pro-Western buffer states like Azerbaijan and Georgia – than to the Azerbaijan's internal conditions. The *de facto* recognition was a shallow success and the Great Powers retained from sending troops to help the Caucasian republics. After three months an informal alliance between the new Nationalist Turkey and Bolshevik Russia paved the way to Soviet invasion of Baku and forced Western powers like Great Britain to renounce to any influence in Caucasus (Gokay 1997). Nevertheless, during the months in Paris the Azerbaijani delegation tried to replace the weakness of the newborn State with a political and ideological challenge to the postwar international environment. The fate of Azerbaijan was dependent on the changing attitudes of the Great Powers towards Russia and Caucasus rather than on the merits of the Caucasian delegation. But the Paris conference opened a window of opportunity for non-European and postcolonial elites to be projected into the international context.

## 2 An Anti-Colonial Struggle

The prominent Azerbaijani politician Əlimərdan bəy Ələkbər oğlu Topçubaşov (Topçubaşı) and the young Vietnamese nationalist known as Nguyen-Ai-Quoc, who would later assume the pseudonym of Ho Chi Minh, were in Paris in 1919. They were both galvanized by Woodrow Wilson's ideas and attempted to gain Peace Conference support for their national cause. This process fell within the political climate of



the Paris Peace Conference and its influence on anticolonial movements. After the end of World War I groups from newly independent non-European and unrecognized States, as well as representatives of peoples subjected to colonial rule, converged in Paris, attracted by Wilson's message of national self-determination. Erez Manela (2001) defines this season as the "Wilsonian moment". The echo of Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points raised the hopes of nationalists and anticolonial activists from Africa, Asia, the former Russian Empire and the Middle East:

Chinese and Vietnamese, Arabs and Zionists, Armenians and Africans and many others, rushed invited or uninvited to stake their claims in the emerging new world. To these representations of national aspirations Wilson was often a symbol and a saviour, committed to the establishment of a new world order, which would augur an era of self-determination for all. They adopted Wilsonian rhetoric in formulating and justifying their goals, and they counted on the president's support in attaining them. Most of these aspirations, however, were quickly met with bitter disappointment. The treaty signed at Versailles not only left the colonial system intact, it expanded its scope to unprecedented proportions. As the nature of the emerging peace settlement became clear in the spring of 1919 frustrated expectations and deep disillusionment fuelled a series of popular and often violent upheavals across the colonized world. (Manela 2001, 117)<sup>1</sup>

According to Manela, the roots of 20th-century anticolonialism have international origins. Anticolonial leaders found in Wilson and not in Lenin an ideological and legitimizing point of reference. Post-World War I nationalism should be considered an international ideology and Wilsonian ideas circulated worldwide. Once the delegations presented their claims in Paris the demands from anticolonial movements were met with hostility, mostly for a racial prejudice. For Wilson and his advisers self-determination was hardly applicable to non-European nationalities. Secretary of State Robert Lansing warned of "the danger of putting such ideas into the minds of certain races," since they were bound to lead to "impossible demands" and "breed discontent, disorder and rebellion" (Manela 2005, 1117).

Events occurring between the dissolution of the Tsarist Empire in Transcaucasia and the independence of the three states were extremely complex. Caucasus was a battlefield since 1914 and had been

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<sup>1</sup> Manela focused specifically his study (2001) on nationalist movements in Egypt, India, China, and Korea. The framework of the Wilsonian moment could be applied to other countries as well.

a field of military and political confrontation between Russia and Ottoman Turkey for more than a century (Allen, Muratoff 1953). With the 1917 February Revolution the Tsarist government collapsed and a phase of informal autonomy began for Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan, while remaining formally within the Russian state. The three nationalities participated in the elections to the Pan-Russian Constituent Assembly in November 1917. In 1918, with the signing of peace with the Bolsheviks, the Ottomans resumed their advance in Caucasus, where the conflict had stalled. In April 1918 a federation of the three states was experienced, which lasted until the end of May of that same year. The three states split counting, at that stage, on different international perspectives and allegiances: the alliance with Germany for Georgia, the support from the Entente Powers for Armenia and the kinship with Ottoman Turkey for Azerbaijan (Afanasyan 1981). Three different and colliding options, which paved the way to separation and conflict. The end of the First World War led Britain to occupy Transcaucasia with a limited military contingent. At that stage, the three republics decided to send delegations to Paris to obtain recognition and security assurances against the return of Russian domination.

The Azerbaijani diplomacy at the Peace Conference shaped the contents of propaganda (the main instrument at its disposal in the political arena) within the context of the anticolonial, 'liberal nationalist' ideology Wilson and the United States championed. Azerbaijan "after 1918 was a typical textbook example of a postcolonial country ill-prepared for the trials of independence" (Swietochowski 1985, 147). As a postcolonial nation Azerbaijan justified its goals and aspirations for independence and international recognition within the conceptual framework of the Wilsonian principle of self-determination for former colonial subjects, as did many other nationalist and anti-imperialist groups operating in Paris during the months of the Peace Conference. On 9 May 1919 the official delegation to the Versailles Peace Conference of the recently established Azerbaijani Democratic Republic (*Azərbaycan Demokratik Respublikası* – *Azərbaycan Xalq Cümhuriyyəti*) arrived in Paris. The Azerbaijani diplomats had departed from Baku at the end of December 1918. On the route to the French capital they were delayed by a forced four-month stop in Istanbul. The tasks of the delegation were the same as those of the Georgians, Armenians and Northern Caucasians: to ensure recognition of independence from Russia and admission to the League of Nations. This meant obtaining the political and military support of the Entente Powers, which in Paris were redefining the post-World War international system. As Kazemzadeh pointed out: "The people of Transcaucasia believed that the Paris Peace Conference would solve all their difficulties and establish a durable peace which would assure their independent existence" (Kazemzadeh 1951, 253). The con-

ference had opened in January 1919. The delegation, headed by the Parliament speaker Topçubaşov, was neither invited nor officially accepted as a participant in the conference negotiations. In addition to this precarious status the circumstance of the late arrival in Paris of the Azerbaijani delegation further weakened its country's position as compared to those of other southern Caucasian states:

[they arrived in Paris] too late to lay necessary groundwork and lobby for their cause. Unlike their neighbours, they lacked support comparable to the Armenophile movement in the West or the Georgian Menshevik's connection with international system. (Swietochowski 1985, 154)

The outstanding result achieved by the Azerbaijani delegation after its eight months of work was the *de facto* recognition of the republic by the Allied Supreme Council on 11 January 1920. The Allied recognition was an ephemeral success and the Allies did not send any material and military support to Baku against Bolshevik pressure. In late April 1920 the Republic collapsed. Baku was invaded by the Bolsheviks and Azerbaijani independence abruptly came to an end. After the Republic's downfall, Topçubaşov and his comrades faced the hardships of exile and continued as *émigrés* to promote the cause of an independent Azerbaijan.<sup>2</sup> In 1919-20 the Topçubaşov group in Paris worked tirelessly to promote the cause of Azerbaijani independence from Russia. During its short-lived independence, Azerbaijan was threatened both by the 'White' Russians and by the Bolsheviks. The activity of the diplomatic mission is richly documented in Topçubaşov's personal archives donated by his family and conserved in the Centre d'Études des Mondes Russe, Caucasiens et Centre-Européen (CERCEC) at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) in Paris.<sup>3</sup> The archival sources shed a new light on the nature of Azerbaijani diplomacy during the independence period. An initial element is that the Paris mission was semi-autonomous from the national government in Baku. Communications with Azerbaijan were difficult and scarce and Topçubaşov often had to rely on his own sources of information.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the Republic was affected by political instability and by a succession of five cabinets in less

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<sup>2</sup> For the Azerbaijani, Caucasian and Turkic exile in Paris during interwar period see Penati 2008; for the 'Prometheus' movement and journal, unifying in Paris non-Russian *émigrés*, see Copeaux 1993.

<sup>3</sup> Əlimərdan bəy Topçubaşov Archive, Centre d'Études des Mondes Russe, Caucasiens et Centre-Européen (CERCEC); Ecole des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS), Paris).

<sup>4</sup> In September 1919 Topçubaşov, in a report addressed to the head of the government Yusifbəyli thanked him because he had received "for the first time" since the starting

than two years. News exchanges between Baku and Paris could only take place through the mediation of Entente missions in the Caucasus. A second element is that the Azerbaijani diplomats (all of whom were unfamiliar with professional diplomacy) counteracted the weaknesses of their political position with an emphasis on public diplomacy. They focused their economic and political resources on publishing and circulating books, pamphlets, journals and articles for the French and international press. The Azerbaijanis were poorly received in official diplomatic circles for different reasons, which went from 'White' Russian influence to suspicions arising from the alliance with the Ottoman Turks in 1918, and to the Armenophile attitude of French public opinion. Azerbaijani diplomacy appealed to public opinion in order to gain consensus for their political objectives. Azerbaijani propaganda went beyond a mere nationalistic claim. Thanks to the intellectual ingenuity of Topçubaşov, Azerbaijani public diplomacy insisted on the internal aspects of the Azerbaijani state, by promoting the self-image of a secular and welcoming country, a young democracy based on liberal values and the rule of law. In order to gain recognition of their independence, the Azerbaijanis were even willing, under the aegis of the League of Nations, to constitute a new Caucasian confederation with Armenia and Georgia, one that would restore the first Transcaucasian confederation of May 1918.<sup>5</sup> Thus the Caucasian State was ready to give up part of its national sovereignty in order to avoid submitting to a new, either 'White' or Bolshevik, Russian domination. The Azerbaijani diplomacy embraced anticolonial solidarity showing, at least on a propaganda level, a conciliatory (though erratically contradictory) attitude towards Armenia and the other Caucasian states, while the Great Powers showed little or no sympathy at all for the "first Muslim republic in the world" (Smith 2001, 228). The *de facto* recognition was little more than a symbolic gesture. As a result of the Soviet invasion, Azerbaijan, though formally retaining its independence, was effectively annexed to the Bolshevik State and later became a constituent part of the Soviet Union, regaining its independence only in 1991. During Topçubaşov's months as chairman of the Peace Delegation he adapted his reformist and liberal culture to the new Wilsonian principles. In his vision the future

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of his mission a detailed report from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and an answer to his previous reports. Topçubaşov to Yusifbəyli, 1919-09-22/25, in *Paris məktubları*, 24.

<sup>5</sup> A Confederation of Transcaucasian states, made up of Armenians, Georgians, and Azerbaijanis, lasted for four weeks between April and May 1918. After the collapse of Tsarist Empire and Brest-Litovsk Treaty, the Transcaucasian assembly (*Sejm*) was not able to resist Ottoman pressure on the Caucasian front and accepted Turkish peace terms proclaiming independence. The unity of the three members lasted scarcely a month, as fundamental divergences emerged and war continued with Ottoman advance towards Baku. See Forsyth 2013, 367-73.

of Azerbaijan was close to democratic Europe and an integral member of the League of Nations. The Azerbaijani delegation in Paris actively and intellectually pursued a gradual integration of the country into the international system as an equal partner to European and Western nations and regional leader in Caucasus.

### 3 The Road to Public Diplomacy

The Azerbaijani delegation was made up of representatives of different political and cultural forces which, since the end of the 19th century, had led the process of national self-determination.<sup>6</sup> Topçubaşov (1865-1934) was a key figure of Muslim political life in the Tsarist Empire.<sup>7</sup> In 1897, he carried on sociopolitical initiatives as chief editor of the newspaper *The Caspian*. After the 1905 revolution he became known as one of the leaders of the empire's Turkish-Muslim population. He was one of the leaders of All-Russian Muslim Congresses held in 1905-7. He cofounded in 1905 the Union of Russian Muslims (Soyuz Rossiyskikh musul'man, Rusya Müsülmanlarının Ittifakı), the leading Muslim political organization in the Russian Empire, which formed an alliance with the Russian Constitutional Democratic Party (Kadets). In 1906 he was elected to the State Duma as a deputy of Baku province and then established the Muslim faction in the Duma. In May 1917 he was among the politicians leading the Moscow Congress of Russian Muslims and worked in the Muslim social and political organizations of Transcaucasia. Topçubaşov was appointed minister without portfolio in the second Republican government formed on 17 June 1918 by Fətəli-xan Xoyski. He left for Istanbul on 22 August 1918 as ambassador to the Ottoman government. The Azerbaijani Parliament opened in December and elected him as Chairman *in absentia*. On 28 December it appointed him Chairman of the delegation to the Peace Conference. Other members included Məmməd həsən Cəfərqulu oğlu Hacınski (1875-1931) who served as first Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic, the socialist Əkbər ağa Şeyxülislamov (1891-1961) and the journalist and writer Ahmet Ağaoğlu (Əğaoğ bba Ağayev, 1869-1939) founder of the *Difai* party, considered one of the first national political parties in Azerbaijan. In 1909 Ağaoğlu was forced to immigrate to Turkey, where he estab-

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed analysis of the cultural and political roots of the Azerbaijani political forces between the 19th and early 20th century, see Ybert 2013.

<sup>7</sup> According to Audrey Altstadt in her introduction to a recent biography of Topçubaşov translated in English, the Azerbaijani leader during his career "shaped the emerging Azerbaijani press, the reform education, and the struggle for female equality starting with access to schools with women's enfranchisement in the Republic's constitution" (Altstadt 2019, I).

lished bonds with the Young Turks and the Union and Progress Government. Since his first days as Chairman of delegation, Topçubaşov adopted Wilson's rhetoric and arguments. The concepts of collective security and economic interdependence for the Caucasian region appeared in a long memorandum addressed to the Entente representatives in Istanbul, presumably in late December 1918. The document, written in Russian and in French, is the first known official communication of Azerbaijani diplomacy addressed to Western nations. The memorandum provided information about the history, geography, ethnography and politics of the Southern Caucasus and Azerbaijan. Topçubaşov's political proposal adopted the Wilsonian argument that a renewed political and economic confederation of the Transcaucasian people would have better chances of being internationally recognized and protected by the Entente Powers. For Topçubaşov the project of a confederation and the political affiliation of his supporters were strictly related elements:

Liées entre elles, comme nous venons de l'expliquer par la communauté des intérêt particulièrement importants dans le domaine économique, ses trois nationalités forment la population originaire de la Transcaucasie, sont appelées par la nature elle-même à une vie politique commune, basée sur le principe de la confédération comme les trois nationalités de l'Union Suisse [...]. Cette idée vit encore et ses partisans ne sont pas seulement les libéraux modérés et nationalistes arméniens, géorgiens, et azerbaïdjanais. La même idée trouve encore des défenseurs chez les sociaux-démocrates [*sic*], qui veulent à présent unir toutes les nations de la Transcaucasie. (Memorandum to the Entente Power representatives in Istanbul, December 1918. Topçubaşov Archives, case 1)

The delegation was stalled for four months in Istanbul, being unable to obtain from French authorities the authorization to reach Paris. For various reasons the French government distrusted Azerbaijan. The republic had proclaimed its independence under the protection of the Ottoman Army in May 1918 and was considered pro-Turkish. France was more inclined to support the counter-revolutionary fight of the 'White' Russians, whose goal was to restore Russian territorial integrity in Caucasus. The delegation faced other problems while in Istanbul. In March Ahmet Ağaoğlu was arrested by the Ottoman government at the behest of the British authorities. On the sole basis of his journalistic writings Ağaoğlu was accused of atrocities against Armenians during wartime. Ağaoğlu was deported to Malta along with other leading cultural and political nationalistic figures of Ottoman Turkey, though no specific charges were lodged against him. In 1921 he was released in a prisoner exchange between the British government and the Turkish nationalist forces (Shissler 2002). His

arrest prolonged the stay of the delegation in Istanbul. Topçubaşov addressed British Prime Minister David Lloyd George on this matter, using Wilson's arguments that 'small States' should be treated with justice. Excluding Azerbaijan would have been unfair and would have prejudiced a balanced solution to Caucasian problems:

les délégations analogues des États voisins composte dans de même conditions que l'Azerbaïdjan – la Géorgie, l'Arménie e la Nord-Caucasie – ont obtenu l'autorisation pour le voyage à Paris et les diverses revendications, des détails sur la situation économique, territoriale et d'importants questions touchant de près l'intérêt vital d'Azerbaïdjan, vu le voisinage de tous ces pays. Il est évident que la solution de pareilles questions ne correspondrait pas à la vérité et à la justice si l'un des pays intéressés était absent [...]. Étant donné que le peuple azerbaïdjanien a fait beaucoup de sacrifices au cours de la guerre européenne et par la suite débarrassa le Caucase du danger bolcheviste, il est en droit de compter que sa voix sera entendue par la conférence de la paix comme la voix d'une nation ayant pris la vie politique selon les grands principes du Président Wilson. (Memorandum to Lloyd George, 21 March 1919. Topçubaşov Archives, case 8)

Eventually the Azerbaijanis received authorization to leave Turkey and to enter France. After a brief stay in Rome they reached Paris and sought interviews with Entente diplomats. On 28 May, a date, incidentally, marking the first anniversary of Azerbaijani independence, the delegation met with Woodrow Wilson and his close advisors. Wilson's attitude was "cold and unsympathetic" (Kazemzadeh 1951, 254) and, as recorded in the transcription, the meeting lasted only twenty minutes. Topçubaşov praised Wilson's role in shaping a new international environment in which "oppressed nations" like Azerbaijan could aspire to independence. For this reason he demanded American support for recognition and admission to the League of Nations. Wilson replied by summarizing the guiding principle of the Allied policy towards the territories of the former Russian Empire:

I am glad, gentlemen, to have met you and heard your claims, but the question of the independence of your country cannot be settled before the Russian question is definitely settled. Please, send your memoranda to the Peace Conference and I shall study them. I trust your claims will be validated. (Wilson to the Azerbaijani Delegation to the Paris Peace Conference, 28 May 1919. Topçubaşov Archives, case 2)

The chasm between the harsh reality of Wilson's words and Wilsonian rhetoric did not discourage Topçubaşov. In a report sent to Ba-

ku he outlined the strategy of the delegation (Topçubaşov to Ussubeyov, 8-10 June 1919. Topçubaşov 1998, 15-18). The Allies prioritized the resolution of the Russian question and supported the 'White' forces against the Bolsheviks. The influence wielded by 'White' Russian circles in Paris was prominent. For the Azerbaijanis the most effective way to counteract it was to influence public opinion. The cause for independence was favoured by a narrative of democratic, liberal, secular ideals and struggle for survival against Russian oppression. From the summer of 1919 numerous memorandums and booklets were published, including a biweekly journal entitled *Bulletin d'informations de l'Azerbaïdjan*, which contained information and propaganda about Azerbaijan's economic and political life. The publications included territorial claims, descriptions of the republican institutions, a history of the process of independence and studies on ethnic distribution in the Southern Caucasus. Much emphasis was given to the economic profile and natural resources of the Azerbaijani State, with the aim of attracting foreign investors and capital.<sup>8</sup> Relations with other Caucasian states were pivotal. A unity of intents among states that had been part of Tsarist Russia was considered crucial for persuading the Entente Powers to lean towards independence and halt the chances of a new Russian conquest. Topçubaşov promoted political coordination among the Caucasian delegates in Paris. On 23 June 1919 the three delegations (the Armenian, the Azerbaijani and the Georgian) sent a joint note to Georges Clemenceau, President of the Peace Conference, protesting against the recognition by the Supreme Allied Council of the 'Omsk government' (ruled by Tsarist admiral Kolchak) as the legitimate power in the former Russian Empire. The Caucasian diplomats wrote to Clemenceau about the danger of a Russian invasion of the Caucasus. If recognized, the three States would constitute a democratic confederation and establish peaceful relations between the Caucasus and Europe:

Les Républiques caucasiennes envisagent leur avenir politique dans l'établissement d'une union des états du Caucase, placée sous la sauvegarde de la Société des Nations qui mettrait l'Istme caucasique, ainsi affranchi, à l'abri de tout impérialisme envahisseur et lui assurerait son rôle de ligne [sic] entre l'Occident et l'Orient. (Delegations of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia to Clemenceau, 23 June 1919. Topçubaşov Archives, case 4)

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<sup>8</sup> *La République de l'Azerbaïdjan du Caucase*. Paris: Harembat Imprimeur, 1919; *Claims of the Peace Delegation of the Republic of Caucasian Azerbaijan Presented to the Peace Conference in Paris*. Paris: Imp. Robinet-Houtain, 1919; *Composition Anthropologique et Ethnique de la population de l'Azerbaïdjan du Caucase*. Paris: Imp. Robinet-Houtain, 1919. *Situation économique et financière*, Paris 1919; *La première république musulmane: l'Azerbaïdjan*. Paris: Editions Leroux, 1919.



In the spring of 1919 a 'White' Russian invasion of the Caucasus seemed inevitable. General Denikin's volunteer army had invaded the Northern Caucasus and crossed the lines drawn by British occupation forces in the Caucasus. On 16 June Azerbaijan and Georgia decided to sign a defensive pact against the peril of invasion. In vain the two countries invited Armenia to adhere.<sup>9</sup> In Paris the text of the treaty (defined a 'convention') was translated and sent to the Peace Conference, where it was presented to Clemenceau as a collective security instrument aimed at preserving the right to national self-determination:

Nous tenons à faire ressortir l'esprit de solidarité des peuples transcaucasiens dont la convention du 16 Juin est profondément pénétrée. Il y a tout lieu d'espérer que cette convention, dont le but est purement et exclusivement défensif, ne sera jamais appliquée en ce qui concerne l'action militaire commune y prévue, et que la Transcaucasie restera à l'abri de toute agression extérieure grâce au contrôle que les Puissances Alliées exercent sur les opérations du général Denikine. (Note to the President of the Peace Conference, 24 July 1919. Topçubaşov Archives, case 4)

#### **4 Armenia and Azerbaijan Between Confrontation and Cooperation**

Another important issue was the relationship with Armenia. In his communiqué to Baku of 22 September 1919 Topçubaşov stressed the importance of seeking cooperation with the Armenian delegation operating in Paris:

in the interests of the peoples of Azerbaijan and Georgia, and maybe even of the Armenian, We have try not only to interrupt the relations with the Armenian representatives, but to support them and also cooperating with them. (Topçubaşov to Yusifbəyli, 22-5 September 1919. Topçubaşov 1998, 28)

As for public diplomacy, this meant representing Azerbaijan as willing to settle territorial and ethnic disputes with its neighbour. A dual communication strategy was envisaged in the second half of 1919. The *Bulletin* published news about Armenian "atrocities" perpetrated against the Muslim population, while the Azerbaijanis plied Armenia and Western public opinion with requests for cooperation towards a

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<sup>9</sup> The Armenian position whether to adhere to the convention was divided between Turkish Armenians, who were in favour, and Caucasian Armenians staunchly opposing. See Afanasyan 1981.

peaceful resolution of conflicts.<sup>10</sup> Since gaining independence in 1918 the two countries had had a series of border disputes in the ethnically-mixed regions of Karabakh, Nakhicevan and Zangezur:

In Nakhicevan, the westernmost, Azerbaijan consolidated control that year with Turkish support, driving out thousands of Armenians. In Zangezur across the mountain to the east, the ferocious Armenian guerrilla commander known as Andranik swept through the region, burning Azerbaijani villages and expelling their inhabitants. In the mountains of Karabakh the situation was more complex: the local assembly of Karabakh Armenians tried to declare independence but had almost no contact with the Republic of Armenia across the mountains. (De Waal 2013, 142)

Given the difficult contact of the Armenian population of Nagorno Karabakh with the Republic of Armenia and through the support of the British occupation forces, an agreement between the local Armenian council and the Baku government was reached in August 1919, recognizing Nagorno Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan and granting the local Armenian population a certain degree of self-government and cultural autonomy. The agreement remained dead letter and in 1920 new ethnic clashes broke out. In March 1920 attacks by Armenian forces on Azerbaijani officers resumed and the government sent troops to the Western frontier, “leaving the northern border unguarded as the Bolsheviks began their invasion” (Altstadt 1992, 103). In September 1919 Topçubaşov translated the text of the agreement into French and disseminated it in diplomatic circles. The Karabakh agreement, with its provisions for self-governance by Armenian local councils, fostered the idea of Azerbaijan as a young but advanced democracy, able to solve ethnic disputes and worthy of international recognition (Accord provisoire entre les Arméniens du Karabakh montagneux et le gouvernement azerbaïdjanien [*sic*], 22 August 1919. Topçubaşov Archives, case 4). At the end of the summer of 1919 the delegation released, in English and in French, the *Claims of the Peace Delegation of the Republic of Caucasian Azerbaijan Presented to the Paris Peace Conference*. On 30 August 1919 Topçubaşov eventually sent the official memorandum to Clemenceau as President of the Peace Conference. Topçubaşov used in large part Wilson’s argument championing the right of the small nations of the world “to enjoy the same respect for their sovereignty and for their territorial integrity that great and powerful nations expect and insist upon” (Speech of Woodrow Wilson, 27 May 1916, cited in Cooper 2009, 327). Topçubaşov rhetorically appealed to the same concept:

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<sup>10</sup> Bulletin d’informations de l’Azerbaïdjan 1919a, 1919b, 1919c, 1919d, 1919e.

La noble tâche donc s'est chargée la Conférence de la Paix dans la sainte cause de la défense des droits des petites nations nous encourage à espérer que la Conférence de la Paix, de sa suprême autorité, reconnaîtra l'indépendance de la République de l'Azerbaïdjan et remplira ainsi sa noble mission de protéger et de défendre les intérêts des petits peuples appelés à la vie par les Puissances de l'Entente sous l'égide des grands principes du Président Wilson. (Azerbaijani Delegation to the President of the Peace Conference, 30 August 1919. Topçubaşov Archives, case 1)

It should be noted that in the *Claims*, as in many other official documents, numerous elements of the recent history of Azerbaijani independence were concealed or misrepresented to Western public opinion and peacemakers. The fact that independence was obtained with the support of the Ottoman Army was represented as incidental; the season of bloodshed from ethnic clashes in Baku in 1918 was attributed solely to "Armenian Bolsheviks"; the whole independence process of the Azerbaijani people was represented as a fight against the Bolsheviks, concealing the complexity of the events of 1918. The Azerbaijani propagandists attempted to accredit the country as a democratic bulwark against the Bolshevik threat. The *Claims* insisted on the democratic and liberal roots of independence. For a century Azerbaijanis were heavily oppressed by Russian authoritarianism. The spread of European values in Russia fuelled the process of independence:

In spite of all obstacles, the Azerbaijanians could not, as may well be expected, remain insensible to the ideas of public, civil, political and religious liberty, which had come from Western Europe and had been spreading in Russia since the beginning of the XIX century. Since 1860, these ideas had conquered the minds of the cultured classes of Russia, as well as of the other natives subjected to the Empire. (*Claims of the Peace Delegation of the Republic of Caucasian Azerbaijan Presented to the Paris Peace Conference*, 1919, 88)

The *Claims* went further, theorizing a sort of "anthropological" and "racial" difference between the Turkic Muslim population of Azerbaijan and the Russian oppressors:

As is proved by their existence of nearly one century under the yoke of Russia, the turn of minds, ideals, political and cultural, the aspirations of the Russians, a Slavonic race, are quite different from those of the Azerbaijanians and are often quite opposed to them. It was this difference of genius that was the source of misunderstanding and mutual ignorance. They did not understand

each other and that very incompatibility proves that the ways of the two nations are quite opposed. (*Claims of the Peace Delegation of the Republic of Caucasian Azerbaijan Presented to the Paris Peace Conference*, 1919, 111)

For this reason it was incumbent upon the two nations to separate and live independently of each other.

## 5 Conclusion

In August of 1919 the British troops abandoned Azerbaijan and the Caucasian territory. The project of replacing Britain with Italy rapidly faded as well as the hypothesis of an American mandate over the Caucasus. Since October the 'White' forces had retreated and faced continuing defeats by the Bolsheviks. At the beginning of 1920 the Bolsheviks threatened the Caucasian republics. It was not the Wilsonian rhetoric that changed the attitude of the Entente Powers towards recognizing the Southern Caucasian states but the fact that these countries were facing the wave of Bolshevik expansion entirely on their own.<sup>11</sup> After the downfall of independent Azerbaijan, Topçubaşov and his delegation continued to pressure the Western powers to condemn the Soviet invasion. In the first two years after the seizure of Baku they acted as a quasi-diplomatic mission, addressing memoranda to and attempting to intervene in the international conferences of the early twenties, as in Genoa in 1922. One of the most prominent battles they fought and lost was Azerbaijan's request to join the League of Nations, which was rejected in November of 1920 (*Admission de la République Azerbaïdjan dans la Société des Nations*, November 1920. Topçubaşov Archives, case 1). During the 1920s they repeated their request for admission, which was denied on the grounds that Azerbaijan was part of another State and lacked an effective government. Ever since Topçubaşov and his colleagues had conducted a cultural and propaganda action within the *émigré* movements in Paris.<sup>12</sup> The work performed by the Azerbaijani delegation in 1919-20 had a cultural and political meaning because it tried to modernize the political culture and language of a postcolonial state. This modernization process was fully compatible with the political culture of the Azer-

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<sup>11</sup> For the circumstances leading up to the *de facto* recognition of January 1920 by the Allied Supreme Council, see *Papers Relating the Foreign Relations of The United States* 1946, 866-8.

<sup>12</sup> Since 1924 the non-Russian *émigré* circles in Paris revived the idea of a Transcaucasian confederation. In 1934 a pact among the exiled governments of Azerbaijan, Georgia and North Caucasus was signed in Brussels. Topçubaşov was the Azerbaijani representative. See Copeaux 1993.

bajjani leadership. In 1919-20 the change of attitude was facilitated by an ideology easily adaptable to Wilsonianism. When Azerbaijan became independent, the *Musavat* government perceived independence as a necessity produced by war and revolution. The independence act was written without any ethno-nationalist rhetoric:

It made no reference to a titular or dominant nation, but defined the state in terms of territory and embraced the principle of neutrality with regard to nationality, religion, and sex. Its content demonstrated that the ideals of Russia's February Revolution and democratic socialism still retained a strong grip over the imagination of Azerbaijan's political elite. (Reynolds 2011, 213)

Wilsonianism was a natural consequence of this approach. During the twenty-three months of its existence, the Republic's foreign policy was deeply reoriented from being a client state of Ottoman Turkey towards an attempt at 'Western integration'. The Paris delegation laid the intellectual basis of this change of policy and inserted Azerbaijan into the cultural wave of anticolonialism and its international origins as happened for the nationalist movements in India, Vietnam and China.

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# Armenian Clergy and Conflict Management in Lebanon, 1920-1994

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**Abstract** This essay discusses the role played by Church institutions and leaders in the history of the Armenians of Lebanon after their settlement in the country. The development of Armenian institutions in Lebanon is marked since the period of the French Mandate by the pervasive role played by political parties based on mass mobilisation. Through alliances and expediency, these parties managed to carve out their own quotas in Lebanon's peculiar power-sharing system. However, Armenians in Lebanon remained highly vulnerable to domestic volatility and regional tensions. Church deliberative organs became a site of conflict among opposed political agendas related to the definition of Armenian and Lebanese national identities, Lebanon's foreign policy, and the relation between the Soviet Union and the Armenian diaspora in the Middle East. Despite these constraints, Armenian Churches remained a vital component in the preservation of Armenian culture and heritage.

**Keywords** Diaspora. Nationalism. Sectarianism. Conflict management. Armenian Church. Lebanon.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Survival and Settlement. The French Mandate. – 3 Rapprochement and Repatriation Attempts. – 4 Conflicts around the Church between 1956 and 1958. – 5 Third Parties and Positive Neutrality. – 6 Conclusions.

## 1 Introduction

According to Nalbantian (2013a), the Armenians of Lebanon are rarely considered in Lebanese historiography. Scholarship of different ideological persuasions (Maronite nationalist, pan-Arab, Marxist) often focused on the claims and narratives of the principal sects, or participated in the debate on




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the 'Phoenician' or Arab national identity of the country. Armenians were usually framed as marginal or recently settled aliens. On the other hand, Nalbantian argues how Armenian diasporic historiography was usually concentrated on unidimensional pan-Armenian narratives and grand conceptual definitions, with scant attention to the multiplicity of ways through which Armenians participated to Lebanon's volatile political arena and negotiated their identity. This limited attention to the history and politics of Armenian settlement in Lebanon is even more surprising when one considers the proximity among Lebanese Christian (in particular Maronite and Greek Catholic) and Armenian diasporic networks in cities such as Marseille, Montréal, Los Angeles, Boston, or Sydney (Abdulkarim 1994), and the role that the research on diasporic communities played in a more thorough understanding of Lebanese history. According to Khater (2001, 180-8), the experience of modernity in Lebanon during the twentieth century and its impact on lifestyles and politics cannot be disconnected from multiple experiences of migration, displacement and resettlement, a wide range of nuanced and hyphenated identities, and the impact of diasporic processes on familial networks, gender roles, and the emergence of a new middle class with its demands of political representation.

The history of Armenians in Lebanon can be better understood as a project, led by political, ecclesiastical, and intellectual elites, that sought to recast the image of the Armenians not merely as survivors in exile, but rather as a constituent group of the variegated fabric of Lebanese society, crafting its own niche within the social and political system. The Armenians of Lebanon (and Syria) strove to preserve their distinct ethnic, linguistic, and religious identity, as they found themselves caught among competing state-building and nation-building projects (Migliorino 2008, 221-3). In Syria, regardless of the staunchly secular rhetoric under the rule of the Ba'ath party since 1963, Armenian religious institutions were maintained and still act as a modern reinterpretation of the Ottoman *millet* system,<sup>1</sup> therefore mediating between members of the community and the state (McCallum 2012). In Lebanon, on the other hand, the Armenian political parties and religious institutions sought to transform the im-

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<sup>1</sup> Under the Ottoman administrative system, matters pertaining to personal status and family affairs (such as marriage and inheritance) for non-Muslim subjects were devolved to a system of religious courts that applied the canon law of each denomination. During the nineteenth century, the term was used for all the ethno-religious minorities that were recognized by the imperial government through edicts and concessions of special statutes. The ongoing scholarly debate is problematizing previously held assumptions on the *millet* as a homogeneous, institutionalized system, pointing out a variety of context-specific practices and arrangements. Eissenstat (2015) offers an assessment of patterns of 'imperial nationalism' and the ethnicization of confessional identities in the nineteenth century.

age of Armenian post-1915 refugees into that of a respectable working class that could blend into Lebanon's system of power-sharing along confessional lines (Watenpaugh 2015, 619). The intention was to portray the Armenians as a trustworthy, hard-working community, and to insulate them from the stigma attached to geographically contiguous ethnic or religious groups (such as Palestinians, Kurds, Shi'a, Dom) that were loathed by the Beirut bourgeois elites.

Through her ethnography of Burj Hammoud, Nucho (2016) shows how Armenian political parties built a dense network of relations and services, and started to claim physical control of some areas on the edge of Beirut in order to claim their share in Lebanon's sectarian system. Nondescript peri-urban spaces were therefore transformed into distinctly Armenian places, with an explicit identity reinforced by linguistic, religious, and ethnic markers. This process was not tantamount to the formation of an ethnic ghetto, but a deliberate choice to become part of Lebanon's social fabric and political system as one of its confessional communities. Whereas Tölölyan (2000) investigates Armenian elites mainly in terms of transition from nationalism-in-exile to diasporic transnationalism, Nalbantian (2008) warns against a monolithic understanding of Armenian identity, whether in Lebanon or in the rest of the diaspora. On the one hand, multiple definitions of homeland (*hayrenik'*) and patriotic (*hayrenamerj*) identity persist until today. On the other hand, the process of identity redefinition among the Armenians of Lebanon was beset by internal fissures and outbreaks of conflict.

This essay discusses the role played by Armenian Church institutions and leaders throughout the tensions and conflicts that affected the Armenians of Lebanon at large. The term 'Armenian clergy' is used here to define the upper clergy and ecclesial bodies of the Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia of the Armenian Apostolic Church,<sup>2</sup> and the Patriarchate of Cilicia of the Armenian Catholic Church. Three levels of conflict are considered here: internal (within the Armenian community in Lebanon), domestic (between Armenian and other social actors in Lebanon), and international (between the diaspora and the Soviet government before 1988). As Barak (2002) explains, the study of intra-communal dimensions of conflict is usu-

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<sup>2</sup> Due to historical circumstances, the Armenian Apostolic Church has two distinct authorities, each with its own organs and jurisdiction: the Catholicos of All Armenians, based in Etchmiadzin, with a preeminent supremacy in spiritual matters; and the Catholicos of Cilicia, based in Sis (the former capital of the medieval Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia), who traditionally ruled over the dioceses of the Ottoman Empire. The Patriarchates of Jerusalem and Constantinople (Istanbul) were highly revered for spiritual and political reasons, the latter in particular acting as a representative of the whole Armenian nation in the Ottoman system of government. A separate Catholicosate of Aghtamar, whose jurisdiction had shrunk in Ottoman times over the southern shores of Lake Van, remained vacant after 1895.

ally underresearched. Approaches based on the securitization theory (Darwich, Fakhoury 2016) tend to overlook the role of identity entrepreneurs, essentialize identities, and fail to capture the dynamics of power-brokering and patronage networks that were (and still are) crucial in the Lebanese parliamentary elections and the related clientelist distribution of resources. Intra-communal diversity, according to Barak, is a source of political tension, but paradoxically also has a mitigating effect on inter-communal conflicts, because it prevents the rise of consistent, homogeneous blocs. For smaller groups such as the Armenians of Lebanon, internal conflict among different groups, vying for hegemony and resorting to alliances with non-Armenian actors, was both a factor of distress and a guarantee that the community would not be aligned with only one of the competing non-Armenian coalitions in the country. As the example of 1958 will show, the conflict between the main Armenian political parties ensured that there was an Armenian voice in both the variegated Lebanese blocs that clashed together (personal communications with the author and interviews 2017). The methods and venues for addressing and mitigating intra-communal disputes also shed light on the processes of bargaining and mediation in conflict management.

A focus on the specific history, location, and agency of the Armenians in Lebanon also helps to escape the tight boundaries of minoritization and appreciate instead their active engagement in politics and society (Nalbantian 2018).

In addition to the existing literature, this essay is based on fieldwork and interviews realized in Burj Hammoud, Antélias, and Beirut (neighborhoods of Jeitawi, Nor Hajin and Qobayat) in May 2015 and January 2017.<sup>3</sup>

## 2 Survival and Settlement. The French Mandate

The political and social development of the Armenians in Lebanon is marked since the beginning of the French Mandate by the role played by political parties based on mass mobilization rather than Church bodies, notables or bourgeois elites.

