

Borderlands of Georgian Ukrainians

by Olga Dorokhina

Georgia constitutes a multiethnic state, in which representatives of various ethnic and religious groups live side by side. The need for coexistence creates areas of interaction that, under the influence of various factors (internal and external), either unite people or, on the contrary, divide them, forming both physical and outwardly invisible but perceived lines of separation. In recent years, due to various political events, Georgia and Ukraine are often mentioned together. Besides common post-Soviet legacy and challenges to security and sovereignty, the two countries are connected by people – Ukrainians in Georgia and Georgians in Ukraine. This paper focuses on Ukrainians in Georgia. Through the concepts of borderlands, contact zones and identities, I address how the Ukrainian community of Georgia was formed, what it represents today, and how it is integrated in modern Georgian society. The paper presents an overview of representation of Ukrainians in Georgia and methods applied by them to maintain Ukrainian identity.

Keywords: cultural borderlands, poly-cultural families, identity, Georgian Ukrainians

Concepts of borderlands, cultural borderlands and contact zones

A special place in border studies is occupied by the concept of borderland or the area adjacent to the border, which, depending on the context or direction of research, can be viewed in different dimensions (physical [spatial] and symbolic).

As a rule, dualism is inherent to borderlines, with opposing concepts such as “we” and “they,” “here” and “there,” “one’s own” and “someone else’s,” “inclusion” and “exclusion”. But as soon as we expand our understanding of borders, including here the areas they share, the situation becomes multidimensional and ambiguous. For Soja, borderlands or some kind of “third space” are characterized by “a constant process of creating and blurring the differences,” constant shifts and struggles.¹ This is a space where language, cultural traditions and customs create demarcation lines and distances of different lengths.² Here the construction of new models of communication occurs, as sharing joint space requires crossing the lines of separation and formation of optimal distances.³ The result of intensive migration flows is the mixing of different cultures. Moving to an area, becoming part of a new society⁴, people bring their borders with them, and in new conditions they engage in processes of conducting ongoing negotiations both within themselves and with host cultures. Over time, multicultural societies are formed, when a specific territory becomes a place for the interaction of two or more cultures for the characteristics of which the concept of “cultural borderland” is introduced.⁵For Gloria Anzaldúa this is a “permanent transitional condition,”

which is characterized by ambiguity“allowing people to adhere to different social and cultural perspectives.”⁶Cultural boundaries within individuals become blurred as components from diverse cultures become incorporated into their individual cultural identity, instead of remaining separate from each other. The concept of borderland allows a person to adhere to different identities that are multifaceted and can be changed or transformed throughout life.⁷

Tolkachev points out that in the conditions of the cultural borderland,

*tolerance towards the “foreign”, the ability to appreciate and assimilate the best cultural achievements of the nations entering the dialogue is assisted by the historical traditions of tolerance inherent in different cultures.*⁸

In the process of social and political interaction, cultural contacts, there is a constant process of agreeing on belonging. Considering the borderland as a psychological area, Heewon Chang, notes that their inhabitants decide “how much they want to identify with their cultures of origin or of adoption.”⁹

Taking into account that the borderland is a place of meeting and interaction of different cultures, the concept of “contact zone” is sometimes used to describe them. The author of this concept, Mary Louise Pratt, considers the contact zone in a broad sense, as any place of interaction between representatives of different races, ethnic groups, cultures: “Contact zones are understood as places such as trading posts, border regions or metropolitan areas, in which cross-cultural interaction occurs on a regular basis”.¹⁰

The result of intensive migration flows is the mixing of different cultures. In the academic literature we can find the following terms: “mixed families,” “mixed couples,” “multiethnic families,” “mixed-race,” “interracial,” “intercultural,” “cross-cultural” families and so on as definitions of marriages between persons with different ethnic, religious, cultural and other backgrounds. In this paper, I will use the term poly-cultural family.

When working with people from poly-cultural families we often observe that they try to identify themselves using such expressions as “I have half of this ethnicity and half of that ethnicity”, or “My blood has 30% of this ethnicity, 30% of this and 40% of that.” Therefore, they divide themselves according to number of cultures they belong to (or want to belong to). The term poly-cultural families underlines the richness brought by all cultures.

