

The Art of Being Georgia

Foreign policy aficionados have slowly adjusted to the fact that the word “Georgia” may refer not only to the American state but also to the state located between Russia and Turkey. If Georgia were to feature prominently on a colored political world map, what lies behind the contour and color determines its role and function beyond geographic canvases.

The “Curse” of History

Georgians pride themselves on being one of the ancient nations that has survived until present times. When talking about the history of Georgia, we can go as far as it gets - how about 1.8 million years? That is what the discovered remains of early humanoids in Dmanisi, Georgia, tell us. Ancient Hellenistic narratives include the story of Jason and the Argonauts, who traveled as far as modern-day western Georgia, called Kolhida for the Golden Fleece, and Princess Medea, allegedly the mother of medicine, pharmacy, and cosmetics. Georgian historians argue that Georgian statehood existed from as early as the fourth century BC. The same can be said about the Georgian al-

phabet, one of the oldest and most unique among phonetic alphabets, even used by North Caucasus nations until the 17th century.

Georgia is one of the earliest adopters of Christianity as a state religion. The year 326 AD is when the Georgian king, following Armenia, decreed Christianity as the religion of his realm. No talks about Georgia can avoid an eventual conversation about wine. Apparently, 8000(!) years ago, proto-Georgians found ways to ferment locally grown grapes into a divine drink, hence - a noble name - the Cradle of Wine. All the above indicates that Georgians have been around for many centuries, and self-identification as “Georgian” is firmly rooted in the national psyche. It also means that people calling themselves “Georgians” have experienced every form of societal development, including social, cultural, religious, political, or technological. Georgian history bears the marks of multiple empires, crisscrossing its land - Persian, Byzantine, Seljuk, Arab, Mongol, Ottoman, Russian, and Soviet. This kind of “busy” legacy obviously weighs on current Georgian political thinking, obfuscating and not simplifying it.



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For many Georgians, a passive “we survived so far and will survive this crisis too” stand often outweighs the necessity to act

A similar “disease” can be found among other ancient nations, like Jews and Armenians. The common denominator can be confusion between “the land” and “the state.” Some Jews can be perfectly patriotic to the “Land of Israel” but not to the “State of Israel.” Similarly, Georgians also confuse the two terms, making it more difficult (as in the cases of Israel and Armenia) to convince the absolute majority of its population (diaspora aside) of the urgency of state matters. A passive “we survived so far and will survive this crisis too” stand often outweighs the necessity to act. Stories of the “glorious past” give false confidence that the future will be glorious as well without any significant efforts from the current generations.

Critics of Contemporary Art and Contemporary Georgia

In her 2022 [book](#), entitled *Fraud of Contemporary Art*, Mexican art critic Avelina Lesper [formulated](#) a whole set of arguments on how mechanisms, instruments, proponents, and participants of creating “contemporary art” are, in fact, eroding the very notion of “art” and “artist” and make contemporary art a fraud. Interestingly, her arguments offer striking parallels with contemporary Georgian political thought, offering a refreshing view on the question: what is exactly “the art of being Georgia?” Some of the concepts that Lesper uses and applies to substantiate her argument could just as effectively be used in Georgian reality, casting more light on Georgia’s current geopolitical state.

“Transubstantiation” of art happens when something ordinary is transformed into art merely by categorizing it as such. This term was coined by

Arthur Danto, a prominent philosopher and art critic. According to Lesper, “in this change of substance, the word plays a fundamental role: the change is not visible, but it is declared.” According to her, this is the idea of “ready-made” art, which takes us to the “most elemental and irrational state of human thought, to magical thinking.”

There are ready-made states, too, that have, as a result of historical magic – decolonization or self-determination, acquired independence and statehood largely due to the political and economic arrangements of that particular era in history. The notion of a state believed to be the best vehicle to address the needs of inhabitants of a particular geographic region and/or ethnic entity is thus often bestowed on these new entities. Georgia, also recognized by the international community as a sovereign state, assumed not only the flag, the coat of arms, and the anthem but a whole set of functioning state institutions dedicated to the well-being of its population. However, such “ready-made” states are not always real states, just like “ready-made” art is not real art. Such states often fail. Georgia, too, was a “failed state” until the 2003 Rose Revolution. A quick look around the globe is enough to discover that the failing status applies to many modern “states,” with the most recent example being Haiti. Nonetheless, statehood remains the only viable way to be part of the international community and a subject of international law. The better and more functional a state becomes, the better chances it has of fitting and benefiting from the current international system, even if most of today’s states were not even around when the current international system was designed and enabled.

The “infallibility of meaning” is another tenet of Lesper’s criticism of current fake art. This concept means that today, anything presented as art automatically acquires uncontested meaning. Through this infallibility, an “artwork” can lack any aesthetic value but will qualify as art through the

attributed “philosophical value.” Lesper writes that because the artist has a good intention when creating a piece of art, it is assumed that the creation becomes art. In other words, the artwork’s value becomes “synonymous with the artist’s intent,” which is in itself “presumed to be necessarily good in the moral sense.”

