

Chapter IV Georgia: Europe Started Here?³²⁶

In summer 2015, Georgia hosted two sporting events with an obvious European background. These were the European Olympic Youth Festival (EOYF) and the UEFA Super Cup final. Presumably, both events could have been used as events for accentuating the European aspirations of Georgia, a country that brands itself for tourists as an “associated partner of the EU”, and struggles to redefine its identity in European terms. In this chapter we are going to deploy these two events in the wider cultural framework of Georgia’s long pathway to Europeanization, and we will discuss the hurdles and impediments of this process.

Georgia’s European (In)vocation

In official documents and mainstream political discourse Europeanization is the pivotal concept that defines Georgia’s international identity. Europe is often seen as the natural environment to which Georgia has historically belonged. It seeks protection from either Islamic neighbours or Russia, and nowadays it wishes to come back to Europe and thus do away with its Soviet legacy. Europe is viewed as a conceptual alternative to the Russian–promoted Eurasian project, and as a source of inspiration underwritten by a strong cultural affinity. In terms of self–identification, Georgia sees itself as neither a post-Soviet nor Caucasian country, but rather a Black Sea nation. It is this regional affiliation that serves as a cultural bridge to Europe and opens up prospects for acceptance from European states.³²⁷ It is the concept of identity, as opposed to purely material interests, that shapes the current Georgian debate about its European pathway.³²⁸

326 A motto of Tbilisi.

327 *Kakachia and Minesashvili*, Identity politics: exploring Georgian foreign policy behaviour.

328 *Kakachia*, Georgia’s Identity-Driven Foreign Policy and the Struggle for Its European Destiny.

Yet Georgia's attachment to the idea of Europe is rather selective. The concept of Europe is perceived as signifier for the prospects of Georgia's recognition as a partner for the EU and NATO. Yet it is put in a more problematic context, as the trigger for changing dominant societal attitudes that remain largely conservative. Emulation of the West is one of the possible ways of resignifying this identity, which presupposes the acceptance of liberal values, such as human dignity and freedom. This process may be dubbed "meandering Europeanization"³²⁹ due to its intermingling with strong patriotic articulations that are a meaningful part of the Georgian political discourse. The project of Europeanization through democratization has been deemed "idealistic" by Georgian authors,³³⁰ which may be explained by the traumatic post-Soviet experiences of nation (re)building and ensuing social and political deprivation. That is why Georgia's discourses on nationhood contain a great deal of self-inflicted marginalization. In our interviews numerous Georgian experts often referred to the Georgian political class as inept, lacking in education, "absurd", and that Georgian democracy was "grotesque" due to the "moral collapse of the elite".³³¹

Thus, Georgian national identity is split between imitation of the West and the simultaneous appreciation of Oriental practices of governance (for example, in Singapore, Dubai and Hong Kong). Involved is also a dichotomy between firstly, the discursive othering of Russia as possessive neighbour and secondly, cultural/religious sympathies to it. Points of national consolidation are few. Security threats from Moscow have not solidified national unity. Rather it has only further split the Georgian national Self. Georgia looks to integration with the EU and Euro-Atlantic institutions, yet at the same time it shares a lot culturally with Russia. This can be seen primarily in regards to the shared Orthodox ethos. This ambiguity fragments and constrains nation building in Georgia, a country where two and a half decades of the experience of transition have not been sufficient "for implanting liberal values. Homophobia and anti-Western propaganda are instigated by conservatives and radicals who are mostly clerical and political elites. These propagandists picture the West as a safe

329 *Delcour*, Meandering Europeanisation. EU Policy Instruments and Policy Convergence in Georgia under the Eastern Partnership.

330 *Aparasidze*, Lost in Democratization and Modernization: What Next in Georgia? P.10.

331 *Berekashvili*, Georgia's grotesque democracy.

haven for homosexuals that will deprive Georgia of its true identity and make it a puppet of international masonry”.³³²

Many of the existing divisions are manifest in cultural and performative terms. For example, a conflict between European-supported anti-homosexual groups and the Georgian Orthodox Church not only grew into a scuffle in the centre of Tbilisi on May 17, 2013, International Day against Homophobia, but also continued when the Church reassigned this day as the Day of the Family.³³³ This attests to the deep cultural roots of political conflicts in Georgia. This is exemplified by contested public rituals, symbols and other elements of the “society of the spectacle”. It would be fair enough to claim that “the European identity and foreign policy course seems to be an elite choice which often equates European identity with national identity. However, national identity for some groups contradicts the values comprising European identity. When European identity boils down to specific actions, it becomes a matter of contestation in the domestic arena”.³³⁴ Thus, being in “a state of flux”,³³⁵ Georgia faces multiple challenges of fixing its identity and cultural preferences under the conditions of a tug-of-war between Russia and the EU.³³⁶ We shall briefly assess the policies of both entities next.

