

## Transforming Sites of Memory, Transforming Time: Telavi's Rehabilitation

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### Abstract

Sites of memory, under the governance of the United National Movement (UNM), were transformed in their function through rehabilitation programs. Sites took on new functions as sites of reminder of the Rose Revolutionary government and what respondents sometimes described as UNM "terror tactics." Decisions made in the aftermath of the 2012 parliamentary elections about rehabilitation programs, in turn, have again complicated the meaning and memories associated with sites of memory.

### Introduction

Claims to 2,000 or even 3,000 years of nationhood are not difficult to find in Georgia (see Pelkmans 2006, Rayfield 2013, Suny 1994). The former president Mikheil Saakashvili was even fond of using the earliest human skulls found outside of Africa, in Dmansi, in southern Georgia, as proof that Georgians were "ancient Europeans." The pride in Georgia over ancient aspects of history is palpable. Yet, the events of more recent Georgian history often have pain and trauma attached to them. Dark events in recent history include the 1992–1993 Abkhaz war, the 1990s during which the country experienced economic and political problems including hyperinflation, civil war and widespread corruption, and the 2008 August war with Russia.

Telavi is a town in eastern Georgia with a large variety of sites of memory varying from traditional sites of memory—e.g. the Telavi historical museum—to less traditional yet still history evoking sites of memory including distinct streets. In this article, I take Pierre Nora's definition of a "site of memory," which coming from French is broader than the English term "site" generally implies. With this definition, sites of memory may include symbols as well as museums, statues, and other monuments. Nonetheless, the sites of memory considered in this article are all physical sites with historical associations attached to them. Sites of memory in the post-Soviet context have received ample attention from social scientists and their work has often focused on the changing meaning of these sites (for another example in the Georgian context, see Baramidze, 2011). This article adds to the numerous examples within the cultural memory paradigm involving sites of memory changing in relation to politics, but also shows the transformation in relation to the frames of time through which inhabitants of Telavi experienced changes in sites of memory.

The article first considers the social context of history in Georgia and its relation to sites of memory. Introducing the "rehabilitation" program initiated by the previously governing United National Movement (UNM), the article describes how memories of the past which sites of memory had evoked were defamed through the

rehabilitation program in Telavi. The article thereafter show how sites of memory, in the socio-political context of the time, were transformed into sites of reminder—a reminder of the then ruling government and as sometimes described by respondents in Telavi, UNM "terror tactics." Thereafter, the article discusses how the UNM tried to project onto the future and eventually how this vision of the future was ruptured after the 2012 parliamentary elections. This rupture in turn, I argue, has likely injected new meaning into the sites of memory in Telavi, and the country more widely, as well as returned the sites to their previous function as sites of memory, but now as sites of memory which potentially evoke both memories of the distant past and of more recent and troubling history in Georgia.

### Background

The symbolic association the government attempted to project involved a variety of forms of meddling with the past, but one notable example comes from former President Saakashvili's presidential inauguration in 2004. Before the ceremony, Saakashvili travelled to Gelati Cathedral near Kutaisi in Western Georgia to take an oath on the grave of the 11<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> century Georgian King, David the Builder. King David is credited with the inauguration of the Georgian 'golden age' during the 11<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> centuries and is known, as his name implies, for the geographic expansion and architectural development of the country (see Batiashvili & Wertsch, 2012). The symbolism Saakashvili intended to project was clear.

Starting in 2007, ostensibly in an effort to build a tourism industry, the United National Movement started efforts to "rehabilitate" sections of towns, cities, and historic sites throughout Georgia. Telavi was a relative late-comer to the process, as a number of cities, towns, and historic sites had been rehabilitated starting with Signaghi (eastern Georgia). In Telavi, the rehabilitation included the remodeling of the town's art gallery, theatre, historic streets, and the Telavi museum which includes the palace of King Erekle II.

The rehabilitation of the Telavi Historical museum is significant not only because museums are one of the

most common sites of memory, but also because its rehabilitation was one more in a long series of alterations made to museums during Saakashvili's tenure. Previously, museums in Batumi, Gori, and Tbilisi had been modified based on the government's political agenda, which attempted to modify historical representations to suit political ends (See Gotfredsen, 2013 for the case of Gori). Yet, these were not the only instances in which the Rose Revolutionary government attempted to meddle with symbolism and historic representation.

Contradicting attempts at symbolic linkage and use of historical representation, three criticisms of the rehabilitation were unanimously agreed upon in Telavi by respondents: the quality of works and materials used in rehabilitation were sub-standard; historical monuments were not well preserved; and coordination with the local population was less than adequate. These complaints are interesting in that they mimic the larger problems present in the country at the time, and, as such, Telavi's rehabilitation can be seen as a metonym for the larger political issues of the time.

### The Present's Perfect Past Shifted into the Past Perfect

As noted above, pride in history and particularly in the distant past is common in Georgia. Within the wider MYPLACE project, respondents commonly listed events from the Georgian "golden age" of the 11<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> century as important events in the country's history, and respondents in Telavi frequently connected local history to King Erekle II, an 18<sup>th</sup> century King of Kakheti. As such, it is easy to understand that residents of Telavi had taken pride in the various historic buildings and sites in the town which functioned as sites of memory.