This framework can also be applied to the states, including Georgia. Presumably, anything the Georgian state or government does has a good intention for its citizens simply because this is how states function and what governments usually do. Unfortunately, this notion becomes challenged once a state is “captured” by one super-rich individual whose personal goals and state interests do not always coincide. The same can be said about Russia, although there the “state capture” was conducted by a group of individuals (with similar former institutional affiliations), not a single person, or rather under the leadership of a single person. In such cases, the whole intent or the *raison d’être* of the state is subjugated to personal interests, caring less about the population and their aspirations. Moldova and, to a certain extent, Ukraine also went through this “state capture” cycle.

“Benevolence of meaning” is the underlying belief, according to Lesper, that conceptual art is morally good and has “great moral intentions” while “the artist is a messianic preacher, a Savonarola who tells us from the white cube of the gallery what is good and what is bad.” This art, Lesper argues, is “empty of aesthetics but wrapped in great intentions” and usually follows the political agenda of the day, often mimicking the television TV schedules. However, even if this “rebellious” art defends the environment, argues for gender rights, and denounces consumerism, capitalism, and pollution, its form is meek, and the level “does not exceed that of a secondary school newspaper.” Therefore, such art “does not displease the power or the oligarchy that sponsors them.”

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This cannot be truer for Georgia and many other states in the contemporary global system. Any Georgia watcher who has taken enough time and tolerance to follow statements and activities of the ruling Georgian Dream party can quickly draw parallels with the above words of the art critic. Disguised with “highest moral intentions,” Georgian ruling party talking heads undermine Georgian statehood, its chosen pro-Western development vector, and rapidly isolate Georgia from its friends and allies in the West. But the declared intentions are moral and messianic. Borrowing from the Kremlin propaganda playbook, these “defenders of Georgian purity,” in fact, mimic Putin’s regime by introducing legislation on “the foreign agents,” portraying the West as the power that “wants to drag Georgia into the war with Russia,” which “undermines Georgian identity by proliferating LGBTQ+ rights” and “corrupts Georgia’s domestic policies through NGOs.” Such a “concept” of Georgia is not only a mockery of statehood but also erodes whatever existing state institutions remain.

Dogmatic Art, Dogmatic Georgia, and Bidzina Ivanishvili

Lesper writes that contemporary fake art has become dogmatic. It is based on the dogma of context, the dogma of the curator, and the dogma of the curator’s omnipotence.

The “Dogma of Context,” according to Lesper, presupposes that contemporary art becomes art only in the context of a museum or gallery and that the

art object ceases to be what it is “the moment it crosses the threshold of the museum.” It is, therefore, effectively a museum, which turns an object into the art. In that artificial setting, “everything is coordinated so that an object without beauty or intelligence is art.” In real, greater art, according to Lesper, “the work is what creates the context” and not the context creating art.

Another aspect of dogmatism in contemporary art can be seen in the “Dogma of the Curator.” Lesper argues that the curator is ultimately a salesman and the person who is relied upon to give meaning to otherwise meaningless art. Thus, “in the brochures of the exhibitions, the artists are no longer mentioned.” Now, the curator’s name is put first and it is specified that the project will be under the guidance of a particular mogul, expert, or personality.

Furthermore, the curators are usually very influential and rich people or renowned experts in the field, and their status is close to almighty. This leads to the “Dogma of the Omnipotence of the Curator,” which suggests that the curators “are more important than the artist, the work itself, and therefore the art.” Contemporary art, Lesper argues, has a symbiotic relationship with curatorial dominion because “it is practically nothing” in itself.

Politics, too, especially in modern Georgia, is all about the dogmas. The narratives of the ruling party in Georgia can be explained by the context of political dogmas, either domestic or international. Domestic context provides that because of the fear of Mikheil Saakashvili’s return, the government needs to be forgiven for any misstep. In other words, the return of the “Saakashvili’s regime” is such a big threat and tragedy that anything can be justified in that context. So what if the opposition leaders get arrested, the media is attacked, minorities are degraded, and the right to peaceful assembly is limited? All this needs to be viewed only

through the prism of context – nothing is worse than Saakashvili and his *natsis* returning to power. Hence, the acts themselves need not be judged but only in the context of the framework. Georgian Dream leaders even tried explaining this to their European and American colleagues and, unfortunately, with relative success.

The dogma of context also has an international aspect to it. Not supporting Ukraine openly – is hard to understand if you are European, American, or Georgian. But the Georgian Dream puts it in the context – if Georgia supports Ukraine, war with Russia will start; hence, the act of non-support, itself an immoral and even impractical foreign policy step, can be justified by the international context – avoiding war with Russia. Not following the EU’s recommendations about democratic institutions or aligning with the EU’s foreign policy is also explained through the same context – all that risks the war with Russia.