The EU: Europeanization at a distance

It was only the Rose revolution that created a “window of opportunity” for Georgia to appear on the European radar after years of relative EU disinterest and neglect.³³⁷ Yet “despite the mass mobilization and protests which seemed democratic at first glance, the Rose revolution was a product of great frustration and universal disgust with the operation of the political system. It did not result in the growth of civil society or signifi-

332 *Sharashenidze*, Georgia and the Vilnius Summit – Before and After, P.7.

333 *Civil.ge*, Tbilisi Hosts European Youth Olympic Festival.

334 *Minesashvili and Kakhishvili*, Foreign Policy Identity in the Domestic Arena as a Subject of Contestation, P.16.

335 *Ditrych*, Georgia: A State of Flux.

336 *Pardo Sierra*, No Man’s Land? A Comparative Analysis of the EU and Russia’s Influence in the Southern Caucasus.

337 *Raquel Freire and Simao*, The EU’s security actorness: the case of EUMM in Georgia, P. 467.

cant democratization”.³³⁸ Moreover, “contrary to the global picture in which modernization tends to diminish the importance of religion, in Georgia economic wellbeing and education, two important indicators of modernization, are positively correlated with religiosity on the individual level”.³³⁹

As for EU perceptions, many of Saakashvili’s policies, widely assessed as authoritarian during his rule, were legitimized on the basis of Georgia’s European aspirations.³⁴⁰ This added to Eurosceptic attitudes within Georgian society and was not just limited to anti-Saakashvili groups. Since the post-revolutionary government failed to create a functional democracy, the need to prevent Georgia from disappearing from the focus of the West remains topical.³⁴¹

Against this backdrop, the EU has developed a number of policy tracks with Georgia. It participates in conflict resolution through reconciliation, dialogue and communication, which is duly appreciated in Georgian society. The EU and its member states promote a liberal agenda of democratization, religious tolerance, multi-culturalism, and minority protection. This is done through multiple European foundations working in the country. All this has created the obviously overrated expectation that in due time the West should treat Georgia as a “part of Europe, less as ‘a foreign entity’ and more like Norway or Switzerland”.³⁴² Many in Georgia would certainly applaud such a prospect, which only increases the importance of various articulations of cultural and symbolic reattachment of Georgia to Europe.

The Russia Factor

Georgia has a record of military confrontation with Russia. On top of this it has signed an Association Agreement (AA), including a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with the EU. The AA

338 *Mestvirishvili and Mestvirishvili*, Emancipative values in Georgia: An individual level analysis, P. 71.

339 *Mestvirishvili and Mestvirishvili*, Emancipative values in Georgia: An individual level analysis, P. 79.

340 *Berekashvili*, Georgia’s puzzled transition.

341 *News.err.ee*, Roivas: We must not allow Georgia to disappear from the focus of the West.

342 *Boonstra*, EU perception of the Caucasus must change.

raised new issues of securitization in relations between Moscow and Tbilisi, as Georgia believed that it might be “the next target of the Kremlin”.³⁴³ In practice, Moscow responded to the AA in October 2014 by fostering the Russia–Abkhazia Treaty on Partnership and Integration in which a military component was key. This suggests that Russia's soft power is heavily based on hard power resources. Zurab Abashidze, Georgia's special representative to Russia, confessed that the two parties remain stranded in “radically divergent positions”, while Georgia's prime minister added that he has not seen any headway in bilateral relations after Saakashvili left the office.³⁴⁴

Evidently, the Kremlin intends to force the West to recognize the inclusion of eastern Ukraine and the South Caucasus into the Russian sphere of interest.³⁴⁵ Yet in the South Caucasus, Russia faces a reality substantially different from that in Eastern Europe, with the key distinction being a limited space for “Russian world” ideas. Yet in its absence, Russia's Georgia policy is based on a number of other arguments.

First, the accentuation of cultural and religious affinity with Georgia is for Moscow a political instrument allowing for emphasizing the incompatibility of “traditional” Orthodox values with the EU's liberal emancipatory agenda, which allegedly “calls for respecting sin” and “forgets about nations and patriotism”.³⁴⁶ Second, Russia tries to explore sceptical attitudes within Georgia to Western institutions, claiming that the AA puts this country in an unequal position.³⁴⁷ Russia transposes into the South Caucasus its (mis)interpretation of the AAs as documents conducive to the relegation of the signatories' sovereignty to the EU. Russia reserves the right to respond by attempting the greater integration of break-away territories. Against this backdrop, the political value of separatist territories for Russia's long-term strategy becomes more obvious. Moscow either threatens to absorb them in order to deter neighbours from a closer relationship with the EU, or decides to attach these territories to Russia as, mostly symbolic, compensation for the possible failure of this policy.