The term poly-cultural families enriches its members as personalities having multiple identities. It helps to get rid of stereotypes, and understand that belonging to several cultures is not a defect, but an advantage. The phenomenon of poly-cultural families is of particular importance in societies divided by wars and conflicts. Representatives of these families are a natural bridge connecting divided communities. It is impossible to reanimate ties broken by conflicts and wars without the engagement of this community. It is impossible to prevent new

bloodshed and hostilities without the proper and deserved integration of poly-cultural families. Being part of a poly-cultural family means being part of the permanent process of negotiations on different levels:

- Internal, when each participant in such a marriage at his/her own personal level constructs interaction.
- Interpersonal binary, when despite the possible difficulties associated with the language of communication, differing traditions, rituals, both representatives of a poly-cultural family are in search of an optimal balance, which implies the preservation of their own cultural identity, while recognizing and respecting others.¹¹
- Intergroup, when representatives of one family need to establish relations in the community surrounding them - parents, relatives, friends, neighbors, co-workers, etc.

Georgia as a borderland and contact zone

The concept of the borderland can be applied to areas of various sizes and characteristics. This can be both the private personal world of the individual and the (internal and external) experience of interaction of large groups of people and/or institutional structures. This also may be the micro-world of a single family, or of any region in a settlement, and the macro-space of a certain trans-region. The concept of borderland can be applied to individual countries as well.¹²

Let us consider Georgia from this point of view, which, being geographically located at the crossroads of leading transport routes connecting the West to the East and the North to the South, is a unique borderland, with many visible and invisible lines of separation and at the same time contact zones in both territorial and symbolic contexts.

In a political and geographical sense, an indicator that Georgia¹³ is a country with a high cross-border potential is that seven of the nine regions (mkhare) of Georgia are borderlands. The Autonomous Republic of Adjara is also a borderland region. In total, more than 2,000,000 people live in these regions.¹⁴ These figures are significant taking into consideration that the total population of Georgia according to GEOSTAT (National Statistic office of Georgia) data (for 2017) is 3 million, 713 thousand people.¹⁵

Since ancient times, Georgia has been a multiethnic and multicultural entity, where representatives of various ethnic and/or religious groups lived and live side by side until today. According to the 2014 General Population Census¹⁶, in addition to ethnic Georgians, there are slightly less than 500,000 people (13.3%) representing other ethnic groups living in the country. Azeris (6.3%), Armenians (4.5%) are among the largest of them having compact settlements. Then come Russians (0.7%), Ossetians (0.4%), Yazidis (0.3%), Ukrainians (0.2%), Kists (0.2%),

Greeks (0.1%), and Assyrians (0.1%). Smaller ethnic groups are Jews, Germans, Avarians, Udins, Poles, Czechs, Bulgarians, Latvians, Lithuanians, Estonians, etc., who constitute 0.4% of the population.

The confessional composition of the population of Georgia is also diverse - 83.4% are Orthodox Christians, 10.7% -Muslims, and 2.9% belong to the Armenian Apostolic Church. The smaller groups include Catholics, Protestants, followers of Judaism, etc. An analysis of the indicators of “inter-ethnicity of marriages (17,793 couples)”, based on 2014 census data, shows that Georgian society is relatively closed, with 96.9% of the couples living together belonging to the same ethnic group (between Georgians, Azeris, Armenians, and others).¹⁷

Over the centuries, a kind of balance was formed that allowed different groups to coexist peacefully when, on the one hand, they interacted and developed contacts with each other, and on the other hand, certain boundaries and distance were preserved, expressed in language, customs, traditions, and religion.¹⁸ The situation peculiar to Georgia as a borderland is very clearly presented in the quotation of the French traveler Chardin. Giving a description of the Georgian population (second half of the 17th century), he wrote:

*Their manners and customs are a mixture of those of the most of the nations that surround them. This I believe proceeds from the commerce they carry on with many different countries and from the liberty everyone enjoys in Georgia, of living according to his own religion and customs and of freely defending them. Here you see Armenians, Greeks, Turks, Persians, Indians, Tartars and Moscovites...*¹⁹

Military, political, and sometimes environmental factors influenced changes in the ethnic composition of Georgia in different stages of history. Despite the turbulent historical events since the restoration of independence, as was shown above, Georgia remains a multi-ethnic state, a place where different cultures meet and interact.