While a presence of Armenian Catholic communities under the protection of the Maronite Church was attested since the eighteenth

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<sup>3</sup> For the sake of consistency, the prevalent English spelling has been adopted for all personal and place names. For the same reason, the term 'Dashnak' and 'Hunchak' are used here in lieu of the Western Armenian versions 'Tashnag' and 'Hnchag', which are prevalent in Lebanon. The prevalent English spelling has been adopted also for all personal and place names in Arabic.

century (Gergian 2011),<sup>4</sup> with some Armenian Catholic officials reaching the highest echelons of the local Ottoman administration (Akarlı 1993),<sup>5</sup> the bulk of the Armenian community stems from the descendants of the survivors of the 1915 massacres. The first wave of Armenian refugees reached Lebanon in 1922, after the 1921 Treaty of Ankara modified the border between Kemalist Turkey and the French Mandate of Syria, which had been provisionally defined by the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres. A second wave took place in 1939, with the incorporation of the Hatay district into the Republic of Turkey. According to Harboyan (1998, 38-40), nearly 25,000 Armenians from the region of Adana (Cilicia), and 8,000 from different parts of Anatolia joined the 2,000 Armenians that already lived in the former autonomous region of Mount Lebanon. Similar numbers, obtained by civil registers and French archival sources, are given in Greenshields (1978, 110, 124-7).<sup>6</sup>

The law on citizenship that was signed by the French High Commissioner on 19 February 1925 granted a privileged path for the naturalization of Armenian refugees as citizens of the French Mandate of Lebanon. Both the French authorities and the Maronite bourgeoisie favoured the inclusion of Armenians into the Lebanese polity as a demographical balance to the annexation of Muslim-majority areas into Greater Lebanon in 1920 (Firro 2003, 120-2).<sup>7</sup>

Although with very diverse social and geographical backgrounds, the refugees shared the experience of being uprooted, exiled, and extremely vulnerable to economic distress. In many instances, they were unable to move or settle freely, and stagnated in precarious camps erected on the edge of urban areas, while French attempts at resettlement schemes in the countryside failed spectacularly (Greenshields 1978, 342-3). In many respects, the dynamics among

<sup>4</sup> Documents and archival sources registered the presence of Armenian Catholics in Ghazir since 1715 and Bzommar since 1742. See also Iskandar 1999.

<sup>5</sup> Two Armenian Catholics were nominated governors (*mutaşarrıf*) of the autonomous province of Mount Lebanon: Garabet Davoudian (Daud Paşa) from 1861 to 1868, and Ohannes Kouyoumdjian (Ohannes Paşa) from 1912 to 1915.

<sup>6</sup> Greenshields notes, like Andézian (2017), that discrepancies and inconsistency between sets of data and various estimates should be attributed to the presence of undocumented refugees, lack of crosschecks, and patterns of swift displacement from different areas of Syria and Lebanon. The 1932 census returned a total of 26,102 Armenian 'Orthodox' (Apostolic) and 5,890 Armenian Catholics, or 3.7% of the entire population of Lebanon. According to the same census (Greenshields 1978, 434), Armenians accounted for 19.3% of the entire population of Beirut.

<sup>7</sup> Following the signature of the Treaty of Sèvres on 10 August 1920, the French High Commissioner Henri Gouraud proclaimed on 1st September 1920 the creation of the state of 'Greater Lebanon' and its detachment from the rest of Syria. The new polity incorporated the areas of Tripoli, Saida, and the Biqa' Valley, which had a clear Muslim majority, into the former autonomous Mount Lebanon, which had a solid Maronite Christian majority.

the Armenians who had recently settled, and between them and those who already lived in Mount Lebanon before 1915, was similar to what has been studied by Der Matossian (2011) in the case of the Armenians of the British Mandate of Palestine. A crucial role was played by associations of laymen who shared the same geographical origin. These groups provided immediate relief assistance, funds, and material help that helped the newcomers, and those trickling from Aleppo and Damascus in 1925, to leave the refugee camp established in the Mar Mikhael neighbourhood and in the Quarantine area near the port, and built permanent houses in the areas of Medawar, Qobayat, and Burj Hammoud. Here, relations of proximity (based upon kinship or geographical origin) were preserved or reconstructed through spatially-based clusters of settlement, largely due to the involvement of compatriotic unions. The name of the newly-built neighbourhoods reflected the areas of origin (Adana, Marash, Sis). In addition to the edification of residential buildings and workshops, a defining moment was usually the foundation of schools with Western Armenian in lieu of Ottoman Turkish as the privileged medium of education and conversation (Jebejian 2011).

The role played by the Armenian Churches at this stage was mostly limited to immediate relief and spiritual guidance.

Like other Eastern-rite Catholic Churches, the Armenian Catholic Church had established its seat in the Kisrawan district of Mount Lebanon in the first half of the eighteenth century, with Abraham Peter I receiving the patriarchal pallium from the Pope in 1742. In 1830, a sultanal decree established a second Armenian Catholic patriarchate 'for civil purposes' in Constantinople, until Patriarch Anthony Peter IX merged both seats (the canonical and the 'civil') in 1866. In 1911, then-Patriarch Paul Peter XIII was prevented to return to Constantinople by the Unionist cabinet and wandered around until 1928, when he eventually settled in Beirut (Iskandar 1999, 70-9). In Palestine, the Armenian Catholic Church was wedged between the Armenian Apostolic Patriarchate of Jerusalem and the Latin-rite Custody of the Holy Land, with the former accusing the Armenian Catholics of excessive Latinization and the latter accusing them of excessive nationalism (Andézian 2017). The situation was markedly different in Lebanon, where the presence of Eastern-rite Catholics was well established and the French bestowed a certain preferential treatment to the Armenian Catholics (Greenshields 1978, 453).

The first Armenian Evangelical Church was founded in Beirut in 1922, later followed by five other congregations. Particular emphasis was given to educational and medical facilities (Hovyan 2010).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The decree 60 of 1936 listed all the religious denominations that were officially recognized by the Mandatory authorities and granted internal autonomy within the scope

The Armenian Apostolic Church was in a state of disarray during most of the Mandate era. Sahak II, then-Catholicos of Cilicia, was expelled from Sis to Aleppo in the summer of 1915, and later to Jerusalem, where the Patriarchal See had been vacant since 1910 (Der Matossian 2011). In July 1916, Sahak II was notified of the Ottoman decision to merge the two Catholicosates of Cilicia and Aghtamar with the two Patriarchates of Constantinople and Jerusalem, creating Sahak II as the new Catholicos-Patriarch in Jerusalem (Güllü 2016). He was allowed to return to Sis after the end of the war, but again had to flee to Damascus in precipitous conditions.<sup>9</sup> Only in 1930 the Catholicosate found a permanent seat in a former orphanage in what was then a beachside village north of Beirut, and turned it into a seminary for training priests and school teachers. The compound was later enlarged and endowed with a library, a museum with several artifacts and manuscripts that had been saved between 1915 and 1921, in addition to a cathedral. Frail and in ailing conditions, Sahak II was assisted by Papken I as coadjutor, outliving him and remaining in his post until 1939. He was briefly succeeded by Bedros IV in 1940, and afterwards the position remained vacant for three years (Iskandar 1999, 121).

Meanwhile, in the Catholicosate of Etchmiadzin, after the establishment of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic and the death of Gevorg V in 1930, the seat remained vacant for two years, until the election of Khoren I in 1932. Despite being more accommodating than his predecessor, the new Catholicos in Etchmiadzin was severely constrained by Stalin-era purges against the Church, and died in mysterious circumstances in 1938, leaving the seat vacant for seven years.

Under these burdensome circumstances, Church figures were not entirely silent or absent from the public sphere. Even in his fragile condition, Sahak II lamented the conditions of the refugees living in the Medawar camp, near the port area in Beirut, and warned the French military authorities that the Church could not be deemed responsible

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of personal status (family law and inheritance regulation). Each recognized denomination needed to submit its own canon law, with its related judicial procedures and organs. The decree recognized the Armenian 'Orthodox' and the Armenian Catholic as distinct denominations. On the other hand, the decree 146 of 1938 added a general, encompassing 'Protestant' denomination that included all Evangelical congregations, both Arabic- and Armenian-speaking.

The Armenian Apostolic canon law was based on the compilation of Mkhitar Gosh, while the Armenian Catholic canon law was modified in order to make it more compatible with the Roman Catholic canon law (Rabbath [1973] 1986, 102-3, 117).

<sup>9</sup> In February 1922, Sahak II wrote a pastoral letter from Damascus, "where there is no Patriarchal throne nor sceptre nor chancery nor chancellor nor seal nor crimson ink, where everything is dark" (Դամասկոսէն ուի ոչ Հայկապետական Աթոռ ու Գաւազան, ոչ հայրապետական դիւան ու դիւանադպիր, ոչ կնիք եւ ոչ ժիրանէկարմիր կան, այլ ամենայն ինչ սեւ է) (Iskandar 1999, 99-100).

for the instances of moral decay, including crime, prostitution, and street begging. In 1929, the Catholicos of Cilicia decried the vulnerability of his flock faced with the aftershock of the global economic crisis, the scarcity of proper employment, the difficulty to pay for rents and basic expenses. He also bemoaned the propagation of Communism among the Armenians of Lebanon (Greenshields 1978, 449).

In general, however, the Catholicosate of Cilicia had a conservative, quietist tradition that prevented the Church from a wider involvement in politics. The 1863 Ottoman Armenian National Constitution, which had redesigned the prerogatives of the Patriarch of Constantinople in his capacity as the secular leader of the Armenian *millet* in the Ottoman Empire, and had created an Armenian National Assembly dominated by bourgeois laymen, remained a frame of reference even after the end of World War I and the dramatic recomposition of ecclesial geographies (Der Matossian 2011). The three major Armenian political parties that had dominated the late Ottoman period were able to reorganize their ranks and files, after the initial period of resettlement, when the central role was played by the philanthropic activities of the Armenian General Benevolent Union. The main issue of contention among the Armenian political parties was the temporality of settlement in Lebanon (provisional or definitive), and the relationship with Soviet Armenia. The Armenian Revolutionary Federation (Dashnak) considered itself as the heirs to the First Armenian Republic that had been smashed by the Red Army in December 1920, and had therefore developed a clearly anti-Bolshevik position (Tölölyan 2000). The Dashnak anticipated that Armenian nationalism could remain palatable to the Soviet leadership only if it remained strictly contained within the geographical borders of the Armenian SSR and the ideological boundaries of the projects of *korenizacija* and national-territorial delimitation in the Soviet Union. On the other hand, the Communists denounced the Dashnak as petit bourgeois who were more concerned with nationalist deviationism than with the interests of the working class (Ter Minassian 1978).

During the Mandate era, the Dashnak, which originally had a socialist-nationalist and anti-clerical stance, aligned at first with the Lebanese nationalists and anti-French candidates against the liberal-bourgeois, pro-establishment Ramgavar, and after 1937 became an ally of the moderate Constitutional Bloc of Bishara el-Khoury, who became the first President of independent Lebanon in 1943. In the meantime, the Hunchak were increasingly aligned with the Soviet Union. A former member of the Hunchak youth, Artin Madoyan, was one of the founders and first members of the Central Committee of the Syrian-Lebanese Communist Party (Harboyan 1998, 32-8).

### 3 **Rapprochement and Repatriation Attempts**

The Popular Front doctrine on the eve of, and during World War II had a significant impact on the relations between the Soviet government and the Armenian diaspora in the Middle East. This carried significant consequences for the Apostolic Sees in Etchmiadzin and Antélias.

In 1943, the Karabagh-born and German-educated Karekin Hovsepian was enthroned as Karekin I, Catholicos of the Great House of Cilicia. Formerly a bishop under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of Etchmiadzin, Karekin I actively participated in the 1918 battle of Sardarabad and fell captive during the Turkish conquest of Kars.<sup>10</sup> In later years, he was appointed to several posts in Etchmiadzin and other dioceses in the USSR, where he established a *modus vivendi* with the Bolshevik authorities. In 1934, he was then appointed as an envoy to the Armenian communities in the USA, where he remained as primate after 1938. His ability in fundraising and his profile made Karekin palatable to the Dashnak, who appreciated his patriotic credentials gained on the ground between 1918 and 1921, and to the Kremlin, where he was deemed amenable.

In the context of the world war, a wide consensus coalesced into the candidature of Karekin Hovsepian as Catholicos of Cilicia, with the potential to bridge the ideological gulf between the Soviet government and the Dashnak, which by then were largely hegemonic in the Armenian diaspora across the Middle East. Such were the expectations around its selection that Karekin I was allowed to travel to Soviet Armenia in 1945, and participate in the election and consecration of Gevorg VI as the new Catholicos of All Armenians in Etchmiadzin. One notable accomplishment of Karekin I as Catholicos of Cilicia was his promotion of cultural exchanges between the two Holy Sees and the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem. In 1947, his secretary Simon Simonian became the editing director of *Hask*, the official journal of the Catholicosate of Cilicia, which had been founded in 1932 and mostly included religious and literary content. Simonian chose to add a special supplement dedicated to Armenian Studies, which quickly involved internationally-recognized Armenologists, theologians, historians, and writers (Armenian Church Catholicosate of Cilicia 2013). In this capacity, Simonian had the opportunity to forge many personal relations with Soviet Armenian intellectuals who were already involved in the project of *Nayiri*, an Aleppo-based literary

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**10** The proclamation of the short-lived, Dashnak-dominated First Republic of Armenia on 28 May 1918 happened at the same time of the battle that temporarily halted the advance of the Ottoman army during the last stages of the Caucasus campaign in World War I. These events carried great emotional significance for Armenian nationalists, and contributed to the patriotic credentials of Karekin I.



journal founded in 1941 by Antranig Dzarugian that featured writings by Silva Kaputikyan, Hovhannes Shiraz, and the late Yeghishe Charents.<sup>11</sup> These publications, like *Spurk* (started in 1958), became a channel for cultural encounters and conversations between nationalist intellectuals in the Armenian SSR and in the Armenian diaspora, and eventually turned into a beacon of Armenian intellectual life in the Middle East (Migliorino 2008). This intellectual landscape is clearly a testament to the role of the Church and related organs in the edification of a complex structure of relations between Soviet Armenia and the diaspora, in an ambivalent process of identity-building that was strongly defined by the intrusion of competing ideological agendas and contentious politics (Panossian 1998).

Much more controversial was the support given by Karekin to the repatriation scheme (*nerkaght*) devised by the Soviet government in 1946. This project aimed at relocating as many as 90,000 Armenians of the diaspora, particularly in Syria and Lebanon, to the Armenian SSR. Laycock (2016) writes that the repatriation is a greatly overlooked page in Armenian diasporic history, a page that is haunted by memories of failure, delusion, disillusionment, and sense of betrayal. The grim reality of everyday Soviet Armenia was very distant from the imagined homeland that was expected, and the reception of newcomers was lukewarm at best. According to Panossian (2006, 306), around 30,000 Armenians of Syria and Lebanon were selected as a possible target for the resettlement scheme, which included a substantial transformation of the notion of homeland, recasting Soviet (Eastern) Armenia as the area to which ethnic Armenians should 'return', even when their background was Western Armenian. The Soviet Union favoured a process of de-Libanization of the Armenians in Lebanon, while the newly independent Lebanese state welcomed the prospect of getting rid of unwelcome Communist supporters (Nalbantian 2019).

The shortcomings of the repatriation scheme fed the anti-Communist discourse of the Dashnak party, which increasingly supported an alliance with Lebanese pro-Western parties in the name of Soviet containment and shared hostility towards pan-Arab nationalism, while the moderate Ramgavar and the socialist Hunchak, although ideologically distant on paper, coalesced in the name of Armenian patriotic unity (Harboyan 1998, 78-9; Krikorian 2007, 44). Repatriation schemes to the Armenian SSR were halted after 1948, but they left a scar in the relationship between Karekin I and the Dashnak,

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<sup>11</sup> The journal *Nayiri* was relocated to Beirut in 1951 and aligned often with the pro-Soviet Hunchak party, which had founded its own daily newspaper *Ararad* in 1937. The Armenian press in Lebanon also included the pro-Ramgavar daily newspaper *Zartonk* (Awakening), also founded in 1937, and *Aztag*, the official newspaper of the Dashnak party.

who had strongly criticized the Catholicos for his support to the project. The poor health conditions of Karekin I were a cause of concern for the Soviet Union, especially after the Patriarchate of Jerusalem became vacant after the death of Guregh in 1949, while the Patriarchate in Istanbul had been vacant since the death of Mesrob I in 1944. With the collapse of the credibility of the Catholicosate of Etchmiadzin, Soviet officials feared an extensive Dashnak takeover in the Middle East, in order to transform it into the new worldwide centre of the Armenian Apostolic Church (Tchilingirian 2016). The Soviet schemes around the Catholicosate of Cilicia were also carefully monitored by the US State Department and the US Chargé d'Affaires in Beirut, who monitored the ecclesial developments and regularly briefed about the activities of the Lebanese Communists among the Armenian community (Stocker 2017).

Another serious reason of concern for the Soviet government was the outreach capacity of Gregory Peter XV Aghajanian, who had been elected Patriarch of the Armenian Catholic Church in 1937 and created Cardinal by Pope Pius XIII in 1946. An expert on the Soviet Union, Aghajanian opposed the repatriation project, claiming that a distinct Armenian identity and religious heritage could be preserved only outside the oppressive Communist rule. On the other hand, Soviet authorities and even *Etchmiadzin*, the official journal of the Apostolic Catholicosate of All Armenians, kept denouncing him as hostile, nationalist, and part of the 'Uniate' scheme deployed by the Vatican as a sort of 'Trojan horse' in order to allegedly attack both the Soviet state and the Orthodox and Oriental Churches in Eastern Europe and the Middle East (Whooley 2016).<sup>12</sup>

When Karekin I died in 1952, the selection of the new Catholicos of Cilicia became a decisive matter for the Soviet officials, who wanted to prevent the total irrelevance of the See of Etchmiadzin and a full Dashnak takeover in Syria and Lebanon.

#### 4 Conflicts around the Church between 1956 and 1958

The selection of a new Apostolic Catholicos of Cilicia was stalled from 1952 to 1956. The Dashnak held an overwhelming majority in the ecclesial committees and organs that, according to the Church statute, selected the electoral delegates that were supposed to choose among the candidates nominated by the clergy. The ensuing conflict between clergy and elected laity in the nomination process was

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<sup>12</sup> As part of his project of revivification of the Armenian Catholic presence in Lebanon, Aghajanian launched in 1947 a periodical journal called *Massis*, with religious, literary, cultural and political content.

therefore first and foremost a political conflict among the Dashnak and their rivals in Lebanon, as well as between the Dashnak and the Soviet Union (Tchilingirian 2016).

On 30 September 1955, Vazgen I was enthroned as the new Catholicos of All Armenians in Etchmiadzin. He announced an apostolic visit to Lebanon that was scheduled to take place in perfect timing with the date that had finally been chosen for the nomination of the new Catholicos of Cilicia. His presence was supposedly meant to reassert the connection, even if not on subordinate terms, between the two Apostolic Sees. On his arrival in Beirut, on 12 February 1956, Vazgen I was greeted by thousands of mainly Hunchak and Ramgavar supporters and officials, who denounced that the Dashnak were devising several irregularities in the forthcoming election. Vazgen I sensed his impotence in the process and, fearing that his further involvement in that quagmire could only lead to a net loss of his residual prestige, left Lebanon just before the scheduled selection of the new Catholicos of Cilicia (Stocker 2017).

Even with the boycott of the non-Dashnak members of the electoral college, a Dashnak-supported candidate was finally elected on 14 February 1956. The new Catholicos, Zareh I, was widely seen as very aligned with the Dashnak. On 5 March, a conclave of bishops was held in Cairo under the auspices of Vazgen I. The conclave deemed the selection of Zareh I as illegitimate on many levels, leading to a delay of the ceremony of consecration. On the other hand, the Catholicosate of Cilicia reacted with a declaration that insisted on its autonomy from Etchmiadzin, prompting what has been defined as both a national and an ecclesial crisis (Nalbantian 2013b). While not technically a schism within the Armenian Apostolic Church, the climate of tension between the two Holy Sees was accompanied by reciprocal accusations of being a puppet church serving a political patron. The See of Etchmiadzin was criticized from the Dashnak side for jeopardizing the national unity of the Armenians in Lebanon through an untenable claim of hierarchical supremacy that masked a complete surrender to Communism. The See of Cilicia was criticized from Etchmiadzin, the Soviet government, the Ramgavar and the Hunchak as having become little more than a Dashnak militia stronghold (Tashjian 2017).

The disappearance of a handful of precious relics, which were connected to the legitimacy of the See of Cilicia, became another issue of contention that exposed the involvement of several actors (Nalbantian 2013b). Even after the ceremony of consecration of Zareh I a group of clerics and laymen tried to establish an anti-Catholicosate either in Lebanon or in Syria, vying for political support in both countries and claiming that the proclamation in Antélias had not taken place in accordance with due canonical process. In the meantime, the newly elected Catholicos asserted his ecclesial jurisdiction on the important dioceses and prelatures of Greece, Cyprus, and Iran

(Tashjian 2017). The international relevance of the dispute, which had already been exposed by the unexpected involvement of Egypt in favour of Vazgen I and Etchmiadzin, is also clearly articulated in the documents and cables from the US Embassy in Beirut, which oscillated between the desire to reinforce Zareh I against pro-Soviet propaganda and the concern that an overt US declaration resulted in the Catholicos being painted as a pawn in the game of American imperialism in the region (Stocker 2017).

A photograph published on pro-Dashnak *Aztag* on 23 February 1956 shows the new Catholicos in full garb seated next to the Lebanese President Camille Chamoun, a fervent supporter of Lebanese isolationism and pro-Western foreign policy who despised progressive politics and was staunchly anti-Marxist (Aulas 1985).<sup>13</sup> Zareh I also sought the support of the full support of Syrian President Shukri al-Quwatli, who had resumed power in 1955 after a six-year hiatus and a string of military coups.<sup>14</sup> Despite his neutralist foreign policy, grounded in the opposition to the Baghdad Pact and the Truman Doctrine, al-Quwatli was concerned by the growth of the Syrian Communists under the expedient leadership of Khalid Bakdash (W.Z.L. 1957). The ecclesial crisis in the Catholicosate of Cilicia flared up precisely at the same time when al-Quwatli called for a national unity government in Syria, as a way to curtail the domestic challenge posed by the Communists and the Ba'ath Party. The Syrian President legitimized the election of Zareh I as a way to assert the relevance of the Syrian state and its institutions, even if that indirectly defied Lebanese sovereignty (Nalbantian 2013b).

While plans for the formation of an alternative diocese loyal to Etchmiadzin never materialized, the rift sparked by the choice of the new Catholicos became even more acute in the wake of the political turmoil that followed the Suez Crisis in October 1956 and the establishment of the United Arab Republic between Egypt and Syria in February 1958. The 1957 general election in Lebanon was dominated by an increased polarization between the mainly Christian conservative camp, rallied around President Chamoun, and the pro-Nasserist opposition, headed by Prime Minister Rashid Karami

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**13** After he rose to political prominence during the French Mandate, Chamoun became a staunch defender of Lebanese nationalism and played a pivotal role in Maronite politics even after the end of his tenure as President of the Republic. He eventually became the chairman of the Lebanese Front coalition of Christian right-wing militias from 1976 to 1978 (Snider 1984).

**14** Shukri al-Quwatli was one the leaders of the National Bloc (later rebranded as National Party), the main opposition movement against the French Mandate, and became the first President of independent Syria in October 1945 (Khoury 1987). Although a conservative on economic matters, al-Quwatli's foreign policy was strongly rooted in his aversion to the Hashemite monarchies in Jordan and Iraq.

and Kamal Jumblatt. In accordance with their visceral, shared anti-Communism, the Dashnak allied themselves with Chamoun, while the Hunchak and the Ramgavar sided with the lists backed by Karami and Jumblatt in the Beirut electoral constituencies. The intensity of the political conflict appears clearly from the narratives and the discourses deployed by the newspapers of the three Armenian parties (Krikorian 2007, 44), as well as from personal memories recollected in Burj Hammoud.

In May 1958, the hostility between the two political camps, which had opposing views about the place of Lebanon in the map of the world during the Cold War, eventually erupted in violent clashes in different parts of the country. A civil war and a possible Nasserist takeover was avoided when the Eisenhower administration opted for a military intervention, one day after the overthrow of the pro-Western monarchy in Iraq.<sup>15</sup> The general crisis led to an outbreak of violence between the Dashnak and the Hunchak in various parts of Beirut and Burj Hammoud, with armed clashes, assassinations, and denunciations of supposed traitors (Tashjian 2017). The Hunchak and the Ramgavar, who held Chamoun responsible for the Dashnak 'occupation' of the Catholicosate, seized control of Nor Hajin and Qobayat, on the western bank of Beirut River, while the Dashnak, who shared the same domestic political objectives of the President and hoped to boost their credentials at the US Embassy, consolidated their grip on Burj Hammoud (Geukjian 2007). The conflict marked the redefinition of some urban spaces in the Beirut metropolitan area as specifically Armenian spaces, and at the same time led to the spatial segregation of these neighbourhoods into two fiercely hostile camps, with conflicting claims over public places, streets, squares, worship places, creating distinct networks of assistance and socialization (Harboyan 1998, 84).<sup>16</sup>

The power struggle among the different factions was accompanied by a process of construction of the Armenian 'other'. Even after the end of violent clashes, Armenian parties continued to perceive and define each other through the image of the internal enemy (Nalbantian 2013c). This process was hardly exceptional in the Leba-

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<sup>15</sup> The crisis ended with a political compromise that allowed the election of Fouad Chehab, then Commander-in-chief of Lebanese Armed Forces, as President, and the return of Karami as Prime Minister.

<sup>16</sup> The spatial dimension of the intra-Armenian conflict was intensified by the location of the Armenian-majority areas in the periurban 'misery belt' that spanned on the edge of Beirut urban area. Burj Hammoud, in particular, was positioned at the crossroads between the port area and the Palestinian and Shi'i-majority areas of Nabaa and Tell al-Zaatar along the north-south axis, and between the stronghold of Achrafieh in East Beirut and the Christian hinterland of Mount Lebanon along the west-east axis (Kassir 2011, 492).

nese context, where practices of political mobilization often capitalized on discourses of territory, historical legitimacy, belonging, and identity. Tropes of communal resilience, perseverance, and steadfastness were commonly juxtaposed to the dehumanized, savage, cruel, beastly nature of the enemy. Equally common were the images that depicted internal dissent as betrayal or cooperation with the enemy (Maasri 2009). The process of othering and rebordering the Armenian public sphere caused long-lasting resentment.

## 5 Third Parties and Positive Neutrality

In the wake of the effort at détente inaugurated by the new President Chehab, several moderate intellectuals tried with limited success to heal the breach among the competing Armenian factions.

The journal *Spurk*, directed by Simon Simonian, was relaunched in February 1959 with the intention of providing a third, independent voice to the Armenian readership in Lebanon. Simonian and other op-ed writers argued that the Armenian parties had behaved out of selfish interest and in a deceptive manner, manipulating the great majority of their followers. *Spurk* criticized the interference of ‘dirty’ politics in church affairs and called for a negotiated solution through a summit meeting in order to address the crisis between the See of Cilicia and Etchmiadzin. The journal also argued that intensified cultural ties, based on a shared heritage, could strengthen the relationship between Soviet Armenia and the diaspora in the Middle East (Tashjian 2017). This goal was partly achieved, although one might question the rather naïve assumption that these cultural relations were devoid of political interference from the Soviet side, or of their exploitation in diplomatic relations. The emergence of an Armenian third force in the Lebanese political landscape was largely less successful. The electoral system, with recurrent instances of gerrymandering, favoured volatile coalitions based on pure expediency, and discouraged unaffiliated candidates.<sup>17</sup> At the time of casting votes, some of the third force proponents leaned to the right wing led by the Phalanges, while others sided with the left-leaning Hunchak.

In 1963 Khoren I became the new Catholicos of Cilicia. The subsidence of the tensions related to the choice of the previous Catholicos helped to put animosities on hold in the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Armenian Genocide in April 1965. As was the case for other denominations in Lebanon, these years were marked

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<sup>17</sup> Thanks to their alliance with the Christian right wing, all seats reserved for the Armenians in the Lebanese parliament were Dashnak members or supporters from 1953 to 1972 (Geukjian 2009).

by huge social transformation and intense ideological mobilization. Lebanese politics became increasingly defined by sharply opposing views on the issue of Palestinian armed militancy and the sustainability of the sectarian power-sharing formula. Many Armenians, disillusioned with pan-Armenian nationalist rhetoric, often leaned towards non-Armenian parties, either to the Phalanges Christian right wing or to the pro-Palestinian revolutionary left, framing their militancy in ideological rather than in confessional or ethnic terms (Harboyan 1998, 102). The political discourse, even among the Armenians, was dominated by the volatile developments in the regional environment, the Palestinian question and its repercussions on Lebanon, and the future of the sectarian power-sharing formula. While many political actors challenged sectarianism for the sake of reapportioning parliamentary seats and influential positions of power, leftist groups advocated a radical overhaul of the entire system.<sup>18</sup>

In the wake of the deterioration of the security situation in Lebanon after the 1968 parliamentary election and the rising confrontation between the Lebanese army and Palestinian paramilitary groups, all the Armenian factions held meetings in order to envisage a common strategy, protect the Armenian areas, and improve ecclesial relations between the See of Cilicia and Etchmiadzin.

Anticipating the future outbreak of the civil war, the Armenian parties and members of Parliament established in 1974 a joint committee for the protection of Armenian-majority areas and the management of basic needs through street-level offices (Nucho 2016). The doctrine of 'positive neutrality' (*drakan čězok'ut'ium*) emerged because almost all Armenian leaders appeared aware of the potentially catastrophic consequences of a sequel of the 1958 crisis for the very survival of the Armenian presence in Lebanon (Geukjian 2007).

Except for the Communists and the pro-Palestinian revolutionary leftists, many Armenian leaders upheld their loyalty to the sectarian power-sharing system, rejected calls for radical secularization, and reiterated an image of Lebanon as a safe haven for persecuted

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**18** The relation with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the Palestine Liberation Organization was especially crucial for Hagop Hagopian and the establishment of the militant Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia in 1975. This connection should not be seen as particularly surprising in the political context of the early 1970s, when the Palestinian cause was not framed in confessional terms, and was often defined as part of a much wider pan-Arab and anti-colonial revolutionary mobilization. The surge of radical left-wing nationalism in the Middle East, with its adoption of the Maoist strategy of 'people's war' and similar experiences of guerrilla warfare in Indochina and Latin America, and its different interpretations of the relation between Marxism and nationalism in postcolonial contexts, is thoroughly debated in the historiography of the Middle East but clearly outside the scope of this article.

minorities,<sup>19</sup> in line with the Christian right wing (Snider 1984). However, the same leaders rejected the idea of a partition of the country, and the prospect of being swallowed into a Maronite canton in the overwhelmingly Christian hinterland north of Beirut (Aulas 1985). Caught in a classical security dilemma, the Armenian parties decided to avoid an escalation of the military confrontation with neighbouring Palestinian militias, even if that meant the hostility of the Lebanese Front and their former ally Chamoun, who felt betrayed by the Dashnak. According to Geukjian (2007), the term 'neutrality' is possibly misleading because the Armenian factions were lightly armed in order to patrol the territories they perceived as their own (mainly Burj Hammoud and Nor Hajin), while trying to maintain channels of negotiation among some of the warring sides. This uneasy armed neutrality was often misunderstood and did not effectively insulate the Armenian areas from external shelling and subconflicts, such as the confrontation between the right-wing Lebanese Front and the Syrian troops of the Arab Deterrent Forces in early 1978.

The position of the churches in this period was particularly delicate. The Armenian Catholic Church had its new Patriarch in July 1976, when Hemaïag Peter XVII, formerly the abbot of the Mekhitarist order in Venice, succeeded to Ignatius Peter XVI. The new Patriarch had to move among the stances of the other Eastern-rite Catholic Churches and the Vatican, which were hard to reconcile. The Greek Catholic Church often expressed pro-Palestinian positions.<sup>20</sup> The Maronite Church was bitterly divided between the Patriarch Anthony Peter Khoreish, who called for moderation and a political settlement of the Lebanese crisis, and the monastic orders, which not only provided ideological support to the Christian right wing, but also actively participated in the conflict, and sometimes even joined the most hard-line militias. The Vatican, which prized Lebanon as a cornerstone of its political map of the Middle East, was extremely disappointed by the diffusion of extreme nationalism among the Maronite lower ranks and sent high-level envoys in order to enforce stricter hierarchical discipline and call for religious coexistence and the respect of Lebanese sovereignty (Henley 2008). Under the papacy of Paul VI and especially John Paul II, the Armenian Catholic Church tried to contribute to the strategy of moderation supported by the

<sup>19</sup> The theory of the 'mountain refuge', originally formulated by Henri Lammens and based on the assumption that Mount Lebanon had historically been a place of safety for Christian minorities, was a recurrent theme in Lebanese Christian nationalist narratives. It entailed claims of historical continuity, rootedness, and insulation from the rest of the Middle East (Salibi 1988, 130-50).

<sup>20</sup> The Melkite or Greek Catholic Church is the Arabic-speaking, Byzantine-rite Catholic Church that is widespread in historical Palestine, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon, with its headquarters in Damascus.



Vatican diplomacy. The attempts at achieving reconciliation and a negotiated settlement of the conflict could not prevent the interne-cine warfare among competing Christian sides in 1989, which pitted the Lebanese Forces led by Samir Geagea against the Lebanese army units loyal to Michel Aoun (Geukjian 2007).<sup>21</sup>

In the Armenian Apostolic Church, the situation was complicated by the poor health conditions of Catholicos Khoren I, who was supported by Karekin Sarkissian as coadjutor in 1977. The latter was elected as the next Catholicos in 1983 under the name Karekin II of Cilicia. According to Migliorino (2008), the new Catholicos relentlessly expressed his wish for an end of the hostilities, but strived to maintain a cautious stance amidst the competing Lebanese factions and the Syrian government, particularly because he did not want to jeopardize the status of the Armenian community in Syria under the rule of Hafez al-Assad. Karekin II preferred to focus on a reform of the Armenian Apostolic system of education and clerical training, which arguably tried to preserve the pivotal role of the Holy See of Cilicia in the complex relationship between the Armenian communities of Lebanon and Syria, the worldwide diaspora, and the Syrian government. While the official line of the Holy See was centred on neutrality, a much more proactive role was played by Khatchig Babikian, who served on the Central Executive Council of the Catholicosate, but had also been a Dashnak-leaning parliamentarian since 1957 and holder of influential ministerial posts in several cabinets since 1960. In his double ecclesial and institutional role, Babikian maintained effective connections with the Armenian diaspora outside Lebanon and served as a prominent associate of the negotiation committee created by Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Peter Sfeir after his appointment in 1986 (Geukjian 2014).

Karekin II also invested heavily in pastoral visits and ecumenical dialogue, particularly through his role in the Middle Eastern Council of Churches.<sup>22</sup> The 1988 earthquake relief operations, the Karabagh question, and the independence of post-Soviet Armenia, fostered the full normalization of the relations between the See of Cilicia and Etchmiadzin, where Karekin II of Cilicia was elected in 1994 as Catholicos of All Armenians under the name Karekin I.

The new Catholicos of Cilicia, Aram II, upheld a policy of ecumenical dialogue, but could not stop the return to political polarization

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**21** The 'War of Liberation' launched by Michel Aoun (at that time Commander of Lebanese Armed Forces, and currently President of the Republic) is generally considered as the final stage of the civil war in Lebanon and resulted in Aoun being ousted from power, while Syrian troops assumed control over most of Lebanon and started to implement the Ta'if Agreement.

**22** Founded in 1974, the Middle Eastern Council of Churches includes nearly all Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, Evangelical, and Catholic Churches of the Middle East.

among Armenian parties in the Lebanese post-war landscape. Paradoxically, the 1989 Ta'if Agreement, which revamped the power-sharing formula and granted more seats to Armenian Apostolic community, created new tensions as it eroded the hegemony of the Dashnak and exposed contrasting strategies. In the first post-war parliamentary election in 1992, Dashnak, Hunchak, and Ramgavar failed to reach a compromise over the composition of electoral lists, prompting the latter to boycott the poll. The political fragmentation of the Armenians of Lebanon was aggravated by the strategies of the Syrian security apparatus and by Yervant Melkonian, the ambassador of the newborn Republic of Armenia, who pressured Hunchak and Ramgavar to reestablish their alliance in order to weaken the Dashnak, at that time engaged in a tense confrontation with Armenia's President Levon Ter-Petrosyan. Finally, Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri was determined to avoid the formation of an Armenian bloc in parliament, and resorted to handpicking his own Armenian candidates for the electoral lists in the Beirut constituency. The increasing tension between Rafiq al-Hariri and the Dashnak eventually prompted Aram II to use his moral suasion and warn all Armenian candidates that communal interests should be placed above personal and partisan ones, in order to spare the Armenian community from further divisions (Geukjian 2009).<sup>23</sup>

## 6 Conclusions

The Armenian clergy did not play an overarching role in Lebanese politics because of its historical constraints, the mode of settlement of the Armenians in Lebanon after World War I, and the establishment of Armenian parties based on mass participation and high ideological mobilization. Rather than a proactive subject leading conflict management strategies, the Armenian Churches in particular the Apostolic Great House of Cilicia) became a site of conflict among local and international actors who saw ecclesial organs as instruments for their strategies and dissemination of propaganda. The 1956 church elections in the See of Cilicia were a particularly prominent example of the fight among rival non-state actors and states. Rela-

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**23** In the 2000 parliamentary election, the Hunchak and Ramgavar sided with Rafiq al-Hariri, who overwhelmingly won in Beirut and defeated the Dashnak, who were then aligned with pro-Syrian President Émile Lahoud. After the assassination of Rafiq al-Hariri in 2005, the sharp polarization of the Lebanese arena (on political rather than purely sectarian grounds) left a profound impact on the Armenian public sphere, with the Hunchak and Ramgavar siding with the pro-USA, anti-Syrian 'March 14' coalition, and the Dashnak firmly siding with Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement, which later formed a coalition with Hezbollah and the pro-Syrian 'March 8' coalition.

tions among the Armenian Churches were therefore largely a reflection of the shifting political dynamics among the Armenian parties, or between the Soviet government and the diaspora. At best, the Armenian Churches tried to reduce the level of animosity among competing factions through a discourse of national unity and shared heritage. In their position as protectors of Armenian identity, culture, and language, the Churches navigated among internal frictions and external pressures, yet managed to maintain a unifying role between the Armenians of Lebanon (and Syria), the worldwide diaspora, and public institutions.

