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Empires of Conquest and Civilization in Georgian  
Political and Intellectual Discourse since Late  
Nineteenth Century

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### Abstract

This article explores understandings of the concept of empire in Georgian political intellectual discourses in the pre-Soviet, Soviet and post-Soviet Georgian contexts. Beginning with an elaboration of contemporary political and scholarly understanding of empire, the article then – drawing on the approaches of intellectual and transnational history – distils two meanings: empire of conquest and of civilisation. Both meanings are mainly attributed to the Russian State in its political incarnations as an empire, as the fulcrum of the Soviet Union and more recently as an entity in search of a Eurasian Union. The article argues that while for most of the nineteenth century, the concept of empire embodied by the Russia state was invested with both meanings, particularly by the end of the Soviet period, it came to be singularised to that of conquest. More generally, it suggests that while in contemporary international relations empire, as a political entity, remains discredited morally and legally, the Neo-Gramscian concept of hegemony in IR scholarship elucidates why and when some hegemonic states act as empires of conquest, and while some others can do both, thus mustering their ‘structural power’ as well as ‘soft power’.

*Keywords:* empire, russian state, EU, hegemony, nation-state, Georgian intellectual and political discourse.

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## 1. Introduction

Since the late nineteenth century, Georgian political and intellectual discourse on empire has attributed two meanings to it, mainly but not necessarily only towards the Russian state. The first one is that of empire as a large political centre/space that wields its power and authority (*imperium*) over smaller nations through actual or threatened military conquest. The second one is that of empire as a locus of civilisation (high/religious culture, values and development) that resonates with, dislocates, protects or advances national culture. Georgia's being historically caught between empires and under imperial rule – from the mid-fifteenth century finding itself, a small and disintegrating Caucasian kingdom, under the military conquests and civilisational influences of the Ottoman and Persian empires, divided in half between the two, until the early nineteenth century when the Russian Empire took control of it in their stead for a little more than a century – has conditioned Georgian modern political and intellectual discourse into this duality of meaning. Significantly also, as will become apparent further below, especially with regard to the twentieth and early twenty-first century, one particular understanding – mainly attributed to the exercise of power by a reconfigured Russia as an Empire, the Soviet Union and as a Federation over Georgia – namely empire as one of conquest becomes hegemonic in Georgian political and intellectual discourse.

While advancing an intellectual history approach, thus seeking to reconstruct an account of the concept of empire in the modern Georgian context – a perspective and theme addressed neither by contemporary Georgian nor wider historical scholarship – the argument put forward here that the concept of empire exhibits two meanings, of conquest and of civilisation, can also be anchored in an IR, Neo-Gramscian approach such as the one suggested by Robert W. Cox. It is not the goal of this article to provide a detailed account of Cox's introduction of Gramsci's concept of hegemony in IR or an overview of the intricate exchanges between realist, liberal and constructivist approaches on the concept of power and consent in the international order. Nevertheless, Cox's sensitive appropriation of Gramsci's historically-bound insights on the concept hegemony for IR theory, namely Gramsci's use of Machiavelli's image of power as a Centaur (half-man and half-beast, thus consent and coercion), of the mechanics of hegemony which Gramsci drew from the thinking within the circles of the Communist International that 'workers exercised hegemony over the allied classes and dictatorship over enemy class' (Cox, 1996[1983]: 126), or of more direct IR categories such as 'structural power' and 'soft power' (Cox, 2004: 313) can serve as elucidating metaphors and categories. This is particularly so when discussing, as below, the assertion that nowadays the concept of empire remains a political taboo, whereby few scholars or politicians are keen to promote the Centaur's 'half-beast' side. They are useful also in reading the empirical part of the article where Georgian political and intellectual discourse reveals not only this duality of the concept of Empire, mainly being about the Russian state, but also points to contemporary shifts in Georgia's historical, relational and structural positioning vis-à-vis the Russian state articulated as a rejection of Russia's exercise of its 'structural power' and its 'soft power'.

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## *2. The concept of empire today: a political taboo and a scholarly curiosity*

It is hardly possible to find contemporary political or public intellectual figures, either in Georgia or elsewhere, making the case for establishing an empire as a political project of conquest (*jus conquestus*)<sup>1</sup>, except perhaps for the main proponent behind the post-Soviet Russian idea of New-Eurasianism, the ultra nationalist Russian thinker Alexandr Dugin (Shekhovtsov, 2009: 1-2), or much earlier for the senior British diplomat and adviser to Tony Blair's government, Robert Cooper, who one year after the 11 September 2001 attacks in New York called on Western European states to consider embracing a 'new imperialism' (one that 'brings order and organisation but one which rests today on voluntary principle') (Cooper, 2002: 17-18). This is because territorial conquest remains a political taboo and more importantly is prohibited under international law (Balouziyeh, 2014: 1). The rather unanimous condemnation by the international community of the annexation of the Crimean peninsula – part of the internationally recognised borders of Ukraine – by Russia in early 2014 was an illustration of the unacceptability of the use of military force and occupation of a territory of a country even though Russia had its own interpretation under the same body of international law (*ibid.*). It is also because of the obvious historical reasons having to do with the rise of nation-states and the collapse of many empires on the European continent in the wake of the First World War as well as the de-colonisation around the globe after the Second World War. At the heart of this modern history of human and military violence and political (re)birth of new states was the struggle against imperial conquest and subjugation of smaller nations' political will. Seemingly, nation-states share a universal desire to preserve sovereignty (political independence and territorial integrity) – a desire that empire as a political project transgresses.