Formation of the Ukrainian community of Georgia

Ukrainians are one of the constituent parts of multi-ethnic Georgian society. Considering the fact that there were several waves (and accordingly reasons) of mass migration of Ukrainians to Georgia today, they are represented by several groups characterized by different levels of integration, different types of identities, and self-perceptions. The first waves of mass migration took place in the second part of the 18th and 19th centuries.²⁰ Some sources indicate that the first contacts between Georgians and Ukrainians took place as early as the 10th and 11th century.

However, the intensity of contacts and mutually beneficial cooperation increased especially in the 17th century, when the Cossacks represented a formidable force in the struggle against Turkey. According to historian Alekberli, “Cossacks greatly

assisted the merchant fleet of Georgia.”²¹ The Cossacks were frequent guests of the Colchis Valley, where they stopped to rest, prepare for maneuvers, and store trophies, hiding after escapes from captivity.²² It is probably not by chance that the first small groups of Ukrainians were represented by internally displaced persons - runaway Cossacks of the Zaporozhian Sich, that was eliminated by the Manifesto of Catherine II at the end of the XVIII century.

The next groups of migrants consisting of Cossacks from Poltava and Chernihiv followed in the middle of the XIX century. These groups were deliberately sent to settle on the territory of Georgia. One of them - 200 families (1,800 people) of Ukrainian Cossacks from the Poltava province - was sent to settle in the Borjomi gorge, located on the territory of modern Samtskhe-Javakheti.²³ Among the objectives of the relocation of the Cossacks to Georgia was to protect the frontiers of Russian Empire on the south of Caucasus after the Russian-Turkish war. Even now there are several villages located in the border region of Samtskhe-Javakheti (near the state border of Georgia with Turkey), where many people of a Ukrainian background and with Ukrainian surnames live - e.g. Martynenko, Ustymenko, Shevchenko, Bandura, Gavva etc.²⁴ It was a very difficult challenge for people who used to live in the steppe to move to high mountainous areas far from “civilized life,” but they survived, and contributed significantly to the development of this region of Georgia.

After the abolition of serfdom, some groups of landless peasants found refuge in various regions of Georgia. In the late 1880s, the Poltava Cossacks appeared in Abkhazia (according to one source, they themselves requested permission to resettle,²⁵ according to other data they were forcibly resettled).²⁶ More than a thousand people from Ukraine settled in one of the villages, which they called Poltavka.

The Ukrainian community was also replenished at the expense of the imperial Russian military forces and employees of administrative institutions, who remained in Georgia after the end of the service.²⁷ In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Ukrainians who settled in Georgia were represented by a wide variety of professional groups - peasants, workers, artisans, traders, military, writers, scientists, engineers, actors, and journalists. Moreover, while the first groups of migrants settled mainly in rural areas, the Ukrainians later became concentrated in urban areas of Georgia. Ukrainians played an important role in the settlement and development of the Black Sea coast of Georgia. Qualified Ukrainian specialists were involved in the construction of new ports, railways, resorts, etc.

According to the census of 1917 the number of Ukrainians was about 130,000 people.²⁸ Representing a large group, the Ukrainians of Georgia at that time were notable in the public and political life, not only of Georgia, but of the Caucasus as a whole. This is evidenced by the creation of the Ukrainian Rada and the Ukrainian Military Rada of the Caucasus in 1917. The process of self-organization

of the Ukrainian communities took place as Ukrainian societies operated in Tbilisi, Batumi, Sukhumi and Poti. Their representatives conducted both cultural-educational and political activities, successfully taking part in the elections of city assemblies and the Parliament of Georgia.²⁹

The second wave of migration (labor/intellectual) occurred during the Soviet period and consisted of several components. In the first years of the establishment of the Soviet government, the number of Ukrainians dropped sharply. According to the census of 1926, there were 14,256 Ukrainians. It is noteworthy that most of them were men (10,747 people) and that Ukrainian was the main language for only 6,633 people within this group.³⁰