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# Alcune considerazioni sulla situazione attuale della lingua svana

## Breve storia degli studi e pianificazione linguistica

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**Abstract** This paper features the current situation of the Svan-speaking linguistic communities in Georgia, the Georgian language policies and the attempts made to make Svan a literary language. In 2013, Richard Bærug published *Svan Youth Literature*, a book containing short stories written by young Svans; this and other recent publications seem to bear witness to the vitality of this endangered language. Anyway, language policy in Georgia still looks far from accepting the Kartvelian languages different from Georgian as separate languages, although other minority languages are earning evident privileges. Recent studies have shed light on some of these problems, which however take on greater meaning when viewed from the diachronic perspective hereby presented.

**Keywords** Svan. Georgia. Kartvelian. Language policy. Language planning. Minorities. Caucasus.

**Sommario** 1 Introduzione alla storia degli studi cartvelologici sullo svano. – 2 Cenni di grafematica e letteratura svana. – 3 La *kartveloba* e le minoranze linguistiche cartveliche in Georgia. – 4 Conclusione.

## 1 Introduzione alla storia degli studi cartvelologici sullo svano

Il Caucaso è un «labirinto etnografico» (Geiger et al. 1959, 5); così affermano quattro insigni studiosi in un volume del 1959 dedicato alla descrizione delle popolazioni caucasiche,<sup>1</sup> e gli svani, oggetto di questo contributo, fanno parte in pieno di tale ginepraio di popoli. Gli svani (o suani, etnonimo *šwanär*) appartengono al gruppo linguistico cartvelico (sud-caucasico), che comprende anche i georgiani, i megreli e i lazi; abitano la regione geografica dello Svaneti, situata nella parte occidentale della Transcaucasia, confinante per gran parte con la Repubblica di Cabardino-Balcaria. Territorialmente, lo Svaneti, dal 1996 riconosciuto come patrimonio dell'umanità dall'UNESCO,<sup>2</sup> si divide tra le regioni georgiane di Rač'a-Lečxumi e Basso Svaneti e Samegrelo-Alto Svaneti. Il primo censimento significativo fu effettuato sotto il dominio russo, e riportò la presenza di 15.756 svani (1897);<sup>3</sup> seguì nel 1926 un'ulteriore indagine, che divideva gli svani secondo criteri sia etnografici che linguistici: 13.218 abitanti, ma 13.142 parlanti. Il linguista olandese Aert H. Kuipers si lamentò di questi ultimi dati, dovuti, secondo lui, a incomprensioni; la prima edizione della *Большая Советская Энциклопедия Sovetskaja Enciklopedija (BSE)* (Grande Enciclopedia Sovietica) del 1944 (vol. 50, p. 371) riportava infatti che gli svani sarebbero stati oltre 23.000. In seguito al 1939, improvvisamente, ogni notizia sulla popolazione svana scomparve dalle indagini etnografiche russe, per ricomparire, curiosamente, nei censimenti del 2002 e del 2010. Karl H. Schmidt (1991) ha indicato la presenza di circa 34.500 parlanti svano, facendo riferimento a un censimento, non ben specificato, del 1967; altri studi, come quello condotto da Kevin Tuite (1997), individuano un numero di parlanti che va dai 35.000 ai 40.000. Quel che è bizzarro, è che ulteriori fonti, ad esempio l'edizione del 2020 di *Ethnologue*,<sup>4</sup> riportano soltanto 14.000 parlanti circa; non completamente a torto, dunque, qualche anno dopo, Tuite scriverà che il numero degli svani non dipenderebbe tanto dai censimenti, quanto «on whom you ask» (2015, 226). Degno di maggior credito è il dato che si rifà ai registri anagrafici (Tuite 2015), i quali riportavano che nel 2006 nello Svaneti vivevano 22.889 svani.

1 Geiger, Halasi-Kun, Kuipers, Menges: «The student or scholar who in the course of his work has to deal with the peoples of the Caucasus is confronted with an ethnographical labyrinth, in which he is the more likely to lose his way as in nine cases out of ten his field of specialization centers outside the Caucasus» (Geiger et al. 1959, 5).

2 <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/709>.

3 Per questo e altri censimenti cf. Geiger et al. 1959.

4 <https://www.ethnologue.com/language/sva>.

La particolarità che rende la lingua svana interessante è che essa, pur appartenendo alla famiglia linguistica delle lingue cartveliche<sup>5</sup> (sud-caucasiche), non fu immediatamente riconosciuta come tale. Nonostante non vi siano molti dati sullo svano anteriori al XIX secolo, desta interesse un testo del 1745, composto da Vaxušt'i Bat'onišvili, intitolato *Ağc'era sameposa sakartvelosa* (Descrizione del regno di Georgia), dal quale sono stati attinti diversi materiali relativi alla situazione linguistica nei territori dell'antica Colchide e dell'Iberia caucasica. L'idea che la lingua georgiana, la sola – tuttora! – ad avere una tradizione scritta in quei luoghi, fosse da considerare la garante linguistica dell'unità territoriale ha da sempre e inevitabilmente determinato giudizi negativi nei riguardi di ogni altra lingua parlata in territorio georgiano. Questo è il motivo principale per il quale il megrelo viene trattato con disprezzo nell'opera di Bat'onišvili:

*enit arian – didni da c'arčinebulni kartulis enita, aramed akwst tvisica ena, garna c'amqdari kartulive, vitarca: ġmerti-ğoronti, čemi-čkimi.*<sup>6</sup>

[I megreli] colti e potenti parlano georgiano, sebbene dispongano di una loro lingua, una sorta di georgiano degradato, come: *ğmerti-ğoronti* “dio”, *čemi-čkimi* “nostro”. (Bat'onišvili 1745, § Odišisatws)

Altra è invece la situazione dello svano, la cui significativa differenza dalle altre lingue cartveliche portò gli storici, almeno inizialmente, a considerarlo come un idioma a sé stante:

*ena twsi akust sak'utari, garna uc'q'ian kartulica.*<sup>7</sup>

[Gli svani] hanno la loro lingua, ma conoscono anche il georgiano. (Bat'onišvili 1745, § Suanetisatws)

In termini di fonetica e morfofonologia, la lingua svana è notevolmente distante dal georgiano (Schmidt 1991), e si presume che questa si sia separata dal ramo principale delle lingue cartveliche nel secondo millennio a.C. In generale si può dire che la grammatica e il lessico dello svano abbiano risentito molto del contatto con le lingue caucasiche settentrionali; non solo, anche la geografia del territorio svano, montano e isolato dal resto della Transcaucasia, ha contribu-

<sup>5</sup> Che comprende, oltre allo svano, anche il georgiano, lingua ufficiale della Georgia, il megrelo e il lazo.

<sup>6</sup> ენით არიან - დიდნი და წარჩინებულნი ქართულის ენითა, არამედ აქვსთ თვისიცა ენა, გარნა წამყდარი ქართულივე, ვითარცა: ღმერთი-ღორონთი, ჩემი-ჩქიმი.

<sup>7</sup> ენა თუსი აქუსთ საკუთარი, გარნა უწყიან ქართულიცა.



ito a rendere la lingua più conservativa, dunque più immune ai cambiamenti a cui andarono incontro le altre lingue cartveliche. Fu l'esploratore e naturalista Johann Güldenstädt che, nel 1787, grazie a tavole di comparazione lessicale, scoprì la parentela dello svano con il georgiano e, in generale, con le altre lingue sud-caucasiche. Stando a quanto dichiarato dal Museo Nazionale Georgiano, non vi sarebbe alcun manoscritto antico composto in lingua svana (Bærug 2013, 101); è plausibile che alcuni documenti siano stati distrutti in circostanze sconosciute o, addirittura, che non siano ancora stati trovati. Una sorte non dissimile è spettata al testo sacro del Cristianesimo, che non ha tuttora ricevuto una traduzione integrale in svano, se non per il *Nuovo Testamento*, tradotto negli anni Novanta da Uč'a C'indeliiani (Bærug 2013, 103).

Tra i primi testi in lingua svana figura il ლუშნუ ანბან *Lušnu anban* (Abecedario svano), un'opera pubblicata anonimamente a Tbilisi nel 1864, che nella sua impresa di pianificazione linguistica non si basa, tuttavia, sull'alfabeto georgiano, il *mxedruli*, quanto su quello cirillico, giacché a quel tempo lo Svaneti era sotto il controllo dell'Impero Russo. Durante il corso del XIX secolo, vennero pubblicati numerosi dizionari. Si ricorda in questa sede lo *Сванско-русский словарь Svanско-russkij slovar* (Dizionario svano-russo) del 1890 di A.H. Gren, autore peraltro di una raccolta di testi in lingua svana (Gren 1890); degna di menzione è anche l'opera di I. Nižaradze *Русско-сванский словарь Russko-svanskij slovar* (Dizionario russo-svano), datata 1910; altro testo rilevante è quello di B. Nižaradze, intitolato *Грузино-сванско-русский словарь Gruzino-svansko-russkij slovar* (Dizionario georgiano-svano-russo), opera di notevole importanza che basa il proprio contenuto lessicale su una particolare variante dello svano, l'alto bäl, la più conservativa da un punto di vista linguistico. Anche se l'opera venne compilata a inizio Novecento, la sua pubblicazione si ebbe solo un secolo dopo, nel 2007; ciò nonostante, si è ritenuto, forse a ragione, che la diffusione di opere di questo tenore fosse supportata da grandi personalità georgiane, come il famoso poeta Ilia Č'avč'avadze (Bærug 2013, 103). Nel 1911 venne pubblicato a Londra lo *English-Svanetian Dictionary*, compilato da Oliver Wardrop, seguito molti anni dopo da un altro dizionario in lingua inglese, lo *Svan-English Dictionary*, a cura di Chato Gudjedjiani e Letas Palmaitis, edito dalla casa editrice Caravan Books nel 1985, che pochi anni dopo darà alle stampe i celebri quattro volumi della serie *The Indigenous Languages of the Caucasus*, curata da John A. Greppin. Altre opere, notevoli per il loro valore lessicografico, sono lo სვანურ-ქართული ლექსიკონი. ჩოღურული კილი *Svanur-kartuli leksik'oni. Čoluruli k'ilo* (Dizionario svano-georgiano. Dialecto ciōloro), pubblicato nel 1994 a cura di Aslan Liparteliani, e lo სვანურ-რუსულ-ქართული ლექსიკონი *Svanur-rusul-kartuli leksik'oni* (Dizionario svano-russo-georgiano), stampato a Tbilisi nel 2001 ad opera di Karpez Dondua;

ciò nonostante, l'opera che più di altre è riuscita nel proprio tentativo di esaustività è stata lo სვანურ-ქართული ლექსიკონი *Svanurkartuli leksik'oni* (Dizionario svano-georgiano) di V. Topuria e M. Kaldani, pubblicato nel 2000. D'interesse per i caucasologi è lo *Словарь кавказских языков Slovar' kavkazskich jazykov* (Dizionario delle lingue caucasiche), opera composta da Klimov e Chalilov, in cui figura anche lo svano, pubblicata nel 2003. Non mancano, peraltro, neppure materiali didattici pensati per lo studio dello svano da parte di madrelingua georgiani, come il volume di Topuria del 2008 intitolato სვანური ენის სახელმძღვანელო *Svanuri enis saxelmdzğvanelo* (Manuale della lingua svana) o il testo di Zurab Ć'umburidze, pubblicato un anno prima, სვანური ენა *Svanuri ena* (Lingua svana), che contiene, oltre che una sezione grammaticale per l'apprendimento, anche dei campioni testuali in prosa e in poesia.

## 2 Cenni di grafematica e letteratura svana

Nonostante lo svano figuri come una lingua non scritta, non si possono ignorare i notevoli tentativi di pianificazione linguistica messi in atto sin dalla fine del XIX secolo, in primo luogo con la pubblicazione del già citato *Lušnu anban*. Oggi si tende tuttavia, considerata la parentela linguistica con il georgiano e l'attuale situazione geopolitica, ad utilizzare l'alfabeto *mxedruli*, con alcune varianti grafiche condivise dal megrelo e dal lazo. Si era già discusso in passato circa l'alfabeto che le altre lingue cartveliche avrebbero dovuto usare; in particolare, P. Uslar, generale e linguista russo, in un'opera del 1887, riconosceva il *mxedruli* come

l'alfabeto più perfetto tra quelli esistenti, che sarebbe ottimo non solo per la lingua abcasia, ma per tutte le lingue caucasiche, anche se questa scelta non servirebbe propriamente gli interessi dell'Impero Russo. (Uslar 1887, 48)<sup>8</sup>

In effetti, anche nei riguardi della variante dell'alto bäl (cf. Tabella 1), la più ricca fonologicamente, l'alfabeto *mxedruli* non necessita di introdurre espedienti grafici significativi come digrammi e trigrammi, diffusissimi nelle altre lingue caucasiche che fanno uso dell'alfabeto cirillico.

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<sup>8</sup> Ove non diversamente indicato, tutte le traduzioni sono dell'Autore.

**Tabella 1** Alfabeto svano (alto bäl) con traslitterazione e trascrizione fonetica in caratteri IPA

<i>Mxed.</i>	ა	ბ	გ	დ	ე	ვ	ზ	ს	რ
Trasl.	a	ā	ä	ǣ	b	g	d	e	ē
IPA	a	a:	æ	æ:	b	g	d	ɛ	ɛ:

<i>Mxed.</i>	ჩ	ც	ძ	წ	ჭ	ხ	ჯ	ღ	ყ
Trasl.	v	z	t	i	ī	k'	l	m	n
IPA	v	z	t <sup>h</sup>	i	i:	k <sup>ʔ</sup>	ɫ	m	n

<i>Mxed.</i>	ო	პ	ჟ	რ	ს	ტ	ც	ძ	წ
Trasl.	o	ō	ö	ō	p'	ž	r	s	t'
IPA	ɔ	ɔ:	œ	œ:	p <sup>ʔ</sup>	ʒ	r	s	t <sup>ʔ</sup>

<i>Mxed.</i>	უ	ჴ	ჵ	ჶ	ჷ	ჸ	ჹ	ჺ	჻
Trasl.	u	ū	ü	ǔ	p	k	g	q'	š
IPA	u	u:	y	y:	p <sup>h</sup>	k <sup>h</sup>	ɣ	q <sup>ʔ</sup>	ʃ

<i>Mxed.</i>	ჩ	ც	ძ	წ	ჭ	ხ	ჯ	ღ	ყ
Trasl.	č	c	dz	c'	č'	x	dž	f	é
IPA	tʃ <sup>h</sup>	ts <sup>h</sup>	dʒ	ts <sup>ʔ</sup>	tʃ <sup>ʔ</sup>	x	dʒ	f	e:

<i>Mxed.</i>	ღ	ჴ	ჵ	ჶ	ჷ	ჸ	ჹ	ჺ	჻
Trasl.	j	w	q	'	ə	ə	h	we	wi
IPA	j	w	q <sup>h</sup>	ʔ	ə	ə:	h	œ	y

\* Digrammi utilizzati in alcune varianti grafiche per indicare rispettivamente i grafemi <რ> e <ჴ>.

Uno dei primi testi in prosa svano fu lo ძველი და ახალი სვანეთი *Dzveli da axali svaneti* (Antico e nuovo Svaneti), del 1926, composto da E. Gabliani, fondatore del primo museo svano. Degna di menzione anche la ქართული (სვანური) ზალხური სიმღერების კრებული *Kartuli [svanuri] xalxuri simğerebis k'rebuli* (Raccolta di canti popolari georgiani [svani]), pubblicata nel 1957 dalla casa editrice T'eknik'a da šroma, a cura di A. Axobadze. M. Gudžedžiani, A. Šanidze e V. Topuria tradussero in georgiano alcune poesie svane, confluite in un'opera bilingue data alle stampe nel 1939, mentre è più recente il testo, che vede ancora una volta tra gli autori A. Šanidze, oltre che M. Kaldani e Z. Č'umburidze, სვანური ენის ქრესტომათია *Svanuri enis krest'omatia* (Crestomazia della lingua svana), contenente anche informazioni sulle tradizioni e le leggende degli svani. Ovviamente, la maggior parte della letteratura in lingua contiene brani che trascrivono principalmente situazioni della vita quotidiana o conversazio-

ni; eccezion fatta per la produzione di Goguca Xergiani, autrice di una raccolta di opere originali in due volumi intitolata მახვში ბაბა *Maxvši Baba*. Il primo volume, pubblicato nel 1999, contiene diverse opere letterarie in prosa con traduzione georgiana, mentre il secondo volume del 2004 ha al suo interno testi in lingua svana e descrizioni accurate di notevoli personalità della storia del popolo svano.

Un ulteriore testo del 2013, dal titolo ლუშნუ ბაფშრე ლიტერატურა *Lušnu bapšre lit'erat'ura* (Letteratura giovanile svana), segue il modello ideato dalla Xergiani: contiene infatti numerose storie a tema storico e folcloristico, composte da giovani ragazzi svani. Quest'opera nasce da un post condiviso su Facebook, che indicava una competizione sponsorizzata dal Grand Hotel Hušba di Bečo e dal suo direttore, il norvegese Richard Bærug. Il testo, con traduzione italiana, è il seguente:

*lax si xi 12-xemka 18-teka ləzai (1995-2001 zäiži lətav), si ču džamiēda monac'ileob axk'əda lušnu lit'erat'urā k'onk'urste 2013 zaigsa! čvatir lušnud tavisupal tema – imvaiži – žicxāndads – livadži, sgvebd liziži mādei edžk'alibži si maivai džalat' [...] nambuāl kek'ves ləsv 4-xanka 16 gverdteka mādei 2000-xanka 8000 sit'q'va – lėkvisg. ira sačukrāl. mačēne nambuālār ira ečeisga. drev: 1 mart' 2013.* (Tuite 2015, 235)<sup>9</sup>

Se hai dai 12 ai 18 anni (nato dal 1995 al 2001), puoi partecipare alla competizione di letteratura svana del 2013! Scrivi in svano su un qualsiasi tema – qualunque tu voglia – le tue aspirazioni, i tuoi successi o qualcosa che ti piaccia [...]. Il testo deve essere lungo dalle 4 alle 16 pagine o dalle 2000 alle 8000 parole. Ci saranno premi per le migliori storie. Scadenza: 1° marzo 2013.

I lavori selezionati, 8 in totale, furono inseriti in un'antologia pubblicata l'anno stesso (Bærug 2013); Kevin Tuite (2015) ha esposto i principali criteri ortografici utilizzati dagli autori delle storie, in genere poco codificati e tra loro discordanti, e commentato la genesi dei testi.<sup>10</sup> Ciò che desta curiosità, e che fungerà da introduzione al-

<sup>9</sup> ლახ სი ზი 12-ხემქა 18-თექა ლგზაი (1995-2001 ზაიჟი ლგთავ), სი ჩუ ჯამიედა მონაწილეობ ახკვდა ლუშნუ ლიტერატურა კონკურსთე 2013 ზაიგსა! ჩვათირ ლუშნუდ თავისუფალ თემა - იმვაიჟი - ჯიცხანდადს - ლივაჯი, სგვებდ ლიზიჟი მადეი ეჯკალიბიჟი სი მაივაი ჯალატ' [...]. ნამბუალ ზეკვეს ლესვ 4-ხანქა 16 გვერდთექა მადეი 2000-ხანქა 8000 სიტყვა - ლექვისგ. ირა საჩუკრალ. მარენე ნამბუალარ ირა ეჩეისგა. დრევ: 1 მარტ 2013.

<sup>10</sup> «Not all comments posted on the contest's Facebook page were positive: some criticized 'mistakes' in the use of Svan, or what they took to be unwarranted code-mixing [...]. Another commentator cited the passage in the Georgian constitution concerning the status of Georgian as sole official language. Other writers, however, vigorously defended the competition (most of these comments were posted in Georgian, but quite a few in Svan)» (Tuite 2015, 236).

la seconda parte di questo contributo, è quanto si legge sul retro del volume. È infatti presente una descrizione in quattro lingue (svano, georgiano, inglese e norvegese) dei contenuti del testo, ma la traduzione di un passo in particolare è degna di analisi. Si osservi dapprima la descrizione in svano:<sup>11</sup>

*lōjr kadžac'onex 8 māmačvene nambuals lit'erat'uraš k'onk'ursxen-ka [...]. māg nambual lōjr li lušnu ninži, xedvājdo li minorul nin sa-kartveloisga. (Bærug 2013)<sup>12</sup>*

Questo libro presenta le migliori otto storie di un concorso di letteratura [...]. Tutte le storie sono scritte in svano, che è una lingua minoritaria in Georgia.

Il testo, sia in svano, così come in inglese e norvegese, riporta la stessa frase; non si comprende dunque la scelta di rendere diversamente la seguente proposizione in georgiano:

*c'igni c'armogidgent 8 sauk'eteso motxrobas lit'erat'uruli k'onk'ursidan [...]. q'vela motxroba dac'erilia svanur enaze, romelic aris kartveluri ena. (Bærug 2013)<sup>13</sup>*

Questo libro presenta le migliori otto storie di un concorso di letteratura [...]. Tutte le storie sono scritte in svano, che è una lingua cartvelica.

La differenza tra le frasi è notevole; in poche parole, in tre lingue su quattro viene riconosciuto allo svano lo statuto di lingua minoritaria, mentre in un'altra lingua (il georgiano) lo svano viene citato come lingua cartvelica, senza alcun accenno alla situazione sociolinguistica della lingua in oggetto. Per quanto possa trattarsi di un errore di traduzione non intenzionale, questa situazione richiama all'attenzione un problema ben più vasto, che concerne il riconoscimento dello svano come minoranza linguistica all'interno dello Stato georgiano.

**11** Le varianti in inglese e norvegese, nelle quali lo svano viene descritto anche come lingua regionale, sono le seguenti (Bærug 2013): «This book presents the 8 best stories from a literature competition [...]. All stories are written in the Svan language, which is a regional minority language in Georgia» e «Denne boka presenterer de 8 beste fortellingene fra en litteraturkonkurranse [...]. Alle fortellingene er skrevet på svansk som er et regionalt minoritetsspråk i Georgia».

**12** ღორდ ქაჯაწონეხ 8 მამაჩვენე ნამბუალს ლიტერატურაშ კონკურსენქა [...]. მკე ნამბუალ ღორდ ლი ლუშნუ ნინჟი, ხედვადო ლი მინორულ ნინ საქართველოსკა.

**13** წიგნი წარმოვიდგენთ 8 საუკეთესო მოთხრობას ლიტერატურული კონკურსიდან [...]. ყველა მოთხრობა დაწერილია სვანურ ენაზე, რომელიც არის ქართველური ენა.

### 3 La *kartveloba* e le minoranze linguistiche cartveliche in Georgia

La presenza di competizioni letterarie e di tanta letteratura scientifica sulla lingua svana potrebbe essere una prova ben valida della vitalità di cui, ancora oggi, questo idioma sembrerebbe godere. Tuttavia, la situazione non è poi così felice; lo svano è stato inserito dall'UNESCO all'interno della categoria delle lingue a rischio<sup>14</sup> e, tuttora, un buon numero di famiglie – soprattutto quelle che ormai vivono al di fuori dei territori dello Svaneti – preferiscono non trasmettere la loro lingua ai figli, educandoli al solo uso della lingua nazionale: il georgiano. Inoltre, lo svano non è affatto considerato una lingua minoritaria in Georgia, a differenza invece dell'abcaso, dell'armeno o dell'azero, e non si registra ad oggi la presenza in questa lingua di programmi televisivi o radiofonici, né di testate giornalistiche supportate da istituzioni statali. Da queste constatazioni sorge dunque una questione molto dibattuta: lo svano è una lingua o un 'dialetto'? Rispondere a questa domanda, più che essere il compito di un linguista (per il quale la supposta differenza tra i termini peraltro non sussiste), sembrerebbe essere compito dei politici. Le scelte compiute negli ultimi anni in materia di politica linguistica georgiana mostrano un'apertura maggiore rispetto al passato; ciò nonostante, l'idea generale è che il georgiano rappresenti la lingua comune di tutti i 'cartvelici', simbolo e massima espressione della ქართველობა *kartveloba* (Georgianità), che accomuna georgiani, megreli, lazi e svani.

Sotto l'Unione Sovietica, tuttavia, la lingua georgiana rappresentava a suo modo una realtà minoritaria, nonostante fosse al tempo stesso la lingua ufficiale e maggioritaria di una nazione in cui erano presenti minoranze ossete, abcase, armene, azere, così come quelle mingrele e svane. Nel 1872, un comunicato ufficiale russo esprimeva l'inutilità dell'apprendimento della lingua georgiana, che «renderebbe i bambini stupidi» (*Droeba* 1872, 3), consigliando di utilizzare il russo come lingua familiare. Contemporaneamente, «per minare l'unità nazionale georgiana» (Amirejibi-Mullen 2012, 184), la Russia vietò l'insegnamento del georgiano nelle regioni del Samegrelo e dello Svaneti, intraprendendo opere di pianificazione linguistica nei confronti delle due lingue cartveliche minoritarie. Un ulteriore tentativo, sebbene fallimentare, fu quello di rendere in megrelo e svano la liturgia nelle rispettive regioni in cui queste lingue erano parlate; nel 1904, in un discorso pubblico, l'arciprete I. Vostorgov, direttore delle scuole di studi religiosi, accusò i georgiani di voler 'georgianizzare' abcas, osseti e megreli imponendo a questi la lingua georgia-

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.unesco.org/languages-atlas/en/atlasmap/language-id-1058.html>.

na (Werth 2006, 91; Friesen 2015). Tra il 1930 e il 1935, venne stampato un giornale interamente in megrelo, chiamato ყაზაყიში გაზეთი *Q'azaq'iši gazeti* (La gazzetta dei contadini), sostituito dal 1936 con un altro quotidiano, il კომუნარი *K'omunari* (Il comunardo), le cui stampe furono interrotte nel 1938. Questo tentativo di alfabetizzazione, fortemente appoggiato dai bolscevichi, non ebbe eco e, come conseguenza, l'uso del megrelo e dello svano diminuì di anno in anno. Ciò che è certo è che, nonostante il georgiano e lo svano siano tra loro inintelligibili, diversi intellettuali georgiani del Novecento hanno proposto e diffuso la visione, più romantica, del georgiano come დედა ენა *deda ena* (lingua madre) di tutti i cartvelici. Così, ad esempio, T. Put'k'aradze (2002, 2003) considera lo svano soltanto una forma dialettale del georgiano; anche il già citato Č'avč'avadze e Gogebašvili sono della stessa idea, ritenendo che ogni gruppo nazionale riconosciuto debba avere una sola lingua madre, con un alfabeto (Tuite 2015, 232). Se si accettassero queste premesse, riconoscere allo svano lo statuto di lingua equivarrebbe a riconoscere agli svani un'identità nazionale autonoma rispetto a quella georgiana:

By identifying Svan and Mingrelian as 'dialects' – even though acknowledging that they are not mutually intelligible with Georgian – Putkaradze and other who share his views assert that they serve the same function as Georgian dialects in the accepted sense (such as Pshavian, Tushetian or Gurian); that is, as nonliterary vernaculars vis-à-vis the single literary language of the Georgian nation. As did Gogebashvili, they define Georgianness [*kartveloba*] on the basis of linguistic affiliation (speakers of Kartvelian languages) rather than a shared liturgical language. As one would expect, proponents of this view frequently recall the Tsarist educational policy of the 1880s and 1890s, and the simultaneous publication of Svan and Mingrelian texts in Cyrillic script, to justify their conviction that Russia is trying to stir up separatist sentiment among Mingrelian and Svans as part of a 'divide and conquer' strategy in the South Caucasus. (Tuite 2015, 232)

Lo stato georgiano non ha ancora ratificato la *European Charter of Regional and Minority Languages* (ECRML),<sup>15</sup> trattato internazionale concluso a Strasburgo il 5 novembre del 1992. Negli interessi della *Carta*, v'è infatti la tutela e la promozione delle lingue minoritarie, attraverso l'uso di queste nella vita pubblica e privata. La *Carta* è entrata in vigore il primo marzo del 1998, in seguito alla ratifica da parte di cinque Stati. In Georgia – sostiene N. Kuprašvili (2010) – v'è

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/treaty/148>. Si ricordi che la Georgia fa parte del Consiglio d'Europa dall'aprile del 1999.

la paura che riconoscere formalmente altre lingue possa provocare nuove tendenze separatiste in un Paese già lacerato dall'occupazione russa; molti intellettuali ritengono che la sottoscrizione di quel documento possa indebolire uno Stato già debole. Nella *Carta* si proponeva lo studio e l'utilizzo delle lingue regionali nell'educazione, nel sistema giuridico, così come nei servizi pubblici e nei media, ma come hanno notato Put'k'aradze, Dadiani e Šerozia (2010), il documento afferma chiaramente che la nozione di lingua regionale «non include né i dialetti della lingua ufficiale dello Stato né le lingue dei migranti» (European Charter of Regional and Minority Languages 1992, art. 1, a, ii). A questo punto, stabilire se lo svano fosse una lingua o un dialetto del georgiano non era più ormai solo una questione linguistica – e forse non lo è mai stata – ma un cruciale problema politico.<sup>16</sup>

La risoluzione di legge sull'educazione adottata nel 1997 garantiva alle minoranze il diritto di ricevere un'istruzione scolastica nelle loro lingue;<sup>17</sup> ciò è significativo, considerando che, secondo alcuni studi (Buchmann 2006, 7), il 13% dei georgiani non avrebbe come propria lingua madre il georgiano. Nel 2010, l'inglese è diventato obbligatorio nelle scuole di primo grado,<sup>18</sup> mentre il russo rimane facoltativo;<sup>19</sup> la scelta, fa notare Amirejibi-Mullen, coincideva peraltro con l'intento di Saak'ašvili di «svincolare la Georgia dall'orbita della Russia» (Amirejibi-Mullen 2011, 285). La questione della lingua svana, così come per il megrelo e il lazo, è ancora dibattuta. Nel 2010, il ministro per l'Integrazione T. Iak'obašvili ha riconosciuto che queste lingue meritano di essere quantomeno tutelate in quanto patrimonio culturale di tutti i georgiani. Tuttavia, quando nel 2016 venne pubblicata una possibile bozza per la ratifica della *Carta*, le lingue minoritarie a comparire erano le seguenti:<sup>20</sup>

- abcaso (lingua caucasica, ramo abcaso-circasso);
- armeno<sup>21</sup> (lingua indoeuropea, ramo armeno);
- avaro (lingua caucasica, ramo nakho-daghestano);

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<sup>16</sup> Nik'a Laliašvili, membro del Parlamento Georgiano, si esprime così: «According to the charter, the awarding of official status is prerogative of the state, so we would not send to the Council of Europe lists of languages that might pose a threat to our country» (Kuprašvili 2010). Altre voci, come quella di Mamuk'a Arešidze, direttore del *Caucasus Centre for Strategic Investigations*, sono state più drammatiche: «[Recognizing these languages,] we could end up in the same situation as Dagestan [...]. Every village will have its own language!» (Kuprašvili 2010).

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.parliament.ge/en/kanonmdebloba/modzebne-kanonmdebloba>.

<sup>18</sup> <https://old.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=22153>.

<sup>19</sup> <https://momavali.wordpress.com/education/varazashvili>.

<sup>20</sup> <https://rm.coe.int/168070c832>.

<sup>21</sup> Da intendersi come lingua armena orientale (Արևելահայերեն), lingua ufficiale della Repubblica d'Armenia e della Repubblica dell'Artsakh, autoproclamatasi indipendente dal 1992.



- azero<sup>22</sup> (lingua altaica, ramo oghuz);
- curdo<sup>23</sup> (lingua indoeuropea, ramo iranico);
- estone (lingua uralica, ramo balto-finnico);
- greco<sup>24</sup> (lingua indoeuropea, ramo ellenico);
- kist (lingua caucasica, nakho-daghestana);
- osseto<sup>25</sup> (lingua indoeuropea, ramo iranico);
- russo (lingua indoeuropea, ramo slavo);
- siriano (lingua camito-semitica, ramo aramaico);
- tedesco (lingua indoeuropea, ramo germanico);
- ucraino (lingua indoeuropea, ramo slavo);
- udi (lingua caucasica, ramo albanico).

Il documento, curato da I. Osipova e K. Čopliani, è stato approvato da P. Zakareišvili, ministro georgiano per la Riconciliazione e l'Uguaglianza Civile, e V. Crnić-Grotić, membro della Commissione Esperti relativa ai contenuti della *Carta*. Tra i pur numerosi (quattordici) idiomi che vi compaiono, non c'è tuttavia traccia delle altre lingue cartveliche che, evidentemente, agli occhi del governo georgiano non rappresentano una realtà minoritaria. La scelta compiuta nella politica linguistica è, dunque, in evidente contrasto con la posizione della scienza linguistica nei confronti dello svano (e delle altre lingue cartveliche non riconosciute dallo Stato). Goguca Xergiani, autrice già citata in precedenza, nel settembre del 2019 ha lanciato una provocazione al governo georgiano, disponibile in rete<sup>26</sup> e diffusa dal giornale მთის ამბები *Mtis ambebi* (Notizie dei monti):

*čven sakartvelos ganuq'opeli nac'ili vart da sep'arat'ist'oba aravin dagvabralos. vtxovdi mtavrobas, svanuri enis gadasarčēnad rame viḡonot.*<sup>27</sup>

Noi siamo parte integrante della Georgia e nessuno ci accusi di separatismo. Chiedo al governo che faccia qualcosa per la salvaguardia della lingua svana.

<sup>22</sup> Da intendersi come lingua azera settentrionale (Azərbaycan dili), lingua ufficiale dell'Azerbaigian.

<sup>23</sup> Da intendersi come curdo settentrionale, o Kurmancî (کۆمەڵە).

<sup>24</sup> Il greco presente in Georgia non corrisponde al greco moderno. Si tratta di una variante che deriva dal greco pontico (Ποντιακόν ἑλληνιστὶν), considerato da Mark Janse (2002) non un semplice 'dialetto' del neogreco, quanto una lingua a sé.

<sup>25</sup> Da intendersi come lingua iron (Ирон æвзар), parlata nella Repubblica dell'Ossezia Settentrionale-Alania e nella Repubblica dell'Ossezia del Sud, autoproclamata e indipendente dal 1991.

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/mtisambebi/posts/677074372777521>.

<sup>27</sup> ჩვენ საქართველოს განუყოფელი ნაწილი ვართ და სეპარატისტობა არავინ დაგვაბრალბს. ვთხოვდი მთავრობას, სვანური ენის გადარჩენად რამე ვიღონოთ.

Destano interesse i commenti dei fruitori dell'articolo, quasi tutti positivi e a sostegno della causa svana; ne vengono riportati di seguito alcuni: A.Q.: «სვანური ენა ნამდვილად არ უნდა დაიკარგოს» *svanuri ena namdvilad ar unda daik'argos* (La lingua svana non deve assolutamente andare perduta); L.X.: «რატომ უნდა დაიკარგოს ან სვანური ან მეგრული ენა? ვთვლი რომ მრავარფეროვნება ან კუთხითაც ჩვენი ერის სიმდიდრეა» *rat'om unda daik'argos an svanuri an megruli ena? vtvli rom mravalperovneba an k'utxitac čveni eris simdi-drea* (Perché lo svano o il megrelo devono perdersi? Ritengo che la varietà in rapporto a ciò sia un ricchezza della nostra nazione); G.G.: «კარგი იქნებოდა სკოლაში ისწავლებოდეს სვანური და მეგრული ენები, მთელ საქართველოში! ვცდილობთ ვასწავლოთ პატარებს ინგლისური, რუსული და ა.შ. დავაფასოთ და პირველ ადგილზე დავაყენოთ ჩვენი ქართული და მერე ყველა სხვა დანარჩენი!» *k'argi ikneboda sk'olaši isc'avlebodes svanuri da megruli enebi, mtel sakartveloši! vcdilobt vasc'avlot p'at'arebs inglisuri, rusuli da a.š. dava-pasot da p'irvel adgilze davaq'enot čveni kartuli da mere q'vela sx-va danarčeni!* (Sarebbe bene che a scuola si imparassero lo svano e il megrelo. In tutta la Georgia! Ci sforziamo di insegnare ai piccoli l'inglese, il russo, ecc. Apprezziamo invece ciò che abbiamo e mettiamo al primo posto il nostro georgiano e dopo tutte le altre [lingue] rimanenti!); M.T.: «სვანური და მეგრული უნდა ისწავლებოდეს სკოლაში ყველაბთვის, აუცილებელია» *svanuri da megruli unda isc'avlebodes sk'olaši q'velastvis, aucilebelia* (Bisogna che a scuola tutti imparino lo svano e il megrelo, assolutamente); A.A.: «ქისტურიც, აფხაზურიც» *kist'uric, apxazuric* (Anche il kist, anche l'abcaso [devono essere tutelati]). Se svani e megreli sono disposti a chiedere pubblicamente aiuto per la tutela e la salvaguardia della loro identità linguistica, «the government might wish to consider this seriously, since it would reduce the further polarisation of the language question as well as help to avoid potential conflicts» (Amirejibi-Mullen 2011, 330). Sempre nel 2019, lo stesso sito ha pubblicato un questionario<sup>28</sup> intitolato *Quanto bene conosci la lingua svana?* (რამდენად კარგად იცნობ სვანურ ენას? *Ramdenad k'argad icnob svanur enas?*), che ha totalizzato circa 12.000 visualizzazioni; alcuni utenti hanno commentato chiedendo un questionario simile anche per il megrelo. Giorgi Svimonišvili ha scritto un articolo,<sup>29</sup> pubblicato su *Iberia Magazine* il 15 marzo dello stesso anno, dal titolo *Lingua o dialetto?* (ენა თუ დიალექტი? *Ena tu dialekt'i?*), in cui difende lo statuto di lingua rispettivamente del megrelo e dello svano. Il testo di Goguca Xergiani, *Maxvši Baba*, ha raggiunto una certa notorietà in Svaneti, e in alcune famiglie

<sup>28</sup> <https://mtisambebi.ge/news/people/item/951?fbclid=IwAR2QRqUrIyK2xpA-aN5uFrvSg7Ny9f456fspkG000h4aeSUA3iXvih7SHHY>.

<sup>29</sup> <https://bit.ly/3lfrMHN>.

viene letto ai figli come libro di storie, facile a ricordarsi per via dei versi rimati. Ne si dà testimonianza anche in un'intervista<sup>30</sup> pubblicata il 1° giugno 2019, sempre ad opera del sito web *Mtis ambebi*. A parlare, questa volta, è una madre che, dopo aver conversato con il proprio figlio a proposito di *Maxvši Baba*, racconta la sua percezione della situazione sociolinguistica che si vive oggi in Svaneti, non senza un tono di rammarico:

*rom gaiarot axla čvens kučebši. bavšvebs mousment. nebismieri taba saubrobs kartulad. ver gaigonet svanurs. arc ert svans ar vicnob, romelmac ar icis kartuli da vicnob q'ovel meore svans, romelmac svanuri ar icis. es današauli ar aris?*<sup>31</sup>

Se ora passerete per le nostre strade, ascolterete [parlare] i bambini. Ogni generazione conversa in georgiano. Non sentirete lo svano. Non conosco nessuno che non sappia il georgiano e conosco molti svani che non sanno lo svano. Non è questo un crimine?