However, these negative sentiments that the 'nemesis' of the empire, the proponents of the nation-state hold are intrinsically linked to the other meaning of empire, namely that of empires as civilisation – advancing, sharing or dislocating the culture (religion, values, arts, literature/language) to and of the incorporated peoples, and nations and bringing in development (science, education, infrastructure) as well as exploitation, violence and war to their territories. This layer of meaning, which at best is ambiguous, in turn, makes it possible to talk indirectly about empires in terms of 'legacies' – legacies that nonetheless cannot brush aside a Gramscian critique of cultural hegemony (Adamson, 1980) in the sense that they continue to strongly influence the national identity and self-understanding of post-colonial nation-states. In this regard for instance, the British Commonwealth functioning as a voluntary forum for former colonies and the imperial core to interact in terms of cultural exchanges is one of the vestiges of the British imperial legacy that does not generate adversarial sentiments from former colonies but that influences them nonetheless. It was to critically reflect on this British imperial civilisational legacy that a body of literature under the title of post-colonial studies emerged in the 1970s. Interestingly, nearly forty years after its emergence as a field of enquiry, post-colonialism has been criticised

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<sup>1</sup> For more on this see Pocock (2003[1975]: 368-389).

from within for obsessing with cultural critique of this legacy rather than seriously engaging with a political and socio-economic analysis of empire. A renowned voice in post-colonial studies, Neil Lazarus, took on this field of academic enquiry for its 'constitutive anti-Marxism; disavowal of all forms of nationalism... [having] a hostility towards "holistic form of social explanation" (towards totality and systemic analysis); an aversion to dialectics; and a refusal of an antagonistic or struggle-based model of politics' (Lazarus, 2011: 21).

Yet while there are scholarly ambiguities with regard to the legacies of the British Empire as civilisation, no one would take seriously the proposition of restoring the British Empire as empire of conquest, given also the 'ascent of democracy' as the normative political framework for world politics (Dunn, 2005: 13). However, when former colonial powers, now liberal democratic states, intervene militarily in countries that used to be former colonies, reactions along the line of this proposition emerge. It might seem counter-intuitive that an imperial behaviour of a country can co-exist with its democratic credentials, however as has been already been noted as early as in seventeenth-century English intellectual thought that the England of that period, for instance, could do both: be an empire and a democracy; by being 'democrats at home and conquerors abroad' (Pocock, 2003[1975]: 392). Nineteenth-century British and French liberal thinkers, while perhaps aware of the implications of liberal/constitutional monarchies as Britain and France (with episodic recourse to republican forms of government), did not see a contradiction between empire and democracy when their respective countries made a conscious 'turn to Empire' (Pitt, 2005) and imperial projects in the world. For one, Alexis de Tocqueville widely seen as a liberal thinker and 'the first serious thinker of democracy' in the words of another nineteenth-century liberal, the British philosopher John Stuart Mill, exemplified this seemingly paradoxical juxtaposition between democracy at home and empire abroad. It was Tocqueville who while writing his famous book *Democracy in America* between 1833 and 1837 was also writing essays, one entitled 'How to Have Good Colonies', in support of French imperial expansion in Algeria and Northern Africa (Duan, 2013: 74-75). To be sure, he insisted in 'Essay on Algeria' (1841) that France had to continue with its imperialistic control of North Africa for otherwise 'in the eyes of the world, such abandonment would be clear indication of our decline' (Tocqueville, 2001: 24). In contemporary scholarship this discord of terms is brought together in the phrase of 'liberal imperialism' in which imperial conquest and empire building came to be justified by nineteenth-century liberal thinkers such as Tocqueville and Mill. One scholar noted that:

Scepticism about both particular imperial ventures and general unlimited expansion was, by the 1780s, almost received wisdom among liberal intellectuals. Just fifty years later, however, we find no prominent thinkers in Europe criticising the European imperial project. Indeed, the greatest liberals of the nineteenth century, including J.S. Mill and Tocqueville, were avid imperialist (Pitts, 2005: 296; in Duan, 2013: 76).

It is from this strand of thinking that Robert Cooper sought to make the case for a liberal empire. Noting a lack of 'imperial urge' among Western democratic,

postmodern (meaning not using war as a foreign policy instrument) states after the Second World War, he asserted that they had 'to get used to the idea of double standards. Among ourselves we operate on the basis of laws and co-operative security. But when dealing with more old-fashioned kinds of states... we need to revert to... force, pre-emptive attacks, deception, whatever is necessary to deal with those who still live in the 19<sup>th</sup> century world of "every state for itself"' (Cooper, 2002: 16).

So then when it comes to juxtaposing imperial projects in terms of conquest and military expansion, there is a fine line between liberal and illiberal empires. As Landers lucidly showed in his book on nineteenth and twentieth-century American and Russian imperialisms, in their drive for imperial control and global ambitions these states similarly engaged in military conquests and clandestine intrigues. Their main difference was a civilisational one, in the 'mechanics' of empire: the 'American Empire' was driven by corporatist imperialism, whereas the Russian/Soviet Empire by the communist one (Landers, 2010). Thus in contemporary international political discourse, given the historical and ideological legacy of the twentieth century, mentioned above, military interventions of the US in Vietnam (1964), Iraq (2003), of Russia in Afghanistan (1979) or as the discussion was here on France with its interventions in civil conflicts in Ivory Coast (2011) and Mali (2013), received scathing criticism by left-wing groups of a sheer demonstration of neo-imperialism (Charles, 2011; Cunningham, 2013) – a neo-imperialism that seeks to appropriate natural resources of these post-colonial countries (Guzman, 2014: 1). Such reactions questioned cultural and linguistic influences of the *Francophonie*, which in turn are positively recognised in the French former colonies and beyond.