At that time, the history of the Soviet five-year economic plans began, within the framework of which industry, resort-medical institutions, agriculture started to develop at an accelerated pace in Georgia, resulting in the mass movement of people. For example, the Ukrainians played a central role in the development of coal production in Tkvarcheli. Then, there was practically no local qualified personnel, and Ukrainian miners from Donbass helped with the development of coal deposits. According to sources, "several parties of skilled workers were sent from Donbass to Tkvarcheli."³¹ The first of them consisting of 50 people arrived in 1929.³² The settlement of Ukrainian specialists took place in both the capital and the Black Sea port infrastructure, water and mountain health resorts, etc. In 1939, there were already more than 45,000 Ukrainians in Georgia.³³ However, the Soviet community in the Soviet era was formed not only at the expense of labor migration flows, aimed at supporting the industrial development of the country. There were also cases of forced migration of Ukrainians to Georgia. Perhaps these were not large groups in terms of size, and they were mixed with the main flow of labor force heading to Georgia. According to some sources, the dramatic and tragic years of Holodomor in 1932-1933 were one of the reasons. Some people trying to escape famine were forced to leave their homes and moved to other countries, including Georgia. One of the descendants of a family with such a history, Mikhailo Glushchenko, recalls:

People were forced to flee their homelands and look for a way to escape famine elsewhere. Many of them came to Georgia then, including us - our father and three young children. The vessel brought us to Poti from Mykolaiv. We, powerless from hunger, could not walk, we were taken aboard from the vessel by a stretcher. The Georgians put us on our feet, shared their last mouthful with us, and provided us an apartment.³⁴

Another component of forced migration was evacuation during the Second World War, when Georgia accepted thousands of Ukrainians mainly from Odessa, Sevastopol and Mykolaiv. Several thousand people were accepted in Poti alone. The settlers could also be found in Tbilisi, Sukhumi, Ozurgeti, Betania, Sachkhere, Signaghi, Kojori. The aforementioned Tkvarcheli hosted the families of Donbass

miners.³⁵ Along with the families, whole orphanages were evacuated, which were located in Gali, Tsalenjikha, Ozurgeti, Tkibuli, Gori, Tetrtskaro, Dmanisi, Tbilisi, Gurjaani, Signaghi, Lagodekhi. Most of these people likely returned to their homeland, but many stayed. In the postwar years, the influx of Ukrainians continued and consisted mainly of technical intelligentsia.

According to official data, there were 52,443 Ukrainians in Georgia in 1989. Due to collapse of the Soviet Union, civil war and economic crises in Georgia for several years, this number decreased to 6044 persons (2014).³⁶ Migration in the post-Soviet period mainly affected Ukrainians living in urban settlements and mainly second-wave migrants. One of main destinations for migration (not only for Ukrainians but Georgians as well) in that times was the historical homeland - Ukraine. People believed that they could survive better in Ukraine than in Georgia, which was going through wars, conflicts, and economic disasters.

The third wave of migration started in the first decade of the 21st century and continues until now. According to the Department of Statistics of Georgia, the number of immigrants from Ukraine was 2922 (2016).³⁷ The number of asylum applications of citizens of Ukraine significantly increased in 2014/2015 due to armed conflict in Ukraine. The modern Ukrainian community of Georgia now mainly consists of Ukrainians from the first/second waves and “newcomers” as well as poly-cultural families (Georgian-Ukrainian, Ukrainian-Armenians, etc.). The majority of them are Ukrainian women married to citizens of Georgia. Regarding gender, unlike the Ukrainian community in 1929, 70% of the modern Ukrainian minority consists of women and elderly people.³⁸ Looking at this factor, the authors of the policy paper “Ukraine’s Soft Power in the Region: The tool for effective foreign policy” explain the “fact that in modern Georgia Ukrainians have not yet risen to the top of political or business pinnacles”.

Identities and self-perception of Georgian Ukrainians

Several sources (non-official) estimate that the number of Ukrainians is more than 20,000.³⁹ An explanation for the inconsistency of official and unofficial data is that sometime until the middle of the 19th century people who spoke Ukrainian were recorded in official documents as Ukrainian Cossacks or Malorussians (Little Russians) (for officials).⁴⁰ By the end of the 19th century, Ukrainians were usually already called “Russians.” This trend persisted during the Soviet era, when not only Ukrainians, but generally all Slavs in Georgia were called “Russians”.⁴¹ In addition, later descendants from poly-cultural families prefer to identify themselves as “Georgians.” The situation began to change slowly after the restoration of independence of Georgia.