343 *Civil Georgia*, PM says Russia Lacks Levers to Deter Georgia's EU Association.

344 *The Voice of America*, Gruzia ne vidit politicheskogo progressa v dialoge s RF.

345 *Markedonov*, Rossiya i konflikty na Bol'shom Kavkaze: v poiskakh optimal'nykh resheniy.

346 *Devdariani*, Maidan izmenil mirovoi poriadok.

347 *Mdivani*, Pravila igry ES s Gruzией nel'zia schitat' ravnopravnymi, “Rossiya-Gruzia: Expertnyi Dialog”.

Third, as in the case of Ukraine, Moscow insists that the “colour revolution” in Georgia led by Mikhail Saakashvili was socially ineffective and politically self-defeating. Ultimately it was conducive to the drastic deterioration of Georgia’s relations with Moscow and the loss of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008.³⁴⁸ Moscow uses the criminal case opened against former President Saakashvili as proof for the validity of its interpretation of “colour revolutions” as unfortunate and detrimental, orchestrated by external powers. Saakashvili’s support for EuroMaidan in 2013–2014 is interpreted as a continuation of his attachment to the idea of “colour revolutions” that had ultimately marginalized him politically within Georgia.³⁴⁹ Georgian nationalists perceived the EuroMaidan, as an attempt to take revenge and revert to the old agenda of pushing Russia out of the post-Soviet area.³⁵⁰

In the Russian media one may find explicit references to the prospect of “the Ukrainian scenario” for Georgia,³⁵¹ which is explicitly threatening and provoking. So far the multiple Georgian steps towards gradual rapprochement with Russia have been neither appreciated nor rewarded by Moscow, which keeps pursuing a highly controversial and inconsistent policy. It both engages with Tbilisi in reconciliation, while simultaneously threatening to further destabilize the country from the inside. To attain its objectives, Russia uses a number of quite vociferous pro-Moscow groups that comprise the most traditionalist Orthodox believers, part of the anti-Saakashvili constituencies, Stalinists, Georgian Euro-sceptics, and also new pro-Eurasianist groups. All of these groups are supported by Moscow. Yet many of them could be hardly deemed full-fledged pro-Kremlin “understanders” since Russia’s support for them is often based on emotional involvement and a sincere belief in the commonality of cultures:

“We have a common Orthodox spirit with Russia...I like the way the Russian state treats same-sex marriages; it is important for us here. When the West came to resist God, we see that we can save ourselves only with Russia.”³⁵²

348 *Silaev*, Vtoroe priglashenie.

349 *Mdivani*, Kak ukrainskie sobytiya pobylyali na rossisko-gruzinskie otnoshenia, “Rossiya-Gruzia: Expertnyi Dialog”.

350 *Devdariani*, Evrodesant v Patriarkhii, “Rossiya-Gruzia: Expertnyi Dialog.

351 *Chernov*, Rossiya vyidet na granitsy Armenii.

352 An interview with Giorgi, a Georgian Orthodox priest, Tbilisi, 2015. Due to ethical reasons all original names have been changed.

Against this backdrop, the US is perceived through the prism of conspiracy theories:

“In Georgia the US Ambassador is more influential than the Georgian prime minister... In all ministries the Americans control the situation.”³⁵³

Much of this conspiracy thinking is based on fears:

“Q.: What do you think about the removal of the South Ossetian–Georgian border into Georgian territory³⁵⁴?”

A.: I believe that this was provoked by America, since they want a NATO army here.”³⁵⁵

Russia’s policy of integrating Abkhazia and South Ossetia into Russia through borderization and passportization only strengthens the mistrust of the Kremlin in Georgia. South Ossetia explicitly wishes to be part of the Eurasian Economic Union.³⁵⁶ This creates a political competition between the two strategic options that Georgia faces, either integrate into the European normative order, or fall victim of Moscow’s neo–imperial policies. At the same time Russia’s policy has also facilitated the further deepening of split–identity in Georgians who consider themselves friendly to Russian culture. Paradoxically, their feelings towards losing Abkhazia and South Ossetia to Russia, coexist with the belief in the efficiency of a dialogue with Moscow. A geopolitical issue of controlling borders has been transformed into a biopolitical issue of taking care of people. It has been elevated to the level of an existential problem:

“We can’t get away from Russia, it’s our destiny, we are almost one body. It is important to build good–neighbourly relations, but in the meantime preserve our own mentality. We always were afraid of Russia and were right. Obviously, NATO won’t do anything for Georgians. Russia is a fire; you shouldn’t make jokes with that – human lives are more important.”³⁵⁷