Un più recente articolo<sup>32</sup> del febbraio 2020, ad opera di Tea Topuria, dal titolo eloquente *La lingua svana si sta perdendo* (სვანური ენა იკარგება *Svanuri ena ik'argeba*), riporta alcune considerazioni di Nargiz Niguriani, filologo madrelingua svano:

*uk've dadga dğis c'esrigši svanuri enis dak'argvis saprtxe. dzalian uc'irt svanuri bavšvebs, odžaxši tu ağar lap'arak'oben svanurad, ar ician. čems dros sk'olaši rom mivdiodit, mašin vsc'avlobdit kartuls, axla p'irikit, svanuri gvakvs sasc'avli.*<sup>33</sup>

La minaccia della possibile scomparsa della lingua svana è ormai all'ordine del giorno. È estremamente difficile per i bambini, non conoscono lo svano se non lo si parla in famiglia. Ai miei tempi, quando andavamo a scuola, studiavamo il georgiano; ora, invece, si dovrebbe studiare lo svano.

I tentativi per la salvaguardia delle lingue a rischio variano nei me-

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/mtisambebi/posts/609673752850917>.

<sup>31</sup> რომ გაიაროთ ახლა ჩვენს ქუჩებში. ბავშვებს მოუსმენთ. ნებისმიერი თაობა საუბრობს ქართულად. ვერ გაიგონებთ სვანურს. არც ერთ სვანს არ ვიცნობ, რომელმაც არ იცის ქართული და ვიცნობ ყოველ მეორე სვანს, რომელმაც სვანური არ იცის. ეს დანაშაული არ არის?

<sup>32</sup> <https://bit.ly/2YK0Vbx>.

<sup>33</sup> უკვე დადგა დღის წერტილი სვანური ენის დაკარგვის საფრთხე. ძალიან უჭირთ სვანური ბავშვებს, ოჯახში თუ აღარ ლაპარაკობენ სვანურად, არ იციან. ჩემს დროს სკოლაში რომ მივდიოდით, მაშინ ვსწავლობდით ქართულს, ახლა პირიქით, სვანური გვაქვს სასწავლო.

todi; in generale, pare che le famiglie svane non riescano più a trasmettere la loro lingua 1) principalmente perché non è più parlata in casa, ma anche 2) perché il georgiano ricopre un ruolo egemone come lingua nazionale. Si è insomma assistito negli anni a una graduale deriva linguistica, che pare condurre all'imminente scomparsa dello svano; di contro, nonostante i tentativi evidenziati in precedenza, non si è creato un senso di lealtà linguistica significativo che controbilanciasse questa tendenza. Ciò considerato, parrebbe che le redini di tale situazione spettino al governo georgiano. Se la Georgia intende rimanere indipendente e, al tempo stesso, tutelare le realtà regionali cartveliche, deve essere in grado di creare un simbolismo che trascenda le differenze etniche e formi un legame comune, pur difendendo i diritti delle minoranze.

#### **4 Conclusioni**

Se si parla di essere neutrali, la linguistica non lo è stata mai, né lo poteva essere. (Cardona 1976, 276)

In un articolo del 2001, Kostas Kazazis riportava che la lingua è cosa «fin troppo importante per essere lasciata ai soli linguisti» (Kazazis 2001, 297). Forse è così, ma, al tempo stesso, non si dovrebbe compiere l'azione contraria e lasciare che le decisioni in materia di politica linguistica spettino ai soli politici. L'esempio dello svano ha mostrato che, nonostante i numerosi studi e i tentativi di alfabetizzazione, gli equilibri in gioco sono più forti di quanto si penserebbe a prima vista. Le istanze che provengono dalla comunità svana non hanno eco sufficiente a provocare significativi mutamenti di rotta nelle politiche linguistiche messe in atto dal governo georgiano. Non è possibile prevedere quali saranno le conseguenze di questa situazione sociolinguistica; ciò nondimeno, talvolta il miglior modo per promuovere un'identità comune sta proprio nel permettere alle differenze di esprimersi liberamente.

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# The Prospect of the Russian Language in Georgia. Insights from the Educated Youth

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**Abstract** After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the status of the Russian language in the new-born Republics became a central issue. In the Southern Caucasus, all the Constitutions promulgated by the three Republics opted for ethnocentric language policies that accepted the titular language as the only State Language. However, the role of the Russian language as a *lingua franca* remained crucial for international communication and everyday interaction. It followed that it continued to play an important role also in education. The present study focuses on Georgia, where a strong derussification policy has taken place in the last decades and aims at understanding to what extent the use of Russian among the young generations has contracted. In particular, we present an analysis conducted on data collected via (i) a survey for young people consisting of questions on their sociolinguistic background and a proficiency test in Russian, and (ii) semi-structured interviews for teachers of Russian and English as Foreign Languages on the research topics.

**Keywords** Georgia. Language policy. Derussification. Russian FL. Sociolinguistics.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 1.1 Language Policy. – 1.2 Georgia Today. – 2 The Study. – 2.1 Methodology. – 2.2 Data Analysis. The Survey. – 2.3 Data Analysis. The Interviews. – 3 Conclusion.

## 1 Introduction<sup>1</sup>

30 years ago, the hammer and sickle flag outside the Kremlin was lowered for the very last time: the Soviet Union officially fell apart. The derussification process has been going on for almost three decades now, but the ex-satellite countries are still influenced by the relatively invisible, yet powerful presence of the Russian Federation and of the Russian language. There appears to be no clear trend on the way the newly emerged post-Soviet countries reacted to the collapse as, in spite of some similar traits, each of them has responded through specific language policies tailored to their geographical, sociopolitical, and linguistic characteristics. Every single country has a unique relationship with Russia, that is the result of history, cultural distance, native-language loyalty, and proficiency during the Russian Empire and before the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, what these countries have in common is what Von Gumpenberg and Steinbach call “postcolonial phantom limb syndrome” (2008, 10).<sup>2</sup> However hard for some nations to admit, Russian has an impact on the post-Soviet space that cannot be overlooked. That is why this article is going to explore the historical and geopolitical reasons for Russian to still be spoken in a country remnant of the USSR like Georgia. Georgia is one of the few examples within the post-Soviet space which is still stuck into an internationally disputed matter like the presence of the *de facto* states of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (under the military, thus economic and political ‘patronage’ of Russia after the 2008 war). There is growing evidence of Georgia’s resistance to Russia (Riasanovsky 2004; Jones 2007; Stefan 2016), a country extremely proud of its unique language and culture (an attitude often referred to as ‘Georgianness’: Juneau 2017a, 2017b; Batiašvili 2012). In the post-Soviet space, Georgia was also the first country to deliberately leave the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) in 2009.

Now, it is only natural to wonder if, as of today, and considering the latest events (war with Russia, secessionism, economic crisis, etc.), the linguistic landscape has changed. It should be remembered that in the same year of the war with Russia, Pavlenko (2008) stated that the competence of Georgians in Russian was decreasing. This is consistent with the results of the 2008 and 2019 surveys about Russian knowledge in Georgia collected by the Caucasus Barometer: the overall response shows that there are fewer and fewer people who

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<sup>1</sup> The authors worked together throughout the paper. Daniele Artoni wrote the sections 2.1, 2.2, 3. Sabrina Longo wrote the sections 1, 1.1, 1.2, 2.3. The design of the research and data collection was developed and administered by Daniele Artoni.

<sup>2</sup> The original German reference is “Postkolonialer Phantomschmerz”. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by the Authors.

learn, speak or have a basic/advanced knowledge of Russian. For all these reasons, this paper is going to explore how the historical and political events of the last decades have influenced the youngest generations. Not only are they the grandchildren and children of those who actually lived during the Soviet Union, but also direct proof of the latest decades' language policies. Specifically, our aim is to investigate what is the educated Georgian youth's perception of Russian and what is the underlying motivation when they choose to study this language. In order to answer these questions, the research first turns its attention to the quantitative analysis of a survey conducted among Georgian young people, who were asked questions about sociolinguistic aspects and to do a proficiency test in Russian. In a second and final stage, the paper focuses on the qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews with teachers of Russian and English as foreign languages (expert interviews) on the research topics.

### 1.1 Language Policy

Language policies are never neutral: they always serve specific ideological and political purposes (Garibova, Asgarova 2009), but the level of politicization usually depends on the compatibility and sense of togetherness within the speech community or society the language policy is planned for. It is fundamental to study language policies because since languages are so intimate and intertwined with our identity, controlling a language is a way of controlling the people who speak that language (Shohamy 2006).

Over the centuries, the never-ending succession of laws, impositions, policies, reforms, rules, and regulations highlights Russia's constant efforts to use language with the ultimate purpose of following its political agenda. Language becomes, in this way, an essential weapon to exert power, to easily reach the lower strata of the population, to control, and sometimes even to manipulate.

The term 'russification' takes on a fundamental meaning in this context. Brel (2017) defines russification as the "forcible imposition of the Russian language and culture at the expense of the native language" (Rannut 2012, 5034, cited in Brel 2017, 60), and "the process whereby non-Russians are transformed objectively and psychologically into Russians" (Aspaturian 1968, 159-60, cited in Brel 2017, 60).

Pavlenko (2011b) argues, instead, that the English term 'russification' is not adequate, unless the user and the reader keep in mind that the word encompasses both *obrusevanie* *обрусевание* (imposed russification) and *obrusenie* *обрусение* (voluntary assimilation). *Obrusevanie* refers to the changes in the public sphere, such as the language of the administration and education, whereas *obrusenie* shall be understood as intentional, spontaneous, and unconstrained actions.

Besides, she points out that the authorities never had the intention or the desire to eradicate all the national languages. On balance, to reconcile these two apparently contradictory viewpoints, it could be agreed that russification alternated different forms according to the time, the promoter, the sociopolitical and historical context.

Peter the Great and Alexander I (1777-1825) left considerable autonomy to most of the non-Russian provinces (e.g. Baltics, Grand Duchy of Finland) while Russian was already starting to creep into local administration and education. Nevertheless, it was during the reign of Alexander II (1818-81) that the map of Russia, therefore of Russian, was mostly redesigned. Not all his campaigns were successful, but the language measures taken during this time can be considered as season openers. Most initiatives did not directly impact the lives of ordinary citizens but rather regarded only the educated: in the case of Georgia, 1% of the population (Juneau 2017a). The authorities were starting to realize that in order to turn people into politically aware citizens, it was necessary for Russian to take roots. The task for Russia was twice as hard because the authorities needed to make faithful imperial members out of Russian peasants (mostly uneducated) and non-Russians (different linguistic backgrounds). At that time, Russian was spoken mostly by the aristocracy and middle classes, who were starting to develop a national consciousness. Because of the vastity of the Empire and a new awareness of the power of languages, Alexander II was also the first to use language to establish control: he tried to bring together the diverse regions of the Empire through Russian (Pavlenko 2006). According to Smith (2012, 27), the Tsar wanted Russian to be used instead of non-Russian languages, for it was the 'single cement' of the reign. It is essential at this point to consider that in the Southern Caucasus Russian gradually replaced Georgian as the language of instruction in primary school between 1867 and 1876. In 1880, Russian officially became the language of administration, but it had already been functioning as such since 1801. Therefore, 1801 is also the year when Georgian officially lost its status as the official language in administration and in the Church.

Despite the issue of literacy among non-Russians was not solved and school was still a privilege limited to the upper classes, russification had a slight but visible impact on the native peoples within the Empire. The 1897 census proves that Baltics and Georgians had some knowledge of Russian (Pavlenko 2011b). Therefore, although the Tsarist-era russification policies were inconsistent and chaotic, they had a considerable effect on the russification measures taken during the Soviet Union (Pavlenko 2011b), when language policies became more systematic.

According to Smith, language during the Soviet Union was basically weaponry used to "dominate and develop the peoples within and

around Russia" (2012, 7). As hegemony is based on a "subtle combination of coercion and consensus, pressure and participation" (Smith 2012, 6), language policies in the first decade (1920s-30s) were never entirely tolerant or radical. The commingling of russification and nativization prevented the locals from rejecting the new measures. The proclaimed essence of the Soviet language reform was, indeed, *jazykovoje stroitel'stvo* языковое строительство (language construction; Smith 2012). In other words, through the Cyrillization of the alphabets, the standardization of the literary languages, the literacy campaigns, the Soviet government was building a new Soviet speech community and preparing the country's future and cheaper workforce: the non-Russians.

In Georgia, in particular, the initial "momentum of tolerance" (Juneau 2017b, 40) was a double-edged sword: by standardizing other minor languages in the territory, the Soviet authorities were attempting to further weaken the status of the Georgian language, thus avoiding the danger of a nationalistic awakening. Moreover, in Georgia illiteracy was not a problem as serious as in the other Republics: by the 1930s literacy level almost reached 100% of the population. Georgian was accorded official status in 1924 and became the state language in 1936 (Juneau 2017a; Grenoble 2006), while the other Kartvelian languages were still being ignored. Standardization in Georgia meant for minority languages – such as Abkhazian or Ossetian – to be written in the Georgian alphabet and to unify the language knowledge of the Georgians. By supporting Georgian, it was easier for the Soviet government to reach the Georgian population because they would only need one language.

From the thirties onwards, the linguistic policy made a U-turn: the Soviet government started to push towards Russian, rather than Georgian. For instance, Abkhazian and Ossetian had to switch the alphabet again: this time to Cyrillic, used to this day. Georgian was becoming less popular beside Russian, still idealized as the language of science, media, and progress. This assumption is confirmed by the fact that the number of 106,000 Russophone students learning Georgian in 1959 dropped to 32,000 in 1964 (Juneau 2017a). Yet, Georgian was still the most preeminent language of instruction in Georgia: education in Russian was anyway not adequate to meet the Russian language requirements demanded by the government. The last decades of the Soviet Union were chaotic for all the Republics, and Georgia was no exception. Contradictory political measures, the prominence of Russian in many spheres of society, the discontent of linguistic minorities, and the ending of the Soviet era between the 1980s and 1990s caused not a few problems. Georgia's sovereignty was proclaimed in 1990 and all the treaties from 1921 onwards were declared void, thereby affirming that Georgia had been occupied and annexed by the Soviet Union (Stefan 2016).



## 1.2 Georgia Today

After Georgia became independent in 1991, the country hardly had any rest. Making its way through civil wars and discontent, Georgia has ever since engaged in a process of derussification. Juneau (2017a) states that, after the break-up of the Soviet Union, the Georgian government has made many efforts to improve the citizens' competence in Georgian while protecting the linguistic minorities – at least on the paper. The linguistic minorities and the autonomous regions (Abkhazia and South Ossetia) are sources of tension with the Tbilisi government to these days as well as a bone of international dispute with Russia.

Today, pursuant Article 2 of the Constitution, amended several times, Georgian is the only official language, but since 2002, the government has also 'virtually' acknowledged Abkhazian as the second official language in the territory of Abkhazia (Stefan 2016, 274): "The state language of Georgia shall be Georgian, and in Abkhazia – also Abkhazian" (Parliament of Georgia 1995).

Even if not officially, Russian is still used as a *lingua franca* (Pavlenko 2013), can be studied as an optional second foreign language up to the 5th class, and is nonetheless important in secondary and higher education (Pavlenko 2006). There are still Russian schools in Georgia, where students are not only ethnic Russians but also Assyrians, Kurds, Armenians, Greeks, and of course Georgians, whose parents decided to educate their children in Russian for a variety of reasons (Pavlenko 2008).

The attitude towards Russian remains ambiguous. In this respect, factors such as the generational gap and the ethnicity of the speakers must be taken into account. It is palpable that those who grew up during the Soviet era tend to feel more connected to the Russian language and to recognize its inner prestige, whereas the rollercoaster of pro-Western and pro-Russian orientation in the Georgian politics is to be considered in the analysis of the following generations. It is surely no coincidence that the presence of ethnic Russians in Georgia has significantly decreased: from 6.3% in 1989 (Demoscope 2013) to 0.7% in 2014 (Geostat 2016). In fact, Russian is preferred among and by the ethnic minorities, and although it is not the official language of the state, it is tolerated in the context of communication with local and regional authorities (Stefan 2016).

Among the Georgian population, if for some Russian remains the language of the colonizer, for others it is regarded as the language of progress. Blauvelt (2013) highlights the presence of Russian in urban areas and the correlation between the language and higher education or social status, a fact that reminds the case study carried out among Armenian youth proposed by Rabanus and Barseghyan (2015). Georgian schools, instead, dedicate limited time to Russian language and

literature; even textbooks have plenty of mistakes. On the authority of Pavlenko (2006; 2008; 2013), it can be argued that the overall low level of competence in Russian in Georgia can be traced back to the country's historically high literacy rates also during the Soviet era and to the strong national identity and heritage. In sum, the fact that Georgia is not a Slavic country and has a specific cultural consciousness (Stefan 2016) led to the overall resistance to Russian.

## **2 The Study**

### **2.1 Methodology**

The previous section has shown how language policy has always mirrored the relationship between Georgia and its northern neighbour. We are convinced that, in order to understand the efficacy of language policy, a good touchstone is to analyse the use and perception of languages among the generations educated according to specific language policy.

The case of Georgia is of particular interest, in that the strong derussification that followed its independence in the nineties could have led to a dramatic decrease of proficiency in Russian among the young generations, i.e. those who were educated in a system that has demoted Russian to an eligible foreign language and promoted English as the only compulsory foreign language.

The objective of our research is to understand to what extent such language policies have affected the spread and use of Russian among the Georgian youth. On the one hand, we have tested their language proficiency in Russian; on the other hand, we have investigated what are the students' motivations in learning Russian and if they reflect the attitude young people have towards Russia, its culture, and its language.

In order to understand this, we have collected data in a two-fold way: (i) a survey for young people consisting of questions on their sociolinguistic background and a proficiency test in Russian; (ii) a semi-structured interview for teachers of Russian and English as Foreign Languages on the research topics.

The survey was based on Rabanus and Barseghyan (2015), who were interested in the role played by Russian among the Armenian youth, in a context hardly comparable to the Georgian one, despite its geographical proximity – in fact, the relations between Armenia and the Russian Federation are definitely less tense than those between Georgia and Russia. Rabanus and Barseghyan (2015) collected data about the participants' sociolinguistic background, their attitude towards Russian culture, literature, and politics, and their perception of the Russian linguistic landscape in present-day Armenia. Similar-

ly, the first part of our survey collected data about the informants' mother language(s), age, sex, education, ethnicity, language(s) spoken within the family, perceived command of English and Russian, frequency of contact with Russia, frequency of use, utility and contexts in which Russian is spoken, perception on the Russian-speaking population, interest in Russian literature and culture, perception of Russia from a political and economic point of view. In order to account for the different degrees of ratings, the latter questions were provided on a 1-to-5 Likert scale.

Unlike the previous studies investigating the level of competence in Russian that were based on self-assessments, the second section of the survey aimed at testing the informants' proficiency in Russian. In order to do so, the participants were required to fill in a cloze test composed of 42 sentences. The targeted structures were case selection within the verb phrase and the prepositional phrase, genitive case governed by quantifiers, adjective-noun agreement, verbs of motion (intransitive and transitive, with and without prefixes), verbal aspect and *Aktionsart*, participles, gerunds, passive voice, and indeterminate pronouns.

The second part of the research involved a different population, i.e. instructors of Russian as a Foreign Language (RFL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The approach used to examine the effects of language policies among their pupils and students aimed at collecting information directly from 'experts' in the field. For this reason, we decided to conduct semi-structured expert interviews. On the one hand, semi-structured interviews are flexible, in that starting from quite general queries, the respondents were led to answer in a more open, conversational way, where the questions are only the starting points of their reflection, thus leaving space for further discussion. On the other hand, the so-called expert interviews are significant for the position the interviewees cover in society and their vision on the topic (Littig 2009). In particular, language instructors can provide their expertise in the issue, but at the same time by no means could they influence the language policy of their country; for this reason, the conversations we held were 'expert' interviews, and not 'elite' interviews – the latter used to analyse attitudes and beliefs of people in powerful positions (Odendahl, Shaw 2002; Kvale, Brinkmann 2009).

The interviews were conducted according to a list of questions targeting a variety of topics. The first part aimed at collecting information about the teachers' formation and expertise; the second section explored the type of motivations among their students – both with and without the support of a list of possible motivations (Table 1); the last group of questions considered the perception, spread, and usefulness of English and Russian in contemporary Georgia.

**Table 1** List of elements affecting the students' motivation in learning English/Russian

Job opportunity	Возможность работы
Interest in the language itself	Интерес к языку и языкознанию
Interest in literature	Интерес к литературе
Interest in the political situation	Интерес к политике
Everyday communication	Каждодневная коммуникация
Interethnic communication	Межнациональная коммуникация
International communication	Международная коммуникация
Desire to look like the people who speak English	Желание выглядеть как русскоговорящие
Desire to get high marks	Желание получить хорошие оценки
Desire to please their family	стремление получить одобрение от семьи
They use it for travelling	Для путешествия
Leisure time (FB, VK)	Для отдыха (ФБ, ВК, и т.д.)
Interest in culture	Интерес к культуре

The list of elements shown in the table was spelled out in order to account for a variety of motivations, such as 'integrative' motivation – the positive attitude towards the targeted language group – opposed to 'instrumental' motivation – the potential utilitarian gains of knowing the language (Gardner, Lambert 1972), or between 'intrinsic' and 'extrinsic' motivations, thus ranging from the motivation to engage in learning for its own sake to as a means to an end (Pintrich, Schunk 2002; Dörnyei 2001).

Data collection took place in November and December 2018 in several educational centres – both private and public – in Tbilisi and Kutaisi. With regards to the survey, the informants were required to fill in the questionnaire in Russian or English, whereas the interviews with teachers of RFL and EFL were conducted in Russian and English, respectively. All the participants were given a consent form in which they acknowledged information about the study and their right of withdrawal, as well as the fact that all the collected data would have been anonymized and analysed as aggregated data.

The survey was taken by N=70 young Georgians, aged 18-25. However, only 43 out of 70 informants completed the questionnaire until the very end of it. The informants had a varied educational background, in that they are (or were) enrolled in different university courses, such as pharmacy, IT technology, philology, law, etc.; in order to avoid the bias connected to their area of interest, those who reported to be students at the faculty of foreign languages were not included in the data set. The results of the questionnaires were transferred to a Google Form, which allowed the organisation of the data in an Excel Sheet.

The semi-structured interviews involved 5 teachers of RFL and 5 teachers of EFL, 9 ethnic Georgian and 1 Armenian, all born and resident in Georgia, whose age ranged from 45 to 60. On average, the interviews lasted 30 minutes; the dialogues were recorded, transcribed, and tagged. The informants were pseudonymized according to their profession, i.e., 'RFL' to teachers of Russian as a Foreign Language and 'EFL' to teachers of English as a Foreign Language, followed by a number from 1 to 5.

## 2.2 Data Analysis. The Survey

The first striking element in the data collected among the young Georgian students is the high number of informants who did not complete the questionnaire, i.e. 27 out of 70 (39% of the total). In a study published by one of the authors (Artoni 2019), in which the same survey was conducted among Armenian and Azerbaijani – as well as Georgian – young people, it was highlighted how the Georgian abandonment rate is unusual, in that less than 10% of the Armenian and Azerbaijani informants did not complete the questionnaire. If, on the one hand, this might be due to the fact that the Georgian respondents had an overall lower competence in Russian, which resulted in tiredness and discouragement, on the other hand, a few participants put a note in the comment section reading “My country is occupied by Russia” – one of the most popular mottos used by Georgian protesters against the support the Russian Federation has shown to Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The high abandonment rate can, therefore, be explained as an act of protest against a survey that was – undeservedly – perceived as pro-Russian. Furthermore, this voluntary withdrawal from the survey has affected the statistical significance of the data, which is overall quite scarce.

Moving to the sociolinguistic questionnaire, 20% of informants (N=14) reported they speak Russian with some family members, whereas 13% use Russian in shops and markets (N=9), and 27% (N=19) with friends. Interestingly, 27% (N=19) of informants stated they use Russian to communicate with people who belong to a different ethnicity and live in Georgia, thus corroborating the fact that Russian still serves – to a certain extent! – as a *lingua franca* for interethnic communication.

The data regarding the perceived utility of the Russian language in various fields of everyday life are summed up in Table 2.

**Table 2** Percentage of answers to the questions related to the utility of mastering Russian per field

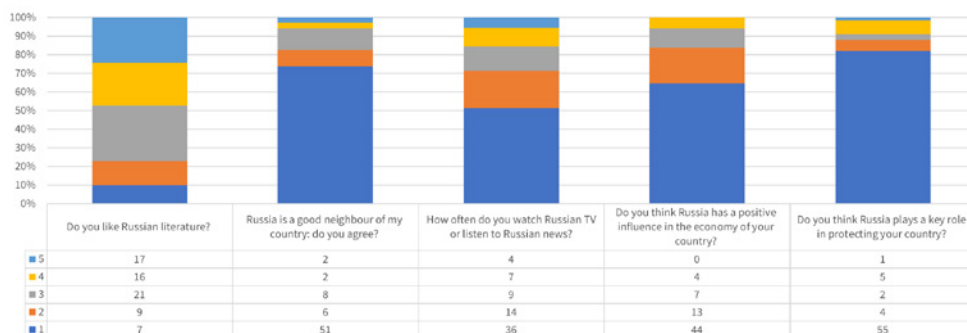
	% yes (N=70)	% maybe (N=70)	% no (N=70)
Study/science	43	20	37
Work	43	24	33
Leisure time	24	31	44
Travelling	47	33	20

The relatively high percentage of positive answers in the fields of study/science (43%), work (43%), and travelling (47%) reveals the instrumental role played by Russian in those areas, where knowing Russian increases the level of opportunities. Conversely, less than one fourth thinks that Russian is helpful in leisure time, thus showing how Russian social media and entertainment products are not so relevant among the Georgian youth.

With regards to the self-assessed knowledge of Russian on a scale from 1 to 5, the mean of the informants' answer is 2.4, a value that is slightly below the medium value, though significantly inferior to the self-assessed knowledge of English (mean value: 3.8). In fact, 70% of informants declared to have a better command of the English language compared to their level of Russian, whereas only 12.9% stated to know Russian better than English.

Despite Russian seems to be a language used on a daily basis for many informants, the attitude towards the Russian world is not positive at all. Table 3 shows the answers provided on a variety of questions that aimed at understanding how the Russian literature, culture, economic influence, and politics are perceived. The answers ranged from 1 (totally disagree, in a lighter shade) to 5 (totally agree, in a darker shade).

**Table 3** Perception of Russian literature, culture, economy, and politics (N respondents, Likert scale)



Whereas the questions involving the perception of economy and politics definitely demonstrate a hostile attitude towards Russia, it is less so for cultural products from Russia, in particular with regards to literature. Almost half of the respondents appreciate Russian literature, and this suggests a clear distinction between Russia as a political entity and the Russian culture – the former being perceived as a colonizing force, the latter as a grand civilisation.

With regards to the language proficiency test, the percentage of correct answers among the Georgian informants reached an average of 37.1% – compared to 70.6% of Armenian and 80.8% of Azerbaijani respondents (Artoni 2019). Looking at the single questions, good scores were performed in case marking (both within the verb phrase and the prepositional phrase), verbs of motion, indefinite pronouns, and aspect. The most widespread errors occurred in the use of participles, gerunds, and *Aktionsart*. The problematic structures are the ones pertaining to the written style – i.e. participles and gerunds – thus requiring formal instruction in order to be mastered, and those involving semantic nuances, like *Aktionsart*.

In sum, data analysis on the survey demonstrates how the Russian language is still a language of certain importance in everyday life, despite the increasing prestige played by English, which has exceeded Russian also in terms of self-perceived competence, and a widespread hostile attitude towards the Russian Federation as a political entity. At the same time, the low mastery of the Russian language seems to concern particularly the areas connected to formal instruction, thus suggesting an overall better command of the Russian language in everyday contexts.

### 2.3 Data Analysis. The Interviews

A useful starting point for the analysis of this study is the students' motivation. According to their teachers, the Georgian students' motivation to study English FL and Russian FL is mainly instrumental: they aim at higher grades, strive for a better education abroad, and desire a better job. However, the main difference is that English is compulsory, while Russian is a language of choice. This implies that when the student is not influenced by external circumstances (i.e. a Russian-speaking family forcing them to learn Russian), intrinsic motivation is higher for students of RFL, since they voluntarily choose to study the language, it is not just part of the programme. English, in this sense, seems to be almost taken for granted, both in a negative and positive way: on one side, it comes in the form of a routinized subject the student does not take up consciously; on the other side, this means that its role of a useful, global *lingua franca* is acknowledged as essential in a student's curriculum, no matter what is their course or field of

studies. The interviewees appear to agree on the status of English as *lingua franca*, even RFL teachers. No competition can be sensed between the two languages and among those who teach these languages.

None of the EFL teachers interviewed has ever lived in an English-speaking country; paradoxical as it may seem, the only one who affirms to have lived in the United States for three years is a teacher of RFL. This is a practical example of the fact that RFL teachers do not show any hard feelings against the 'competitor', the English language. Among those interviewed, it appears clear that the status of English as a global language is acknowledged alongside its usefulness as a job requirement. Also teachers of RFL consider English the world's most privileged means of communication, "*jazyk nomer odin v mire*" язык номер один в мире (the number one language in the world), to quote Teacher RFL 4. The interviews also suggest that English is largely used for international communication in Georgia, though playing a minor part in the interethnic exchange. According to their teachers, students also appear to enjoy social media (Facebook, Instagram, etc.), computer games, movies, and books in English, but they are not interested or not yet able to read literature in English. The desire to please their family is not particularly significant, as well as the cultural interest does not appear too popular among the students. With regard to the item 'desire to look like English speakers', one teacher (Teacher EFL 1) also notes that there is not a great divergence between English native speakers and Georgians, supporting the idea of Georgia as a westernized country.

The difference in the relationship and attitude towards Russian is evident on many levels. First of all, the subjects show to have close relations to Russian, i.e. they come from a Russian-speaking family, someone in their family teaches or used to teach Russian, they claim to love Russian literature; but what is even more interesting is the fact that this is not limited to RFL teachers, but also involves EFL ones. Students as well are said to have some kind of bond with Russia, i.e. they have relatives or friends in Russia, and also, in this case, it does not affect only those who learn Russian but also learners of English. When asked which language is the most useful and what they think about English, RFL teachers acknowledge English as *lingua franca* but do not give in to the provocation. They recognize the importance of English as a scientific, indisputable fact, but are overtly attached to Russian, the language they teach.

Teacher RFL 1: It is useful to know English. Absolutely. There is no competition. It's just desirable to know Russian, of course. Since we are specialists of Russian, we are for Russian.

Teacher RFL 2: I think that first of all, you know, the first [foreign] language here is English; well, I certainly very much promote the



Russian language. I am a patriot of the Russian language and the Russian culture. I don't concern myself with the rest.

The opinion of the respondents is in line with both the general perception of English in Georgia and the already mentioned generation gap. English is, indeed, praised as the language of globalization and economics since Georgia is highly dependent on foreign investments and President Saakašvili's pro-Western orientation (Robinson, Ivanišvili 2010) could not help but influence this tendency and increase, once again, the generation gap between those who were born and raised during the Soviet Union – the so-called *staraja gvardija* старая гвардия (the older generations) – and those who came after. As a matter of fact, the interviewed emphasize a high intrinsic interest in the Russian language, culture, and sometimes literature, especially when compared to English. Teachers report a growing fascination and motivation for the learning of Russian in recent years. This concurs well with the answer to the desire to look like the people who speak, respectively, English and Russian. If with English this desire seems rather low, with Russian it can be argued that rather than look, Georgian students try at least to speak like them, i.e. by following their accent, the accent of their teacher or by making contact with native speakers on social media. It is also noteworthy that Russian is defined as the language of their 'neighbours', whereas English remains a foreign language.

As a consequence, in general, English appears a normal part of the Georgian educational system, without the students asking too many questions about its learning because they are aware of its importance but at the same time it is safe to say that they hardly ever choose it consciously or out of passion. Russian instead is not compulsory and unless their (in some cases Russian-speaking) family or other external causes call for its learning, it remains a subject of choice. From all this, it follows that the influence of Russian in Georgia is undeniable and, despite a dramatic decrease of its role after the collapse of the USSR, it is far from being wiped off completely from the Georgian society. Everyone, even EFL teachers, have a strong opinion, a story, or are somehow linked to Russian. This is also further confirmed by the fact that, as previously shown, 39% of the interviewed Georgian students have refused to take part in the survey, have not completed it or have written commentaries like "I am from Georgia and 20% of my country is occupied by Russia". For all these reasons, it is hardly an exaggeration to say that Georgians are still patently emotionally bound to Russian, for better or worse.

It is evident that, given their long, shared history, there are contrasting thoughts on Russian: does it belong to their identity or is it just an enrichment of their linguistic repertoire? This is a question that can be answered over the next decades, by observing attitudes

towards language in public and private contexts, i.e. in education or in everyday life. All this goes to show that, as of today, the attitude towards Russian remains ambivalent. On the one hand, although it is difficult to speculate on such a sensible subject, it is equally difficult to imagine Georgia's linguistic future in the hands of the Russian language. On the other hand, despite the massive presence of English, the language policies of the last decades, the pro-Western political orientation and Georgia's repeated attempt to break away from the Soviet legacy, Russian is still resisting within Georgian society.

Likewise, Pavlenko (2013) claims that the population in Georgia still seems to use Russian actively regardless of their competence. This confirms the commodification of Russian, especially in the Armenian and Azerbaijani communities in Georgia.

### 3 Conclusion

The study we have conducted has shown how the language policy promoted by Georgia up to present days has definitely affected the younger generation and their relationship with the Russian language. However, despite the strong policy of derussification and the investment in the promotion of the English language, Russian still plays a relevant role within the Georgian society, even among the younger generations. Data analysis shows that Russian is considered by almost half of the informants a useful language in a variety of fields, especially those connected to science and the world of work, and that most of the respondents like Russian language and culture, despite their hostile attitude towards Russian politics. With regards to the educational system, the analysis of the language proficiency test suggests that students somehow lack formal instruction, as they are more capable in mastering structures pertaining to oral competences than to written ones.

Needless to say, the results of our study have strong limitations, like the scarce number of respondents and the fact that the survey was conducted in the two main cities of Georgia (namely, Tbilisi and Kutaisi) – thus without considering other regions and rural areas – and only among university students. Nonetheless, we are convinced that this population of young educated Georgians is the most suitable to investigate the effects of language policy in the educational system they were grown in.

The evidence from this study points towards the idea that, according to the interviewed teachers, the motivation that drives Georgian students in learning English and Russian as foreign languages is predominantly extrinsic: increasing their job opportunities, getting high marks, and better education in English-speaking universities in Georgia or in other countries. However, being English com-

pulsory and Russian a subject of choice, intrinsic motivation shall not be underestimated in the case of Russian. Intrinsic motivation in English seems scarce, thereby confirming the theory developed by Dörnyei and Al-Hoorie (2017), according to which intrinsic motivation decreases in students of English as a compulsory foreign language, in that studying the language has become a routine. As for Russian, intrinsic motivation becomes extrinsic when parents require or force their children to learn this language. Furthermore, the data comparison would appear to indicate that there is no competition between the two languages. Taken together, the results suggest that there is a part of the Georgian population who still has Russian at heart – without any significant distinction between RFL or EFL teachers. The subjects claim their country is occupied and it is evident that they are aware of the complicated political relations with Moscow; yet both students and teachers are usually able to separate language from politics. In Georgia, the considerable presence of the *staraja gvardija* cannot be unnoticed. They or their parents grew up and received their education in the Soviet Union, and it occurs that their children and grandchildren “continue the dynasty” – to quote Teacher RFL 3 – of learning (and sometimes also teaching) Russian. The investigation also confirms the assumption arisen from scholarship according to which Russian is considered by many a language spoken by the intelligentsia, whose culture and literature are “among the richest”, as stated by Teacher EFL 2.

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# Le trasformazioni urbane nella Tbilisi post-sovietica

## Note su istituzioni, modernità e spazi della città

Vincenzo Zenobi

Studio indipendente

**Abstract** After the Rose Revolution, a process of transformation of the city begins. Very different public and private architectures from the past arise, while the strategies for the conservation of old Tbilisi are matter of discussion. To understand the factors that determine the creation of new urban spaces we first need to focus on two factors: the process of Institution Building that follows the Rose Revolution and the emergence of a political narrative that combines modernisation and nationalism. The hypothesis is that these two factors create the ground for developing the specific practices of transformation of the city and for the emergence of a new urban form.

**Keywords** Tbilisi. Post-soviet City. Institution building. Symbolic space. Urban form.

**Sommario** 1 Le istituzioni e la polifonia di Tbilisi. – 2 Institution Building e luoghi urbani. – 3 Una genealogia interrotta.

### 1 Le istituzioni e la polifonia di Tbilisi

Superata la cosiddetta fase di transizione, che dura nei paesi del Caucaso circa dieci anni a partire dall'indipendenza, la *Rose Revolution* del 2003 avvia in Georgia una vera e propria ricostruzione dello Stato in senso liberista cui si associa un intenso processo di trasformazione delle città.



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I processi di rinnovamento urbano sono differenti fra loro. Essi interessano soprattutto la capitale, Tbilisi, ma riguardano, cosa non del tutto inaspettata in un contesto policentrico come quello georgiano,<sup>1</sup> anche altre realtà urbane. A volte sono l'esito di operazioni condotte dallo Stato o da altri soggetti pubblici, altre volte di interventi di tipo privato. Si possono osservare opere concluse, progetti interrotti (o in alcuni casi abbandonati dopo la loro realizzazione completa) oppure operazioni solo discusse, che occupano per periodi più o meno lunghi l'agenda dei decisori e il dibattito pubblico.