Some experts underline that clearly expressed identity with Ukraine as a state (apart from ethnic Ukrainian identity) is connected with the dissolution of

the Soviet Union and regaining of independence by both Ukraine and Georgia. A representative of the non-governmental organization Dnipro, Professor Sinyuk says:

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the wars that Georgia suffered helped the Ukrainians to realize that they were Ukrainians. Until then, they were Russians.⁴² At a minimum, one can say about people of Ukrainian origin that at present they are in the process of reconstructing the content of their self-identification, whereby their hidden, until recently unclaimed identity has increased in significance. More and more people are beginning to attach meaning to their Ukrainian origin, recalling "that someone had a grandmother who had a great-grandmother or grandfather who were Ukrainians. Previously, they did not attach any importance to this, now the genes have made themselves known."⁴³

The Ukrainian community of the first wave is fully integrated into Georgian society. They are represented by poly-cultural families of the fifth or sixth generation. Mostly, they are Georgian-speaking (and generally do not speak Ukrainian or even Russian, especially those living in rural regions). Part of this group has a Georgian or dual identity and they consider themselves both as Ukrainians and Georgians. One of the residents of the village of Atskuri (Samtskhe-Javakheti), Merab Shevchenko, says: "I consider myself both Georgian and Ukrainian, because I have a Ukrainian surname, my ancestors were Ukrainian. But I am also a Georgian, because I was born here, I grew up here, and I live here."⁴⁴

The following quote demonstrates how this group of Georgian Ukrainians⁴⁵ is seen and perceived by others: "The only language my friend speaks is Georgian; his typically Caucasian appearance does not even remotely remind him of having Slavic origin, and his surname remains the only evidence of his Ukrainian roots."⁴⁶ But after visiting their villages, one can see that family relics are carefully kept in the houses of the descendants of the first settlers - embroidered bench hammers, icons or Cossack sabers or cradles. The history of the families and their resettlement in Georgia is verbally transmitted from fathers to sons.⁴⁷ This duality is also visible at dining room tables where both Ukrainian "vareniki" and "borsh" and Georgian "khinkali" and "khachapuri" are served.

Ukrainians were also among IDPs and refugees from Abkhazia. As a result of the conflict, some Ukrainians living in Abkhazia returned to their historic homeland or other countries, some shared the fate of forced migrants (refugees and IDPs), and a small group still lives in Abkhazia. The war divided some families with Ukrainian background according ideological preferences.⁴⁸ In 1996, the organization of Ukrainians IDPs from Abkhazia "Vidrodzhenia" ("Revival") was created in Tbilisi. Unfortunately, 10 years later (in 2006), this organization ceased its operations.⁴⁹

Representatives of poly-cultural families (having Ukrainian roots in the third, fourth or more generation) who were forced to leave Abkhazia retained fond

memories of their ancestors, although for most of them the self-identification of being a Georgian and a resident of Abkhazia is dominant. This group usually has good knowledge of both Georgian, as well as Russian (to a lesser extent Ukrainian). The famous blogger Giorgi Jakhaia, who is from Sukhumi, recalls his Ukrainian ancestors:

My great-grandfather and great-grandmother were from Poltavka, and although I have seen only my great-grandmother, (she was from the first generation born in Abkhazia) I learned a lot from her about Ukraine. It was then that I loved this country, this language as a child.⁵⁰

Among representatives of the second wave, there are those who are indifferent towards their origins, those who consider themselves as Georgians or representatives of other ethnicities, those who also have dual or multiple identities and those who consider themselves as Ukrainians. The self-perception of children representing poly-cultural families in each particular case depends on many factors, one of which is the sex of the child. Representatives of the Ukrainian Embassy in Georgia, who have constant contacts with members of the Ukrainian community, share the following observations

The Georgian society is patriarchal and patriotic in spirit. From childhood, they treat boys like adults and try to foster the mentality of defenders of their own homeland in them. In mixed families where the mother is Ukrainian, and the father - Georgian, mothers may cultivate a Ukrainian identity in daughters; the boys mostly feel like Georgians.⁵¹

The need for reconciliation of different identities is particularly pronounced among representatives of families, where more than two cultures merge. Some prefer only one of them, while others accept their belonging to the poly-cultural world. For example, Elizaveta Krasenko from Batumi (Adjara), whose father represents the Ukrainian-Russian family, and the mother - Armenian-Belarus family, would not single out a specific ethnicity: "I cannot say that Ukrainian is more prevalent in me or Russian and Armenian. All of these cultures come into my family at a certain level, and I am naturally part of that diversity as well."⁵²

Unlike the older generation, young people are better integrated into society, are fluent in Georgian, and mostly remain less active and involved in the public life of the Ukrainian community. In the group belonging to the second wave of migration, many maintain their knowledge of the Ukrainian language and try to teach Ukrainian their kids or grandkids or other youngsters via language lessons in weekend schools. They also try to maintain ties with relatives in Ukraine and some of the young people study in Ukrainian universities. Over time, ethnic cultural traditions have undergone a transformation and dissolution, absorbing elements of neighboring cultures and at the same time abandoning and losing some of their own, thus constructing new spaces.