However, most of our Georgian interviewees, even those tolerant towards Russia, exposed a strong attachment to Georgia as their motherland. An Orthodox priest, who appealed to the Russian aggression with the response of prayers and love, ultimately conceded that if Russia invaded

353 An interview with a representative of an NGO considered as pro-Russian by liberal experts in Georgia, Tbilisi, 2015.

354 An incident orchestrated by the Russian military in July 2015.

355 An interview with Giorgi, a Georgian Orthodox priest, Tbilisi, 2015.

356 *Tebilov*, *Yuzhnaya Osetia vidit otkrytuyu perspektivu vo vstuplenii v EAES*.

357 An interview with a Georgian writer, Tbilisi, 2015.

Georgia again, he would defend his country. In this light neither the commonality of history nor religious belief could hoodwink Georgians in regards the nature of Russia's policy. As another priest noted about the 2014 Ukraine crisis,

“What Russia did with Ukraine for us was expected... It could have been a surprise in the West, but not here, since we went through all this earlier, and keep going, it's far from over.”³⁵⁸

Europe through Sport?

This analysis sets a rather controversial framework for Georgia's symbolic identification with Europe. An overwhelming part of the population supports the Orthodox Church, an institution that lambasts “*all things coming from the West, such as Coca-Cola, MacDonald's, Harry Potter, the Da Vinci Code as harmful and detrimental.*”³⁵⁹ One of the Georgian clerics spoke out against the holding of music festivals in the country “alleging it would bring God's wrath to our land”.³⁶⁰ To this might be added that some Georgians were disappointed with the EU and the ongoing process in visa liberalization,³⁶¹ which is seen as a factor widening the cultural distance between Georgia and Europe.

Thus, a vast majority of Georgians support European integration.³⁶² Yet at the same time, a large majority also supports the religious model of social conservatism. There is only one way to explain this paradox: the pro-European part of society deems that Europe ought to accept Georgia as it is, with all its cultural traditionalism, and without expecting profound social or political changes.

This controversy sharply illuminates perhaps the most important aspect in the unfolding Europeanization debate. The Georgia case demonstrates that the idea of a European identity might come in different versions, two of which will be elucidated further. On the one hand, Europeanization can

358 An interview with Alexander, a Georgian Orthodox priest, Tbilisi, 2015.

359 An interview with a Georgian policy expert, Tbilisi, 2015.

360 *Vacharadze*, *The End of the Georgian Orthodox Christian Church, As We Know*, P. 53.

361 *Sharashenidze*, *A dangerous vacuum in Georgian politics.*

362 See, for instance: *Thornton and Sichinava*, *Public Attitudes in Georgia Results of a April 2015 survey carried out for NDI by CRRC Georgia.*

be understood as a long and often painful process of social readjustment to the European normative order, with profound domestic reforms grounded in adapting best governance practices and experiences of other's success stories. On the other hand, Europeanization can be reduced to nation branding and place promotion in terms comprehensible for Western consumers and conducive to the popularization of the most marketable elements of local culture. The "battle for values" in Georgia seems still to be a sensitive issue, as demonstrated by the anti-anti-discrimination actions on 17 May 2013. It is this second model that plays a particularly important role, with a strong emphasis on the techniques of governmentality, promoted and sustained with the direct assistance of multiple Western foundations, who have worked in Tbilisi for years.

Culturally, this trend seems to be quite compatible with the Rose Revolutionary discourse, which involves an orientalist identification of "civilization" and "modernity" with "westernization". This is contrasted with "the Orient", which justifies the intentions of erasing all signs of the Orient from the Georgian cultural landscapes. Yet this strategy of symbolic erasure presumes that "if Georgia can be made to look like Europe, then it will magically become part of Europe... This use of brand iconography is a continuation of the semiotic ideology underlying the Rose Revolution itself".³⁶³

In Georgia the heavy emphasis on nation branding, sometimes at the expense of domestically welcoming and accommodating European experiences, is accompanied by the narrative of a symbolic return to Europe. It implies that Georgia does not necessarily need to consistently undertake efforts to become a European country. Rather it just needs to remind others about its past cultural links and consonance with Europe. In accordance with this logic of commodification, Georgia brands itself, and thus apparently legitimizes its Europeanness, as a tourist destination with cultural and gastronomic authenticity and beautiful nature. It advertises its wine and cuisine as the key arguments for it being accepted into the inner circle of the Western consumerist universe.³⁶⁴ Georgia's soft power thus boils down to the ability³⁶⁵ of generating positive non-political stories³⁶⁵ of a

363 *Manning*, *The Epoch of Magna: Capitalist Brands and Post-Socialist Revolution in Georgia*, P.928.