The same ambiguities and suspicions can be found when dwelling on imperial Russian and Ottoman legacies and their respective successor states, the Russian Federation and the Turkish Republic, which at differing scales have yet to prove their liberal democratic credentials at home and abroad. As historical and civilisational legacies, these entities enjoy a contested discursive reality – nonetheless not entirely negative and dismissive as would be the case if one spoke of an empire as a political project. Turkish foreign policy's examples of the 2000s in evoking the Ottoman historical and cultural legacy, wrapped in a concept of 'strategic depth' (Davutoglu, 2001), as way for Turkey to forge closer relations with countries that were part of the Ottoman Empire spurred strong reactions in some of these countries which pointed to the emergence of neo-Ottomanism (Birnbbaum, 2013) – this, of course, from nationalist perspectives is being conceived as inherently negative. Meanwhile, Russian President Putin's project of the Eurasian Union (as an economic project, complimentary to European integration) during the 2012 Russian presidential election campaign – a project which began in earnest with the signing of a treaty of customs union between Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan in May 2014 – raised suspicions to those who saw behind this project the attempt of resurrecting the Soviet Empire, under the new banner of Eurasianism, as mentioned above. For the proponents and also for many supporters of the Soviet system and identity in the post-Soviet republics, however, this process of integration was about promoting 'common Soviet civilisational values' and reviving 'infrastructural legacies of the USSR' (Oskanian, 2013: 1).

The European Union as a political and economic project of integration also has not escaped the analogy with an empire. Promoting itself as a democratic and voluntary union of nation-states coming together on the basis of peace, economic prosperity and common values, the EU with its Eastern Enlargement, for instance, triggered strong responses in this regard. Political scientists such as Jan Zielonka in his book *Europe as Empire* concluded that the expansion of the EU borders and “the aggressive” export of EU rules to its neighbour’ had showed that ‘the EU is (or is becoming)[sic] an empire of some sort’ (Zielonka, 2010: 13). Others, from the perspective of critical historical sociology, have found confirmation to the analogy of the EU with empire<sup>2</sup> not only by reference to the Eastern Enlargement (Böröcz, 2001: 5), but also in the utterances by the higher echelons of the European Commission. Indeed, the former Commission’s president, José Manuel Barroso, in a press conference on 30 July 2007 on the text of what became the Treaty of Lisbon (2009) described the EU as ‘non-imperial empire’.

Sometimes, I try to compare [...] the European Union as a creation to the organisations of *empires*... The *empires*... Because we have [the] dimension of empires. But there is a great difference. The empires were made usually through *force*. With a centre that was imposing a *diktat*, a will on the others. And now we have what some others are calling the *first non-imperial empire*. We have... by dimension ... twenty seven countries that *fully* decided to work together to pool their sovereignties, if you want to use that concept of sovereignty, and work together to add values. I believe it’s a great construction and we should be proud of it – at least we in the commission are proud... of our union (in Böröcz, 2010: 9).

What the President of the Commission was pointing to in describing the EU as an empire and yet drawing a ‘great difference’ to the concept is a distinction used in this paper with regard to Georgian modern discourse on empire, namely that between the empire of conquest and that of civilisation. It does not take much to discern from this utterance a political attempt to positively resurrect the notion of empire but of course with sharp qualifications, namely, an empire of conquest which uses force and imposes diktats is inherently an unwanted creature, as confirmed by history; however, an empire of civilisation that is all about values, ‘the non-imperial empire’, is a construction that generates pride, at least in Barroso’s understanding.

Even though a lone political voice in the EU context, Barroso’s positive take on the notion of empire goes against a well-established view on it as political taboo, ‘a dirty word’ (Lieven, 2000: 4) that was in place for most of the twentieth century, due to its association with political conquest as well as human and economic exploitation. The notion of empire was discredited – particularly by Marxist academic circles and official propaganda of communist countries, not least by Lenin himself in his booklet *Imperialism, the High Stage of Capitalism* (1917) and the state, the Soviet Union, that he helped to establish – not only as a political project for undermining the will of smaller nations but also for its cultural and economic imperialisms. So, why is there an

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<sup>2</sup> For a recent recapping of this significant body of scholarship see H. Behr and Y. A. Stivachtis (2016)

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emerging scholarly curiosity on empires, given the negativity with which the concept has come to be understood? One explanation is that the notion is employed as to criticise – from perspectives of the nation-state and underprivileged groups within it – any political, cultural or economic pressures that fall upon a smaller state or former colony by external forces, be they former colonial powers or new regional, multi-state formations. Another explanation has to do with the much-trumpeted proposition in globalisation theory that the paradigm of the nation-state as a self-sufficient political, economic and cultural unit has come under strain, while some other, much larger formations/units are emerging, such as the ‘non-imperial empire’ of the EU, the Russian sponsored, Eurasian Union, or even more boldly and teleologically suggested, a world state (Wendt, 2003: 491). Therefore, reflection is needed on thinking ‘beyond the nation-state’, as intellectual history – the approach taken in this article – along the lines of transnational history approach (Patel, 2010). This, in turn, links us with the realm of the ‘international’ – an analytical framework that operates with concepts such as empire, inter-state order, international law and transnational markets (Hopkins, 2014: 33). The assumption is that if the early twenty-first century increasingly resembles the nineteenth century – and this line of thought is being suggested for instance in regard to rate of wealth and capital accumulation in British and French empires in the nineteenth-century and the British and French societies of the early twenty-first century (Piketty, 2014: 114) – then engaging with the concept of empire positive as well as negative lessons can be learned for the rather confused post-nation- and quasi-imperial state that many countries on the European continent seem to find themselves in.