Yet, the complaints that materials used for rehabilitation were sub-standard and that the historical monuments were poorly preserved resulted in the defamation of sites of memory for residents of Telavi. Furthermore, the defamation of sites, through their perceived and actual debasement had in some way erased future memories of the past. One respondent noted, "I think that generally what's happening here is the eradication of the old, and the newly made will no longer be able to preserve the history." With the "eradication" of the past, the then ruling government had damaged an image it had consistently attempted to associate itself with. Saakashvili's attempt to join his image with David the Builder's was here unraveled through the shoddy rehabilitation works.

In English grammar, the past perfect tense is generally used to establish that one event occurred before a second one, though at an unspecified point in time. Using this as a metaphor, the rehabilitation appears to have moved then current representations of the distant

past evoked by sites of memory to the past—that is to say that the sites of memory being rehabilitated had evoked memories of the distant past, until rehabilitation. As a result of rehabilitation, the distant past evoked by sites of memory had been defamed and in turn, sites of memory often became associated with new meanings, which were obviously not intended to be created by the then ruling UNM.

### The Present Wasn't Quite Perfect

The present perfect tense is used to refer to an event which happened at an unspecified moment in the past—it often refers to change over time as well as, in its negation, uncompleted events. In many ways the rehabilitation forged a present perfective relationship with Telavi residents.

During 2007–2012, the United National Movement grew increasingly authoritarian. The third respondent complaint mentioned above, that consultations with the local population were inadequate, is consistent with this observation. This sentiment was reflected in the following statement which exemplifies a common sentiment found during fieldwork:

"Telavi needed rehabilitation. Telavi needed renewal, but not in the way in which it occurred. It was done in an absolutely ignorant way in the opinions of historians, ethnographers, and I can also say architects, as well as in the opinion of the entire Telavi society. And, it seems to me that a group of five people sat down somewhere far away, and, by the way, of those five people, not one was Telavian, and they decided on the question of Telavi's rehabilitation and not a single [person] knowledgeable of Telavi was asked a question".

Though qualitative data cannot be generalized to the entire population, the lack of local participation in the work was apparent. Not only did respondents feel that rehabilitation works were not under local control, but the fact that they were not is well exemplified by some of the results of the rehabilitation works. After the rehabilitation, residents whose homes were "rehabilitated" often came home to destroyed furniture, damaged interiors, and, most worrying, buildings which had potentially become structurally unsound. These issues quite accurately reflect the problems which came from the democratic deficit in the period from 2007 to 2012.

The latter years of UNM governance were characterized by what some respondents referred to as UNM "terror tactics." In addition to facing problems with damaged residences and other everyday inconveniences associated with construction, Tevalians' lives were disturbed through the meddling with sites of memory. Through

the rehabilitation program, the sites under rehabilitation which had previously evoked affects of pride in the historic past, now often served as a reminder of the tense political situation under which Telavians, and Georgians more generally, lived. One young woman noted during an interview that she tried not to look at what was happening in the historic center and tried not to notice what was new while walking through it. Her avoidance is at least twofold—not only was she avoiding looking at the defamed past, but also the less than democratic present.

Although, generally sites of memory work to inform or remind society of the past, in the context of rehabilitation, the sites had a further function—they reminded Telavians of the present. Sites of memory had been transformed through the rehabilitation program into sites that were attached to a reminder of the present interceding on the interpretation of the past and the less than democratic present.

### The Future That Wasn't

The third fold present in the avoidance of the young woman mentioned above was an avoidance of looking into the future. Through rhetoric, the former government attempted to project itself into the future. Giorgi Maisuradze, in a 2009 publication, pointed out that, “Contemporary Georgian politicians see history not as the past, but as a way to shape the future.” a similar idea was put forward by Thomas De Waal, using the analysis of Archil Gegeshidze, a Georgian political analyst, when he characterized the rhetoric of the UNM for the Georgian population as “living in the future perfect” (De Waal, 2011). This meant that the population was told that “we” would have any number of things—material and/or political. The future perfect was also accompanied by projections of tourist visit numbers, economic growth figures, and construction of infrastructure in official discourse. Yet, rhetoric was not the only tool used during this period to project the government's vision onto the future.

Construction, particularly in the form of rehabilitation, was another form in which the government was able to project its vision of the future onto society. Ongoing construction works in and of themselves can inherently be seen as a projection into the future—a building being built today may be in response to the needs of the day, but they are also for a projected future use. In looking at construction as a projection into the future, coming along with it is a projection of what that future will be like. In Telavi, and throughout Georgia, construction was accompanied by glossy brochures which were widely distributed with computer generated images of what finished buildings would look like. Works in progress were not left to the imagination alone, but an

image of the finished site, often with people interacting with the building as part of the environment, was delivered along with the grounds broken for construction.