Possiamo nominare i progetti cui facciamo riferimento iniziando dallo sfondo, da ciò che accade al di fuori della capitale. Possiamo allora citare le modificazioni, legate in gran parte al turismo, di Batumi; la proposta di una città-nuova, Lazika; i processi di trasformazione pensati per Anaklia e per il suo porto, legati al progetto One Belt One Road (OBOR) promosso dalla Cina; il decentramento di funzioni politiche a Kutaisi; la riqualificazione di Signnagi; la costruzione di aeroporti, per esempio a Mestia, e di altre infrastrutture; operazioni sul patrimonio e su altri siti storici o religiosi su cui si sollevano dubbi, talvolta, anche da parte dell'UNESCO, e altri casi ancora.<sup>2</sup>

Su questo sfondo, tuttavia, le trasformazioni di Tbilisi assumono un rilievo particolare. Non solo per il ruolo di capitale dello Stato, che la rende spazio privilegiato della rappresentazione politica ma soprattutto per i caratteri della sua storia urbana e culturale. Tbilisi, დედაქალაქი *dedakalaki* (madre delle città), città storicamente multiculturale (Suny 2009), vero e proprio mosaico di culture differenti che integrandosi in un quadro complessivo formano un insieme che trascende le singole componenti (Ferrari 2018). Città quindi polifonica (Salukvadze, Golubchikov 2016), ibrida, cosmopolita,<sup>3</sup> fatta di parti diverse, riconoscibili, deposito di una pluralità di storie e di legami. Città distrutta e ricostruita venti volte in 1.500 anni di storia (Bakradze 2018) e oggi luogo dove al tempo stesso sperimentare nuove possibilità e un percorso verso una nuova modernità, percepi-

**1** Negli anni più recenti il policentrismo, minacciato da una consistente riduzione della popolazione, dovuta tanto ad un basso tasso di natalità quanto all'emigrazione, appare «socially and economically divided between islands of rapid progress and a large, mostly rural hinterland that has not benefited as much from growth» (World Bank 2018, xiv).

**2** In questo senso, e almeno per il periodo considerato, va ridimensionato il giudizio di Charles King: «In the 1990s and early 2000s, amid the twists and turns of post-Soviet change, the region had become less a collection of independent countries and unrecognized republics than a constellation of city states - Yerevan, Baku and Tbilisi. These cities were the principal recipients of external aid and foreign investment, the main destinations for migration from the countryside and the central arenas in which fitful reform and reaction were played out» (King 2008, 221).

**3** «A cosmopolis is a risky place or, more precisely, a place of risk [...]. The risk of giving up identity, the risk of change with an uncertain outcome, is a precondition of freedom» (Andronikashvili 2018, 65).

re lo smarrimento e il timore della perdita della propria identità e a volte riaffermare la propria, forse presunta, autenticità.<sup>4</sup>

Per quanto riguarda Tbilisi possiamo per semplicità raggruppare le trasformazioni più rilevanti in tre tipi. Il primo tipo è determinato dalla costruzione di significativi edifici pubblici, destinati alla funzione politica o alla fruizione sociale, che spesso adottano vetro e acciaio come materiale costruttivo e un linguaggio architettonico moderno, solitamente privo di riferimenti contestuali. Il secondo tipo è relativo alla trasformazione di vaste porzioni della città attraverso la costruzione di edifici privati, destinati alla residenza o al commercio, di volumetria consistente e che talvolta, per la loro altezza, si mostrano evidenti nello skyline della città. Il terzo tipo può essere riferito alle operazioni di rinnovamento di alcune parti della Tbilisi storica, con metodologie e significati che probabilmente evolvono nel tempo.<sup>5</sup>

L'ipotesi è che queste trasformazioni possano essere interpretate come l'esito non predeterminato di un processo di ricostruzione dello Stato in senso occidentale attraverso la creazione di istituzioni neoliberali. L'esito delle trasformazioni non è completamente definito perché le istituzioni, in quanto 'regole del gioco', secondo la definizione di North,<sup>6</sup> determinano le condizioni, sociali ed economiche, che permettono a diverse reti di attori rilevanti di attivare processi di trasformazione che assumono poi legittimità (o mirano ad assumerla) anche alla luce delle narrazioni e delle retoriche che vengono mobilitate.

Questo punto va approfondito. Lo stesso premio Nobel Douglas North fa un passo ulteriore quando evidenzia una duplice natura delle istituzioni, formali (per esempio le leggi) e informali (per esem-

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<sup>4</sup> Il timore della perdita di identità può essere proiettato sulle trasformazioni fisiche della città ed essere identificato con il fenomeno della *gentrification*: «Much of what has survived and once constituted the flair of metropolis is now falling victim to gentrification or to unloving and unprofessional restoration» (Bakradze 2018, 39). Oppure essere legato ad una sorta di timore per la mancanza di autenticità determinato dalle nuove forme di vita importate dall'Occidente: «In recent years, anti-Western sentiments have been expressed much more strongly in public discourse than they had been earlier – especially with regard to religious nationalism. Arguably, one of the reasons for the crashing defeat of the National Movement in 2012 elections was a backlash against its reforms, which some people perceived as undermining authenticity of the Georgian culture and identity» (Nodia 2018, 61).

<sup>5</sup> Si potrebbero aggiungere altri tipi di questioni rilevanti per la gestione della città, come il trattamento del patrimonio storico, specialmente del periodo sovietico, o del patrimonio religioso.

<sup>6</sup> Seguendo il premio Nobel Douglas North (1994) possiamo pensare le istituzioni come strutture imposte all'interazione umana che condizionano le scelte individuali e determinano il funzionamento della società e dell'economia. Le istituzioni non predeterminano in modo meccanico gli esiti dell'interazione: secondo la sintesi di North, le istituzioni sono le regole del gioco mentre le organizzazioni sono i giocatori.



pio la cultura e le forme di comportamento implicite).<sup>7</sup> La riflessione economica riconosce da tempo sia l'importanza delle istituzioni per lo sviluppo economico sia, più nel dettaglio, l'importanza delle istituzioni informali, anche se poi non appaiono del tutto chiari i meccanismi attraverso i quali questa influenza prende consistenza.<sup>8</sup>

Se ci si limitasse a questa suddivisione nel contesto georgiano, tuttavia, il quadro sarebbe incompleto. Nel caso georgiano dobbiamo tenere conto di una terza dimensione, ovvero non l'informalità delle pratiche sociali (avversate, per diversi motivi, dallo Stato) ma delle pratiche di governo, che ha fatto parlare di una «Informalization of State Interventions» (Timm 2014, 11). L'informalità delle pratiche di governo individua un ambito scivoloso dove il potere si concentra, in modo non trasparente, al di là di quanto previsto dalle istituzioni formali, colloca l'azione di governo in una dimensione extra-legale che merita grande attenzione perché può mettere a rischio la natura democratica dello Stato,<sup>9</sup> perché impatta con grande evidenza il tema dei diritti civili e non è comunque estranea ai processi di trasformazione della città.<sup>10</sup> Senza soffermarsi troppo sulle questioni più ovvie (le istituzioni dovrebbero garantire trasparenza, apertura dei processi decisionali, inclusione dei soggetti sociali) è per esempio lo stesso processo di formazione del budget per opere pubbliche, «il meccanismo di allocazione delle risorse che la comunità produce in avanzo» e il loro spostamento su piani diversi rispetto a quello delle necessità quotidiane<sup>11</sup>

**7** «Institutions are the humanly devised constraints that structure human interaction. They are made up of formal constraints (rules, laws, constitutions), informal constraints (norms of behaviour, conventions, and self-imposed codes of conduct), and their enforcement characteristics» (North 1993).

**8** «Although the literature concerning the role of institutions for development is becoming more voluminous and transcends numerous academic disciplines, scholarly research is labouring to go beyond the idea that 'institutions matter.' Hence, how institutions shape economic progress still remains the 'dark matter' of economic development» (Rodríguez-Pose 2020, 3). E ancora: «studying in detail the mechanism through which formal and informal institutions impinge on urban and regional economic performance is more necessary today than ever» (6).

**9** «On the one hand, it is a hard fact that this was the first government in Georgia's history that passed the most basic test of democracy [...]. On the other hand, however, the same leaders made steps (through constitutional means) to concentrate power in the presidency and the executive branch in general, which effectively weakened the parliament and the judiciary, and one could hardly speak of level playing field in electoral competition. Their method of governance combined traits of autocratic modernization and true democracy» (Nodia 2018, 63-4).

**10** Fairbanks (2012) associa in uno stesso stile di governo lo scandalo della prigione di Gidani con le pratiche di richiesta forzosa di denaro che, come vedremo, permettono di creare fondi opachi a disposizione del governo.

**11** Focalizzare la realizzazione di opere d'arte da parte dello Stato (o in generale della comunità) come scelta di allocazione di risorse permette di focalizzare il significato delle stesse, un tema presente anche nel mondo antico. «In una società come quella greca, sempre al limite della sussistenza e orientata a raggiungere l'ideale dell'au-

a esigere un'elevata capacità di rendere conto delle scelte effettuate.

È possibile sostenere che il processo di costruzione di istituzioni formali neoliberali, affiancato all'uso di routine informali, sia orientato, nel caso georgiano, da due valori, parzialmente in tensione tra loro. Il primo aspetto è un certo autoritarismo politico, che consente l'affermazione di una leadership e di un'élite attraverso la legittimazione della possibilità di decidere senza troppi vincoli con efficacia e velocità, incidendo in campi diversi, dall'economia alla forma urbana, senza la necessità di faticosi percorsi inclusivi di decisione. Il secondo aspetto è quello promozione di un certo individualismo basato sul riconoscimento della proprietà e della sua valorizzazione.

Questi due versanti, autoritarismo e individualismo, pur appartenendo all'universo del neoliberalismo, sono difficilmente conciliabili, ma rivelano un'ambiguità o un'indecisione profonda nella direzione del processo di riforma che inizia con la *Rose Revolution*, dura almeno per il decennio della presidenza di Mikheil Saakashvili (2004-13) e sopravvive probabilmente con modi e intensità differenti negli anni successivi. Essi inoltre hanno conseguenze sulle trasformazioni urbane, permettendo di concettualizzare in modi diversi lo spazio e i suoi valori simbolici.

## 2 Institution Building e luoghi urbani

Negli anni successivi alla *Rose Revolution* si avvia dunque un processo di *Institution Building* legato ad un profondo processo di ricostruzione dello Stato. In modo probabilmente non del tutto consapevole, questo processo crea anche le condizioni per una profonda trasformazione urbana. Per capire i modi in cui questo avviene occorre però tenere in considerazione una doppia intenzionalità che caratterizza il processo di *Institution Building* nella Georgia post-rivoluzione.

La prima riguarda il ruolo dello Stato. Da un lato possiamo osservare come, sulla scorta di una narrazione liberista (per alcuni libertaria) del sentiero di sviluppo su cui è avviata la nuova Georgia, lo Stato sembri ritirarsi e rinunciare a svolgere tanto un ruolo di attore nei processi di sviluppo, quanto pure talvolta il ruolo di regolatore, come avviene in campi quali la sicurezza alimentare, la protezione

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tarchia, l'arte diventa lo spazio in cui si realizza un meccanismo di allocazione di risorse che la comunità produce in avanzo. Esse vengono spostate su altri piani rispetto a quello delle necessità quotidiane, ed elevate su dimensioni come quella sacra, per esempio nella dedica votiva, o quella della memoria collettiva, come nell'attribuzione di onori civici. Il medium di simili pratiche è offerto dalla creazione artistica, che condensa e tesauroizza ricchezza in pochi e rari oggetti. Un legame indissolubile fra arte ed economia risiede dunque nella proprietà dell'arte di serbare le risorse residuali della comunità» (Marginesu 2020, 101).

del lavoro, la sicurezza delle costruzioni. Dall'altro però, per esempio nei processi di trasformazione urbana, emerge la diversa volontà del governo di essere protagonista di alcuni processi perché intende illustrare il senso della propria azione politica e costruire un *brand* attraverso la realizzazione di una nuova immagine urbana e le nuove istituzioni sembrano creare le condizioni perché questo accada.

La seconda ambiguità, una volta individuati due approcci, non congruenti, dell'azione pubblica, riguarda il modo in cui questi sono ricomposti. Si può osservare come venga affidato ad istituzioni formali il compito di affermare la narrazione della Georgia come luogo dello sviluppo liberista e dell'individualismo mentre viene affidata a istituzioni e pratiche informali, spesso accompagnate da processi decisionali poco trasparenti e quindi in fondo autoritari, la realizzazione di una forma urbana che illustri, attraverso opere pubbliche, i caratteri del nuovo Stato.

Proviamo ad affrontare il primo livello di azione pubblica, ovvero la definizione di un approccio liberista allo sviluppo urbano attraverso la costruzione di un'istituzione formale come quella del mercato delle costruzioni.

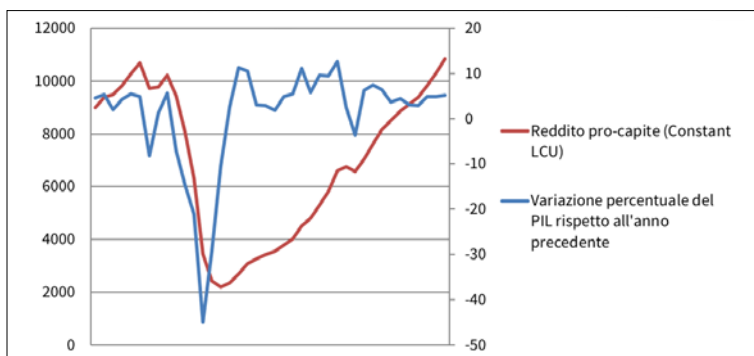
L'azione politica di Saakashvili è apprezzata, soprattutto nei primi anni del suo governo, per il successo conseguito in alcune politiche formali quali la lotta alla corruzione, la riforma del sistema di tassazione, la semplificazione nella regolazione del settore degli affari, la riforma della polizia, la riforma dell'accesso universitario ecc. (Papa-va 2013; World Bank 2018). Anche la corruzione di piccola scala nel settore delle costruzioni viene affrontata con successo (Van Assche, Salukvadze, Duineveld 2012, 5).

Questi sforzi portano ad alcuni successi: la crescita del PIL e il miglior posizionamento della Georgia nelle classifiche redatte dalla World Bank relative all'*Ease Doing Business*, un indice che misura l'intensità (o meglio, evidenzia la leggerezza) della regolazione nel campo dell'economia. Se il posizionamento della Georgia in questa classifica migliora di anno in anno, la semplificazione nel settore delle costruzioni (che registra, per esempio, il numero di procedure necessarie all'ottenimento di un permesso di costruire, i tempi, i costi, i controlli di qualità ecc.) determina un impatto notevole che contribuisce a collocare la Georgia in posizioni di evidenza [graf. 1].

La mossa che appare peculiare, coerente con l'incardinamento della pianificazione spaziale nelle competenze del Ministero dell'Economia e dello Sviluppo Sostenibile a partire dal 2005,<sup>12</sup> è l'utilizzo di un approccio che affida alle politiche di costruzione della città il compi-

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**12** Nel 2005 il Ministero dell'Urbanistica e delle Costruzioni viene incorporato nel Ministero dell'Economia e dello Sviluppo Sostenibile, presso il quale viene costituito un Dipartimento della Pianificazione Spaziale e della Politica delle Costruzioni.



**Grafico 1** Variazioni del PIL e reddito pro-capite (a valori costanti della moneta locale LCU) nel periodo.  
(Fonte: elaborazione dell'Autore su dati WorldBank: <https://data.worldbank.org/>)

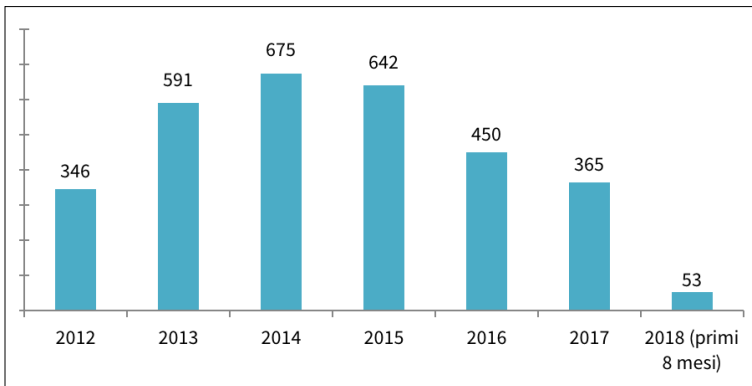
to implicito di finanziare il budget municipale attraverso la pratica che è nota come 'cattura di valore' e che si traduce nella commercializzazione degli indici edilizi e quindi delle quantità di volume realizzabili. Una norma inserita nella legge sulla tassazione locale del 2007 in questo senso consente per ogni area, previo pagamento di una tassa, di avviare una revisione della volumetria ammessa attraverso la definizione di un accordo speciale.<sup>13</sup> Si tratta in buona sostanza di una pratica di commercializzazione dei diritti edificatori per cui attraverso uno speciale permesso di zona (Special Zonal Permit, SZP) e dietro pagamento di una tassa un operatore può costruire una quantità edificatoria maggiore di quanto consentito dall'indice edificatorio del lotto stabilito dal piano urbanistico (indice comunemente identificato con il termine 'K2').

Dal punto di vista del controllo pubblico dello sviluppo del territorio non vengono quindi formalmente negate l'esistenza e la funzione dei piani urbanistici, che tanto in periodo sovietico che post-sovietico vengono progettati per Tbilisi,<sup>14</sup> ma di fatto la regolazione che questi propongono viene decisamente indebolita.<sup>15</sup>

**13** L'art. 12, comma 1 della legge georgiana sulla tassazione locale recita: «A fee for issuing special (zonal) agreements shall be paid by natural or legal persons that have obtained a special (zonal) agreement for the purpose of changing the maximum limit of the floor area ratio [K2] provided for by the Law of Georgia on the Basic Principles of Spatial Planning and Urban Construction».

**14** In particolare dopo la *Rose Revolution* un primo piano urbanistico per Tbilisi viene approvato nel 2009, un secondo nel 2018. Sulle politiche di governo del territorio di Tbilisi si vedano Salukvadze, Golubchikov 2016; Salukvadze 2018.

**15** «Practice of increase of K2 coefficient is a hot topic in Tbilisi, because many times it became a reason for public discontent and a matter of corruption risks. It is noted

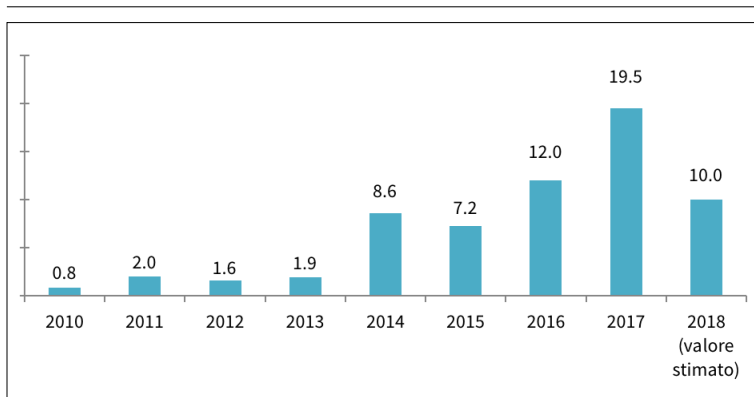


**Grafico 2** Numero dei permessi rilasciati per l'aumento del coefficiente K2 (Fonte: Namchavadze 2018)

Sul piano prettamente economico questo approccio consegue un duplice risultato. Dal lato dell'Amministrazione Pubblica si rivela una fonte di entrate rilevante per la Municipalità di Tbilisi cui, nel tempo, è difficile rinunciare seppure, in modo incongruo rispetto all'obiettivo, venga fissato per legge (all'art. 7, comma 4 della Legge sulla tassazione locale) un limite massimo di 400 GEL di tassazione per ogni metro quadrato incrementale di costruzione [graf. 2-3].<sup>16</sup> Dal lato degli operatori rende il mercato immobiliare un settore interessante, che favorisce la crescita e attira investimenti stranieri (Foreign Direct Investments, FDI). Il settore delle costruzioni in generale e del *Real Estate* in particolare registra un notevole apporto di capitali stranieri e in parte rivela la politica estera dello Stato: a seconda del periodo vengono studiati accordi per la realizzazione di Trump

in an explanatory note of the new Construction Code that the existing practice of special zoning agreements and so-called trade with coefficients are problematic. On the one hand, it reduces the role of the concept of city-building planning and, on the other, it gives a broad discretion to an administrative body and allows establishing malpractice of different approaches. Moreover, it creates high risks of corruption» (Transparency International Georgia 2018, 13).

**16** «Officials (head of architectural department, head of urban development department, member of Tbilisi city assembly) as well as developers (all four of them), while questioning about the reasons of introducing the SZP [Special Zonal Permits] regulation, were answering that one of the main objectives was to increase the revenue source for the budget. But as soon as we were changing the question and stating that if the reason was to increase the income, why did they set maximum amount to be paid, or why did they set fixed normative coefficient in some areas to 4.6 and additionally gave the developers 20% free increase margin, some of them (head of architectural department, member of city assembly) quickly changed their answers and stated that the goal was to promote the development» (Nemsadze 2012, 41-2).



**Grafico 3** Municipalità di Tbilisi. Entrate costituite dalle tasse dovute per l'aumento del coefficiente K2 (milioni di GEL) (Fonte: Namchavadze 2018)

Towers a Tbilisi e Batumi oppure viene realizzato un consistente intervento cinese da parte dello Hualing Group per la realizzazione di una nuova parte di città, un intervento complesso dal punto di vista urbano e impegnativo dal lato finanziario, e comunque capitali provenienti da vari altri Stati (dalla Turchia all'Azerbaijan) vengono impiegati nel settore delle costruzioni e del *Real Estate*.<sup>17</sup>

Solo negli anni più recenti queste politiche vengono mitigate. Nel 2016 una direttiva della Municipalità di Tbilisi, a fronte di una situazione di disordine edilizio e varie problematiche ambientali, sospende la pratica dell'incremento del coefficiente K2 mentre lo Stato, aderendo infine alla richiesta dell'UE di maggior regolazione e maggiori controlli nel settore delle costruzioni (dalla verifica dei materiali alla sicurezza nei cantieri) avvia una legge di riforma complessiva del settore nel 2018, vigente dall'anno successivo.

A fronte di politiche formali, è interessante però osservare il secondo livello, ovvero come il Governo, attraverso istituzioni implicite e pratiche informali, riesca ad avviare e realizzare una politica di 'grandi progetti' sulla città con l'utilizzo di notevoli risorse economiche e con procedure amministrative facilitate.

Destinare risorse pubbliche alla realizzazione di grandi progetti governativi potrebbe apparire sorprendente per uno Stato caratterizzato, negli ultimi anni della presidenza Shevardnadze, da un'acuta crisi del budget statale. Uno dei successi riconosciuti all'amministrazione Saakashvili è in effetti il risanamento del budget grazie anche

<sup>17</sup> Nel 2018 il settore delle costruzioni rappresentava l'8% del PIL georgiano e il *Real Estate* l'11% (Bochorishvili, Samkurashvili 2019).

ad una politica di semplificazione del sistema delle tasse e di lotta alla corruzione.<sup>18</sup> Accanto al risanamento, tuttavia, con l'obiettivo formale dichiarato della lotta alla corruzione,<sup>19</sup> viene in realtà inaugurata la pratica informale della formazione di fondi extra-budget, una parte dei quali andrà a finanziare, in modo opaco, l'agenzia pubblica incaricata della realizzazione dei progetti di Stato.

Tra le pratiche meno trasparenti attraverso cui questo avviene, la prima è quella dei 'riscatti per la libertà'. Con l'accusa di arricchimento illecito vengono arrestati numerosi oligarchi, rilasciati solo dietro il pagamento di una certa somma di denaro alle casse dello Stato. Con alcuni problemi: la somma da restituire (che si suppone proporzionale a un danno causato) non è quantificata in modo trasparente e soprattutto versata per buona parte su fondi extra-budget istituiti presso alcuni ministeri-chiave (Papava 2013). La formazione di fondi extra-budget è rafforzata da un'altra pratica informale come quella delle 'donazioni volontarie', in realtà richieste forzose di contributo a carico di soggetti economici di rilievo<sup>20</sup> mentre, dal punto di vista delle procedure e in contrasto con l'obiettivo dichiarato di tutelare

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**18** «The government began by focusing on tax collection and prosecuting high-profile corrupt businessmen and government officials, sending a strong signal that corruption would no longer be tolerated. In parallel it also began reforms to improve public service delivery, starting with the then ambitious objective of providing continuous power supply to all. Reforms were also implemented in public registries, business regulations, customs, traffic police and entrance examinations for higher education and local governments. The results were spectacular. Tax collections increased from 12% of GDP in 2003 to 25% in 2010 on the back of tax reforms which included firing corrupt officials, the elimination of tax arrears, a reduction in the number of taxes and tax rates, simplification of the tax code, and the introduction of e-filing of tax returns. Similar reforms were undertaken in other areas, including starting a business and customs among others» (World Bank 2018, 4).

**19** La corruzione georgiana è stata definita 'sistemica' e 'decentrata', per cui i network di corruzione in lotta tra loro si autonomizzano completamente rispetto al controllo esercitato dallo Stato centrale (Stefes 2008). L'esito verosimile di un sistema di corruzione decentralizzato è appunto la tragedia dei Beni Comuni, con la ricerca della massimizzazione del guadagno personale da parte dei diversi gruppi in competizione a scapito dei beni comuni, tra cui possiamo comprendere la crescita economica, le entrate statali come la fornitura di energia elettrica, divenuta problematica negli ultimi anni della presidenza Shevarnadze.

**20** Per esempio: «Questions are flying about how the Georgian government operates two special bank accounts earmarked for developing the army and law-enforcement agencies. The funds were established shortly after the November 2003 Rose Revolution. Specifically, Georgian media mogul Badri Patarkatsishvili publicly charged the authorities with forcing Georgian businessmen, including himself, to contribute to these funds as part of a 'state racket' (see EDM, March 31). 'Businessman should be told why the money was taken, and where it has been spent and by whom... the public should learn the truth,' he added. Before Patarkatsishvili's broadside, Georgian NGOs had demanded that the government make these funds transparent, due to speculation that part of the money has been misappropriated. Although both funds have formally placed under liquidation many questions are waiting for answers, including the question of whether the funds have actually been liquidated» (Anjaparidze 2006).

la proprietà privata, viene inoltre inaugurata una pratica di cessione forzata dei lotti di terreno che interessa diverse aree del Paese in cui è previsto un intervento del Governo e soprattutto l'area di Rhike Park, in cui alcuni ristoratori vengono indagati per evasione fiscale, i ristoranti confiscati e attribuiti al Ministero delle Finanze e poi ceduti alle agenzie *Old City Rehabilitation and Development Fund* e *Tbilisi Development Fund* (Rimple 2012, 124).

Dunque le due agenzie che ricevono in dotazione dallo Stato un'area strategica della città la cedono a un privato per circa 7 milioni di dollari nel 2006 riacquistandola poi, dopo varie vicissitudini, per 17 milioni nel 2008 (Rimple 2012, 126). Questo perché le due agenzie vengono continuamente finanziate attraverso la formazione di fondi esentati da pubblicità<sup>21</sup> (per oltre 100 milioni di GEL, circa 30 milioni di dollari, solo nel 2012) in parte disponibili per la realizzazione di progetti di trasformazione urbana considerati strategici dallo Stato come quelli che interessano Rhike Park.<sup>22</sup>

### 3 Una genealogia interrotta

Se spostiamo lo sguardo, orientandolo non tanto sui processi astratti di definizione di istituzioni ma sulla costruzione materiale dello spazio fisico, possiamo forse notare una corrispondenza tra i primi e la seconda.

La duplicità che abbiamo osservato nella costruzione di istituzioni si proietta anche sullo spazio fisico di Tbilisi, connotandolo alternativamente come *spazio simbolico*, prodotto paradossale di una governance informale e talvolta opaca e come *spazio-merce*, prodotto della creazione e del funzionamento di istituzioni formali come il mercato.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> «The Presidential Reserve Fund and the Governmental Reserve Fund are contingency funds with a budget of GEL 50 million each in 2012, the Tbilisi City contingency fund accounted for GEL 2 million in the same year. The original purpose of these contingency funds is to cover expenses that are unpredictable and/or are caused by emergency situations. On 28 December 2005, amendments to the law on the budget code where adopted, permitting a usage of money from the Funds for other proposes than unforeseen emergency situations» (Transparency International Georgia 2013, 5).

<sup>22</sup> Il Tbilisi Development Fund è per esempio indicato come committente del teatro e del centro espositivo progettato da Fuksas: <https://fuksas.com/rhike-park>.

<sup>23</sup> Questa distinzione è soprattutto analitica, utile perché permette di isolare diversi attori, diverse finalità e diversi processi di trasformazione. D'altra parte, se lo spazio può essere sempre riguardato come spazio simbolico perché sempre incorpora valori culturali e veicola significati, l'intensità dei significati veicolati è diversa in quello che abbiamo chiamato 'spazio simbolico' e quello che è stato chiamato 'spazio-merce'. Lo spazio simbolico assolve la funzione di 'amplificatore di significato'. Anche oggi, come nel mondo antico «l'opera è dunque un vettore di significato, amplificato all'esposizione nello spazio pubblico» (Marginesu 2020, 19)





**Figura 1** I progetti promossi dalla presidenza Saakashvili nell'area di Rikhi Parke, più in alto, l'edificio del Palazzo presidenziale. © Autore

Il governo georgiano opera su uno spazio simbolico collocando, soprattutto in aree centrali, le sue opere, caratterizzate da materiali e linguaggi peculiari (soprattutto acciaio e vetro), accompagnate da una specifica narrazione della nazione e del futuro. Una pluralità di operatori opera su uno spazio-merce avviando processi di valorizzazione, spesso puntuali, più raramente areali, della dimensione del quartiere, solitamente resi possibili dalla commercializzazione degli indici edificatori.

Il governo Saakashvili affida all'architettura, ad un'architettura programmaticamente nuova nel linguaggio e discontinua rispetto al contesto, il compito di illustrare plasticamente la costruzione di un nuovo Stato. Quasi alla fine della sua parabola così sintetizzava Saakashvili:

One of the biggest architectural magazines in the world has a cover story on Georgia, Georgian architecture, and I read articles there where they are saying that this is one of the world's most interesting construction processes. An absolutely *new brand for a new country emerging with absolutely new architecture*, [corsivo aggiunto] but it's not really Georgian, this architecture. It really doesn't fit those narrow streets, the old fashion style, and their traditional sights. As if we always were doomed to be in the middle ages, we are always doomed to be always backwards. [...] We want to create

a modern society, we want to be successful, and we want to learn from others and to be ourselves. (Saakashvili 2012)<sup>24</sup>

Se l'intero spazio urbano di Tbilisi è dunque l'occasione per organizzare la narrazione di uno Stato che si ricrea, per esempio, in modo quasi didascalico, attraverso la realizzazione di nuove, trasparenti, stazioni di polizia, certo è che la concentrazione di progetti nell'area di Rhike Park (il ponte della Libertà, l'auditorium, la stessa sistemazione del verde con la statua di Ronald Reagan), su cui insistono vivamente il Palazzo Presidenziale e la nuova Cattedrale della Chiesa ortodossa georgiana, ne fa un campo di osservazione privilegiato, quasi uno spazio teatrale o un palcoscenico [fig. 1].<sup>25</sup>

Le obiezioni che vengono avanzate nella società nei confronti dei progetti sono di natura diversa. Trascurando quelle più propriamente politiche, la più ricorrente, da parte degli architetti locali, è la mancanza di comprensione del contesto da parte dei progettisti incaricati. Per esempio, il Ponte della Libertà, pur essendo costruito in ferro e vetro, di fatto ostruisce la visuale di un'importante area storica. E in generale i nuovi edifici vengono da molti considerati come degli 'invasori aggressivi' di un delicato tessuto storico.<sup>26</sup> Sollevando una questione più generale, quella della lettura morfologica come strumento di legittimazione del progetto che appare oggi messa in crisi dal carattere multiscalare delle città.<sup>27</sup>

Le fortune dei progetti della presidenza Saakashvilli saranno parzialmente differenti. In alcuni casi divenuti elementi vissuti della città, in altri sostanzialmente dismessi, come il palazzo presidenziale, oggi semplice palazzo di rappresentanza; in altri casi non finiti, come nel caso dell'auditorium di Fuksas, realizzato però in gran parte e quindi quota non utilizzata del capitale fisso della città. Lo stile decisionale con cui i progetti sono stati definiti ha in parte contribu-

<sup>24</sup> È perfino inutile sottolineare come compaiano continuamente termini positivi come 'nuovo', 'moderno', 'successo' e, per contrasto, termini che assumono una connotazione negativa nel contesto come 'vecchio', 'tradizionale', 'indietro'.

<sup>25</sup> Riprendendo l'espressione e il progetto di Aldo Rossi si potrebbe ricorrere alla suggestione di pensare Rhike Park come presupposto a grande scala per una sorta di 'teatrino scientifico'.

<sup>26</sup> «Thus, the new projects realized in the old city, in order to demonstrate its new history, have failed because of the destructive role they have acquired, turning themselves into aggressive invaders into the historical texture of the city by ignoring the historical context of their surroundings. This invasive architecture is typical for the post-Soviet condition, and ignores the contemporary developments in world architecture» (Khabuliani 2016, 46).

<sup>27</sup> «In the complexity of contemporary cities, one cannot expect to see the crucial intervention of individual architect-artists as determining the development of the urban form and conditions, even less as the concretization of the *genius loci* that is surely meaningful at given scales, but may appear irrelevant for agents that operate at others» (Ponzini 2020, 47).

ito alla loro sorte. Si è già detto delle modalità di individuazione del budget. L'attore principale della selezione dei progettisti è il presidente stesso, cui è riconosciuta una certa passione per l'architettura.<sup>28</sup> La selezione dei progettisti è in realtà talvolta casuale (De Lucchi, per esempio, è coinvolto in numerosi progetti dopo aver partecipato ad un concorso di cui non risulta vincitore) e il criterio dell'imitazione di progetti presenti in altri contesti, divenuto pratica comune negli anni recenti (Ponzini 2020), sembra poi applicarsi anche ai criteri decisionali georgiani.<sup>29</sup> La preferenza per architetti stranieri a scapito dei progettisti locali porta poi conseguenze sul mercato della professione. Il rapporto tra progettisti e committente non sarà comunque semplice perché lo stile decisionale con cui vengono realizzati i progetti è analogo a quello con cui viene sviluppata l'azione di governo su altri temi, con impazienza e con una sorta di lotta per l'affermazione della propria agenda.<sup>30</sup> Nella sintesi di Irakli Zhvania: «Saakashvili behaved like a king, just picking his favourites with no competition or discussion [...]. He dismissed any opposition voices as retrogrades, standing in the way of modernisation» (citato in Wainwright 2018).

Se vogliamo trovare una ragione profonda nella lotta per l'affermazione della propria agenda urbana, possiamo osservare che Tbilisi costituisce per l'azione del governo uno spazio simbolico che narra una nuova identità nazionale.<sup>31</sup> Agli inizi degli anni 2000 sono pre-

**28** La passione di Saakashvili per l'architettura è «più politica che artistica, più da uomo comune che da addetto ai lavori» secondo Michele De Lucchi (Bucci 2011b, 9). Saakashvili è stato definito come «a known lover of contemporary design, although the scope of his tastes was somewhat limited. The aforementioned structures were all designed by Italian poundshop starchitects Massimiliano Fuksas and Michele De Lucchi, whose fondness for gratuitous form-making was matched only by the president's zeal to get their schemes built as quickly as possible. He also commissioned German blobitecture maestro Jürgen Mayer H. to build a slew of undulating follies across the country, many of which remain unfinished» (Wainwright 2018).

**29** «In a TV interview, president Saakashvili talked openly about how decisions on new constructions were made; noting that if any building seen while travelling internationally impressed him and his team, they immediately worked out plans to build a similar structure in Georgia» (Khabuliani 2016, 45).

**30** «Fast. It was a time that is hard to imagine now. The country had to modernize quickly [...]. There was a lot of time pressure [...]. Sometimes things had to move very quickly: 'Could you come up with a design in a week?' Then all of a sudden we'd be told 'It's has been approved'. Often you wouldn't hear anything about it for a long time afterwards but then you suddenly get a request: 'We need the next set of plans in two weeks'. Each project was implemented in a different constellation depending on whether it was for private developers, companies or public contracting authorities. Afterwards I understood that there were often multiple enquires to different architects for one project but at the time that wasn't discussed so openly» (Intervista a Jürgen Mayer H.; citato in Kurtishvili, Cachola Schmal 2018, 127).

**31** Sull'identità nazionale georgiana come progetto politico si veda Nodia 2010; sulla diversa interpretazione di Tbilisi multi-etnica e Tbilisi città georgiana si veda Suny



Figura 2 David Agmashenebeli Avenue: riqualificazioni concluse e in corso. © Autore

senti nel dibattito sulla città di Tbilisi differenti narrazioni della nazione. Zaza Shatirishvili (2009) ne riconosce tre, in tensione tra loro. La prima, tradizionale, ha una connotazione escatologica: è la narrazione di una salvezza. La storia della nazione georgiana e il suo presente sono tragici ma il futuro contiene una promessa di giustizia. Un'altra è quella promossa dalla chiesa georgiana, che racconta l'appartenenza alla cristianità ortodossa come elemento che fa coincidere identità georgiana e religione cristiana ortodossa.<sup>32</sup> L'ultima, promossa dalla *Rose Revolution*, è la narrazione di una cosmogonia: la storia di un nuovo universo che emerge, la nascita di una nuova nazione che nasce dopo gli anni caotici della transizione. E forse questo è il modo più corretto di interpretare i progetti pubblici per Tbilisi: quello del tentativo di accompagnare e stimolare l'emersione di una nuova configurazione (dello Stato e dello spazio) che si arresta o almeno si attenua ancor prima della conclusione dei progetti fisici per la fragilità del progetto politico. In effetti se osserviamo le

2009; sulla pratica di iscrizione di simboli della memoria nel paesaggio fisico della città si veda Storm 2019.

**32** Anche la Chiesa Georgiana rappresenta questa narrazione con una trasformazione fisica, l'edificazione della Cattedrale della Santissima Trinità (Sameba) in collina e in posizione dominante sulla città, in un luogo in cui in precedenza sorgeva della comunità armena di Tbilisi.



Figura 3 Le Axis Towers che appaiono come oggetti... nel contesto urbano di Tbilisi. © Autore

celebrazioni della nazione attraverso i Grandi Progetti, come avvenuto per esempio negli anni Ottanta del secolo scorso nella Parigi di Mitterrand, si può notare il tentativo di legittimazione attraverso l'affermazione di una continuità con la storia più che attraverso una cesura. Sebbene ricorra anche da parte di Saakasvili il riferimento a uno dei grandi progetti di Stato di Mitterrand («Ciò che il ponte dimostra, analogamente alla piramide del Louvre, è che la modernità è totalmente compatibile con il nostro passato», Bucci 2011a, 114) proprio il confronto con *Les Grands Projets* mostra forse i limiti dell'esperienza georgiana, che si evidenzia inoltre nella sua gestione. Il voler evitare processi aperti nella scelta dei progetti (gran parte dei grandi progetti di stato parigini sono affidati a seguito di un concorso d'architettura), la mancanza di dialettica e anche di conflitto tra presidente e sindaco della città come condizione per la ricerca di soluzioni equilibrate per gruppi diversi di popolazione e così via, rendono i progetti di Tbilisi un facile bersaglio delle amministrazioni successive e l'esperienza complessiva una genealogia interrotta [fig. 2].