Georgian politics also has a curator, in fact, a billionaire, a philanthropist, and even an avid art collector. He is also a master at [collecting](#) trees and transporting them from Africa and other parts of the world to Georgia. From the beginning of Ivanishvili’s rule, he always emphasized that Georgia should be an object of the foreign policy of other states and not an active subject or actor. The justification of the “curator’s” motive was linked to the international environment, as well as his personal outlook. Thus, “the curator” stripped Georgia of its intrinsic value for the global system and defined its value through an arbitrary personal decision.

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The state capture in the Georgian context indeed elevated Bidzina Ivanishvili into the role of “curator” of Georgia, who is also quite “omnipotent.” Today, whatever happens in the state, by the state, or with the state carries his name. He is the ultimate arbiter of Georgian politics, and external players understand this “phenomenon well.” This is why the senior foreign dignitaries visiting Georgia, besides protocol-determined meetings, often seek an audience with the “curator.” That the meetings are not always held can be explained by “the curator’s” reclusive nature.

For Ivanishvili’s regime, anything or anyone that radiates an alternative to his rule is considered “blasphemy” and hence subject to ex-communication and punishment. Any meaningful opposition party or entity in Georgia has experienced this bitter lesson. To paraphrase Lord Ismay’s famous maxim on the purposes of NATO, for the self-imposed “curator” Ivanishvili, the purpose of the Georgian State is to keep the West out, alternative leaders in (prison), and the opposition down.

Allegedly, Mr. Ivanishvili’s wealth is greater than Georgia’s annual budget, a major source of his omnipotence, together with the ubiquitous state security apparatus resources. This almightiness makes him “always right” for his followers and servants. Such arrangements leave no room for discussion, be it political, economic, security, or other. Consequently, the real debates between government and opposition are long gone from the media coverage. Unfortunately for the Georgian state, Ivanishvili’s personal life experience does not leave much room for optimism. He became an oligarch in Russia through predatory actions, far apart from modern business ethics and practices. Mr. Ivanishvili’s claim that he “decoded the true meanings of the works of Friedrich Nietzsche” is a very scary proposition. His knowledge of international relations is embryonic at best, and his love of art is not good enough to make him a successful and desired statesman and curator.

From the dogmas governing contemporary art (and contemporary Georgian politics), the “dogma

of ‘everyone is an artist’” is the most pernicious. Through this approach, “democratized mediocrity” becomes the standard. This dogma stands on the premise that it is no longer required to dedicate oneself and spend thousands of hours “learning and forming one’s talent.” Lesper argues that “this dogma started from the destructive idea of ending the figure of genius and has a certain logic because, as we have seen, geniuses – or at least talented artists with real creativity – do not need curators.”

Anyone could become a politician, a member of parliament, or a talking head of the party – knowledge, experience, and public trust were replaced with loyalty to Mr. Ivanishvili and dependence on Ivanishvili.

This is just as true of Georgian politics as of contemporary “fake” art. Georgians remember what the Soviet schools taught them – that, according to Vladimir Lenin, “every cook has to learn how to govern the state.” Among those who govern today’s Georgia, one may find more crooks than cooks. Personal doctors, bankers, bodyguards, and assistants of Bidzina Ivanishvili and his family found themselves in ministerial jobs in Georgia after 2012. Anyone could become a politician, a member of parliament, or a talking head of the party – knowledge, experience, and public trust were replaced with loyalty to and dependence on Ivanishvili. In such a model, indeed, anyone can become a politician, but only if the blessing is given by “the curator.”

Such a system, by default, is a rigid vertical of subordination where any deviance from the ‘supreme wish’ is punishable, hence zero chance for any creative or competitive ideas. Such a mechanism is

deadly for any modern state that wants to achieve rapid growth and prosperity. Even the Chinese system allows degrees of freedom and competition among internal regions and their governors. The rigidity of power vertical is at the mercy of the flexibility of the man on top, whose loyalty often leans toward the goal of self-preservation, even at the expense of the Georgian state.

Beauty and the Beast

At the beginning of this article, I described the manifold merits of Georgia, reflecting merely on the intrinsic potential that the Georgian state has for its population, for the region, and for the wider world. If we compare Georgia with the well-established art piece of an old master, any museum or gallery would be happy to have it. In its current form, Georgia looks more like a dusted, cobwebbed, frameless art piece stored in the attics that requires proper care to shine. Ultimately, it is up to the Georgians themselves to get rid of the moldy stain and exhort the beast from within. At the same time, as we know from fairy tales, the enchanted beast needs the unconditional love of beauty – the West, to revert to its handsome form.

Meanwhile, Avelina Lesper reminds us that “this misnamed art is a defect of our time and, as such, it means a setback in human intelligence. The endemic contempt for beauty, the persecution that has been mounted against talent, the contempt for techniques and manual work, are reducing art to a deficiency of our civilization.”

It is probably time for Georgians to get rid of defective politics, recall true aesthetics, and build a better state not only as a tribute to great ancestors but also for the better future of upcoming generations ■