Such scholarly work that tries to examine imperial experiences for positive and negative aspects has already been under way. An edited volume entitled *Imperial Rule* – a comparative study of how imperial rule operated in four imperial settings with multi-ethnic populaces, Habsburg, Ottoman, Hohenzollern and Russian – was largely conceived as a reflection on integration processes of the EU and the question of governing in multi-ethnic societies (Miller and Rieber, 2005). Also, a more recent edited volume entitled, *Comparing Empires: Encounters and Transfers in the Long Nineteenth Century*, analysing British, Habsburg, Ottoman and Russian empires, in the context of political conflict, infrastructure development and war experiences, examined the limits of imperial integration, and drew two significant points on empires, namely that empires were not predestined to fail and that they foster ethnic pluralism (Leonhard and Hirschhausen, 2012). A shorter contribution considered the extent to which a notion of cosmopolitanism understood in terms of cultural and economic openness could be descriptive of the nineteenth-century Ottoman and Russian empires cultural and economic discourses (Brisku, 2014). Furthermore, there is a vast literature on each of these empires and their individual attempts to exert control over their multi-ethnic territories as for instance is the case with the book *The Russian Empire: A Multiethnic History* (Kappeler, 2001), which is relevant for the case of Georgia. Thus, in this larger context, exploring modern Georgian discourse on empire – a small country that historically has found itself wedged between empires – allows us to observe this fluctuation overtime between an understanding of empires of conquest and that of civilisation and the implications of such positioning, particularly

when both meanings were ambiguously interwoven as was the case in the period of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

### *3. Soviet and post-Soviet Georgian understanding: the empire of conquest*

Thinking beyond the nation-state in modern Georgian political and intellectual discourse entails precisely reflecting on larger political and economic regions while considering the place and positioning – political, cultural and economic – of smaller nations within them. For Soviet and post-Soviet Georgia, the political, intellectual as well as historiographical discourse on empire has been largely informed by an understanding of it as a set of destructive and unequal encounters and relations with bigger neighbouring states – encounters that have brought about political domination and subjugation as well as national cultural relegation within larger cultural spaces and hierarchies.

To begin with, contemporary Georgian political discourse on empire is one that underscores its conquering and subjugating aspects. This is certainly addressed towards Georgia's northern neighbour, the Russian Federation. Speaking to a group of student cadets at the Museum of Occupation in Tbilisi on the 25 of February 2011 – marking the 19th anniversary of independent Georgia's occupation by the Red Army – Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili drew strong parallels between the early Soviet Union acting as an empire of conquest and the Russian Federation of the twenty-first century. He reminded them that, 'Significant parts of Georgia are still occupied [referring to the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which are under Russian military protection]. The same empire, which carried out February 25 of 1921, is dreaming about abolishing Georgia's sovereignty' (Saakashvili, 2011). For Saakashvili this contemporary, 'new' and yet 'dying Russian Empire' wielded its 'waning' conquering imperial impulse on small Georgia, while showing no features of a civilised entity. In his last speech to the United Nations Assembly in September 2013 as Georgian president, touching on Russia's project of Eurasian Union, he strongly reiterated the conquering aspect of this new empire – thus one without civilisation. 'It makes me sick,' he declared, 'when KGB officer Vladimir Putin lectures the world about freedom, values and democracy. But this new project [the Eurasian Union] is much more dangerous than his lectures. The Eurasian union has been shaped as an alternative to the European Union and unveiled by Vladimir Putin as the main project of his new presidency – the new Russian Empire' (Saakashvili, 2013). Certainly, the rise of ethnic nationalism among Georgians and other ethnic groups within post-Soviet Georgia and the role of Russia in undermining the territorial integrity of Georgia fuelled this contemporary political discourse on Russia as a new empire of conquest, while also being a 'civilisational-less' empire. Yet, unsurprisingly, it goes back to the late Soviet period and even further back in time.

The first post-Soviet Georgian president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, represents that link in the political and intellectual discourse on empire between contemporary and late Soviet periods. As a politician in the early 1990s he would see Russia as the heir to the Soviet Union, the former imperial power, from which 'Georgia's ills' derived (Jones, 2013: 67). And as an intellectual, he would insist on describing the Soviet



Union as an empire. One particular exchange, in the early 1980s, between literary critics Guram Asatiani, Akaki Bakradze and Zviad Gamsakhurdia was a case in point. The debate was triggered by Asatiani's book entitled *At the Origins*. In it, among others things, he reflected on cultural/civilisational influences of empires on Georgian culture, arguing that Georgian culture was a synthesis of Western and Eastern traits (Asatiani, 1982: 7-8). Bakradze, meanwhile, shifted his analysis from the discourse of empires of civilisation to that of conquest.