Può essere incidentalmente notato che di fronte a questa operazione di modernizzazione, con tratti autoritari, da un lato le operazioni di recupero del patrimonio storico non costituiscono un bilanciamento attraverso la re-immissione nel paesaggio urbano di una quantità di architettura 'identitaria', mentre d'altro lato, gran parte delle trasformazioni urbane, esterne alle parti storiche, accentua-



no l'immagine cosmopolita dell'architettura e della città, producendo poi un certo caos visivo dovuto all'accostamento piuttosto casuale di architetture, altezze, dimensioni.

Per quanto riguarda il primo aspetto, il recupero, operazioni come Aghmashenebeli Avenue soffrono di un approccio eccessivamente sbrigativo al restauro che fa grande uso di soluzioni industriali (Spita 2017, 2018; Zhvania 2020) che insieme alla caratterizzazione turistica dell'area crea anche le condizioni per la ricreazione e la percezione di una falsa architettura storica. Ancora di più, le prime soluzioni di sostituzione edilizia per piazza Gudiashvili costituiscono l'occasione per l'emergere di forme di protesta che riescono a produrre un miglioramento delle soluzioni proposte, in direzione del recupero più che della sostituzione con il nuovo.

Dunque una situazione complessa, che registra tra i suoi effetti indiretti e non previsti l'emergere di un certo attivismo sociale, rivolto tanto al patrimonio (con una maggiore attenzione per le operazioni di rinnovo urbano, come nei casi descritti sopra, nonché per gli edifici dell'architettura sovietica) quanto alle aree verdi (Zhvania 2020).

Anche i progetti dei *developers* (residenze, hotel, centri commerciali) hanno un notevole impatto sulla città, talvolta modificandone lo skyline con l'aggiunta di alti edifici a torre [fig. 3]. Le modalità di realizzazione di questi interventi, con procedimenti puntuali di incremento delle volumetrie, fanno sì che le torri non siano concentrate come nei Business District di tante città globali ma siano per così dire disperse nei vari quartieri residenziali (come esempio Vako, Saburtalo ecc). Cercano di distinguersi attraverso forme riconoscibili, sviluppando il tema scontato del *landmark* altamente visibile nel paesaggio urbano. Gli edifici sono in vetro, il linguaggio architettonico si rifà a quello di una certa architettura commerciale internazionale e in effetti i progettisti chiamati dai *developers* appartengono spesso al mercato anglosassone,<sup>33</sup> dunque un'ulteriore connotazione cosmopolita, cui si associa una scarsa relazione degli edifici con il contesto e un effetto complessivo di una certa confusione. In termini generali questo caos visivo può essere interpretato come l'iscrizione di rapporti di potere sullo spazio urbano, con il conseguente impoveri-

**33** Ellis Williams Architects di Londra progetta le Beruk Towers o King David Towers per l'austriaco Rezid Holding GMBH; lo studio Shankland Cox nel 2012 progetta per il gruppo Abu Dhabi la torre sghemba dell'Hotel Biltmore, che permette una sorta di restauro dell'IMELI (Institute of Marx, Engels, Lenin), comunque incorporato nell'hotel, dopo che un progetto era stato affidato a Christoph Kohl e Rob Krier dai precedenti finanziatori, Kempinski & Vostok Capital; le torri ritorte dell'Axis Tower, finanziate dal CGF sono invece realizzate da progettisti georgiani, come anche le torri che diremmo allargate a bottiglia di Giorgi Khmaladze Architects per Alliance Group. Anche interventi di minore altezza, ma comunque rilevanti dal punto di vista dei volumi realizzati, vengono realizzati da studi internazionali, come Wandel Hoefer Lorch & Hirsch, impegnati nel progetto Pixel 34.



**Figura 4** Il primo edificio del progetto Panorama, con le sue vetrate nere, partecipa al caos visivo della capitale. © Autore

mento degli spazi pubblici.<sup>34</sup> Il caso più evidente di impatti prodotti da singoli progetti, tra quelli che hanno ricevuto maggiore attenzione pubblica,<sup>35</sup> è quello di Panorama (Zhvania 2016). Potremmo definire Panorama un progetto ibrido, anche per il numero e la qualità degli attori che coinvolge, che si colloca a metà strada tra l'operazione commerciale e l'operazione simbolica. Il progetto è promosso dalla società CFG di cui è proprietario l'ex presidente Ivanishvili, leader del partito Georgian Dream, avversario politico e successore di Saakashvili. Già solo per questi elementi l'operazione appare eccedere la sola finalità economica. Ivanishvili già iscrive la sua presenza nello spazio simbolico di Tbilisi con la sua abitazione, celebrata nelle in-

**34** «Although land-use planning and urban development policies in Tbilisi have strengthened over the past decade, much of the city's public and green spaces have been replaced by private development from past zoning amendments» (Zhvania 2020, 387).

**35** Andrebbero quanto meno nominati due progetti che utilizzano edifici preesistenti per la realizzazione di hotel. Il caso dell'hotel Iveria, di epoca sovietica, che ospita IDP (Internally Displaced Persons, persone evacuate dalle aree dell'Abkazia e dell'Ossezia) sgombrati per favorire la riconversione commerciale. Il caso del riuso dell'Istituto di studi marxisti e leninisti (IMELI) per la realizzazione di un hotel di lusso. Ben diversa l'operazione di riuso nei due progetti Fabrika e Stamba che non è possibile trattare per esteso.



**Figura 5** Il secondo edificio del progetto Panorama in corso di realizzazione nell'area collinare di Tbilisi. © Autore

terviste e realizzata dall'architetto giapponese Shin Takamatsu. Ubicata sulle colline che circondano la capitale, non lontana dalla statua della Kartlis Deda, la Madre della Georgia, si colloca ad un'altezza comparabile al palazzo presidenziale e alla Cattedrale di Sameba, sembrando che anche la conquista dell'altezza (e, più prosaicamente, il superamento delle norme di salvaguardia che interessano le colline) possa essere considerato un valore simbolico e un'affermazione di potere nella Tbilisi contemporanea. L'operazione Panorama intende costruire tre importanti volumi (poi ridotti a due) in aree delicate del centro della città e delle colline, collegandole con un sistema di funivie. Impone quindi la sua architettura di vetri neri accorciando la catena decisionale e forzando le procedure, come avveniva per i progetti pubblici promossi dalla politica [figg. 4-5].

Si può forse cercare a questo punto di tirare le fila del discorso. Si può cercare di farlo partendo dall'osservazione che dal 2003 al 2011 Saakashvili avrebbe citato trentacinque volte Singapore come modello per il governo georgiano (Timm 2014) e in effetti ha talvolta sintetizzato il suo progetto con lo slogan di voler creare una Svizzera del Caucaso con elementi di Singapore.

Associare tre paesi (Singapore, Svizzera e Georgia) assai diversi tra loro è operazione apparentemente bizzarra che racconta forse



qualcosa dei diversi obiettivi, dei successi e dei fallimenti delle operazioni di trasformazione urbana di Tbilisi.

Ad un primo livello possiamo individuare una tensione costituita tra autoritarismo e individualismo già nell'immaginario dei protagonisti della *Rose Revolution*. Se Zurab Zhvania, uno dei politici più autorevoli della nuova classe dirigente fino alla sua scomparsa nel 2005, in veste di presidente del Parlamento georgiano nel 1999, poteva sostenere: «Sono georgiano, quindi europeo» in occasione di un discorso al Consiglio d'Europa, Saakashvili mostra spesso riferimenti più articolati e in qualche misura ambigui. In questo senso il riferimento a Singapore, sintesi di sviluppo economico e autoritarismo stigmatizzata già negli anni Novanta da Ralf Dahrendorf (1995), è in effetti una suggestione capace di sintetizzare di due valori-guida di Saakashvili. La 'Singaporizzazione' è una delle vie alternative allo sviluppo che, secondo De Waal (2011) si aprivano alla Georgia agli inizi della *Rose Revolution*. La scelta di quella via, alternativa a quella di una più completa europeizzazione, sembra aver portato la Georgia della *Rose Revolution* su un percorso di modernizzazione autoritaria (Nodia 2005), di occidentalizzazione più che di democratizzazione (De Waal 2011). Gli anni successivi, con l'avvento al governo della coalizione guidata dal partito Georgian Dream e ispirata da Bidzina Ivanishvili hanno proprio mostrato una volontà, non sempre coerente, di mitigare le asperità del governo Saakashvili, tanto in campo socioeconomico che nel governo delle trasformazioni urbane.<sup>36</sup>

Dal punto di vista del governo urbano il carattere di Stato-proprietario di Singapore che governa con attenzione la risorsa terra e pratica una pianificazione meticolosa dello spazio urbano, ben lontana da approcci liberisti connotati dal *laissez faire*, individua soluzioni inaspettate per fornire una rete di protezione sociale complementare allo sviluppo economico, sembra problematicamente lontana dallo stile georgiano di governo del territorio, pur con la rivalutazione implicita dell'intervento dello Stato che viene poi compiuta.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>36</sup> In effetti la mitigazione delle politiche neoliberiste, un certo pragmatismo, e un minore uso di meccanismi coercitivi sono tra i fattori che determinano la tenuta del governo del Georgian Dream (Lebanidze 2017). La conclusione di Lebanidze è che «Ivanishvili built a political system which does not rely on coercion but rather cooptation through material and political incentives. Therefore, the state appears less threatening and does not challenge the vested interests of influential veto actors. Ivanishvili has succeeded through the use of a pragmatic and Machiavellian policy mix to establish a system of oligarchic governance that remains fairly popular».

<sup>37</sup> Solo a titolo di esempio, e senza voler forzare la comparazione: «The government owns 90 percent of the land in Singapore and leases the land to developers through land auctions. At a time when European cities are privatising their public land, the exceptional case of Singapore offers a real world alternative showing the benefits of land as a public good» (Haila 2016, 17).

Restano, forse, ad un terzo livello, quello più propriamente visivo e architettonico, le meno condivisibili esaltazioni della confusione, visiva e strutturale, intesa come ampliamento del campo delle possibilità che viene da un esponente del gruppo OMA.<sup>38</sup> Rem Koolhaas, che del gruppo OMA è teorico e leader, propone proprio Singapore come prototipo di questa condizione urbana della tarda modernità fatta di configurazioni provvisorie:

Singapore rappresenta il punto in cui il volume del nuovo, che ha soverchiato quello del vecchio, è diventato troppo grande per essere animato da quest'ultimo ma non ha ancora sviluppato la propria vitalità. (Koolhaas 2010, 85)

Sarebbe forse un paradosso se l'equiparazione forse ingenua operata da Saakashvili tra Tbilisi e Singapore si rivelasse una profezia proprio dal punto di vista di uno sviluppo urbano atipico e generico.

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**38** «OMA partner Reinier de Graaf believes Tbilisi's political chaos and the resulting architectural incoherence could provide a window of opportunity. "When things are a mess then lots is possible", he told the audience in a keynote speech at the biennial's symposium. "[Tbilisi] is at the stage where a certain amount of anarchy still has beneficial effects, which I hope will continue to last. It's seemingly a hopeful moment in the city", he told Dezeen in an interview following the keynote: "An absence of a certain system and the absence of a certain order simply enlarges the scope of possibility, for better or for worse", he added. "As an architect you are condemned to optimism"» (Block 2019).

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# The Cultural and Political Claims of the Caucasian Minorities in Turkey

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**Abstract** More than in the previous years, in 2019 the organisations and the social media groups of the Turkish citizens who are fully or partly descendants of Caucasian refugees looked active not only around 21 May, their “genocide commemoration” day, but also around 2 May, remembering the 2 May 1923, when the Kemalist government deported Eastwards many Circassian villages located in Western Anatolia. In sum, we are witnessing that now the “Circassians of Turkey” (a term which generally includes North-Eastern Caucasians like Chechens and South-Eastern Caucasians like Abkhazians) are struggling not only for a worldwide recognition of the “Circassian genocide”, but also for an open debate on what has meant and means being “Circassian” in the Republic. This paper tries to draw an updated picture of what is up within Circassian *intelligencija* and what Caucasians of Turkish nationality are aiming at.

**Keywords** Circassians. Turkey. Political Debate. Identity. Abkhazians.

**Summary** 1 The Background. – 2 Jineps. – 3 The Abkhazians.



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## 1 The Background

This contribution is an ideal sequel of my book about the Circassian ordeal (Grassi 2014, 2017, 2018).<sup>1</sup> The 21st of May is the day when the Circassians of Turkish nationality, who are the greatest Circassian community in the World and form the 'golden share' of the Caucasian diaspora in Turkey, mobilize and publicly commemorate the extermination and expulsion their ancestors suffered in 1862-4 due to the expansionist policy of the Tsarist Empire. And generally the other Caucasian-originated communities join them. But recently I have noticed a secondary mobilization around the 2nd of May. On 2 May 1923, eight months after the successful military conclusion of the Independence War, the Kemalist government deported Eastwards many Circassian villages located in Western Anatolia. The communities of these villages were accused to have collaborated with the Greek occupants, because they had been in contact with the most famous and ill-famed guerrilla leader of the war, Ethem the Circassian.<sup>2</sup> Merging Islam and bolshevism, this brave and skilled chieftain wanted the resistance of the Muslim communities of Western Anatolia against Greeks and Allies to evolve in a socialist revolution. In Ankara he had realized that the leading pashas had far different ideas, so at the end he rebelled against Mustafa Kemal's superior authority and escaped to the Greek-occupied area, living in exile the rest of his life (Grassi 2020, 197, 206, 211, 214). Hence, he is the only famous personality of contemporary Turkey whose nickname is directly associated to a non-Turkish community and at the same time the villain *par excellence* in the official history of Contemporary Turkey. Naturally, the Circassians of Turkey are very sensitive about this issue. They try to contrast this deprecative association in two ways. The first one is to recall the many Circassian-born Turkish military and civilian personalities who well served the Turkish state and the Turkish nation;

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<sup>1</sup> Grassi 2014, 2017 (shortened Turkish translation), 2018 (shortened English translation). Here I refer to the English version. To tackle once and for all an annoying yet unavoidable question and go ahead with the topic of this paper, my personal opinion is as follows: the war of extermination led by the Tsarist Empire against the native populations of the North-Western Caucasus and the expulsion of nearly all the survivors are one of most terrible misdeeds of 19th century; the ferocious elimination of the Armenians from Anatolia in 1915 was one of the most terrible misdeeds of 20th century; however, let them be labelled or not 'genocide', it is wrong to match them with the *shoah* and more in general with mass murders having a decisive ideological root.

<sup>2</sup> See for example Yelbaşı 2018. *Çerkes* Ethem obviously was Circassian, but in this case *Çerkes* had an onomastic function, to distinguish him from other Ethem in a society where regular Western-type family names were absent (Republican Turkey adopted them in 1934-5). In some documents and works he can be mentioned as *Çerkez* Ethem. Actually, even today the Turkish word for 'Circassian' swings between the forms *Çerkes* (prevailing) and *Çerkez*. To be unquestionably Circassian are the *Adiges* (sometimes transcribed as *Adige*). They accept and use the word *Çerkes* but prefer to be known as *Adige*.

the second one is to challenge the official history in order to partially excuse Ethem's shocking choice. This latter is a risky way, because Atatürk's assertions against Ethem, especially the assertions included in the 36-hours speech he delivered in six days in 1927, are the cornerstone of the official history. It means that it is hard to belie official history without belying the Great Leader himself. Moreover, the apology of Ethem has been for long time a matter of far-left intellectuals, a quite embarrassing aspect for conservative Circassians. The situation has changed in the last two decades, when a wider range of intellectuals, including some religious and conservative ones, have begun to openly challenge the official history. The crucial issue in this quarrel is the battle (more exactly the battles) of Gediz, in Western Anatolia (24 October-12 November 1920). In the above-mentioned megaspeech Atatürk shortly and plainly stated that the Turkish forces, including Ethem's warriors and units of the regular army under the command of Ali Fuat Cebesoy, had been defeated by the Greeks, whereas a growing number of authors argue that around Gediz the Turkish forces scored a victory.<sup>3</sup>

I have already recently observed that Atatürk imposed silence not only on the Armenian question but on almost everything that had happened before 1923 and that Kemalist regime was concrete poured over an exploded volcano (Grassi 2018, 132). Like the other non-Turkish Muslim communities, along the single-party era the Circassians and the other Caucasus-originated communities experienced a complete denial of their identity – with the unpleasant exception of the public deprecatory memory of a Circassian who officially had committed betrayal – and could start their struggle for positive visibility and their quest for self-consciousness in the multiparty era, with a strong acceleration in the AKP-era. At the same time, a formerly concealed debate came to the surface: which ones, among the Caucasian population who suffered Russian conquest, are to be considered Circassian, which ones are not? A never-ending debate, I am inclined to argue.

Another misfortune of the Caucasian diaspora in Turkey is that in the last twenty years the fight for the acknowledgement of the Armenian genocide has become an identity flag of the Turkish democratic *intelligencija*. The historians and the intellectuals forming this cultural-political *milieu* does not like the policies of massacre and expulsion suffered by Muslim communities such as the Caucasians and

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<sup>3</sup> See for example Armağan 2018, 74-9. The meaningful title of the chapter is "Tarih açılımı Refet Paşa ve Çerkez Ethem'i de kapsayacak?" (Will the Revisionist Wave in Turkish Historiography Include Refet Pasha and Ethem the Circassian?). Refet pasha was one of the first companions of Mustafa Kemal in the adventure of the war of independence. Like the others, he was quickly dropped out in favour of more acquiescent executors like İsmet İnönü.



the Balkan Muslims to be recalled, because they are afraid that the nationalists use these events as an excuse for the decision taken by the Unionist government to eradicate the Armenians from Anatolia. Indeed, too many times the cold-blooded goal to understand what happened before 1915, during 1915 and after 1915, and why – i.e. what must be the single goal of a historian – has been sacrificed to the tactical needs of a (surely well-meaning) political-cultural fight. Thus Turkish revisionist historiography, just like the Western, looks as much ideologically biased as the Turkish official nationalist historiography, with – as far as I know – one bright exception: Fikret Adanır (Grassi 2019, 157-67).

## 2 Jineps

Circassian and, broadly speaking, Caucasian organizations and social media in Turkey and in the other countries where a more or less relevant diaspora is present (websites, social media etc.) are a very complex archipelago.<sup>4</sup> All the organizations and organs of this kind in the world, from the organizations of the native Americans to the Szekely communities of Romania, run the risk to be very narrow-sighted, to remain confined in dealing with the life of the community and in cherishing the memory of the (generally tragic) turning point of their own history. They are generally stuffed with news of conferences, marriages, obituaries, calls to action in occasion of the key-dates, and show widespread deference to general and local political powers. An additional feature of the Caucasian diaspora are the above-mentioned taxonomical discussions: who is Adige? Who is Circassian but not Adige? Who is not Circassian? But some years ago a share of the Caucasian diaspora in Turkey realized that the particular identities in Turkey are a great national matter of democracy, that the preservation of the Caucasian identities, the opening of university chairs of Circassian language and culture, the opening of TV and radio broadcasts in Circassian, a wider knowledge of the Circassian genocide must go beyond the fences of the communitarian claims to become a way for a general democratization of Turkey and decided to issue a politically-oriented monthly magazine. Its name is *Jineps* ('resin drop' in Circassian). It was founded in December 2005, when Turkey was experiencing a positive wave of democratization. This monthly magazine is *also* a typically bilingual 'bulletin of the community' (the pages in *adige* are written in Cyrillic characters); it is *also* a house organ, but its cover pages are the ones of a militant leftist democratic

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<sup>4</sup> A brave, uncommon, useful attempt to draw a map of Circassian/Caucasian associationalism in Turkey, Germany, Jordan and USA is Mattei 2019.

magazine. Above the name of the magazine one can read the following slogan words: “Bağımsızlık demokrasi özgürlük ve birlik” (Independence, Democracy, Freedom and Unity). Under the name one can read “Çerkeslerin özgür sesi” (The Free voice of the Circassians). As a prominent and combative Circassian intellectual, Yalçın Karadaş, personally confirmed to me, intellectuals, militants and journalists who founded *Jineps* consciously followed an admirable model, that of *Agos* (‘furrow’ in Armenian).<sup>5</sup> *Agos* is the bilingual weekly newspaper of the Armenian community of Turkey. Its founder, the great intellectual and journalist Hrant Dink, wanted it to be an authoritative voice of the whole of democratic Turkey. After Hrant Dink’s shameful murdering (19 January 2007) *Agos* has remained faithful to Dink’s ideals. For example, it regularly hosts the articles of a well-known great Turkish democratic intellectuals as Baskın Oran, who is not an Armenian-originated Turkish citizen like Dink but a ‘standard Turk’ (I refrain from writing ‘ethnically Turk’, being the word ‘ethnically’ pure nonsense in the giant melting pot that is Turkey). Shortly, *Agos* is still a common ground of common fights for all those Turkish citizens who challenge the ‘official ideology’ and discriminatory policies. *Jineps* looks as *Agos*’ younger brother. Here, however, we must add that the core of the Armenian community in Turkey prefers low profile, just like the Jew... and the Circassian. Indeed, *Jineps* is the most important and interesting voice of this community, but it is all but universally beloved inside the community itself.

Let’s take as example of the inspiration of *Jineps* three recent issues, starting from March 2019. Nearly the whole of the cover page is dedicated not to a whatsoever Circassian/Caucasian internal issue but to the Women’s Day, which is not addressed in a rhetorical and innocuous way. On the contrary, the full-page title is on the brave resistance of the democratic women of Istanbul who had organized a ‘feminist night stroll’ against the ferocious assaults of the police who had tried to stop them, as their demonstration had been forbidden. Such a title makes us understand that *Jineps*, just like *Agos*, has remained bravely faithful to its original mission even in these last years, when the level of freedom and democracy in Turkey has dramatically dropped.

The cover of April 2019 issue (clearly ‘closed’ before 31 March) is far more multifaceted. On the top two titles: the first one, on the left, is about how had been celebrated the Newroz, the great celebration of the Spring equinox: “Newroz’da binler buluştu” (For the Newroz

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<sup>5</sup> Yalçın Karadaş, while enquiring the complex identity of his community, has been calling for a common democratic struggle of all the ethnical and religious communities of Turkey against the structural ‘monist’ and repressive attitude of all the regimes who have taken place the Republican age (Karadaş 2009).

thousands of people gathered). As the readers know, the celebration of the Spring equinox is particularly important and historically has taken a mass and solemn form first of all among the Iranian peoples, being later adopted by several neighbouring peoples. It was for a long time forbidden and repressed in Turkey, insofar it was a symbol of Kurdish identity. The 'W' character was long time forbidden as well, because it was not part of the alphabet adopted in 1928. This title is in itself a sign of solidarity towards the Kurds and a sign of dislike of the 'official ideology' which has dominated Turkey since the foundation of the Republic. The second title, on the right, is a "let's start the engine" for the coming anniversary of the *tsitsekun*, the word Circassians adopted as equivalent of the Armenian *metz yeghérn*.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, under the word *tsitsekun* lies in smaller characters the Turkish translation: "Çerkes soykırımı" (Circassian Genocide). The main title this time is about the local elections that were about to be held. Again, no routine: "Daha fazla demokrasi Daha az nefret dili" (More Democracy. Less Hate Speech).

This time, however, the main title does not stretch from edge to edge of the page, as it leaves two columns to the mass shootings of Muslims committed on 15 March 2019 in New Zealand by a 'white supremacist'. But what the title, the photo and the subsequent article emphasize is the strong solidarity towards the Muslim community expressed by New Zealand's Prime Minister. Less important news is given space towards the bottom of the page. A piece of news refers to the "Çoğulcu Demokrasi Partisi" (Pluralist Democracy Party), a recently-funded party born inside the Circassian community. As its name shows, this party claims to be an enlightened and liberal organization, but many liberal and leftist Circassians are quite sceptical about it, arguing that a new little party can only cause a dangerous fragmentation of the democratic forces. This concern was particularly high about the aforementioned local elections. The decision of this party to present its own candidates in Ankara and Istanbul, where a head-to-head race between the candidate of the government and the candidate of the opposition was expected, encountered harsh criticism and arose suspects of being a calculated service in favour of the AKP regime.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> It is interesting that the word *tsitsekun* does not belong to the alive *adige* language, the language spoken by the better part of those who feel themselves Circassian, but to *ubih* language, a dead language we know mainly thanks to the researches of great scholars like Georges Dumézil and Hans Vogt and thanks to Tevfik Esenç, the last *ubih* speaking human being, dead in 1992, who accepted to be recorded (*Jineps*, May 2019, 1; Grassi 2018, 22-3). Thus, a dead word of a dead language has been willingly chosen to symbolize the demographic and cultural destruction committed by the Tsarist policies.

<sup>7</sup> Indeed, in the local elections held on 31 March, 2019, a head-to-head race occurred in Istanbul, where the common candidate of the main opposition parties, Ekrem

Let's come to the number of May 2019. Obviously, the first and many of the following pages are full with the commemoration of the *tsitsekun*. The first page, in particular, contains the translation of Russian sources (dispatches and souvenirs) proving the genocidal policy of the Tsarist state. But this first page is not monopolized by the Genocide Day: two 'windows' are devoted to other issues: the first one to the Workers' Day (1st of May); the second one to the three far-left militants hanged on 6 May 1972, in the frame of the turn of the screw imposed by the Army with the 'coup d'état by communiqué' of 12 March 1971. Especially the leader of the group, Deniz Gezmiş, is the sorrowful icon of Turkish left. Other sides of this first page are devoted to the visit to Turkey of the President of the Russian Republic of Adygeia (23-26 April) and to the results of the local elections. This number includes (page 17) a short article on the *metz yeghé-rn*, that Armenians commemorate on 24 April. The article records the demonstration held in Istanbul to commemorate the Armenian genocide day. The beautiful title is "Birlikte yaşama kültürüne han-çer" (A Stab to the Coexistence Culture). Just before delivering the final version of this paper I can record with pleasure that the number of May 2020 devotes larger space, more exactly the better part of page 23, to the Armenian genocide with a long article titled "Ermeni soykırımı'nın 105. yılı - 'Artık yüzleşin'" (105th Anniversary of the Armenian Genocide - 'Face It, Time Has Come').

I have personally and/or publicly asked to some Circassians - all people fiercely claiming what the Tsarist Empire committed was a genocide - if they acknowledged the *metz yeghé-rn* as a genocide, and all of them replied they did. The ground for a sincere reciprocal and even common recognition and remembrance is ready. Yet, once again the situation of the Circassians is ambiguous. Like the Kurds, they were part of the winning side, the Muslims of Anatolia who during the Armageddon of 1914-22 wiped out almost all the Christians; then Caucasian identity was repressed or - for the Circassians - unpleasantly quoted in reference to Ethem. However the Caucasian-born communities had more than the Kurds a debt of gratitude towards Turks, they did not rebel, they were not subject to terrible repressions like the Kurds, in a higher rate compared to Kurds they were accepted as 'brothers' of the Turks and individually admitted in the cadres of the state. In sum, Circassians are different from the Armenians and the Kurds. For them, putting at the centre of their identity the cult of the genocide means shadowing their being part of the winning Muslim

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İmamoğlu, defeated the candidate of the government, the former Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım, for a handful of votes. The losing side obtained, with specious reasons, the repetition of the elections. In this second round (23 June) İmamoğlu won again, this time with a consistent gap.

side. For the defeated and wiped-out Armenians there is no alternative. For the Circassians there is. Consequently, even a broad-minded magazine like *Jineps* refrains from openly tackling the Armenian file. As for the psychological relations with the Kurds, they were much more victimized than the Circassians but later, in the years of the democratization process, were given a TV channel and other opportunities of free expression in their native languages. In spite of the recent developments, they still enjoy what they obtained about ten years ago. As a consequence, Circassians are inclined to think Kurds as the community who has obtained what they have not obtained yet. This feeling can be a drawback on the road of harmony and solidarity among Turkey's 'minorities'. Indeed, the last time I went to Istanbul I was invited to attend an event in the frame of the International Day of the Native Languages. I listened to the speeches of representatives of Circassians, Hemshins, Zazas, Abazas, Lazes and Pomaks (all of them frequently switched from their native language to Turkish) and enjoyed their songs. And these representatives more or less openly expressed the desire to see their native language gaining the same position as the Kurdish language. The Kurds were absent.

*Jineps* is a monthly 24-page magazine printed in 900 copies. All the people who work for *Jineps* are voluntary. True, it is read along one month in many circles by more than 900 people. Moreover, it reaches a broader audience with its digital edition. Its likeness is not the one of an amateur bulletin; on the contrary, its graphic is accurate, professional and elegant. But it does not regularly host contributions of prominent opinion makers. *Jineps* is a first step, and if you do not take the first step you cannot arrive anywhere. But it is still far from having reached the importance of the weekly *Agos*. The Armenian model is all but a popular review. It is a niche organ just like *Jineps*. However, *Agos* has got a firm place in relevant intellectual circles and an authoritative voice in Turkish political debate. The positions of these two publications symbolize the huge gap still existing between the Armenians of Turkey and the far more numerous Caucasians of Turkey on the way of becoming permanent subjects and participants of the public discourse (let's add that at the moment this gap is even greater if the two out-of-Turkey diasporas are compared). In the Republican era the surviving Armenians of Turkey struggled on as a *de facto* discriminated, half-tolerated, half-bullied *millet*. Caucasians were denied public recognition and remembrance of their sufferings, however they could feel part and were actually allowed to be part of the dominant community, on the condition to dismiss whatsoever public extra-Turkish identity. A man like Hrant Dink knew what to do once the slightest chance to raise publicly the question of 'the 1915' would rise in Turkey, being aware of how dangerous such a task was. Moreover, Dink was in contact – not always in full harmony – with a powerful diaspora, who had raised awareness about the Armenian

tragedy among historians, men of culture, parliaments. Instead, on the one hand no Circassian fighting for the acknowledgement of the Circassian genocide runs the risk to be murdered for this reason; on the other hand, the voice of the Circassians abroad is very feeble and until now unable to influence the international public opinion. This ambiguous position is one of the reasons – maybe the most important – of a persistent incertitude and weakness in the ‘political-cultural platform’ of the organized Caucasian diaspora.

### 3 The Abkhazians

In the Caucasian diaspora archipelago the Abkhazians occupy a special place for several reasons. Firstly, despite having ties with the Circassians, they lived in the Southern side of the Caucasus, much closer to the Russian-Ottoman boundary. Secondly, their forced migration, occurred mostly in 1865-7, was a classic migration by land which produced a far lesser rate of casualties than the extermination/expulsion of the *stricto sensu* Circassians. Thirdly, a self-proclaimed independent Abkhaz state, backed by Russian Federation but not recognized by the ‘international community’ (just like the self-proclaimed South-Ossetian state), has seceded from Georgia. Therefore the consistent Abkhaz diaspora in Turkey does not share the generally anti-Russian mood of the Caucasian diaspora. On the contrary, it must cope with the pro-Georgia stance of the Turkish state.

Turkey records important relations with Georgia, which is a crucial partner in the distribution of Azerbaijani oil and gas. Consequently, the official position of Ankara is quite clear:

Turkey strongly supports territorial integrity of Georgia and does not recognize the so-called independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Turkey hopes that these conflicts will be resolved within Georgia’s territorial integrity and sovereignty through peaceful means. Turkey also supports Georgia’s efforts for integration with Euro-Atlantic organizations.<sup>8</sup>

Under the surface, however, the situation is not that simple. Together with the Mesketian Turks, Abkhazians are a thorny issue in Turkish-Georgian relations. The pure descendants of the Abkhaz refugees in Turkey are some 100,000. They are the core of a much wider ‘Abkhaz-participated familiar area’. This core has got direct family

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<sup>8</sup> Republic of Turkey. Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2011). “Political Relations between Turkey and Georgia”. <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/relations-between-turkey-and-georgia.en.mfa>.

links with the Abkhazians living in Abkhazia and forms a powerful lobby. While Ankara should abide by the rule of economic embargo to the self-proclaimed independent Abkhazia, in practice an intense direct trade is run between Turkey and Abkhazia, tolerated by Turkish authorities. Moreover, many Turkish citizens go to Abkhazia passing through Russia (Göksel 2013, 4-5).<sup>9</sup> Naturally Abkhaz authorities

view the diaspora as an important political ally, as well as an economic and demographic resource, and have encouraged Turkish Abkhaz to resettle in Abkhazia [...]. As residence in Abkhazia is not a requirement for Abkhaz citizenship (which is open to all ethnic Abkhaz worldwide), the number of diaspora representatives holding Abkhaz passports is much larger. (Weiss, Zabanova 2016, 2)

In sum, Circassians and Chechens want the Republic of Turkey to put in its political agenda the defence of their rights in the international arena and the recognition of 1862-4 facts as a genocide. They know that if Turkey opened these two files serious consequences in Turkish-Russian relations would occur, but they desire it and are covertly disappointed when Moscow-Ankara relations look good. On the contrary, the Abkhazians are sad when Moscow-Ankara relations are tense and are happy when they are – or look – good:

The Federation of Abkhaz Associations (*Abhaz Dernekleri Federasyonu*, or Abhazfed), which is the leading diaspora organisation, established in 2010, has been known for its generally pro-Russian stance. In the wake of the rift between Russia and Turkey, Abhazfed publicly stated its loyalty to the Turkish government, yet refrained from criticising Russia directly. Shortly after Turkey's downing of a Russian military jet on the Syrian border, Abhazfed representatives visited the Russian Ambassador in Ankara to discuss future relations and promote dialogue. In April 2016, diaspora activists and Turkish think-tank analysts took part in a round table in Sukhum(i) with the participation of Abkhaz officials, as well as Russian MPs, businesspeople, and pro-government experts, to discuss options for improving Russian-Turkish relations. It is likely

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<sup>9</sup> 'Militant' Abkhazians affirm that the descendants of the Abkhaz refugees are some 500,000, i.e. much more than the some 125,000 Abkhazians living in the self-proclaimed independent Republic of Abkhazia. As modern Turkey is a giant melting pot, it is absolutely realistic to esteem up to 500,000 the number of Turkish citizens who have *also* Abkhaz ascendants, but this does not mean that the main identity of all of them is Abkhaz (they may have got either a plain Turkish identity or the identity of another particular group). Therefore it looks realistic that the correct figure of people feeling themselves mainly Abkhazian is 300,000 ca., of which no more than 25,000 are native or fluent Abkhazian-speakers.

that the Abkhaz diaspora's conciliatory stance towards Russia protected it from harsher repercussions. (Weiss, Zabanova 2016, 4-5)

Correspondently, Circassians love Georgia, until now the only state officially recognizing *tsitsekun* as a genocide, and look grimly at the 'opportunistic' choice of the Abkhazians. We can notice that backing the secessions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia Vladimir Putin has succeeded not only in punishing Georgia and in reaffirming Russian presence, if not hegemony, in 'Transcaucasia', but also in dividing the Caucasian diaspora.

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# Central Asia in Contemporary Russian Literature Among Nostalgia, Trauma and Orientalism

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**Abstract** Central Asia in contemporary Russian literature is represented by two main discourses, Nostalgia discourse and New Orientalism discourse. This article follows a diachronic perspective in an attempt to understand their origins, the characteristics of the Tashkent text and the Tajikistan text in literature, as well as historical and cultural factors which led to the present-day image of Central Asia in Russian culture, from the first Orientalist works through hybridisation processes to the collapse of the USSR and the Post-Soviet trauma. As a sample of contemporary literature, novels by Dina Rubina, Suhbat Aflatuni, Andrey Volos, Yevgeny Chizhov and other writers are analysed.

**Keywords** Russian Literature. Central Asia. The Other. Nostalgia. New Orientalism.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Notion of Central Asia, Orientalism and New Orientalism, PostColonial Studies and Internal Colonization. Nostalgia and Post-Soviet Identities. – 3 Birth of Central Asian Orientalism in Russian Literature. – 4 Rise and Fall of the Assimilation Discourse. – 5 Nostalgic Utopia and Tashkent Text. – 6 New Orientalism. Tajikistan Text, Trauma and Return of *the Other*. – 7 Conclusion.



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## 1 Introduction

The aim of this article is to provide a brief overview of how Central Asia is represented in Russian literature, with a close look on contemporary authors. This research does not pretend to be exhaustive; single literary works will be taken as samples of general tendencies; analysing the literary production of all contemporary Russian writers linked in some way to Central Asia is beyond my objectives. I will talk about those contemporary novels which are present in the Russian book market and are available to an average (or mass) Russian reader, so marginal literary activities, if such exist, are beyond this research. In an attempt to understand the main factors which led contemporary Russian writers to choose a certain way of representing Central Asia, I will necessarily speak about facts from History as to better understand their impact on culture and literature, though one should be aware that here History serves for merely illustrative purposes, as well as data from Sociology and Culture Studies: mine is a study in Literature.<sup>1</sup>

The image of Central Asia in Russian culture and literature through the last 150 years has undergone changes, defined by political events: the Russian conquest of Central Asia, its status as part of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union and then the creation of independent states. After a preliminary analysis of the most important theoretical issues of this research (such as the notion of Central Asia, Orientalism, the applicability of postcolonial theory, the idea of the internal colonization and the question of post-Soviet identities) I will show that chronologically the first and most persistent discourse in depicting Central Asia is Orientalism, dominating, for example, in the 'Caucasus text' in Russian literature of that epoch.<sup>2</sup> I will speak also briefly on differences in the representation of the Caucasus and Central Asia in 19th-century Russia. Then the article will proceed to the shift in Central Asia representation during the Soviet times, when literature reflects a gradual turn from Orientalism to Assimilation; a turn favoured by multinational nature of the so-called Soviet literature. Finally I will concentrate on the characteristics of the post-Soviet Russian literature look on Central Asia, which clearly falls into two trends. For one of them I'm proposing the term 'Nostalgia discourse', as I see it akin to a more generic post-Soviet nostalgia for the Soviet utopia and harmony lost; I will try to trace

<sup>1</sup> Those interested in the Post-Soviet space in historical, cultural and sociological dimensions, among other sources, can find a lot of interesting materials in a specialized scientific review, *Ab imperio*, available at the following link: <https://abimperio.net>.

<sup>2</sup> The long tradition of the Caucasus text in Russian literature is analysed in a great number of studies, to name a few: Shul'zhenko 2017; Grimberg 2000; Gadzhiev 1982; Dudareva 2019; Helle 2009; Dudareva 2019; Helle 2009.

down its features through the analysis of Dina Rubina's and Suhbat Aflatuni's prose. Then I will focus on the second trend, for which I'm proposing the name of 'New Orientalism'. I will show that it results from the recent political transformations and their traumatic experience. As a sample I will analyse Andrey Volos', Yevgeny Chizhov's, Lyudmila Basova's, and Vladimir Medvedev's works.