364 *McIntyre*, *Why Should You Get to Know Georgian Wines? Because They Are Exciting*.

365 *Mitchell*, *Understanding Georgia's Soft Power*.

mixture of consumerism and cultural promotion. Ultimately Tbilisi did achieve a lot in culturally promoting itself across the globe. Thus, in 2015 Tbilisi was included in the top 10 little-known attractive world cities³⁶⁶ and in the top 10 cheapest world capitals.³⁶⁷ Georgia is listed among the top 15 cheap, safe and friendly countries,³⁶⁸ as is Tbilisi among the 10 top cities “to get drunk in”.³⁶⁹ Kutaisi and Mtskheta were included in the list of the 16 oldest European cities.³⁷⁰ A number of Western-supported projects in Georgia, such as *Georgia Compact I and II*, specifically focused on “developing a qualified workforce in such sectors as tourism and hospitality business, including hotel management, service and maintenance personnel”³⁷¹ by 2020. Often these efforts achieve fruition, for example, in 2015 the Radisson Blue Hotel in Tbilisi won a World Travel Award³⁷² and Tbilisi hosted the inaugural World Conference of Winery Tourism in 2015.

Interestingly enough, this strategy of commodification extends to the figure of Joseph Stalin. Georgia is known for a significant level of pro-Stalinist sympathies, and Stalinism remains one of the momentous elements of Georgian identity, thus merging with Georgian nationalism³⁷³ on an anti-European and anti-liberal grounds. The conflicting views on Stalin are a sign that Georgia is still struggling to come to terms with its past, even as it seeks closer ties with the west.³⁷⁴ To be a pro-Stalinist does not prevent one from being a pro-Putinist at the same time.³⁷⁵

Paradoxically, in Europe itself the strategy of inscribing Stalin into the Georgian self-narrative resonates in commodified and medialized forms. An excerpt from a Spanish TV video about Tbilisi on the eve of the UEFA Super Cup is indicative of this:

“Many interesting facts are connected to Georgia. Joseph Stalin was born in Georgia and the bones of the first European were discovered here as well.

366 *LNR Media* 2015.

367 *Geomigrant.com*, Tbilisi voshol v top 10 samykh deshovykh gorodov mira.

368 *Georgian Journal*, Georgia listed among op 15 cheap, safe and friendly countries.

369 *Georgian Journal*, Tbilisi listed among 10 cities to get drunk in.

370 *Georgian Journal*, Kutaisi and Mtskheta among 16 Europe’s oldest cities.

371 An interview with a Millenium Challenge Corporation official, Tbilisi, 2015.

372 *Georgian Journal*, Radisson Blue Hotels in Georgia win the “Oscar” of tourism.

373 *Gugushvili and Kabachnik*, Stalin is dead, long life Stalin? Testing socialization, structural, ideological, nationalist, and gender hypotheses, P. 9.

374 *North*, Georgia’s Stalin museum gives Soviet version of dictator’s life story.

375 An interview with a former member of the government of Georgia, Tbilisi 2015.

Therefore, if your father or your family is from Europe, it means that you are Georgian. Here you can see typical Georgian sulphur baths, and it is quite hot inside. I will go inside in order to get some relaxation, before the long-awaited football match starts”.³⁷⁶

In this politically and ideologically sterile narration meant for entertainment industry, the name of Stalin is a parts of the company of historical claims of Georgia’s European authenticity. What is even more noteworthy is that both parts of the story, Georgia as Stalin’s motherland and Georgia as an ancient European country, are counter-balanced by the explicit language of enjoyment Georgia seeks to associate with in international tourist markets. In another report from Georgia on the eve of the UEFA Super Cup final a Spanish journalist described Tbilisi as a city with a melancholic spirit of “a Bolshevik flavour mixed with spices that add an exquisite touch to the local gastronomy”.³⁷⁷ A similar example of a merger of political meanings with the hegemonic narrative of *jouissance* can be personified by Simon Sebag Montefiore, the British author of a book about Stalin. His sympathies to the Soviet dictator co-exist with his promotion of the image of Georgia based on a number of cultural stereotypes like the “natural beauty” of Georgian women, cuisine, and historical sites.³⁷⁸

Yet in the meantime, the strategy of advertising and promoting Georgia can be vulnerable to criticism, due to the dysfunctional state of a significant part of the urban infrastructure that can

“impede Georgia’s path to Europe, and be a disincentive to investors, as visiting diplomats, policy makers, businesspeople and even tourists...will judge Georgia based on a capital that looks and functions radically differently than any major European city. Georgia invests a lot of energy into showing the world its beauty, but a few days in Tbilisi, especially for those foreigners who make it out of the old city or who walk a few blocks from their hotel, can rapidly undermine that perception”.³⁷⁹

Against this backdrop, the UEFA Super Cup final in Tbilisi, which pitted two Spanish clubs, *Barcelona* and *Sevilla*, against each other, is definitely

376 *Georgian journal*, Georgian Journal featured in Spanish television report on Tbilisi just before Super Cup finals.