The motto for “newcomers” is the following sentence: “It is wonderful to be an eternal guest in Georgia, but it is priceless to become part of Georgian society.”⁵³

This group includes professionals in the field of art, medicine, IT-technologies, and businessmen. It is also represented by members of poly-cultural families (again, mainly women who married Georgian citizens). The complexity of the process of their integration is represented by the Georgian language⁵⁴. Different strategies are taken here, and more and more people are choosing to gradually learn this language which is difficult for them, while not forgetting their own. The perception of the Ukrainian community with many years of experience of living in Georgia by the “newcomers” is interesting as well:

*The Ukrainian diaspora in Georgia is special. These are not just people who are united by a new temporary (or permanent) place of residence. This is not a group of people who support each other in a foreign country... These are people who love Georgia. These are people with a similar way of thinking, with similar values, with a similar worldview.*⁵⁵

Representatives of the latter wave play a very important role in strengthening Ukrainian identity in Georgia. They are carriers of the modern Ukrainian language, better understand the events taking place in Ukraine and have more active and intensive contacts with relatives and friends in Ukraine. Historical ties, joint multicultural families, the similarity of the problems of the two countries of Ukraine and Georgia also lead to an increased interest in highlighting and emphasizing their “Ukrainian” identity.

Institutional structures promoting Ukrainian culture in Georgia

The interests of Ukrainian community are advocated by several non-governmental organizations. Since the restoration of independence of Georgia, about 18 organizations⁵⁶ have been created, the main purpose of which is to unite the Ukrainians of Georgia.⁵⁷ As a rule, the goal of these structures is to revive and preserve Ukrainian cultural traditions, support the process of self-identification of persons of Ukrainian origin, develop and strengthen friendship between the Ukrainian and Georgian people, and protect the social rights of Ukrainians in Georgia. Some of them operate Sunday schools where Ukrainian culture and language are studied and promoted.

The activities of organizations include organizing concerts, exhibitions, festivals, issuing publications. Thanks to their activity, monuments, memorial plates and signs testifying to the achievements of the Ukrainians of Georgia have appeared in various places of Georgia. Particularly noteworthy are the efforts of Boris Sinyuk and Mikhailo Boris (Association of Ukrainians of Georgia) to conduct historical research and collect information on representatives of Ukrainians of Georgia from different generations. Two professional organizations have been created - the Union

of Ukrainian Pedagogues of Georgia and the Union of Journalists - "Association of Georgian-Ukrainian Press and Books."

Unfortunately, Ukrainian community organizations are poorly represented on the internet. The leaders of most of them are representatives of the older generation. The only organization that was created by young Ukrainians in Georgia is the organization *Svitanok* (Dawn), registered in 2016. In 2018, at the initiative of this organization and with the support of the Ukrainian Embassy in Georgia, a conference "Youth Scientific and Practical Forum "Ukraine-Georgia 100 Years of Diplomatic Relations: The Role of Youth in Strengthening Economic, Cultural and Scientific Relations" was held. At the international level, Ukrainians of Georgia are represented in the Ukrainian World Congress (UWC).

Traditions and language are among the most important elements uniting ethnic groups.⁵⁸ The Ukrainian language, literature, history are studied in Georgia in various formats. Sunday schools operate at public organizations of Ukrainians in Georgia where Ukrainian culture and language are studied and promoted. The state program of the government of Ukraine operated until 2014 within the framework of which quotas for students with Ukrainian origin were allocated at Ukrainian universities. In the period of 2006-2014, 174 students from Georgia participated in this program.