These two positions, however, are reflected in the historiographical literature on Georgian nationhood. On the one hand, like most of the twentieth-century political and intellectual discourse, as just mentioned above, much of Georgian historiography on country's political history and its external encounters is written also from the perspective of Georgia surviving subjugation by great empires (Brisku, 2013: 15). Yet both dimensions of empire, conquest and civilisation, are part of the discourse, which, in turn, accounts the national historical experience as one of martyrdom and resilience. Georgia's all three historical, regional empires, the Ottoman, Persian, and much later, Russian, are primarily seen as empires of conquest, which by default, through their civilisational markers (religious, cultural) profoundly dented the political and civilisational nature of Georgia in terms of dismantling its medieval monarchical order and of infusing religious and cultural diversity – as a place in between empires. A brief sketch of this historical account illustrates this – an account that can be traced back to the collapse of the Byzantine Empire and its consequences for the medieval Georgian Kingdom. Seeing the Byzantine Empire as an empire of civilisation rather than conquest with which it shared a religion as well as cultural norms, the complete separation of medieval Georgia from Christendom (primarily Byzantine) followed by the occupation and division of the kingdom into western and eastern zones of influence respectively by two Muslim empires, Ottoman and Persian (Clot, 2005: 162), is narrated as a tragic event and even as an act of martyrdom for Georgia. The tragedy of course comes from the fact that these conquering/civilising empires established different occupying regimes, from direct rule to tributary regimes in the case of the former, and indirect – through viceroys – in the case of the latter, as well as civilisational pressures on the Georgian population, in terms of the Christian religion. While there was a difference between the two imperial regimes, in which the Persian Empire allowed for the existence of a political and religious community in the eastern part of the former kingdom, namely that of Kartli-Kahheti, the two empires exerted religious pressures on the Georgian political and economic community – linking the maintenance, or expropriation of property by the indigenous nobility on the condition of conversion to Islam. For instance, Persian law of the time permitted all the converted to take control of the property of relatives who remained Christian. Significantly also, eastern Georgian monarchs could not keep their throne if they 'did not outwardly profess Islam' (Gvosdev, 2000: 2-3).

Georgian historiography accounts this position of a divided medieval Georgia in-between the two Muslim empires as enduring yet unsustainable. The political drive of eastern Georgians, a drive that they could amass especially under Georgian monarch Erekle II (1720-1798) – vassal to the Persian throne – following the collapse of Persian rule there, was for political independence. This was to be with the help of

an empire that exhibited similar civilisational properties with eastern Georgians, as was then perceived the Russian Empire. In this, king Erekle II was successful in convincing Russian Empress Catherine the Great's favourite Prince Gregory Potemkin and her secretary Alexander Bezbordko to enter into a Russian-Georgian alliance – both, Potemkin and Bezbordko, were keen supporters of the idea of Russian expansion in the Caucasus – that an alliance with Georgia would serve not only as military base against the Ottoman and Persian empires but also as a new trade route in Asia. King Erekle's message to Catherine the Great was to underscore the civilisational similarities, Orthodoxy, between imperial Russia and his kingdom. 'Our requests', he wrote, 'are useful to the service of the Great Russian monarchy and to the benefit of many Christian peoples' (*ibid.*, 53-54). The outcome of this Russo-Georgian rapprochement was the Treaty of Georgievsk of 24 July 1783. What ought to have been – from a Georgian perspective – an encounter with the Russian Empire based on shared civilisational traits turned into an encounter of annexation, i.e., conquest. In the Treaty, the Russian Empire recognised the independence and territorial integrity of the Kartli-Kakheti kingdom, the Georgian dynasty's hereditary rights and its supremacy in domestic affairs, and the Georgian Church got a seat on the Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church. In return, king Erekle II recognised Russian suzerainty, renouncing the Persian one, which meant that his foreign policy would be conducted under Russian supervision, while when needed the Georgian military would come under Russian command. However, the newly crowned Russian Emperor Alexander I in issuing 'The Manifesto to the Georgian People' in 1801 made the annexation of the kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti a reality (*ibid.*). Thus the desired encounter with the empire of civilisation turned into the reality of an encounter with one of conquest. The imperial Russian move with regard to Georgia's annexation opened up divisions, hence debates among Georgians on its legality at the time of the event as well as among subsequent generations. For those who saw it as an annexation by a conquering empire, the case was made for restoring the Georgian state nearly a hundred years later to the European/international community at the Hague Peace Conference in 1907, separating it from imperial Russia as well as nearly eight decades after that in 1991 from the Soviet Union.

Returning to the intellectual debate of the early 1980s mentioned earlier, the understanding of empires as one of conquest, thus, trumped that of civilisation, which was of a second order. In this debate, Bakradze discarded the idea of Georgia's cultural flexibility. Historically positioning Georgia as a land between empires, he could see only its historical resilience and survival against conquering world empires. This resilience manifested itself throughout time – evoking the Jewish/Biblical imagery of David and Goliath – whereby Georgia did not have 'relationships with nations of its size, but it always stood against the world's Goliaths.' Bakradze continued with a list of unequal encounters that the Georgian nation had to endure and survive.

Georgia and the Roman Empire

Georgia and the Byzantium

Georgia and the Caliphate of Arabs

Georgia and the Persian Shahinshati

Georgia and the Mongolian Hordes

Georgia and the Ottoman Sultanate

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Georgia and Russian Tsarism (Bakradze, 2006: 227).

Meanwhile, Gamsakhurdia's intervention in this debate was to ask Bakradze why he did not include the Soviet Empire as the contemporary Goliath that Georgia had to face (Brisku, 2013: 140-141).