377 *Ruiz*, Mano de chapa y pintura al estadio donde se jugara la Supercopa de Europa.

378 *Georgian journal*, The first real biography of Stalin and its author’s fascination with Georgia.

379 *Mitchell*, Making Tbilisi’s Future.

one of these seemingly “non–political stories” in which Georgia could be a beneficiary. The city’s football stadium was largely renovated for this occasion, with a budget amounting to 8 million of euros.³⁸⁰ With over a 54,000 capacity the “*Dinamo Arena*” became the Super Cup’s largest host venue ever. The Georgian parliament accorded tax benefits for investors, who by law were exempt from value–added, income and import taxes for a ten–year period, and from property and land taxes for five years.³⁸¹

The opening ceremony of the event³⁸² serves as a good cultural illustration of nation branding orchestrated for a European audience. It started with a multi–coloured human chain encircling the stadium. It was made of children, who symbolized a “universal message of peace and unity”, which was then immediately followed by a series of traditional Georgian dances, with the insignia of UEFA and the two Spanish finalists at the end. This relatively simple scenario can be read as an attempt to culturally expand the boundaries of Europe as a source of universal meanings through including authentic Georgian folklore as a symbol of its traditionalist and self–minded identity.

The other sport competition, the EOYF, was covered in the Georgian media as a momentous event. For first time in the Georgian history this country hosted the Olympic flame. Fifty countries participated in the event, and seven new sport venues were constructed for the Festival. The Prime Minister, Irakly Gharibashvili (2013–2015), emphasized that no sports event of this scale has ever been held in Georgia.³⁸³

The opening ceremony of the EOYF gave a similar picture of cultural representation. The festive spectacle was full of artistic references to Georgian historical mythology, with some elements of religious symbolism, which might be interpreted as harmonious with the nationalist narrative of Georgia allegedly being a fully–fledged Christian, and thus European, nation during Europe’s “dark ages”. The overall idea of the ceremony was to inscribe Georgia into a broadly defined European cultural context, as the major indication of the Georgian European identity, not as an ideal to be attained in the future, but as a *fait accompli*.

380 *Stadium Database web site*, Tbilisi: Is Georgia Ready for Barcelona and Sevilla?

381 *Human Rights Georgia*, Investors to enjoy tax privileges for the construction of Olympic village.

382 *YouTube*, UEFA Super Cup Tbilisi 2015 Opening Ceremony.

383 *Georgian Journal*, Olympic Village opens in Tbilisi, with famous footballer Levan Kobiasvili appointed its mayor.

As a representative of the Georgian government investment agency notes,

“Indeed, Georgia tries to make a European image for itself. This is based on history, we always tried to be closer to the West, largely on religious grounds, unlike Azerbaijan, for example. In the 10th and 11th centuries we had our representative in Constantinople, and we wanted to resemble them. Historically we always were surrounded by Muslims, and thus wanted to somehow associate with the West. Whether we are a European country or not, depends on the definition of Europe. For me Europe means above all values, human rights, property rights, and fundamental freedoms. And Georgia gradually moves in this direction. I am not sure that someone thought that this Olympic Festival would make us closer to Europe. We simply wanted to host the real Olympics, real championships, and the EOYF was a small step forward. We always wanted to host the UEFA Super Cup final, since between 300 to 400 journalists would come to the country, go to our restaurants and report about all this. This is a good investment.”³⁸⁴

With all its officially declared intention to detach sports from politics, the EOYF also had political connotations, not only due to its performative articulation of Georgian identity. Sport became part of “high politics” when the Georgian government accorded 300 tickets for the UEFA Super Cup to young Abkhazians and Ossetians:

“These young guys came to Tbilisi, since otherwise they wouldn't be able to. And they have seen what Georgia and Tbilisi are like nowadays, a beautiful stadium, Messi on the pitch. Then we took them to Batumi which is a kind of Las Vegas in comparison to Sukhumi. Perhaps this might help in a dialogue between Abkhazians and Georgians, when they come to power. The Berlin wall has fallen because West Germany was able to accommodate the interests of East Germany. Things might change if Georgia can make a difference.”³⁸⁵

As far as Russia is concerned, in 2010 the Georgian government, perhaps unexpectedly, secured support from Russia during the bidding stage for EOYF.³⁸⁶ Yet during the event itself Russia was referred to in a rather confrontational way:

“Russians are as fond of taking part in Olympic Games as they are of using sports events for their own political machinations...The Russians also know how to exploit an international event held in the name of global peace and

384 An interview with a representative of the public agency responsible for promoting and facilitating foreign direct investment in Georgia, Washington DC, 2015.