Until 2011, Mykhailo Hrushevsky Ukrainian-Georgian School in Tbilisi played the most important role in the in-depth study of the Ukrainian language. The school was established in 1999 with the support of the former Presidents of the two countries, at the initiative of the Association of Ukrainians of Georgia.⁵⁹ The school was created in order to help children from the Ukrainian community to fully integrate into Georgian society. A bilingual education program was created where some of the subjects were taught in Ukrainian, using a Ukrainian curriculum, and some of the subjects in Georgian.⁶⁰ Thanks to the efforts of the teaching staff, standards for the Ukrainian language as a foreign language for Georgia was developed. In 2011, the school was closed as part of restructuring process. The name and number of the school (School No. 41 named after Mykhailo Hrushevsky) were assigned to the nearby public school. The whole administration, and all teachers and students were also forced to move to this school. The formal standard approach to the restructuring process, which ignored the uniqueness of this institution, unfortunately led to the disappearance of the microcosm of the Ukrainian school, as it was essentially absorbed by and dissolved in another system.

The Embassy of Ukraine in Georgia plays an important role in popularizing the Ukrainian language and culture. Ukrainian language courses are given at the embassy where any youngster who wants to study Ukrainian can participate. At the academic level, the Center of Ukrainian studies at Iv. Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University Faculty of Humanities plays a significant role. The Center maintains

close ties with Ukrainian universities such as Kyiv-Mohyla Academy of Ukrainian Language and Literature and Kyiv Taras Shevchenko National University. Courses in the Ukrainian language are taught at Sukhumi State University.

Despite its contribution strengthening Ukrainian identity, the Ukrainian language has not become wide-spread.

Conclusions

Throughout history, Georgian Ukrainians always have been and are an important part of Georgian Society and a connecting bridge between the two countries despite the turbulent years of wars, conflicts, political and economic crises. The Ukrainian community of Georgia is a unique phenomenon. It was formed mainly by Ukrainians who arrived from the central and eastern parts of Ukraine. The formation of the Ukrainian community of Georgia reflects the main historical and political events and trends, but it also could be characterized by constant refreshing and revitalization.

Ukrainian emigration to Georgia was almost never political. Among the representatives of the Ukrainian community of Georgia, there were practically no political leaders with a pronounced ideological vision of the Ukrainian national idea and the future of Ukraine as a state (such as Ukrainian emigrants in western Europe and Canada whose leaders strengthened the desire to preserve traditions, language and culture). As shown above, the peak of social and political activity of Ukrainians in Georgia was the 1917-1919 period. Even though the Ukrainian Community was formed in a different way than the “western Ukrainian diaspora” for whom the understanding of being Ukrainian and preservation of this identity was always an important issue, Georgian Ukrainians still preserved their identity.

Forced and voluntary migrants from Ukraine were able to form contact zones in their environment where different cultures complement and enrich each other. Representatives of different waves of the Ukrainian community have different identities and are well integrated into Georgian society. Today’s Ukrainian community is represented mainly by poly-cultural families and therefore it is useful for researchers to apply the concepts of borderlands and multiple identities.

The continuity and connection of generations plays an important role in the preservation of Ukrainian identity. The modern generation of Ukrainians in Georgia tries to empower their spiritual connection with historical homeland by preserving culture, traditions and developing language skills. There are many works covering historical events, diplomatic relations, translations and artistic works, but among this diversity there is an obvious lack of sources analyzing the specifics of the formation of Ukrainian community in Georgia, the history of settlement of certain territories of Georgia by Ukrainians, and the impact of wars and conflicts on the Ukrainian community.

The level of identification with Ukraine/being Ukrainian in Georgia has increased in recent years, but there is still a lot to do.

About the author:

Olga Dorokhina graduated with honors from the Georgian Polytechnic Institute. Since 2002 she has been Program Manager of the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly Georgian National Committee (hCa GNC)/Tbilisi Institute for International Relations, and since 2012 Deputy Head of the Caucasus Laboratory of Geopolitical Modelling, Caucasus International University. She is author, co-author, and co-editor of several books. She has written numerous research articles including "Archipelago Caucasus: myths and real politics," "Pseudo-conflicts and quasi-peacemaking processes in the Caucasus," and "Civil Society or Civil War?". Olga has extensive experience in theoretical and practical research on topics such as border security and management, border policy, borders aesthetics, cross-border cooperation, cross-cultural communication, migration, inter-municipal cooperation. The topic of her dissertation thesis is "Political aspects of delimitation/demarcation of borders and development of cross-border cooperation in Georgia."

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