But seeing the Soviet Union from within as an empire was indeed a marginal position in late Soviet Georgia. Outside however, Georgian intellectuals, such as Mikhako Tsereteli, who escaped Soviet rule after the fall of the First Georgian Republic in 1921, had no difficulty in describing the Union for what it was, an empire of conquest. Writing in the early 1950s, at the height of the Cold War, Tsereteli, in a similar way as president Saakashvili, warned the 'West' that the Soviet Union represented not only an imperial danger to the Georgian nation but to the whole West. As he put it figuratively, the 'whale of Eurasia [was] ready to devour the West' (Tsereteli, 1990: 282) – interestingly, the notion of Eurasia was already used in a pejorative sense in the Georgian context. For a brief moment as well – that being the early years of the Soviet Union, more precisely in the late 1920s – the emerging tensions between the high-ranking Georgian Bolshevik party members such as Budu Mdivani and Philippe Makharadze and Soviet central rule were framed as imperial-colonial relation manifested through political processes of Russification and economic colonial exploitation of the Georgian nation. This was a brief moment for it happened in the rather specific context of a power struggle between Leo Trotsky and Stalin's factions for the control of the Bolshevik state after the death of Lenin in 1924. After winning the contest in 1929, Stalin branded these proponents as 'nationalist deviationist', brutally suppressed them (Brisku, 2013: 88) and with this the view that the Soviet Union as the sole political entity that Georgians had to live with, exhibited the properties of an empire exploiting and negatively transforming the cultural make up of the Georgian nation swiftly disappeared.

Part of the weakening of the vocabulary of empire as civilisation in Soviet Georgia, for most of the communist period, was due to the secularist and atheist position of the Soviet state vis-à-vis religion. In this regard, what had been the common civilisational marker for Georgia and Russia, i.e. Orthodoxy, while culturally still important, had become politically irrelevant. Adding to this was also that the historical territorial and existential threats from the former Muslim empires, modern Turkey and Iran, no longer constituted such dangers. In fact, tensions between Moscow and Tbilisi exacerbated by the emphasis of cultural (linguistic) differences in the late 1970s between the two centres when Georgian Communist Party leader Eduard Shevardnadze, in the spring of 1978 sought to implement a policy 'dictated by Moscow [of withdrawing] the traditional clause in the Georgian constitution affirming Georgian as the sole state language' (Ekedahl and Goodman, 1997: 23) yet failing to pursue it due to mass student demonstrations (ibid.). A renewed Georgian ethnic nationalism in the late 1980s as well as the ethnic wars in post-Soviet Georgia in which Russian troops took control of the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia finally stripped off discursively Russia (late Soviet or post-Soviet) of any civilisational elements, while reinforcing an understanding of it as re-emerging empire of conquest, reasserting its influence not only within its federal territory, as in the case of the Chechen Wars (1994; 2000) but also in Ukraine, Moldova and so on.

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This has remained so for most of the two decades of the new millennia, even though an undercurrent of the much-contested Huntingtonian thesis of the ‘clash of civilisations’, which divides the world in a number of religious based civilisational clusters predestined for conflict, seemed to have gotten some traction among some segments of the Georgian populace toward the ‘Slavo-Orthodox’ civilisation. In the words of a prominent analyst of the Caucasus, Tom de Waal, despite recent history, there is a historical affinity between Russians and Georgians.

The bitter political conflicts with Russia over the past 20 years have obscured a deeper historical reality: ordinary Georgians feel a closer affinity with Russians than they do with many other nationalities, including Americans. Probe below the surface and you find an older ‘other’ in Georgian cultures: the Turks, not the Russians. Over history, the Ottomans threatened Georgian nationhood far more than Russia did, while the Russians periodically protected Christian Georgia from Muslim Persians and Turks (De Waal, 2012).

Thus Orthodoxy, again, could be that vocabulary which positively rekindles the view on Russia a bearer of a common civilisation with Georgia and a defender of Georgian civilisation not only from its historical ‘civilisational enemies’, but also from a ‘heretical’, contemporary European civilisation (Asatiani, 2014: 78-79). Already, as it appears in the early 2014, in its political discourse Russia is doing its bid towards this in the face of a small but growing scepticism in Georgia towards the country’s Euro-Atlantic perspectives (the EU and NATO). To be sure, results of a poll for April 2014 showed support for EU membership falling by 3 percent to 65 percent from the 68 percent that it was in November 2013, whereas positive opinion for a Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union was 16 percent, up 5 percent from the November 2013 (Fix, 2014: 4). With a small but increasing number of Russian supporters in the country, an offer is made in the Georgian public discourse of ‘Civilisation. Choice. Peace’ to all those ‘forces of pro-Russian apologia, anti-Western conservatism and religious nationalism [that] have began to unite after years of gradual convergence’ (Cecire, 2014: 2-3). In the cultural (religious) discourse, the Georgian Orthodox Church, which ‘represents of the central domains of [the] nationalist discourse’ in the country, preaches to its flock about how the West is a ‘de-nationalised, sinful space that threatens Georgian national uniqueness and traditions with obliteration’ (Asatiani, 2014: 78-79). These views of the Georgian Church ‘are largely determined by its ties with the Russian clerical space... [which through its] religion-driven Russian messianism or the metaphor of Moscow as the “third and ultimate Rome”... opposes heretical Europe’ (ibid., 79).