385 An interview with a Georgian diplomat, Washington DC, 2015.

386 *Georgia Times*, Tbilisi mixing sports and politics.

unity. On August 8th, 2008, as the Beijing Olympic Games opened...the Russian army invaded Georgia...History seemed to be repeating itself...A few days before the commencement of the EYOF, Georgians got a chilling reminder of Beijing (Olympic Games 2008. – A.M., A.Y.) when Russian forces in so-called South Ossetia decided to redraw the “administrative border”...It does not matter what kind of event you are able to host, what your country may aspire to; don’t forget that the schoolyard bully runs the playground, this was Russia’s message to Georgia. In August 2008 the attention of the entire world was on Beijing. By the time the world had figured out where Georgia was on the map, the Russian army was already 40 kilometres away from Tbilisi. But now the attention of the entire European sports community has been drawn to Tbilisi.³⁸⁷

This narrative praises the success of Georgia as the host of an international sporting event, including the EOYF and the Rugby Cup held in Tbilisi in June 2015. By the same token, Russia is always part of any story of Georgian identity, as a powerful factor that splits this identity. Indeed, in the context of the EOYF, Russia can be portrayed both as being supportive and simultaneously as a negative reference point, as Georgia’s external and intrusive Other, against whom a symbolic revenge needs to be undertaken:

“I only wonder how the Russians, the Abkhazians and the Ossetians have reacted to this outstanding victory of the Georgian people (the hosting of the EOYF. – A.M., A.Y.)... I suspect that a certain amount of anger has reigned in their hearts and minds...I hate to say that the breakaway lands of Georgia, inspired by Russia, regretted the fact of Georgia’s being in the vanguard of the civilized world, which t persistently refuses to accept them as legal units and keeps them hanging heavily on Russia’s scraggy tired neck. I will never understand that they do not want to be at home and happily at work, plus playing international games like the Olympics. Why do they wish to be hungry, naked and shackled when they can be fed, clad and free? The door is open.”³⁸⁸

In this light it is quite remarkable that Abkhazia and the South Ossetia were represented as a part of Georgia at the EOYF opening ceremony.³⁸⁹ However, despite meaningful cultural and political connotations, neither the EOYF nor the UEFA Super Cup final were a ground-breaking event for Georgia, notwithstanding their potential for symbolically articulating Georgia’s European identity. For example, the President, Giorgi Margve-

387 *Shelegia*, EYOF had an Olympic-size launch.

388 *Civil.ge*, Tbilisi Hosts European Youth Olympic Festival.

389 *Youtube*, UEFA Super Cup Tbilisi 2015 Opening Ceremony.

lashvili, did not show up at the EOYF Opening ceremony and addressed the public via social networks.³⁹⁰ As one of our interviewees suggested,

“there is a tug-of-war between the President and the prime minister who can’t decide among themselves who would be better to represent the country. Besides, the current regime is so averse to Saakashvili that they seem to always act against his legacy. Since Saakashvili was a genius of PR, they are implicitly hesitant to do something above the average for promoting the country through international events.”³⁹¹

Another expert confirmed that “*today’s image of Georgia is constructed in opposition to the times of Saakashvili, we are not supposed to be pompous*”³⁹². This low profile can be explained as something that distinguishes Georgia from Russia:

“When a Russian region hosts a mega-event, its importance is based on Putin’s attendance: what if he comes and dislikes something? We don’t have that...It’s not like in Russia, let’s spend big money and invite big people...We need publicity, but don’t wish to waste half of our budget on it.”³⁹³

At the same time, there are more practical reasons; the relatively modest scale and scope of the events hosted by Georgia, the specific sport interests of the local audience, and budget restrictions were mentioned among the limiting factors:

“We shouldn’t overestimate the overall importance of these events. But for a small country they were quite important...The UEFA Super Cup is of particular significance, because historically we are a football country, and in the Soviet times our team played quite well...Now the top team in the world, Barcelona, came to Tbilisi. It was a huge event, yet it’s over, and the country is concerned about other issues...In the near future we are going to host the Rugby Championship...UEFA can testify that Tbilisi can manage it.”³⁹⁴

390 Rustavi 2, Mayor of Tbilisi has no information about the reasons for absence of the president at the Olympic Games opening ceremony.