## 2 Notion of Central Asia, Orientalism and New Orientalism, Postcolonial Studies and Internal Colonization. Nostalgia and Post-Soviet Identities

The borders of the area understood as Central Asia vary depending on its application for geographical, cultural or geopolitical purposes,<sup>3</sup> and can include territories from the Caspian Sea to as far as Lake Baikal and Mongolia, from the Southern Siberia to the northern borders of Pakistan and India. In this article I will use the term 'Central Asia' as an equivalent to the Russian term *Srednyaya Aziya* Средняя Азия (Middle Asia), thus embracing contemporary Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Central/Southern Kazakhstan. Having much in common since their early history due to geographical affinity, these territories later on have experienced similar political and cultural events: after a series of wars in the middle of 19th century, they were either included directly into the Russian Empire or became its protectorates (as the Khiva Khanate and the Bukhara Emirate), thus marking the start of Russian domination in the region. Then for almost 70 years, from early 1920s to 1991, they made an integral part of the Soviet Union, which exposed them to social and cultural processes, unknown, for example, to Afghanistan or Western China; Central Asia in this meaning still exists in Russian collective mentality as a certain whole, domesticated in the past. Till 1920s this region in Russian was also called *Туркестан* (Turkestan), so in Literature Studies a peculiar 'Turkestan text' is sometimes distinguished.

To describe the Russian vision of Central Asia I will use the term 'Orientalism' which, after the famous book *Orientalism* first published in 1978 by Edward W. Said, for almost half a century has provoked infinite discussions: the interpretation of Orientalism varies from the positions of Said (though the scholar himself gives, at least, three possible meanings of the term) to that of his ardent adversaries; the truth is that Said did not speak much of Russia, and the question is if his idea of Orientalism as a way to exercise the power of the West

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed analysis of this problem see, for example Lolaeva 2009.

over the East is applicable to Russian realities.<sup>4</sup> While all interested readers can find materials on the theoretical debate over the Said's positions elsewhere, in this article 'Orientalism' is taken in a broad meaning of 'an interest towards Eastern cultures from the positions of *the Other*'.<sup>5</sup> Understood in this way, the interest towards the East is a specific case of the interest towards a collective *Other*, which takes form in a binary opposition: 'We' (European civilization) vs '*the Other*' (non-European civilizations located in Asia); as Said notes, "Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident'" (Said 1980, 10). In my opinion, this interest may (or may not) include civilizing, imperial, ethnographic or other intentions. Of course, the self-imposed distinction between Europeans and non-Europeans defines a specific European way of describing non-European Eastern cultures. I can't but agree with Hassan Hanafi, who, following Said's ideas, states that Orientalism "expresses the searching subject more than it describes the object of research" (Hanafi 2010, 15). In an attempt to understand the mood of some works of Post-Soviet Russian literature dedicated to Central Asia, I'm also proposing another term, 'New Orientalism', which retains the main characteristics of the classic Orientalism with one significant difference: the cultures described in this way (namely those of the former Soviet Central Asia republics) returned to the status of *the Other* after a seemingly successful assimilation with Russian culture (in this case, deemed European), so this *New Orientalism* is a reaction to the conscious choice of the cultures to dissent from the West and to regain their original heritage and forms of existence.

The ideas of Orientalism inevitably recall the rise and the success of the Postcolonial theory. The input of this theory in describing cultural situations in the former British and French colonies is difficult to negate, but its applicability to the post-Soviet reality is not free of controversies:<sup>6</sup> while European and American scholars use it extensively to understand various dynamics of the post-Soviet countries, in Russia itself this theory has not had much success.<sup>7</sup> Ilya Kukulin notes that

<sup>4</sup> A very interesting analysis of Edward Said's ideas applicability to the 'Caucasus text' in Russian literature can be found in Zakharov 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Vladimir Medvedev, whose novel *Zahhok* I will analyse, says: "Edward Said damaged the reputation of this term. It would be worth restituting its original meaning: Orientalism is a narration about the East, a study of the East, love to the East" (Medvedev 2018). Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by the Author.

<sup>6</sup> The literature on the subject is vast and easily available; just to name a few, see Adams 2008; Chioni 2001; Kukulin 2013; Morozov 2015. Among the recent works of particular interest is Smola, Uffelmann 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Eleonora Shafranskaya cites an interesting document: an explicitly negative reaction of some Moscow-based scientists against a Seminar in Colonial and Postcolonial

[a]ny attempt to interpret the contemporary cultural situation of Russia, post-Soviet republics and Eastern Europe as postcolonial is regularly rejected by Russian scientists. (Kukulin 2008, 126)<sup>8</sup>

The refusal to apply the postcolonial approach to, say, Central Asian literatures is easy to understand: accepting it would mean to qualify the former Soviet republics as colonies; it is absolutely contrary to the idea of a specific Soviet nation, based on the concept of 'friendship of nations'. That is why in Russia "the postcolonial discourse [...] is not assimilated; it is considered improper and not adopted [to Russian realities]" (Berg 2005, 119-20).<sup>9</sup> Vladimir Medvedev holds that contemporary Russian novels about Central Asia have nothing to do with Postcolonialism:

I'm convinced that these novels can't be qualified as postcolonial, because you won't find even a trace of postcolonial issues in any of them. Compare *Khurramabad* by Andrey Volos, *Tashkent Novel* by Suhbat Aflatuni or *Interlinear Crib Translation* by Yevgeny Chizhov with a classic postcolonial novel like, say, *Time for a Tiger* by Anthony Burgess, and you will see crucial differences. (Medvedev 2018)

It is evident that in the case of the former USSR the problem is the notion of *colony* which undermines postcolonial discourse. An attempt to resolve it and to underline the difference in the modes of interaction between the centre and the periphery in the British or French colonial empires, on the one hand, and in the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, on the other, is the theory of *internal colonization* (or *self-colonization*), proposed by Alexander Etkind.<sup>10</sup> Dragan Kujundzic, sharing the ideas of Etkind, agrees that this is the way "by means of which Russia acquires its history" (Kujundzic 2000, 896). The internal colonization, in fact, tries to adapt the Postcolonial Theory to the realities of the Russian and Soviet history, where the absence of great geographical distances between the centre and the periphery made the application of British-African or French-Asian relations model impossible. In case of the mainland Russia and, for example, Central

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Studies, see Shafranskaya 2016, 39-40.

<sup>8</sup> In an obvious attempt to overcome this prejudice, a leading Russian scientific journal *Новое литературное обозрение* dedicated one of its latest issues to the problem, see: "Постсоветское как постколониальное. Специальный выпуск. Часть 1" (Post-Soviet as Postcolonial. Special Issue. Part I) (2020). *Новое литературное обозрение* (New Literary Review), 161(1).

<sup>9</sup> A discussion between Ekaterina Dyogot and Margaret Dikovitskaya on the pages of *Ab Imperio* journal seems very symptomatic; see Dyogot 2002; Dikovitskaya 2002.

<sup>10</sup> See Etkind 2010, 2011a, 2011b.

Asia, due to assimilation processes, hybrid Russian-local identities were often formed. In the Soviet times they were comprised by the Soviet identity reflected in Soviet multinational literature. The concept of internal colonization, in fact, describes perfectly not only the mechanisms of the assimilation in the Soviet Central Asia, but also the effects the collapse of the Soviet Union produced on these hybrid identities. As “after 1991 the Soviet identity gave place to new national identities” (Puleri 2016, 14), it is comprehensible why the second predominant discourse of the Central Asia representation in contemporary Russian literature is Nostalgia: more than nostalgia for the territories lost (as would be in case of classic colonialism), this is a nostalgia for the identities lost when the new ones have still to be found. Alexandra Kazimirchuk describes the problem:

After the collapse of the USSR, its former republics saw the birth and a subsequent growth of a nostalgia for community, for a certain commitment to the metropole; there began a search for their own identity. (Kazimirchuk 2017, 163)<sup>11</sup>

Gradually, this ‘local’ nostalgia merged with a much more ponderous discourse in Russian culture: nostalgia about the Soviet Union, provoked by a complex social phenomenon known as ‘post-Soviet trauma’. The number of studies dedicated to the essence and to the effects of post-Soviet trauma is high, and an interested reader will easily find them. I will just note that it is generally considered that the lack of clear strategies for the future development of Russia, defected economy, recent challenges in security and welfare push Russian collective mentality to the image of the Soviet Union as a sort of past utopia opposed to the instability of the present-day world, where “variables include Russia’s image of itself” (Bowring 2000, 240). Russia is also seeking for a national identity, and nostalgia for the Soviet Union is one of the ways to regain it.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, another problem related to the question of identity is what the borders of Russian literature are. As Nina Friess notes,

[t]hanks to the spread of the Russian language with the expansion of the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union, as well as large waves of migration from Russian-speaking areas during the twentieth century, Russian or Russian language literature no longer originates

<sup>11</sup> The very search for identity, peculiar for the Post-Soviet space, is sometimes seen as a serious proof that Postcolonial theory can be applied to post-Soviet realities, see, e.g. Puleri 2018.

<sup>12</sup> This problem is studied, for example, in Bassin 2003. See also a volume, dedicated to the relation of Eurasianism and contemporary Russian national identity: Friess, Kaminskij 2019.

only from the territory of the Russian Federation. (Friess 2019, 149)

In other words, the problem is the following: what Russian literature *is* and what *is not*. For example, Tamara Ivanova says:

It's difficult to consider certain texts, written in Russian, a part of Russian literature. The problem is not only the writer's vocabulary, Oriental realities or the content of the book, but more a specific syntax, mentality, cultural values, literary strategies characteristic for the Eastern tradition. (Ivanova 2019, 46)

When the postcolonial approach has not found much enthusiasm on the Russian ground, a number of terms are used to characterize contemporary Russian-speaking literature written abroad, such as 'frontier literature' (Madina Tlostanova), 'hybrid literature' (Sergey Tolkachev), 'multicultural literature' (Tlostanova, Tolkachev, Elena Tkhaidze), 'cross-cultural literature' (Zhanna Burtseva), even 'post-Russian literature' (Diana Ziyatdinova); recently the term 'transcultural literature' has been used extensively. All these definitions underline a specific situation when a work of verbal art belongs simultaneously to more than one culture, without making choice in favour of only one national literature. Tatyana Kolmogorova, trying to resolve this controversy, marks all post-Soviet authors writing in Russian as "Russians by profession, because the Russian language is the only language they use in their works" (Kolmogorova 2015, 261). Here I would add that often it is the author himself to label his works as Russian literature (for example, Suhbat Aflatuni from Uzbekistan) or national literature written in Russian (Russian-speaking Andrey Kurkov from Kiev who declares that he's a Ukrainian writer): the choice depends on the personal national self-identification.

### 3 Birth of Central Asian Orientalism in Russian Literature

The birth of Orientalism in classic Russian literature is related to the cultural discovery of the Caucasus. As Vladimir Zakharov notes,

in the 19th century the Caucasus for Europe and for Russia was associated with the Orient [...]. Orientalist topics became traditional in Russian literature already in the first quarter of the 19th century. (Zakharov 2014, 41)

'Meeting' the Caucasus happens in the epoch of Romanticism, thus provoking a certain romantic Orientalist mood (see *A Hero of Our Time* by Lermontov or *The Prisoner of the Caucasus* by Puškin) in Russian literature. As Pavel Alekseev sustains, the main sources of



Romantic Orientalism in Russia are “Arabian fairy-tales, Sufi poetry and the Quran” (Alekseev 2013, 21). The idea of Central Asia is typologically close to the Caucasus (as another exotic part of the Russian Empire), but it entered Russian collective imagery later, after the Russian-Kokand war in 1850s. In general,

the perception of Central Asia by Russian, ‘Russian-Soviet’ and contemporary Russian mentality changed according to the political and state evolution of Russia itself. (Lolaeva, Ryabov 2009)

The conquest of Central Asia falls in the epoch of Realism, which put the accent away from the Romantic, enchanted narrations and was little if no interested in ‘romancing’ and, therefore, romanticizing the region:

When the Russian troops were conquering Tashkent and subduing the Khanate of Bukhara, the Romanticism had already been burnt out. This exotic periphery was of little use for the Realism, known for its capacity to discover new worlds in the most mundane and routine things. (Abdullaev 2011)

Consequently, the amount of literary works dedicated to Central Asia in the pre-revolutionary Russia is scarce; from a long row of Russian classics of the 1850-1900s only Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin recurs to the Central Asian topic in his *Gospoda tashkentsy Gocnoda tashkenttsy* (Misters from Tashkent, 1869-73), a satire on Russian bureaucrats, sent to Tashkent to ‘civilize’ the local population.

It is the discourse of civilizing Orientalism that characterizes the initial attitude of Russian culture towards Central Asia. As in the case of the Caucasus discourse, Russian culture is seen more progressive and modern, while Central Asian local culture(s) are deemed underdeveloped and wild. The first professional Russian writer, who dedicated the majority of his production to Central Asia, is Nikolay Karazin (1842-1908).<sup>13</sup> His orientalist novels, short stories, travel diaries opened the region to a Russian mass readership. In his works the local population is savage, wild, uncontrolled – it is the same ‘child of nature’, as in Romanticistic depictions of the Caucasus, but Karazin’s Central Asia lacks that magic enchantment typical of the Caucasus. What he describes is the territory of *the Other*, and Karazin meticulously provides the reader with various data about life habits, national character, religion and beliefs of the local population, their clothes and typical food – all that definitely strange for a *European* Russian reader. As Eleonora Shafranskaya notes, “Karazin gave a

<sup>13</sup> For a detailed analysis of Karazin’s poetics and legacy, see: Shafranskaya 2016.

start for a lot of those stereotypes which afterwards became clichés of the Turkestan East” (Shafranskaya 2016, 37). His works follow the usual strategy of the European writers, depicting *the Other* from the East: “The description of a singular case is represented as a description of typical features of a given culture” (Repina 2012, 16). Let’s mention the fact that Karazin’s works (over 20 volumes, as his complete works edition of 1904-5 counts) were not published in the Soviet Union; they were marked as the expression of the colonial expansion of the Russian Empire, and Karazin’s name was nearly forgotten.

Immediately after Karazin, the Orientalist perception of the region is obvious, for example, in Nikolay Gumilev’s famous poem *Turkestanskies generaly Туркестанские генералы* (Turkestan Generals, 1912) – a sort of ode to the brave conquerors of the wild East, messengers of the illuminated Russia. Tashkent in the pre-revolutionary Russia was a peripheral centre of Russian poetry from Central Asia, which, at least, initially, was perceived as “typical literature written abroad” (Asanova et al. 2016; Ivanova 2000). A number of local newspapers (*Turkestanskiy kuryer Туркестанский курьер*, *Yezhemesyachny zhurnal Ежемесячный журнал*, etc.) regularly published the poems of local Russian-speaking authors,<sup>14</sup> but in the collective Russian imagery Central Asia remained a sort of *terra incognita*.

#### 4 Rise and Fall of the Assimilation Discourse

First Russian civil colonists arrived in Central Asia just after the conquest of the Khanate of Kokand, and the more was the region consolidated with the Empire, the higher was the number of internal migrants. The flows of Russian-speaking immigrants continued throughout Soviet times. This process was reinforced by political and social events: the industrialization (1920-1950s) brought a great number of Russian-speaking specialists to Central Asian cities; the region served as a destination for political exiles and refugees, who escaped from the persecutions of the Regime. Wartime evacuation (1941-45), the Ashkhabad (1948) and the Tashkent (1966) earthquakes contributed to the change of the ethnic balance in the area. The Russian-speaking population quite rapidly gave birth to new generations who acquired life habits and a mentality peculiar for the place and unknown to the Russian mainland, and who considered themselves locals. The assimilation processes couldn’t be unilateral (Russian culture towards Central Asia), and, effectively, gradual russification of Central Asia, more evident with the local intelligentsia, lead to a typi-

<sup>14</sup> For a detailed analysis of the 20th-century Russian poetry in Central Asia see Asanova et al. 2016; Ivanova 2000.

cally Soviet situation where many Uzbeks, Tajiks, Turkmens etc. were bilingual; these was the internal colonization in action.

The Soviet Union adopted the civilizing discourse to its own ideological needs; literature was seen as a conductor of communist ideas, and it corresponded perfectly to the project of Central Asia domestication and helped eliminate the idea of the Other; thus Orientalism gives place to Assimilation discourse. In 1924 *Tashkentskaya organizatsiya proletarskikh pisateley* Ташкентская организация пролетарских писателей (Tashkent Organization of Proletarian Writers) was founded; it united writers of local and Russian origin. The Union of Soviet Writers organized regular tours to Central Asia. Central Asia was still perceived as an exotic and uncivilized, definitely a *non-Russian* place, but much closer to an average Russian reader than it was earlier. For instance, materials collected in 1930 were used for a number of short stories and essays, let's name P. Pavlenko's *Pustyni* Пустыни (Deserts), Vs. Ivanov's *Rasskaz brigadira Sinitsina* Рассказ бригадира Синицына (The Story of Brigadier Sinitin), N. Tikhonov's *Kochevniki* Кочевники (Nomades) and others. The most famous example is that of Andrey Platonov, who visited Central Asia twice, in 1930 and 1934, to leave such brilliant short stories as *Dzhan* Джан (1934) or *Takyr* Такыр (1934).

In 1920-30s Central Asia faced the process of national delimitation between the newly created republics:

The process of drawing national boundaries in a region where these borders had never existed before, where bilingualism and multi-layered identities were common, and where divisions of language and ethnicity often fell along the rural/urban divide, created many anomalies. (Morrison 2017)

At the same time, the project of creating a peculiar *Soviet nation*, which would include all the nations of the USSR, began. These events favoured the leading role of the Russian language ('the language of communication between nations') and Russian culture, and accelerated the assimilation processes. The Soviet nation, a melting pot of all nations in the Soviet Union, was served by Soviet literature, meant as a sum of all national literatures. As Susanne Frank notes, this literature was characterized by several features, namely,

the dominance of Russian as lingua franca and the language into which all (relevant) literary texts had to be translated was only one feature, others being dogmatism of one aesthetic doctrine – Socialist Realism – and universalism. (Frank 2016, 193)

As a result of these policies, since 1940-1950s Central Asia in the Russian cultural space is represented by writers who split into two cat-

egories. On the one hand, there are ethnic Russians, mostly living in Central Asia, often born and bred there, therefore assimilating the local mixture of cultures from their childhood. On the other hand, a lot of Uzbeks, Tajiks and other ethnically non-Russian authors write their texts in Russian. The idea of Soviet literature eliminated at the moment any possible discussion whether the works of these writers belonged to Russian literature or to their national literature, though written in Russian; Soviet literature was automatically transcultural: “the mixture of the Russian language and other culture’s paradigms resulted in hybrid texts” (Tolkachev 2017, 194). Some of these writers (representing both streams) gained all-Soviet fame, just to name Chingiz Aytmatov (an ethnic Kyrgyz), who wrote both in Russian and Kyrgyz, with his notorious novels *I dol’she veka dlitsja den’* *И дольше века длится день* (A Day Lasts more than a Hundred Years, 1980) or *Plakha* *Плаха* (The Place of the Skull, 1987). We can find a vast variety of genres in the Central Asian prose written by ethnic Russians, from philosophical novel to detective stories and science fiction, but the most prolific was the historical novel, which gained wide, all-Soviet popularity. There are, at least, three subgenres in Soviet Central Asian historical novel: novels illustrating the life after the Russian conquest and the subsequent establishment of the Soviet power; novels about the ancient history of the region (these two subgenres are often documental, or tend to be such); and, finally, novels about legendary events and personalities; this third subgenre is close to a fairy tale as if taken from *Arabian nights*.

Among the most prominent novels dedicated to the victory of the revolutionary forces in Central Asia let’s name *Po volchiemu sledu* *По волчьему следу* (Tracing the Wolf, 1958) and *Dzheihun* *Джейхун* (1983) by Mikhail Sheverdin, *Gnyot* *Гнем* (The Yoke, three volumes published in 1957-60) by Anna Almatinskaya. Quite predictably, these works implement the principles of Socialist Realism in the most consecutive way. Among those depicting the ancient Central Asia I’d mention *Zvezdy nad Samarkandom* *Звезды над Самаркандом* (Stars over Samarkand, 1955-73), a history novel in three volumes by Sergey Borodin; or *Sozvezdie Oriona*. *Avitsenna* *Созвездие Ориона*. *Авиценна* (Orion Constellation. Avicenna, 1978) by Lyudmila Saldadze. An absolute bestseller is a novel written by Leonid Solovyev and dedicated to the adventures of Nasreddin Hodja, a folklore trickster from Central Asian tradition. The first part, *Vozmutitel’ spoko-* *jstviya* *Возмутитель спокойствия* (The Mutineer), was published in 1940, the second – *Ocharovannyj princ* *Очарованный принц* (The Enchanted Prince), in 1956. It is re-edited regularly in the ‘mainland’ Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union; the latest (by now) Moscow edition dates back to 2016. The popularity of the historical novel may be considered as a testimony of the continuity of the Orientalism discourse: Central Asia is still a mysterious, unknown place, the

territory of *the Other*; though, unlike the initial period, this *Other* is not an enemy but more an object of interest and curiosity.

In December 1991, though, the Soviet era officially came to its end, and Central Asian republics gained their independence. A difficult economic situation and national policies adopted by the local governments provoked a mass migration of Russians and Russian-speaking population since the 1990s. These drastic changes seriously questioned the Soviet idea of the 'friendship of nations' and the success of the assimilation processes; the role of the Russian language significantly diminished.<sup>15</sup>

Two main discourses characterize post-Soviet Russian literature focussed on Central Asia: on the one hand, its Nostalgia discourse, which manifest itself in the images of the idyllic Soviet past, with the locals and Russians living happily together, as we see, for example, in the novels of Dina Rubina. On the other hand, there is New Orientalism, whose essence coincides with the Karazin's mood in the epoch of the Central Asia conquest: we see a hostile, mysterious, definitely alien region, where Russians are invaders and outsiders, despite many years of cohabitation with the native population. It often reveals a trauma of the generations of ethnic Russians in Central Asia, whose usual life pattern is "terra incognita - a new place to live - Motherland - crush of the habitual world - saying the last farewell - a new (strange / alien) place" (Remizova 2000). Thus the concept of *the Other* came back to the description and representation of Central Asia. This discourse is represented by the novels of Andrey Volos, Vladimir Medvedev, Lyudmila Basova, and Yevgeny Chizhov.

## 5 Nostalgic Utopia and Tashkent Text

Tashkent in the second half of the 20th century became one of the centres of hybridization processes in Central Asia, which led to the formation and further development of a peculiar Tashkent text in Russian literature, "it's a city text born on a cultural frontier" (Shafranskaya 2010, 6). As it happens to the majority of post-Soviet places, their link with the Russian collective imagery is weakening, and this process brings to life a tendency

to preserve the image of this city in scientific studies and literary texts, [...] to 'preserve' that cultural layer of the city, which is physically no more recoverable, but will exist in literature and re-

<sup>15</sup> A peculiar case is the so-called 'Fergana School of Poetry' in Uzbekistan, formed in early 1990s. Though Russian-speaking, their poetry was clearly oriented on Western avant-garde traditions. See Korchagin 2017.

search as a document of the epoch. (Shafranskaya 2010, 9)

The Tashkent text now is mostly a Nostalgia text, located in the past and in memories; it is clearly retrospective and extremely personal: the author shares his memories with the reader, accompanying him to a secret, utopian place.

The most prolific and renowned author representing this literary vein is Dina Rubina (b. 1953 in Tashkent), who left Tashkent for Moscow in the 1980s and then moved to Israel. As a consequence, in Rubina's works there are two possible depictions of the East: the domesticated East, which "is formed, primarily, through the discourse of everyday life" (Ziyatdinova 2015, 192) – Tashkent and Jewish Israel, and the East of *the Other*, realized through the Orientalist discourse, as in the case of the Arabs. The Tashkent text is recurrent in Rubina's autobiographical works: it is often the city where her protagonists were born or have spent their childhood. In *Ich bin nervoso*, a collection of essays, Rubina says:

I understand now that Tashkent was a microscopic model of that melting pot which American and Israeli sociologists are craving for [...]. Under the Tashkent sun, I was – all we, children, were – a sort of a homogeneous mixture, a sort of clay used to sculpture a man... I'd say a 'colonial man'. (Rubina 2007)

Rubina's novel *Na solnechnoy storone ulitsy* *На солнечной стороне улицы* (On the Sunny Side of the Street, 2006) is a sample text implementing Nostalgia for Central Asia. It's a sort of remembrance, as Rubina explicitly says several times through the text: the Tashkent she is showing does not exist anymore, and this literary text is a tribute to the past, to an illusory territory of peace and happiness. The structure of the novel is complex; Tashkent itself is the main protagonist of the book, which the author populates with various characters: Russians, Jews, Uzbeks, whose lives make up the history of the city. The formal protagonist, an artist named Vera Shcheglova, is the alter ego of Rubina, who keeps also a place for herself among the heroes of the novel, sometimes describing the same event from the point of view of Vera and then from the point of view of an imaginary 'little Dina'. The novel exists in several time layers: the city during the Great Patriotic War (1941-45), when the future mother of Vera is evacuated to Tashkent from Leningrad; the 1950s-60s, when Vera's mother is growing and becomes a criminal; the 1960s-90s, Vera's personal and professional growth; all these periods are accompanied by the author's personal recollections and comments on the peculiarities of Tashkent life. These time layers are interlaced and non-chronological; in fact, it is a sort of game with reality, where the only real space is a utopian city disappeared forever with the Soviet Union. The people of Rubina's

imaginary Tashkent all live but in memories, and the novel, formally following the belles-lettres trend, seems a postmodern docufiction.

The Tashkent text reveals itself also in the works of Suhbat Aflatuni, alias of the Tashkent-based writer Evgeny Abdullaev. ‘Suhbat Aflatuni’ in Uzbek literally means ‘Plato’s Dialogues’, and, actually, Aflatuni’s prose follows a philosophical trend and goes much beyond Rubina’s everyday life descriptions. His *Tashkentskiy roman Tashkentский роман* (A Tashkent Novel), *Muravyiny tsar’ Муравьиный царь* (The Ants’ King), *Dikiy plyazh Дикий пляж* (Wild Beach) deal with memories, but these are not personal memories, for Aflatuni tries to reconstruct the historical memory of the region – from the present-day independent Uzbekistan back to the ancient history, to the times of Alexander the Great, Buddhist expansion and the epoch of Zoroaster. “Tashkent in Aflatuni’s prose is the main ghost, a sacred mystery, a city of dreams” (Kazimirchuk 2017, 163), but here we deal not with Rubina’s explicit nostalgia for the forever lost Soviet Tashkent, but with a much more complicated feeling: a strong wish to understand oneself and realize one’s own place in the universe through the cultural history of the region. All people, all nationalities, all religions rooted in Central Asia throughout history, are equal and homogeneous. Using postmodern composition techniques, Aflatuni often refers to the Buddhist idea of reincarnation and makes the same hero live simultaneously in different epochs and in various cultural environments. In a certain sense, Aflatuni continues the tradition of Soviet-time hybridization strategies; he declares that “Central Asia is very scarcely ‘inhabited’ by Russian literature [...] and my task, one of my tasks is to continue this process” (Aflatuni 2016, 6), but if the Soviet case was inspired by State ideology and limited to the synchronic dimension of happy Soviet peoples united in one Soviet nation;

Aflatuni’s personal style is characterized by interference of the past into the present: myth and history in his novels merge together to create a peculiar kind of reality where the author tries to ponder over eternal global problems. (Emelina 2019, 80)

Political, cultural and temporal borders disappear, and Central Asia constitutes an organic part of the Universe, as well as Russia or any other place in the world. Therefore it seems that Aflatuni’s novels eliminate the concept of *the Other*.

## **6 New Orientalism. Tajikistan Text, Trauma and Return of the Other**

A discourse, opposite to Rubina’s or Aflatuni’s works, is the discourse of a failed assimilation: it shows Central Asia as an unfriendly or ex-

PLICITLY hostile territory, where traditional habits and a peculiar way of life turned out much stronger and more persistent than the civilizing attempts of Russians. These ideas seem to represent a comeback to Nikolay Karazin's Orientalist positions which marked the introduction of Central Asia into Russian literature 150 years ago. This New Orientalism, though, has lost its initial innocence: local inhabitants are savage not because the Western world has not arrived (and the Russian in this model is a Western, or at least, a non-Oriental culture) but because this is their conscious choice, a kind of rebellion against the West. The most evident example (but not the only one) of this discourse is the Tajikistan text. Created mostly by writers born and long-lived in Tajikistan, it is a reaction to the Civil War (1992-6) and to the social and demographical changes caused by this war. Therefore, the nostalgia, widely present in the Tajikistan text, also cries for the times lost, but the past is not the happy 'melting-pot' utopia of Rubina; here Russians all of a sudden discover that "one of the Soviet ideologemes, 'the friendship of nations', is just a simulacrum, there is nothing like this 'friendship' in the real life" (Shafranskaya 2019, 127). Thus the question which torments the authors is 'why?': why it happened at all and why Russians, living for years back to back with the locals, became *the Other* in their own Motherland? The most famous and renowned representative of the Tajikistan text is Andrey Volos (b. in 1955 in Stalinabad, now Dushanbe) with his notorious novel *Khurramabad* *Хуррамабад* (2000); let's also name *Sinie zvezdy Evropy, zelenye zvezdy Azii* *Синие звезды Европы, зеленые звезды Азии* (Blue Stars of Europe, Green Stars of Asia, 2006) by Lyudmila Basova and *Zahhok Zaxxok* (2013) by Vladimir Medvedev.

*Khurramabad* by Andrey Volos opens the list of the contemporary Russian novels which dwell on the Tajikistan civil war. The novel, first published as separate short stories in a number of literary journals, was conferred several prestigious literary awards and played an important social role, exposing the problem of the Civil War to a Russian reader not as a fact taken from daily news but as a reality for thousands of compatriots, abandoned by the Government and desperately struggling to survive in a land suddenly turned dangerous and hostile. The novel follows a non-linear structure; as in Rubina's novels, *Khurramabad*'s only protagonist is a place – Tajikistan, from its capital Dushanbe to the tiniest *kishlaks* (villages) in the Pamir, where Russians happened to live by some chance. Nostalgia is widely present, the very title *Khurramabad* refers to Tajik-Persian folklore and means something like 'a city of flowers', 'a garden-city'. Still Volos' heroes have no time to indulge themselves into the opiate oblivion, dreaming about the happy times of childhood, as a real Nostalgia discourse suggests. His heroes have to be rough, smart and determined, for their habitual world one day has broken and they have to survive, they *are* to survive and to save their families. Volos shows a gallery



of human types, united in this struggle; each chapter contains one particular story, be it a grandson who is to accompany his old grandmother while she's visiting her husband's tomb; an average Russian man desperately trying to buy a machine-gun (and finally managing to do it) to protect his own house from paramilitary criminals; or an elderly Russian lady, whose solitude (as her children have been settled in mainland Russia for a long time) finds the only consolation in a strange affective relation with a mortally poisonous snake, which becomes a sort of pet for her. The topic running throughout the novel is *the Otherness*. People from *Khurramabad* (as noted above) are striving to understand why years of seemingly harmonious coexistence with the locals and of *seeming* harmony ended in a massacre, in a collective call to expel the Russians from Tajikistan; and neither the external look nor the knowledge of the Tajik language and of the local way of life can save one from the status of *the Other*.<sup>16</sup> An exemplary story here is that of a Russian man named Sergey, who married a Tajik girl from the Kulyab region. He lives in Dushanbe and works in a city grocery market. Sergey changes his name to *Sirojiddin*, switches to the Tajik language and accepts Tajik habits but still feels a stranger. One day, during the outrages in the streets of Dushanbe, Sergey is captured by armed people; they make him pronounce a nursery rhyme to understand his provenance: Sergey speaks Tajik with a strong Kulyab accent, acquired from his wife, so the militants take him for a Kulyab spy and kill him. It would be an ordinary civil war story if not for Sergey's last thoughts: he understands that he's dying but he is happy: he is local, he is not *the Other* anymore, even if the price for the total assimilation is his life.

Basova's novel *Sinie zvezdy Evropy, zelenye zvezdy Azii* *Синие звезды Европы, зеленые звезды Азии* first publication dates back to 2006 (literary journal *Brega Tavridy* *Брега Тавриды*, issued in Crimea). Overlooked by literary critics, it drew no attention from the readers. The second journal publication appeared eight years later, in 2014 and was awarded with the prize for the Best Novel of the Year by the literary journal *Sever*, issued in Karelia. At the same time it was published in a book edition, followed by a sequel, *Verblyuzhya Kolyuchka* *Верблужья колючка* (Camelthorn). Basova's prose shows a strong typological resemblance to Rubina's works; it is a stream of personal memories, family stories and tales, a whole which forms a utopian place of stability and happiness left in the past. The difference is that if Rubina stops at this idyllic picture, strictly separated from her post-Tashkent life, Basova goes on describing the outburst of the Civil War and the crash of the imaginary utopia, typical of Russian refugees from Tajikistan. In this way the novel's mood turns from

<sup>16</sup> For a detailed analysis of this problem see Abashin 2003.

nostalgic to traumatic; it is not only the war trauma but also the trauma of an average Russian who became stranger in his own Homeland.

It is worth noting that the New Orientalism reveals itself in other forms as well. For example, Volos' novel *Vozvrashchenie v Pandzhrud* (Return to Pandzhrud, 2013), a literary biography of the Central Asian ancient poet Rudaki, may be read as an evergreen story about the relation between Power and Talent, though it continues the 'historical' Orientalist vein of the Soviet times, as is evident from its languidly reeling off narration, a peculiar language used and the attempt to introduce the Russian reader to an unknown and dangerous but still very attractive East. Eleonora Shafranskaya sustains that this novel is not Orientalist at all, motivating this opinion in the following way:

[a]lmost all Russian literature about the East is Orientalist in its nature, but the novel by Volos is purposely non-Orientalist. In his narration we find all the loci and artefacts of Orientalism – *bazaar*, *mazar*, mosque, *Arc*, *zindan*, dervishes, *bachas*, *rishta*, local cuisine and others – but they are not represented as exotic things, they are an integral part of the Oriental world. (Shafranskaya 2020, 299)

This position, though, is vulnerable: to qualify a novel as Orientalist, who is to perceive typical Eastern realities as exotic: the reader or the author? For an average Russian reader all Eastern realities seem exotic, so we should speak about Orientalist novels. For the author, which in case of Russian literature is almost inevitably born and bred in Central Asia, nothing of these is exotic, so all these novels should be non-Orientalist.

Vladimir Medvedev's *Zahhok Zaxxok* combines both these streams: it is a tragic story of the Civil War in Tajikistan and of the destinies of the Russians involved in it, generously ornamented with local folklore, life habits, typical mentality and traditional rites. In fact the very title of the novel is a reference to the medieval Persian poem *Shahnameh* by Ferdowsi, where Zahhok is a serpent-like evil demon; in Medvedev's novel a wartime criminal, Zuhhursho, inseparable with his domestic python, tries to imitate that mythological creature. *Zahhok*, as *Hurramabad*, is a non-continuous novel: the author gives the word to seven protagonists of different nationalities, gender, social and educational background. So the narration shifts from Oleg, a Tajikistan-born Moscow journalist, to Zarina, a young girl of a Tajik father and a Russian mother, a refugee in a mountain village and betrothed to a mighty criminal mogul; from her to Vahhob, a typical representative of the urban russified intelligentsia, forced to take the role of *eshon* (a local saint); from him to Davron, a former Soviet officer now in service of paramilitary groups, and so on. In this constantly changing kaleidoscope of thoughts and characters the author

tries to show Tajikistan as it was, from the point of view of both Tajiks and Russians. Like that, *Zahhok* is both a novel about the Trauma and about the strange East, whose original nature, as it turns out, was only suppressed but never eliminated by the Soviet hybridization processes, and it is also “a historical novel about the recent past, with the names of real politicians and with the details of the war of the 1990s” (Shafranskaya 2019, 134).

The above-mentioned novels are written by authors whose relation to Tajikistan or Central Asia is personal; the personal experience is shown as typologically generalizing. Real facts show a strong tendency to contaminate imaginary situations and stories, present in their works; therefore these novels often seem more a human document than a fiction. That is why it is interesting to see the look on the Central Asian region of somebody who has never lived there and has no affective relations with the place. This is the case of Evgeny Chizhov and his novel *Perevod s Podstrochnika* *Перевод с подстрочника* (Interlinear Crib Translation, 2013). The novel received a critical acclaim and got several nominations for Russian literary awards (*Natsbest* *Нацбест*, *Bol'shaya Kniga* *Большая книга* and others). In a certain sense, it sums up the idea of Central Asia in the imaginary of an average Russian, made up of fragments from mass-media, testimonies, anecdotes etc. The author purposely rejects the idea of showing a real place, and gives way to his imagination, creating a country named *Koshtyrbastan* *Коштырбастан*, governed by a life-long President Gulimov. A Russian-speaking reader with an access to the Russian media space finds immediately an infinite stream of clues which point at Central Asia, from the name of the country and the surname Gulimov which sound very ‘Asian-like’, to numerous descriptions of the nature, life habits and history of *Koshtyrbastan*. Gulimov is a poet, which is a broad hint on contemporary Central Asian leaders, famous for their literary creativity. In this way *Koshtyrbastan* is a deliberate summary of modern-day Russian stereotypes and ideas about what Central Asia is twenty years after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

In Chizhov's book New Orientalism is more than evident, and the central problem of the novel is *Otherness*: what *the Other* is and how a person can overcome this status, assimilating Central Asian cultural conventions, and converting from a foreigner to a local. This is what the protagonist, Moscow poet Oleg Pechigin, is trying to do. His surname is an explicit reference to Pechorin, the ‘hero of our time’ from the homonymous classical novel by Lermontov. Pechorin is sent to Caucasus, Pechigin to Central Asia; in both cases we see the encounter with the East and the problem of the acceptance of *the Other*. Pechigin's counterpart is Timur Kosymov, a native *koshtyr*, who studied with Pechigin in Moscow and after the independence of his republic made a brilliant career in the President's Administration.

Kosymov is a recognizable portrait of the former russified local intelligentsia, who easily accepted Western ways of life during the Soviet times just to lose them with the same ease after 1991. He invites Pechigin to Koshtyrbastan to work on the translation of Gulimov's poetry into Russian: in Moscow Pechigin lacks the real 'eastern' atmosphere and the translation is blocked.