In projecting onto the future the vision of what would be, the government in effect projected a future in which Georgians as individuals, and young people in particular, needed to find their place. As this projected future became increasingly erratic, it was often difficult for Georgians to find their place in it. In his ethnography, *Young Men, Time, and Boredom in the Republic of Georgia*, Martin Demant Frederiksen noted that his informants, young men in Batumi, were unable to imagine who would be going to an Opera House, then under construction during his fieldwork in Batumi, implying that they themselves could not imagine being there. The following quote is demonstrative of a similar phenomenon in the Telavi context:

“[The rehabilitation] is very bad, not only from the technical point of view, but from the historical, cultural points of view as well. <...> In my opinion, [everything that has been renovated] should be destroyed and renovated again. Can't you see everything gets destroyed? <...> People around me think the same way.”

In addition to exemplifying the instability in the lives of respondents, it also shows uncertainty in how young people envisioned the future—after all, everything gets destroyed and needs to be rebuilt again. Yet, in saying that everything needs to be renovated again, the respondent reflected on a future—presumably a different future than the one which was being projected.

The future which the now previous government had projected was ruptured making it a past future after losing the 2012 parliamentary elections to the Georgian Dream Coalition. In losing the elections, together with losing control over the wheels of government, the UNM also lost its ability to project itself onto the future of Georgian political, physical, and mental landscapes.

After the 2012 elections, works on Telavi's historic center as well as other historic sites were put on hold. As such, the question arises, are the works partially completed under the old regime, if left as they are, going to become sites of memory of the recent past rather than the distant past as they had been prior to rehabilitation, or some combination of both? If the latter, the sites of memory which became sites of reminder shall once again be sites of memory, but ones with a polysemous meaning—memory of both the recent past and the distant past will cohabit the same sites.

### Conclusion

This article has shown how sites of memory in Telavi during rehabilitation shifted from sites of memory to sites of

reminder and questions whether they have again turned back to sites of memory, but with a new multi-faceted meaning. It has shown how the future was projected onto Georgian society during the rule of the United National Movement. With this past future ruptured,

what will be projected onto the future now remains to be seen. What is certain though is that the present and future political regimes will continue to attempt to produce effects and affects through the use of the past, as well as through the projection of visions into the future.

*About the Author and Acknowledgements:*

Dustin Gilbreath is a Research Consultant at CRRC-Georgia. The author would like to thank Tinatin Zurabashvili's for her comments on earlier versions of this article, which were invaluable, but the author claims any mistakes as his own.

Research data was gathered as a part of a EU funded project, MYPLACE: Memory, Youth, Political Legacy, and Civic Engagement (<<http://www.fp7-myplace.eu/index.php>>). Fieldwork in Telavi was conducted in order to better understand the role of historical memory in the civic engagement of young people (aged 16 to 25), and the inter-generational transition of memory in families (MYPLACE work package 2: Interpreting the past: The construction and transmission of historical memory). Portions of this article were previously published on the MYPLACE project blog (<<http://myplacefp7.wordpress.com>>). Permission for reprint was generously granted by the MYPLACE project leadership. This article builds upon the arguments and data presented in MYPLACE country reports on Interpreting Participation and Interpreting the past which are listed below in the suggested reading section.

*Suggested Reading:*

- Batiashvili, Nutsa and Wertsch, James. "Mnemonic Communities and Conflict: Georgia's national narrative template." *Trust and conflict: representation culture and dialogue*. Hove, East Sussex: Routledge, 2012, 38–48. Print.
- Baramidze, Ruslan. "April 9, 1989 as a Site of Memory: The Policy of Commemoration and History Teaching in Georgia." *The South Caucasus and Turkey: history lessons of the 20<sup>th</sup> century*. Tbilisi: Heinrich Boll Stiftung, 2012. 170–193. Print.
- Frederiksen, Martin Demant. *Young men, time, and boredom in the Republic of Georgia*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013. Print.
- Gotfredsen, Katrine Bendtsen. *Evasive politics: paradoxes of history, nation and everyday communication in the Republic of Georgia: PhD dissertation*. Kbh.: University of Copenhagen, Department of Anthropology, 2013. Print.
- Zurabishvili, Tinatin, and Tamuna Khostaria. "WP2: Interpreting the past (The construction and transmission of historical memory) Deliverable 2.1: Country based reports on historical discourse production as manifested in sites of memory (Georgia)." *MYPLACE (Memory, Youth, Political Legacy And Civic Engagement)*. N.p., n.d. Web. 6 Sept. 2014. <[http://www.fp7-myplace.eu/documents/Partner%2012%20-%20Georgia\\_deliverable\\_2\\_1\\_submission.pdf](http://www.fp7-myplace.eu/documents/Partner%2012%20-%20Georgia_deliverable_2_1_submission.pdf)>.
- Zurabashvili, Tinatin, Tamar Khoshtaria, Natia Mestvirishvili, Madona Shildelashvili, and Louis-Philippe Campeau. "WP5: Interpreting Participation (Interviews) Deliverable 5.3: Country-based reports on interview findings." *MYPLACE (Memory, Youth, Political Legacy And Civic Engagement)*. N.p., 30 Nov. 2013. Web. 6 Sept. 2014. <<http://www.fp7-myplace.eu/documents/D5.3%20Georgia.pdf>>.