391 An interview with an NGO activist, Tbilisi, 2015.

392 An interview with a head of a think tank, Tbilisi, 2015.

393 An interview with a representative of the public agency responsible for promoting and facilitating foreign direct investment in Georgia, Washington DC, 2015.

394 An interview with an NGO activist, Tbilisi, 2015.

As one of our experts noted,

“we would like to talk with FIFA, but it doesn’t pay attention to countries like Georgia. They deal with Qatar, for example...UEFA is less pretentious. For us this is more about globalization than about European aspirations...This is about putting Georgia, Tbilisi, in the global context.”³⁹⁵

This approach attests to Georgia’s intention to boost its international profile using the opportunities of the global industry of sports events:

“The EOYF was important in terms of advertising and promoting tourism, but I wouldn’t say that it is the most important thing to organize...As an urban scholar I see a lot of negative effects and not for everyone is it so important... I guess there is only one sport that can consolidate people here, this is rugby.”³⁹⁶

Thus, at first glance, unlike neighbouring Azerbaijan, which invested lots of effort and finance in staging the First European Games (June–July 2015) and the Eurovision song contest in 2012 to promote its European cultural affinity, for Georgia the sporting events were less visible and did not grow into nation-wide celebrations of belonging to Europe. This could be a reaction to the widely shared opinion that in many earlier cases the declarations that were supposed to expose Georgia’s European identity “ranged from exaggerations to simple mendacities” or “were embroidered, embellished, or even manufactured to sustain a contemporary political narrative that seeks Georgian membership of western political, economic, and military alliances”.³⁹⁷

Yet in the meantime, the relative low profile of the two Europe level sports events in Georgia in the summer of 2015 may attest, though perhaps indirectly, to the ambiguous resonance of the very concept of Europe in Georgia. In many respects, though, instead of playing a consolidating role, Europe as a signifier still might be culturally divisive, since for a significant part of Georgian society it is associated more with gay rights than with democratic institutions, transparency and sustainability. This partly explains a certain duality in Georgian identity. Official Tbilisi is proud of being one of three post-Soviet countries that managed to sign an AA with the EU, which is basically perceived as an economic move, but is reluctant

395 An interview with a vice-rector of a University in Tbilisi, Tbilisi, 2015.

396 An interview with a vice-rector of a University in Tbilisi, Tbilisi, 2015.

397 *O’Beachain and Coene*, *Go West: Georgia’s European identity and its role in domestic politics and foreign policy objectives*, P.932.

to associate with Europe axiologically. Georgian Euroscepticism can turn Europe “into an alien force that can infiltrate and pollute cultural values. As a result, the notion of the West appears as a double-edged sword; it is something that will assist the Georgian effort of territorial reintegration; it could, however, simultaneously potentially damage cultural or even spiritual integrity. Ambivalence towards the West tends to be more implicit than explicit”³⁹⁸ and can be verbalized as follows:

“one of the hurdles is a low level of understanding of what is democracy, and what does it mean to live in a tolerant society that respects human rights.”³⁹⁹

Besides, Europe does not seem to be the only landmark for Georgia's pathway to globalization:

“The EU faces its own troubles, they are not ready to take risks and launch projects in Georgia. America is far away, and its awareness of Georgia is low. If someone invests in Georgia, this happens basically as an emotional investment, through friends. Who are our target countries? It's our neighbours, Turkey and Azerbaijan; it's the Gulf countries, along with China, India, South Korea, and also Japan.”⁴⁰⁰

There is a due understanding within Georgia that the idea of Europe is primarily value-based, and EU partnership countries are expected to strive for implementing a normative approach to Europeanization. However, norms and values seem to be an extremely sensitive policy area, which drives Georgian elites to focus more on technical instruments and standards that can make Georgia more compatible with Europe and more attractive to it.

Yet Georgia's preference to depoliticize approaches to Europeanization, of which the sporting events analysed in this chapter play an important role, differs from many authoritarian regimes that prefer to focus on administrative and managerial forms of cooperation with European partners, thus avoiding heavily loaded normative issues. Georgia's specificity is the multiplicity of policy actors, political parties, the Orthodox Church,

398 *Batiashvili*, The “Myth” of the Self: The Georgian National Narrative and Quest for Georgian.

399 An interview with Alexander, a Georgian Orthodox priest, Tbilisi, 2015.

400 An interview with a representative of the public agency responsible for promoting and facilitating foreign direct investment in Georgia, Washington DC, 2015.

NGOs that have very different attitudes to the prospects of Georgia. Policy consolidation under these conditions is a hard task. This fragmentation of Georgian society complicates a value-based agenda that in many respects is substituted by performative actions aimed at nation (re)branding rather than nation (re)building.