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#### *4. Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Georgia: Russia a 'benevolent' and yet to be 'democratic' empire*

There was a period of time, however, in modern Georgian intellectual and political discourse – the late nineteenth century – in which empire was vested with both meanings: conquest and civilisation – loaded equally and ambiguously with positive and negative connotations. For the ‘father’ of modern Georgian nation, writer, thinker and public figure Ilia Chavchavadze (1837-1907), who exerted great influence on the Georgian intellectual and political scene from the 1860s till 1907, it was clear that with an emerging modern Georgian nation, and in the context of an inter-state order in the hands of empires, a choice had to be made as to which alliance benefited Georgia politically, economically and culturally. Seeing Georgia as a historical nation wedged between empires and under their constant political and cultural pressures, the choice to be made was between an alliance with a benevolent empire, such as the Russian Empire, or relapse under the rule of the two empires, Ottoman and Persian, with which it did not share the religion nor the prospects for a modern civilisation. To him, the much-contested Russian act of incorporating the Georgian kingdom in 1801 was not an act of conquest but one of alliance – one, which ensured peace as well as offered a window to modern civilisation.

Chavchavadze’s semantic shift of calling Russia’s act of annexation in 1801 one of benevolent patronage rather than conquest was helpful for him in portraying Russia as a benevolent empire – adhering to the same religion as the Georgians and a backer of Georgia’s stability. As perhaps the most poignant critic of Russia’s imperial policies in Georgia, Chavchavadze, nonetheless, supported Russia’s ability to fend off constant threats from the Ottoman and Persian Muslim armies. Georgia was better off within Russia – which, for him, was an important power in Europe – rather than outside it. He clearly articulated this position in an article entitled ‘Hundred Years Ago’, published in 1899. Evoking events a century before, when the first Russian army came to assist the Georgian kingdom threatened by the Ottoman and Persian armies, Chavchavadze underscored the double benefits from the Russian Empire: peace and civilisation, as opposed to the war with the Ottomans and Persians. He wrote, Russia ‘opened the doors of the Enlightenment ... [and] Georgia found peace. The patronage of our fellow believers quelled our fear of the enemy ... The constantly warring, exhausted country became tranquil, freed from havoc and devastation and rested from war and struggle’ (Chavchavadze, 1987: 186). In this dramatic historical context, king Erekle II’s decision to seek Russian help when faced with threats from the Ottoman and Persian empires had been just and right. Russia and Georgia shared the same religion and the former was Europe not only in geopolitical terms but also in a cultural sense (ibid., 178-80). Chavchavadze was highlighting the most crucial benefits for the Georgian nation in being under Russian imperialism and hence undergoing a ‘colonial experience’, an experience which according to prominent analyst of Georgian modern history, Stephen F Jones, after losing its political ‘rights’ were balanced by them getting access to education, national security and imperial glory. In fact, for Jones there was a parallel to be drawn between the experience of Scots in the British Empire and that of Georgians in the Russian Empire who similarly were ‘in the vanguard of imperial officer corps, fighting in battles and sharing its victories’ (Jones, 2005: 2). Under the

Russian imperial banner, the territorial disintegration of medieval Georgia was reversed after the 'gathering of the lands' – the last territories to be reincorporated in Tsarist Georgia (which then was divided into two *gubernias*, Tiflis and Kutaisi), were the regions of Batumi and Kars, following the 1877-1878 Russo-Ottoman war – and Georgians could have the 'benevolent' empire to thank for that.

If in Chavchavadze's understanding the Russian Empire ranked rather highly to Georgia as an empire that fostered an alliance with it rather than conquered it, defended its religion while supplanting it also with elements of modern European civilisation, in the thought of Georgian enlightenment figure Niko Nikoladze (1843-1928) – another intellectual and public activist of the period – this positive duality of benevolent and civilised empire required more qualifiers. For one, he was more ambiguous than Chavchavadze on the 1801 political move. He considered Russian and Georgian political relations marked by violence even though for him, too, the 1801 act was a union and an alliance rather than an annexation. Nikoladze was also convinced, expressing this in an article written in 1873 entitled 'Life in Russia: A Survey', that 'our fatherland's fate and future is entangled with the Russian condition and Russian social and political life has influence on our country's luck' (Nikoladze, 1966: 358). And while a supporter of the Russo-Georgian alliance, past and future, he argued that this alliance could be improved by either a 'constitutional' negotiations with the imperial structures or by establishing political alliances with 'progressive' forces in the imperial centre. In an article written in 1897 titled 'Kossuth and Deak', he suggested the former by a way inference to the 1867 Austro-Hungarian Compromise, which led to the establishment of the Dual Monarchy. The Georgian nation within the Russian Empire could have what Hungary got in this compromises – control over its own finances, its parliament, laws and army (Nikoladze, 1997: 186-213) – thus gaining equal rights as an independent state like Austria while sharing the same emperor (Kann, 1980: 333). Failing in this, the Russian Empire would continue to exert its imperial autocratic authority (political, legal) on the Georgian nation and hence lose its appeal among Georgians in the context in which the superiority of the modern European civilisation was in the ascent. Or, another alternative was that of forging an alliance with Russian 'progressive' and 'democratic' political forces (socio-liberal), which could rebound the Russian Empire as a civilised one. This latter alternative was embraced by Georgian Social Democrats – the largest and the most successful political party that led the Georgian nation to independence in 1918 until the incorporation of it in 1921 by Soviet Russia (Jones, 2005: 9) – including their leader Noe Zhordania, who also became the prime minister of the First Georgian Republic (1918-1921).