In this way the novel shows Central Asia with the eyes of a stranger, as in the European Romantic tradition; the author "creates the atmosphere of *Arabian nights*" (Sargsyan 2019, 71). Pechigin encounters religious radicals, local singers and sculptors, medieval-like peasants and is struggling to understand the significance and meaning of the President's poetry; the only way to succeed in this task is to overcome his own *Otherness* and assimilate the local habits. In fact, the Soviet State failed in what Chizhov's protagonist is trying to do: to become an integral part of the local community. Since Pechigin originally is a stranger, the novel does not appeal to nostalgia; even more, it is a clear statement of the fact that after a brief period of affinity, Central Asia for Russians turned to be the domain of *the Other*, full of dangers and mysteries, as it was before the 20th century. This gap for the author is too serious: just the moment Pechigin finally feels to be a real native koshtyr, he commits a series of fatal errors which lead him to trial and death; despite his ideas, he *is the Other* and will forever remain such. It is interesting to see that, commenting on the novel, Marine Sargsyan (a young researcher from Saint-Petersburg), says: "Yevgeny Chizhov creates a *truthful* picture of life in an Eastern country" (Sargsyan 2019, 74) – that's another confirmation of what the popular image of the former Soviet Central Asia is nowadays.

## 7 Conclusion

Due to complex historic events of the 19th and 20th centuries the image of Central Asia in Russian literature has undergone changes and passed from initial Orientalism through Assimilation to the actual situation, when contemporary Russian literature depicts Central Asia mostly in two ways: as a domesticated utopia of hybrid identities (Nostalgia discourse) or as a place of *the Other*, exotic for Russians (New Orientalism discourse). Both trends reflect the reaction of Russian collective imagery to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent creation of new national identities, not only in former Soviet republics, but also in Russia itself.

The theory of internal colonization describes quite adequately the reasons and the effects of creating hybrid identities, which find their full implementation in Nostalgia text, referred to the past. Still, pure Nostalgia discourse, represented by Dina Rubina's prose, is mainly

limited to personal (or pseudopersonal) memories of the author, and with time it will become more and more peripheral, as the reality of the happy Soviet 'friendship of peoples' is turning into a myth, gone forever. In fact Suhbat Aflatuni's literary production, though formally adjacent to Nostalgia text, expands itself over a much wider temporal dimension; on the one hand, it expands the limits of Nostalgia discourse, but on the other it breaks its tight connection to the Soviet utopia, and gains full features of transcultural literature, linked to Russia mostly by the ties of the Russian language.

New Orientalism initially reflected the traumatic experience of the Soviet Union collapse and the failure of the assimilation discourse. The novels by Andrey Volos, Lyudmila Basova, Vladimir Medvedev represent an attempt to fix the moment of the trauma (the sudden break of hybrid identities, which is also the authors' personal experience) and to ponder over its reasons and consequences. Still New Orientalism, unlike Nostalgia discourse, looks not only into the past but also at the present, and changes respectively. As mental and political distances between Russia and Central Asia continue to grow, Russian collective thinking is gradually accepting the thought that Central Asia is not domesticated anymore; it returned to be the territory of *the Other*, an image which is evident in Evgeny Chizhov's prose, where there is no trace of nostalgia. Considering the current political and social processes in Central Asia, it seems much likely that in future New Orientalism will establish itself as the predominant Central Asian discourse in Russian literature and culture.

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# The Role of Kazakhstani Society in the State Development

## An Overview of the Current Situation, Between Governmental Fickleness and Nation Branding Initiatives

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**Abstract** The following paper focuses on the current role of nation identity development in Kazakhstan in shaping decisions and directions of the government in the state development discourse from a nation branding perspective. After focusing on macro concepts of brand and nation branding in Kazakhstan, an analysis of the structural changes experienced by the country in 2019 is conducted. The main goal of this research is to highlight how local people's nation identity perception can affect government branding projects. While nation branding is becoming a permanent feature of the government discourse, enhancing only the international image, the discrepancy is becoming more visible and local population can be highly affected by this branding strategies.

**Keywords** Kazakhstan. Nation Brand. Nation Identity. Protests. Eurasia, Nazarbayev. Society.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Nation Branding and Its Features, Image and Identity. – 3 Nation Branding in Kazakhstan. – 4 The Strategy *Kazakhstan 2050* and the Language Reform in Ruhani Zangyru. – 5 Kazakhstan in 2019. – 6 Identity in Kazakhstan. – 7 Conclusions.

## 1 Introduction

The main purpose of this paper is to examine the strategies of the Kazakhstani government in relation to the concept of nation branding in Kazakhstan, with a particular focus on the development of Kazakhstani national identity. A linkage between some major branding initiatives and general popular disagreement is presented; the increasing importance of the role of the society in shaping decisions and sometimes limiting nation branding activities is also discussed.

The Kazakhstani government started promoting the Kazakhstan brand on a global level in the context of the national development strategy Kazakhstan 2050 in 2012,<sup>1</sup> an ambitious state plan aimed at making the country one of the 30 most competitive in the world by 2050. Moreover, Kazakhstan is a pivotal hub in the ambitious Chinese project Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), being located in the “heart” of Eurasia. However, the success of the national brand promotion plan seems to have structural limitations. As a matter of fact, branding strategies in the field of tourism, export promotion, investment attraction, or public diplomacy seem to be highly affected by the lack of communication between the government and Kazakhstani society, with a negative repercussion on the overall development plan and the economic diversification projects.

Since 2019, the country has witnessed a number of protests in the main cities (the capital Nur-Sultan and Almaty), due to a lack of trust and communication between people and the authorities. The situation intensified after Nursultan Nazarbayev resigned his presidential role, paving the way for further discussion about the future of Kazakhstan. As stated by political analyst Dosym Satpayev, “Yesterday’s [1st of May] protests in several Kazakh cities once again showed that authorities’ power demonstration is a sign of their weakness. [...] It is time to learn how to communicate with people.”<sup>2</sup> The resignation of Nazarbayev and the following presidential elections in June became indeed a reason for popular strife, that peaked with about 500 people being arrested on the 9th and 10th of June.<sup>3</sup>

This study seeks to explore the development of nation branding and national identity in Kazakhstan, arguing that the discrepancy between the brand image projected by the country and the one perceived by local population has become increasingly manifest. Con-

<sup>1</sup> For details, see Akorda.kz 2012.

<sup>2</sup> For the full text, see Osservatorio Asia Centrale e Caspio (OACC) 2019.

<sup>3</sup> For details, see *The New York Times*, 9 June 2019.

sidering the socio-political, cultural and economic changes that have happened in Kazakhstan in the last few years, the main research questions are:

1. What is the significance of nation branding and identity development in Kazakhstan?
2. Have the major challenges that both the government and society have been facing, in particular since March 2019, had an impact on nation branding strategies? And if so, which one?

Firstly, the following section defines the concept of nation branding and the main nation branding strategies and activities in Kazakhstan since its independence from the Soviet Union. Secondly, the article outlines the social and governmental changes that took place, focusing particularly on the events of 2019, and, finally, the article concludes by highlighting the impact of these events on the national brand. Data was collected mostly from scientific articles, websites, newspapers, and academic publications. The analysis on the formation of national identity has been conducted through semi-structured questionnaires in Russian language, collected from the 3rd to the 31st December 2018 in Almaty for a total of 100 surveys completed. The majority of the respondents lived in Almaty (47.4%) or in the Southern region (27.4%). Moreover, 47% of the people who answered were younger than 20 years of age, and 29% between 21 and 25. Concerning the gender divide, 73% of the respondents were women.

There is a wide gap between the brand identity projected by the country and the brand image perceived by the rest of the world in Kazakhstan. While nation promotion has become a permanent feature of government discourse, although enhancing only the international image, the discrepancy became broadly visible. The local population can both affect this image and be highly affected by these branding strategies.

## **2 Nation Branding and Its Features, Image and Identity**

A brand can be described as a name or a distinctive symbol that helps to identify the goods or services of a certain seller and to differentiate them from those of competitors. However, as stated by Keller (2013), a brand is a more complex concept. It allows consumers to gain knowledge about the products, through the creation of a reputation aimed at improving the position in the market.

The concept of nation branding is usually associated with place marketing and country-of origin-effect, as the usage of commercial strategies to promote the image, products and the attractiveness of a country, improving tourism and foreign investments, "nation branding concerns applying branding and marketing communications tech-

niques to promote a nation's image" (Fan 2006, 6). However, according to Simon Anholt (2007), nation branding has a wider meaning and is linked to the strategic plan of a country aimed at strengthening its connections with the rest of the world. Anholt defines branding as the process of creation and communication of the identity of a country, in order to build and manage its reputation. In other words, the brand of a nation consists of its unique name and the images projected in the imagination of the people both inside and outside the country. It is the process of strategic self-representation which, when effectively structured and managed, can improve the reputation of a country and diminish the gap between the desired image of a nation and reality.

There are substantial differences between a commercial brand and a nation brand. A country can have several images, depending on the audience and the historical-geographical contexts in which they are perceived, "China, for example, could conjure up the following image: largest country with 1.3 billion people, the Great Wall, panda, kung-fu, Made-in-China, etc. Time seems to be an important factor here in determining people's perceptions" (Fan 2006, 8).

It is complex for a government to fully achieve the desired results through branding campaigns, also because rarely the image projected on an international level accurately reflects the real situation of the nation itself. As for the so-called developing states, as in the case of Kazakhstan, socio-economic progress (or decay) is often much faster and more changeable than the image of the state that has been created over time (Anholt 2003).

The effectiveness of the brand depends on a large number of factors, which are mainly related to the quality of the 'product' offered. Among the (few) successful stories, an interesting model is that developed by the ex-Yugoslav countries. As a matter of fact, they managed to find their independence, even culturally, from Belgrade through rather aggressive marketing campaigns right after their secession. Slovenia is a significant example of this development path; the country, with the 'I Feel Slovenia' promotion project, has managed to obtain very positive and encouraging results, linking its nation brand to the concept of national identity and self-identification of local population (Konecnik Ruzzier et al. 2012).

In terms of strategic marketing, nation branding can be used to manipulate the perception of a country to contrast stereotypes that might negatively affect its reputation on an international level. For instance, former Soviet countries started intense branding campaigns after independence, in order to get rid of their bad reputation in Western countries (Szondi 2007). Latvia was one of the first countries to develop a structured strategy of nation promotion; in 1998, the government created a non-profit organization called 'Latvian Institute (LI)' with the goal of promoting and raising awareness about Latvia's culture, history and society abroad.

One of the main problems in obtaining the expected results of a branding campaign is that rarely the image projected on an international level perfectly reflects the actual situation of a country. This is even more relevant for so-called developing countries, like Kazakhstan, where the economic and social progress (or downturns) are usually faster and more changeable than the brand created by that country over time.

In order to become a 'strong' brand, several elements have to cooperate to form the nation brand image and to consolidate the unity of brand identity. However, certain features such as the name of the country cannot be changed and are fundamental in fostering the social cohesion given by national identity. The identity of a national brand can therefore be defined as a set of associations originated through the analysis of the strengths and weaknesses linked to the attributes of the nation (Aaker 1996; Rojas-Méndez 2013). In parallel, every nation has an image, which consists of its perception by the external world. This is formed through interaction between foreign audiences and a country, such as travel, import-export of goods, mass media and social networks, education and exchange students, over which the government has little control.

The concept of nation refers to a social group, a community that possesses unique characteristics, different from other similar groups. Through this feeling of belonging to a nation and, consequently, recognising what is different, individuals can define their own identity. Certain elements among many others play a meaningful role in the identification process, such as religion or language, as means of social communication (Smith 1991).

Rusciano (2003), moreover, states that identity is an artificial construct used by the state to develop its branding strategies. As a matter of fact, "The national identity as a 'granted' identity is not a natural and spontaneous identifier that emerged in any certain period of history. Contrarily, the intervention of the modern state shapes the construction of the national identity as Massimo d'Azeglio claims: "We established Italy and now it is time to create the Italians" (İnaç, Ünal 2013, 225).

National identity plays a fundamental role in creating a sense of affiliation within a specific group and, at the same time, in developing the ability to stand out from others.

In today's globalized world, the mass media contribute enormously, albeit indirectly, to the modelling of identities, through the sharing of common customs and traditions, the language and a shared socio-cultural background. Therefore, national identity is a very dynamic concept, which arises from the continuous exchange between the members of a society that lives in the present and the legacies of tradition.

The political aspect of national identity refers to nation building strategies, such as several activities promulgated by the government



to make the nation more united, loyal and homogeneous. The government takes care of spreading a certain image of the nation, often based on the history and culture of the predominant ethnic group, also through the popularization of symbols and traditions and the use of the educational system and mass media.

There are nations, such as Kazakhstan, in which numerous different ethnic groups coexist; therefore, governments can face the situation by constituting multiple national identities, or by separating the concept of citizenship from the ethnic one. Since national identity lays the foundations of its promotion and development strategies on constituent elements of the nation itself, it represents a cornerstone of branding development: “A deep and authentic nation brand must include the many elements *and expressions of a nation's culture*” (Dinnie 2008, 112; emphasis added).

Unlike commercial brands, nation branding uses identity elements in a wider and more varied way, as the image projected of a country has to be organic and correspond to the real values of a nation. National identity is, therefore, a constituent element of the branding process and at the same time a component of the image, which is why it often represents the starting point for the development of promotional strategies used by many countries.

### 3 Nation Branding in Kazakhstan

After the fall of the Soviet Union, the newly formed independent states started a process to establish their identity and role within the world. The process of economic transition, which can be partially considered as still ongoing, consisted of a throwback to the period before Soviet dominance, but at the same time moving forward to a new definition of state identities. While transitioning to a market economy and more democratic systems, a transformation of both the image and identity of the new independent states began (Szondi 2007).

As a consequence of globalization first, but also of the change in the geopolitical stability of the region, the necessity to develop a positive nation image is becoming a priority for those countries. In the Caucasus, both Georgia and Armenia developed nation branding strategies, the former by celebrating the production of wine through Western television and newspapers such as *The Economist*, as Azerbaijan did on CNN, while Armenia focused on its Christian identity, *Noah's route, your route*.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> This slogan refers to Armenia as ‘The land of Noah’, with reference to the Biblical Mount Ararat, where Noah’s Ark landed according to the Bible. The mountain, geographically located in Turkey since the Turkish-Armenian war in 1920, is considered

In Central Asia, nation branding is a serious matter (Marat 2009). As a matter of fact, governments are financing publications, research, films and a number of cultural events to be shown in the international arena.<sup>5</sup> The contents shared regard economic growth, strategic advantages of the region, along with cultural and natural heritage, and reveal the governmental efforts to gain recognition from other countries. However, results do not seem to be as expected, “Partly because the wider international audience is so diverse, the messages produced by Central Asian states are quite haphazard, often lacking a single unifying idea. [...] Therefore, such images of state and nation represent the ideas of the diplomats and the ruling elites, not the collective of people living in their respective countries” (Velikaya 2018).

As for the other post-Soviet countries, also Kazakhstan after independence started a process of rebuilding its own national identity and image at an international level. Nation branding during the years became a basic practice of the political strategy of the country. Kazakhstan distinguished itself from the other states of the region for the fast-paced economic development since the beginning of the 21st Century, due both to its rich natural resources and to its strategic geographical position, “as Kazakhstan accounts for 60 percent of Central Asia’s GDP, it attracts up to a million migrant workers from its poorer neighbours. Its impressive levels of economic growth have been fuelled by Kazakhstan’s vast wealth of hydrocarbon resources and minerals. It boasts the 11th largest oil reserves in the world” (Zogg 2019, 2).

This role as a strategic hub was confirmed by the inclusion of the country in the Chinese project *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI), which should guarantee growth in the commercial activities with and through Kazakhstan, as it pledged significant investments in infrastructure and logistics, even in less developed areas of the country. The economic transition of Kazakhstan from the Soviet model to a market economy has been described as ‘Frankenstein Syndrome’, referring to the fact that “Kazakhstan’s political and economic system, [...] is a patchwork of different models, including some foreign models that were embedded into our current status” (Satpayev 2016,

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as one of the main symbols of Armenian civilization and Christianity. See also: Agadjanian 2016; Cummings 2013; Marat 2009.

**5** For instance, Uzbekistan had a poor political image for several years on an international level, in particular during the government of Islam Karimov (1991-2016). Therefore, the government started promoting among the international community a national image, very different from the domestic one. As a matter of fact, the cultural brand of the country is promoted through the organization of frequent cultural events and celebrations, displaying traditional cuisine, handicrafts, and ceramics. In parallel, historic sites and Samarkand are showed in numerous websites and books, in order to promote internationally cultural tourism in the country.

7), such as Norway or Singapore. Despite the growing interest for its new emerging economy, Kazakhstan is still almost unknown by the majority of the Western world, both on a geographic and a cultural level (Zakarijanovna 2015).

One element which contributed to the global diffusion of a negative image of the country was the 2006 mockumentary *Borat – Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*, which depicted the country and its citizens as primitive communities, degraded and poorly educated. As a consequence, in 2007 the Kazakhstani government created a special department, the *International Information Committee*, to promote the national brand abroad and to increase the country's competitiveness: "the *International Information Committee* is responsible for promoting and strengthening the positive image of our country abroad. In the globalised information world, there is the need to work out new approaches to creating a positive image for a country, which is why many countries are currently 're-branding' themselves to increase their recognisability and attractiveness".<sup>6</sup> Among the best known examples, Kazakhstan invested to realize the Expo *Future Energy* in Astana in 2017, an international exhibition focused on the themes of sustainability and safe access to energy, and the same year hosted the 28th winter Universiade (an international sports competition for students that takes place every two years) in Almaty.

The most famous promotional campaign carried out by the Committee was certainly 'Kazakhstan – the Heart of Eurasia' a series of informative advertisements distributed on the main western media, which promote not only the strategic position of the country (in the 'heart' of the Eurasian region) at a political and economic level, but also the beautiful natural sceneries and landscapes of the country as a tourism destination (Sengupta 2016, 47-67).

Arguably, Kazakhstan's branding strategies mainly promote culture, in an effort to intensify the positive image of the country abroad. In reality, the results are very different from expectations: in fact, the country is often described in a negative way, underlining the presence of an authoritarian regime hidden behind these strategies, or recalling damaging stereotypes: "the capital city Astana – whose urban development is one of Kazakhstan's main brands – is consistently depicted by Western observers as *Nowheresville*, *Tomorrowland*, or a *Potemkin village*" (Insebayeva 2016, 55).

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<sup>6</sup> For the full text, see Investkz.com 2007.

#### 4 Domestic Society's Response to Nation Branding

From the domestic point of view of nation branding, the goal of consolidating the national unity and identity of Kazakhstani citizens still seems a long way off. There have been numerous criticisms made by the domestic audience, often related to the implementation of projects of nation branding. A significant show of discontent arose during the first days of Tokayev's government, when the capital city was renamed from Astana to Nur-Sultan in honor of the First President. About 20 people were arrested protesting against the decision to rename the capital, while "an online petition launched on the GoPetition platform against the city's fourth name change in less than 60 years has exceeded 42 thousand signatures".<sup>7</sup>

Not only have some of the actions implemented been interpreted as mere propaganda, but also many people have criticized the excessive public resource spending (especially during years of global economic crisis) resulting from the organization of these grandiose commercial operations.

An example of this popular discontent was the petition promoted in 2014 by a group of Almaty residents to obtain the withdrawal of the Kazakh government from the negotiations to host the 2022 winter Olympic games in the former capital, primarily for economic and environmental concerns (Insebayeva 2016). However, the government did not listen to the protests and did not withdraw the bid, which was eventually won by China.

Another example of general discontent for the economic management of the country were the protests that took place between April and May 2016, starting in the city of Atyrau. Citizens protested against the land reform that would have allowed long-term renting of unused lands to foreign entities, "after a quarter-century of pushing a national unity narrative, kicked into higher gear with last year's celebrations of 550 years of Kazakh statehood, it's no surprise that citizens would get riled up about the idea of selling the homeland to foreigners" (Putz 2016).

Although there are no structured and direct connections between the protests and nation branding strategies, it can be said that the intense activity of brand promotion and the inefficiency in involving local population in this process has inevitably contributed to the creation of a tense situation. This disappointment has become manifest with the sudden resignation of Nazarbayev, contributing to weakening the new governmental apparatus, "Under Nazarbayev, the government paid lip service to democratic values and the protection of human rights, while simultaneously clamping down on political and

<sup>7</sup> For the full text, see Asianews.it 2019.

civil liberties. The regime became increasingly intolerant of challenges not only to its rule, but also to its vision of what Kazakhstan should be and how its people should think. [...] This has created disaffection and prompted protests, which gathered pace after Nazarbayev's resignation" (Lillis 2019, 37-8).

In answering to the first research question of this work, "why is the development of nation branding strategies so meaningful for Kazakhstan?", these promotional campaigns were certainly planned to make a first impressive appearance in the international economic and political arena and to strengthen its country image. Among others, some elements support this statement, such as the spectacularism of the capital city, the advanced technology presented at Expo in 2017, and the promotion strategy to enhance the tourism. All these branding activities have specifically been planned for an international audience.

A brief outline of the development strategy *Kazakhstan 2050*, which has established growth goals not only in terms of promotion abroad, but also internally, involving all the most important aspects of a nation's development, is set out below.

## **5 The Strategy Kazakhstan 2050 and the Language Reform in Rukhani Zhangyru**

The Kazakhstani government started promoting the brand *Kazakhstan* systematically in the context of its development strategy *Kazakhstan 2050*. Among its main goals, the ambitions of diversifying their economic portfolio, improving domestic economic development and opening the country to sustainable energy sources stand out. The strategy was presented in 2012 by the president Nursultan Nazarbayev. One of the main characteristics of this plan is that it clearly defines the new international markets to be approached by the country: "Currently ranked as the 51st most competitive country in the world, Kazakhstan, according to Nazarbayev, should be ranked among the 30 most advanced nations by 2050. To do so, Kazakhstan will need to integrate its economy into the global and regional environments by capitalizing on its transit potential and bolstering information technology capabilities".<sup>8</sup>

As a matter of fact, Kazakhstan is the richest and most dynamic post-Soviet country in Central Asia, with an economy strongly dependent on natural resources. Since the price of oil is extremely volatile, one of the main goals of the strategy is to diversify the internal

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<sup>8</sup> For the full text, see the website of the Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan (kazhembus.com) 2012.

production of the country. Moreover, thanks to this plan, the country jumped from 53rd to 36th in 2018 in the *Doing Business* ranking of the World Bank, even though oil & gas still represent the main economic markers of the country.

Kazakhstan has been improving its competitiveness mostly on an international level, promoting several activities in the economic and political area. However, it seems that the government has not invested enough in the domestic sphere, not even in activities aimed at shaping national identity, such as those planned in 'Rukhani Zhangyru' (2017) and its continuation 'The Seven Facets of the Great Steppe', two development programs outlined by former President Nazarbayev for the modernization of Kazakhstan with a focus on national origins, traditions and identity. Concerning national identity, it is stated that "Preserving the inner core of national identity while changing only some of its characteristics is significant and a number of archaic habits should be left behind for successful implementation of spiritual revival" (Gaur 2018).

In particular, the development of the national identity in Kazakhstan is still a rather complex issue today. The adjective 'multicultural' is well suited to the population living in the country, a real melting pot of ethnic groups made up of almost 140 different nationalities who coexist in an atmosphere of relative tolerance. Originally, the Kazakh population was born at the crossroads of at least three nomadic ethnic groups that populated the great steppes of Central Asia and shared part of the Islamic and Turkish cultural heritage, also on a linguistic level. At independence, ethnic Kazakhs represented a minority of the population, behind Russians. At the same time, the development process of the national identity was structured through the opposition of two concepts, 'Kazakh', that is an individual of Kazakh ethnicity, and 'Kazakhstanets', a person of Kazakhstani citizenship, regardless of ethnicity.

As the proportion of ethnic Kazakhs grew steadily in the decades after independence, Nazarbayev proposed a reform of the state language alphabet, moving from the use of Cyrillic to Latin alphabet through the decree 'On the translation of the Kazakh alphabet from Cyrillic to Latin graphics'<sup>9</sup> by the year 2025. Public opinion has been very divided about the possible reasons behind this decision. The former president's official statement concerns the desire to modernize the country, making it more competitive in the world arena also through a latinisation of the alphabet. Language is recognized as a fundamental tool in the process of establishing the national identity (Fishman 1999), as an element transversely present in the cultural, political and social life of a nation, which allows the creation of a com-

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<sup>9</sup> For details, see Akorda.kz 2017.

munity through the transfer of its history and traditions from generation to generation. As a matter of fact, it is possible to note that in recent years the country has increasingly entered the international arena, and has been included in the Chinese project *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI); in parallel, in recent years has started an unofficial movement, which uses Latin characters for writing Kazakh words. Numerous brands and businesses have word for word transliterated their name to make it appeared more modern and western, even without a standardized version of the alphabet (Yergaliyeva 2018).

This strategy can also be read as an attempt to create a homogeneous social and national identity. Kazakhstan, in particular during the first independence period, based its nation building policies around three elements: language, nation and territory. These practices have shown a strong link with the process of identity constitution developed by the Soviet regime, which provided for the creation of a single supra-ethnic 'Soviet identity'. Similarly, Nazarbayev attempted to strengthen the role of the Kazakh language, as a symbol of the unity of the people in the country (Burkhanov 2017). This initiative was also interpreted as a personal branding technique by Nazarbayev, capable of consolidating his role in connection with the formation of the national identity. Language reforms are a powerful tool in the national identity building process and could have a major impact in shaping his role as *Father of the Nation*.

In Kazakhstan, the process of establishing national identity appears to be already very dynamic and characterized by unpredictability, which "is also highly relevant to the cultural and political complexities of Kazakhstan, which is often deemed in the literature to be Janus-faced, as it works to simultaneously promote multiculturalism and a more homogenizing 'kazakhization' of society" (Zabortseva 2016, 25). The Kazakhstani government failed to develop a dialogue with its citizens and an adequate strategy to sustain a national identity development policy. Therefore, it is possible to state that the inconsistency of the propaganda surrounding national identity has led to a fragmentation of the identity of the Kazakhstani population, which might have a serious impact on the competitive activities of Kazakhstan on the international market, since it lacks a real correspondence between the projected image of the country abroad and reality.

These reforms are not only aimed at consolidating national unity, but also at personally glorifying the head of government,<sup>10</sup> and they have certainly had an impact on society. Specifically, for the purpos-

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**10** As a matter of fact, Nazarbayev has named himself 'Leader of the Nation' through the constitutional act 'On First President of the Republic of Kazakhstan - the Leader of the Nation' on June the 14th, 2010. For the full text, see the website of the Information and legal system of normative legal acts of the Republic of Kazakhstan (adilet.zan.kz 2010).

es of this paper, the current development situation of the identity formation process in Kazakhstan will be analysed, highlighting how the disunity and sometimes ambiguity of the objectives of these government strategies have led to a fragmentation of opinions, with consequences also in relations with the government apparatus that implemented such strategies.

## 6 Identity in Kazakhstan

The concept of national identity, in the context of processes such as ‘slowbalization’,<sup>11</sup> is once again becoming a central definition within the nation building strategies of many countries. In fact, unlike family descent, which are innate and exclusive of the individual, belonging to a specific nation is not defined in a natural way at the time of birth, but is an artificial identity construct that sees its origin contextually with the birth of the modern state.

Following the fall of the Soviet Union at the beginning of the Nineties, several post-Soviet countries had to start a series of activities aimed at creating an identity for their own country other than the previous Soviet identity, which had dominated in terms of propaganda during the last century, in an effort to unify the country, while causing the quasi-annihilation of any national uniqueness (Burkhanov 2017).

Nazarbayev has carried out numerous activities related to the practices implemented by the Soviet regime in the field of civil identity, institutionalizing the symbolic unity of the people, the territory and the Kazakh language, depriving the concept of any ethnic connotation with the aim of stimulating the pride of all the peoples of the country. With the aim of investigating the issue of Kazakh national identity in greater depth, a questionnaire was developed in the MA thesis *Nation Branding in Kazakhstan* (Bortolotti 2019) to understand the popular perception of Kazakhstani national identity and its most representative elements. After a series of general questions, the 100 participants in the interview were asked about what meaning they attributed to the fact of being ‘Kazakh’ (67% of the questionnaire participants were of Kazakh ethnicity) or ‘Kazakhstanets’ (the necessary requirement to participate in the survey was in fact to have Kazakhstani citizenship).

The majority of the answers collected could be categorized as patriotic (such as, for example, ‘Being proud of one’s homeland’ or ‘Loving one’s own people and country’), thus indicating that the very

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**11** This term, mixing the words ‘slow’ and ‘globalisation’, indicates “a continued integration of the global economy via trade, financial and other flows but albeit at a significantly slower pace” (Kupelian 2020, 1).



meaning of being a citizen of Kazakhstan is a matter of respect and pride towards the country and civil society. Similarly, many have also provided answers regarding the importance of traditions and knowledge of national culture and language, elements consistent with the concept of patriotism and a source of pride in their origins. Again, according to this line of thought, some have also indicated behavioral characteristics and ways of being typical of the population, such as friendliness, generosity and hospitality. It is also very interesting to note that some respondents highlighted the difference between the term 'Kazakh' and 'Kazakhstanets', without however indicating a hierarchy between the two definitions.

The last question of the questionnaire also tackles the issue of identity. In fact, respondents were asked what identity represented them most between European, Asian or Eurasian. The answers, in this case, are very uneven. In fact, 20.4% said they identify more with the former, while the majority equally divide the Asian identity (31.2%) and the Eurasian identity (31.2%). European identity, being a concept linked to factors such as music or cooking, is easy to understand in light of the fact that many of these elements are widespread globally, especially among young people and in large cities (almost 50% of the respondents comes from Almaty and are under twenty years of age). In the same way, the Asian identity structure can also be read in terms of cultural soft power, strengthened by geographical proximity and therefore by a predominance in the market of final products, which are purchased daily by the Kazakh population. The Eurasian identity can be read in light of the Eurasian theories actively promoted by Nazarbayev and in relation to Kazakhstan's strategic geographical position of 'bridge' between Asia and Europe.

The people of Kazakhstan are very proud of their values and traditions, which found a fertile ground for development in Eurasian doctrine,<sup>12</sup> combining Asian and European culture in a peaceful, stable and multi-ethnic growth model. The current internal fragmentation of the population with respect to identification in an identity category of belonging can be interpreted as a sign of the structural weakness of the domestic nation building strategy. The relatively unstable foundations of this strategy can potentially lead to a failure in the manoeuvres aimed at putting Kazakhstan in competition with the international market, lacking a concrete correspondence be-

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**12** Concerning Eurasianism, since the early 1990s Nazarbayev has repeatedly attempted to create and promote his Eurasian doctrine, focused on the strategic geographical location of the country and on the Eurasian Economic Union, founded in 2015, "Kazakhstan's Eurasianism is promulgated as an official ideology by the top leadership of the country and the focus was to build peace, solidarity and unity among peoples on the basis of morality, spirituality, cultural and historical interactions of peoples of different ethno-linguistic, cultural and religious backgrounds" (Mostafa 2013, 164).

tween the homogeneous image projected by the government towards the rest of the world and reality.

## **7 Kazakhstan in 2019**

Kazakhstan is characterized by a fragile institutional and social system, with a weak parliament and widespread corruption. “Not one Kazakh election has ever been judged free and fair by international observers, corruption is rife, and police brutality is commonplace. No credible political opposition exists, and civil society is stymied” (Tynan 2019). As a matter of fact, the main goal of Nazarbayev’s strategies has always concerned the economic aspects and stability more than even wealth distribution or internal political reforms. As a result, power has accumulated within selected elites, “Power structures in Kazakhstan are cliquish and hierarchal. Connections count in what is essentially a one-party administration. Family, business, and regional relationships define the breadth and scope of influence” (Tynan 2019). At the same time, even if this pattern has contributed to consolidating poverty, especially in small villages, it is the most relatively stable country in the Central Asian region, with a position of mediator between the major international players, such as Russia, China, the European Union and the USA.

Kazakhstan was experiencing structural changes during 2019. The presidential elections, held on the 9th of June, were characterized by widespread protests against injustice, lack of transparency and government corruption; protests were restrained by limiting internet access, arresting thousands of people and detaining journalists.

As a result, government image among local people was seriously damaged, explicitly showing the undemocratic nature of the state ruling powers, “the government had been facing mounting concerns from vocalized public assemblies on issues related to the provision of adequate housing, higher wages, and increased social benefits” (Sullivan 2019). Over the last few years, several social protests have started, against the government’s refusal to make changes and reforms; this process intensified after the resignation of Nazarbayev in March 2019, when the number of protests in the main cities started growing due to a lack of trust and communication between the people and the authorities.

The complexity of the political situation encouraged the government to hold elections as soon as possible and restabilize the relationship between the authorities and society, to restore the ‘balance of power’ in the country, preserving the foundations of the Nazarbayev system but still undermining many citizens’ confidence in the power structures of the country. Tokayev is the chosen successor of Nazarbayev, even though “the line of command still leads directly to Nazarbayev, and his ability to pull the strings of personal-

ly approved ministers and officials in key positions is undiminished" (Tynan 2019), a fact confirmed also because he still bears the title of *Elbasy*, that is the leader of the nation.

Tokayev, soon after being elected, declared that "[the] world is changing rapidly and unfortunately, we are facing new challenges ahead. We must confirm the continuity, predictability and stability of our domestic and foreign policy".<sup>13</sup> One of the key words in this context and in his first declarations was 'continuity'. This term can be interpreted in two very different ways, on the one hand as the willingness of the authorities to preserve the situation as it is, avoiding changes or reforms, on the other as the prosecution of the multi-vector foreign policy supported by Nazarbayev.

As far as internal politics are concerned, since his resignation Nazarbayev has continued to act as a powerful supra-system player, invested with the role of keeper of the national *status quo*. In parallel, Tokayev is maintaining a policy that can be defined as 'stability for stagnation', meaning that any variation is considered negative and not changing is preferable to instability. However, this position is very distant from what Kazakhstani society requests. As a matter of fact, citizens are looking forward to the promotion of a policy of 'stability for development'. This high need for change has been clearly shown in social media and so-called 'online' activities, especially in Almaty and Astana (Nur-Sultan). However, this emerging social explosion has so far been only local, not really structured or politically organic. This fact shows the absence of clear ideological niches among the majority of the population, which usually express an almost total political apathy. Moreover, the high level of corruption has fostered a growing crisis of confidence among authorities in a huge part of society.

However, there is no social basis for the development of an independent civil society. The active population, representing the majority of the middle class, expresses itself on social networks, seeking changes in the social, economic and environmental spheres. On the other hand 'the many' are passive mostly because they do not feel they have enough economic stability, "also in the post-Soviet era, people prefer to rely on private social networks and family ties rather than on civic engagement and the involvement in public associations to address their concerns" (Pierobon 2016, 218).

Younger generations, corresponding to 51% of the total population (18 million), are divided into different groups, with different levels of education, opportunities and goals. This situation clearly reflects the social pyramid of Kazakhstan. They do not have any memory of the Soviet Union, since they have only lived under the "reign" of Nazarbayev. However, even if the 'Nazarbayev generation' has been ex-

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<sup>13</sup> For details, see: Akorda.kz, 2 September 2019.

periencing increasing restrictions on media, religion and public expression, they feel they are living in a comparatively free country, especially in comparison with the other post-soviet countries in Central Asia. Moreover, Nazarbayev intensively promoted both Kazakh nationalism and the multi-ethnic composition of society. As a consequence, the strategy of the First President contributed to raising a number of identity question among younger Kazakhstani generations.

## 8 Conclusions

This paper has explored the relation between the development of national identity and self-promotion strategies of the government in Kazakhstan, considering the relatively active role of new generations in the sociopolitical life of the country.

Nation branding strategies and national identity have been chosen as the keys to understanding the new dynamics between Kazakhstani government and society. As a matter of fact, the nation branding strategies of promotion implemented by the government have led to the establishment of a narrative that is quite distant from reality. In parallel, identity issues are inevitably linked to the sense of disappointment, which is spreading especially among the youth, “Citizens’ perception about their own country is reflected into the country’s image both internally and externally. [...] if a country’s citizens do not believe in the power of their country, then they will not be able to persuade others to believe. To build a strong country brand, first it must be crept in the minds of citizens, otherwise any attempt at branding the country will result in failure” (Andrei 2017, 510).

Since 1991, Nazarbayev had consolidated his power and built a strong cult of personality. His resignation was certainly unexpected, but at the same time it did not break the legacy of his personal cult, and certainly he has not been replaced in this sense by the less charismatic Tokayev. In parallel, the dialogue between citizens and the government was becoming harsher, “frustrations have been bolstered by perceptions that crucial national decisions are being made without the general population being consulted”<sup>14</sup>

The sudden resignation of Nazarbayev provided the opportunity to start pro-democratic protests against the government, that ended in dozens of people being arrested because of the very restrictive law on public assembly. It can be noted that since 2018, the number of spontaneous protests increased, also because several opposition parties ceased to exist.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> For the full text, see Eurasianet.org 2019.

<sup>15</sup> For details, see Cabar.asia 2019.

The concept of 'identity fragmentation' reflects the shortcomings of government promotional activities, which have always excluded citizens and failed to consolidate in a structured way. As a matter of fact, significant actions such as the transition to the Latin alphabet or Expo in 2017 have had more positive resonance in the international community, exacerbating the tension within local society.

Kazakhstan is striving to increase its competitiveness in the international arena, strengthening its state reputation and promoting its economic and political interests through a series of activities of different natures (culture, sport, politics), while leaving the domestic sphere in the background, especially as regards the question of the constitution of identity. However, since this is a fundamental aspect, in order to make effective the efforts implemented in the field of nation branding, it is necessary in the near future for Kazakhstan to establish a direct dialogue with its citizens, developing more appropriate strategies and supporting a national identity implementation policy, which would be both structured and comprehensible for citizens, also at the level of linguistic decrees and propaganda.

It seems, therefore, that the government has not invested that much in the domestic sphere, including activities aimed at shaping national identity. The Kazakhstani government has failed in developing a dialogue with its citizens and an adequate strategy to sustain a national identity development policy. The general inconsistency of the propaganda about national identity has led to a fragmentation of the identity of the Kazakhstani population. This may have a serious impact on the future competitive activities of Kazakhstan on the international market, since a real correspondence between the projected image of the country abroad and reality is lacking, "By ceding the presidency, Mr. Nazarbayev also deftly stepped out of the firing line at a time of irksome civil unrest".<sup>16</sup> The intensification of the protests might also be linked to the rough narrative of Kazakhstani nation brand and identity, which became more evident with the resignation of Nazarbayev.

In conclusion, branding strategies are a tool used by Kazakhstan's government, albeit not fully effectively, not only to create a more consistent image of the country on an international level, but also domestically. In order to reach this goal, it is necessary that the government starts including the concept of a shared national identity as an integral part of the governmental nation branding plan, narrowing the gap between the image projected by the elites and the way it is perceived by society.

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<sup>16</sup> For the full text, see *The New York Times*, 22 March 2019.

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