The appeal of Europe in the Georgian discourse of this time was that even though it was largely seen as a set of conquering empires per se, these empires were not perceived as such with regard to Georgia. On the contrary, Europe represented the most advanced form or even the source of modern civilisation (political, economic, and cultural), while the Russian Empire was losing its appeal as a benevolent political power and empire of civilisation, worse – it came to be relegated as 'Eastern', thus backward, together with the Ottoman and Persian empires. Zhordania, unlike Chavchavadze, considered Russian culture as Eastern and stuck in the past. The social democrat recognised that over the centuries Georgian culture had

greatly been influenced by Eastern civilisations: Persian, Ottoman and Russian. Yet, accordingly, these civilisations had kept Georgia outside of the European sphere and the 'idea of European culture - which we sought to embrace' (Zhordania, 1990: 90). With a growing Eurocentrism in Georgian intellectual discourse, particularly in the second decade of the twentieth century, Europe's civilisational rise was seen directly correlated to the decline to 'barbarity' of Eastern civilisations: Persian, Ottoman and Russian. Therefore the time had arrived, according to literary criticism of the time, for Georgian society to embrace Europe, and open itself up to European influences for the sake of Georgian national cultural development (Brisku, 2013: 59).

They used to say that 'the light comes from the East'. And truly it was like this, while in the East, the Persian, Arabic, Syrian and Byzantine cultures flourished, and Western Europe, on the other hand, represented a less populated and developed country [sic]. But it has been quite some time now that the world's illuminations to humanity have come from the West... Russian culture is still new [in comparison to the European one], but as Russian writers themselves rightly point out, ... it is already showing signs of old age and degeneration... It is already centuries that Mongolian Hordes altered the nature of Russian people into the Eastern spirit (Kikodze, 1997: 331-332).

The discourse of European civilisational superiority and the backwardness of 'Eastern' empires were strongly articulated by the prominent Georgian cultural movement of symbolist poets called *tsisperkhantselni* (1915-1930). For one of them, being stuck between empires generated restlessness and motion in Georgian culture and politics, whereby the desire was to part with the 'dormant Orient' and join the Western space (Robakidze, 1997: 275). The more the Russian Empire was losing its appeal, as a civilised entity in the Georgian discourse, the less evident became its political benevolence. This appeared to be so when the independence of the First Georgian Republic was declared in 1918, after the Russian Empire succumbed to dissolution and a new state was born, Soviet and Communist Russia, that threatened conquest and imposition of a new civilisation, the Soviet, on a fragile Georgian state. Seeking to garner support from important European states in 1920 for de jure recognition of Georgian independence when also faced with an offensive by the Red Army, Georgian Foreign Minister of the time, Akaki Chkenkheli declared that: 'we stand by our thinking that Georgia is for itself and so is Russia. They [Western Europeans] need to help us to show to the European societies the truthfulness of our requests ... I consider that the question of Georgia ... should be examined separately, without Russia ... They cannot force us to become part of Russia' (Chkenkheli, 1920: 6-7) - recognising thus that the ambiguities vis-à-vis Russia as a benevolent as well as a democratic and multi-ethnic state were no longer there.

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## 6. Conclusion

Georgian historical experience and modern political and intellectual discourse offer a profound familiarity with the notion of empire – a notion which, as noted above, fluctuates between an understanding of it as an empire of conquest or exercising its ‘structural power’ and one of civilisation, promoting its ‘soft power.’ For most of the twentieth century, the ‘age of nation-states’, not only in the Georgian discourse, but also in the wider academic literature and political discourse, the notion of empire lost its ambivalence of meaning because of a strict reading of it in terms of conquest and political subjugation and economic exploitation.

This was not the case, of course, in the nineteenth century Georgian discourse, especially during the ‘age of the empire’, in which empire, in this case the Russian State, was equally and ambiguously loaded with the political attributes of a ‘benevolent’ empire, attributes largely shared by Russian imperial and intellectual elites (see Jersild, 2002; Layton, 2005[1994]; van der Oye, 2010) and the prospects of a ‘democratic’ future, with the markers of modern civilisation, all these contrasted with the pressures of conquering Ottoman and Persian empires, and as Europe as a civilisation drawing the political and intellectual imagination of an emerging modern Georgian nation. Fast-forwarding to the twenty-first century, what appears to be a transitory period of nation-states and regional politico-economic formations, Georgian discourse is in and in-between position again but with rather reversed political actors. One the one hand stands the former ‘benevolent’ empire, Russia, with which the Georgian nation shares the same civilisation markers, which now ‘conquers’ and undermines the territorial integrity of the country, while on the other hand stands the European civilisation of the EU, which could offer the country peace, prosperity and a democratic future.

And while Georgia’s northern neighbour is clearly seen as a re-emerging conquering and uncivilised empire, time will show if the Europe of the EU – which is not about diktats or territorial conquest but certainly is about economic and legal expansion beyond its evolving borders – as an ‘empire of civilisation’ – for as Europe as a civilisation has long been there in its modern discourse (Brisku, 2013: ix) – the *non-imperial empire*, will enter Georgian political and intellectual vocabulary. What is clear, generally speaking, is that in the wider, contemporary international political and intellectual discourses is it easier to point to large powerful, multinational states behaving as empires when they lack ‘soft power’ hence resorting to their ‘structural power’ of coercion in a classical imperial territory-grabbing style as opposed to others that combine both, or to those that go by exercising only their ‘soft power’; as entities that embody civilisational and democratic values.



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