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Khalvashi, Tamta

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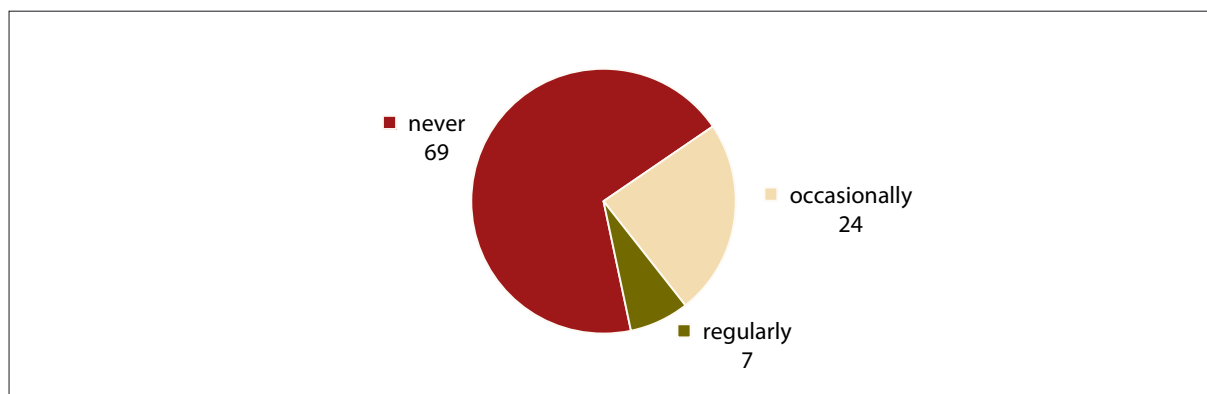
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Figure 13: In the last 12 months, how many times have you: Visited a webpage with historic content / discussions?



Source: MYPLACE (Memory, Youth, Political Legacy And Civic Engagement) survey conducted in 2012 in two cities of Georgia (Telavi and Kutaisi) among 1,176 young people aged 16–25, <<http://www.fp7-myplace.eu/>>.

Capturing Marginality: The Social Role of Photography in the Wake of Rapid Urban Development in Batumi, Adjara

By Tamta Khalvashi, Copenhagen

Abstract

This article examines the social role of photographic images in relation to the rapidly changing urban space of Batumi, Adjara. I argue that although photographic images selectively freeze certain moments of the past and render them stable, they simultaneously highlight the ambiguous aspects of the present and capture the socially marginal positions of their authors. I analyze how this tension plays out among a middle-aged and elderly generation of Soviet photographers in Batumi who, by capturing the past through their photographs, try to position themselves in an uncertain present and imagine their future(s).

From the Margins to the “Miracle”

Zviad, a photographer in his early sixties was showing me his photo collection of Batumi’s urban landscapes when he said: “Look at this black and white photo. I took it in the 1980s. Here, as you see, used to be this derelict and ugly Hotel Medea built during Soviet times. Now, look at this new photo. The same place, but with a contemporary five-star Radisson—all fleshy, like in Europe. These photos show that the city has radically changed, but not for people like me. I am no longer able to live with my own profession. There are simply no jobs for people like me.” Zviad kept contrasting the old and new look of Batumi’s urban spaces through his photos as he added: “So, I am going to Turkey this summer to work on a hazelnut plantation while Turks are coming here

to take over our city.” Emphasizing contrasts between the old and new look of Batumi through photographs was commonplace among the middle-aged and elderly photographers while I was doing my fieldwork between 2012 and 2013. These contrasts between past and present were usually called upon to highlight the tangible urban changes taking place in Batumi and to stress the photographers’ marginal positions, shuttered professional lives, and uncertain future paths.

Batumi, with its 137,000 residents, is the capital of the Autonomous Republic of Adjara in Georgia, located on the Black Sea and bordered by Turkey. It had been a peripheral part of the Ottoman Empire until 1878. Hence, when Batumi rejoined Georgia under the Russian Empire, it did so with a distinct Muslim legacy. It

was due to this religious background that Adjara was granted autonomy in 1921, codified in the Treaty of Kars signed between Soviet Russia and Turkey.

With its subtropical climate and favorable location on the Black Sea coast, Batumi became a crucial tourist and cultural destinations during Soviet times. Oil refining, garments, leather, and shoe factories, together with the Batumi seaport, constituted the backbone of the local economy and provided its multi-ethnic residents—Armenians, Russians, Jews and Greeks as well as local Abkhazians, Gurians, Megrelians and Imeretians—with steady jobs and decent salaries. A vibrant cultural and economic life during Soviet times changed the peripheral status of the region and positioned Adjara at the center of socialist Georgia. Intelligentsia and artistic circles—as diverse as the ethnic composition of the city itself—played a major role in reinvigorating cultural life in Batumi. While enjoying advanced social positions and stable jobs in state-sponsored photo laboratories, culture houses, art institutions and unions, the creative class gave the city its rich cultural capital and distinctly cosmopolitan nature. The internationalist outlook of Batumi's residents thus changed the once peripheral status of this region and helped define it as modern and educated, mainly by eclipsing its Muslim Ottoman past.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Aslan Abashidze—a descendent of a Muslim Adjarian noble family who facilitated a revival of Orthodox Christianity in Adjara—became the head of the region in 1991. However, the arrival of a new era in Adjara dramatically shuttered the economic lives of Batumi residents, challenged the widely celebrated cosmopolitan outlook of the city and prevented the central government from extending its sovereignty to this region. During his time in power, Abashidze took excessive control over much of the cultural and economic domains in Batumi. Many industrial factories were shut down or illicitly privatized by Abashidze's political clan, which facilitated a high level of corruption, and controlled most of the market spheres, customs offices, and seaport revenues. Moreover, several state-funded artistic unions or institutions ceased to exist or instead, became tools for promoting Abashidze's political "achievements," as his regime grew more and more authoritarian. While the well-connected intelligentsia was able to maintain privileged social positions in exchange for aligning with Abashidze's authoritarian regime, others who refused to support Abashidze often lost their affiliations with preferred occupations. The lives of many artists who once held advanced social or cultural positions in Batumi became all about making ends meet in this precarious state of affairs in the 1990s. Emphasizing ethno-religious sentiments strongly tied with Orthodox Christianity and downgrading Batumi's once cosmopolitan

nature hence became an effective tool to reposition oneself within the uncertain economic and political domain.

It was against this background that the Rose Revolution government brought down Abashidze's corrupt rule in Adjara in May 2004, and tried to revive central state control over this semi-independent region. The massive infrastructural and construction projects that have greatly transformed Batumi's urban space thus were one of the tools to exercise effective state administration and sovereignty over Adjara. Five-star hotels, casinos and tall apartment blocks mushroomed among the 19th century low Batumi houses, highlighting the neoliberal and internationalist aspirations of the government. Hence, investors, tourists and gamblers, mainly coming from Turkey, Iran, Armenia, Ukraine and Russia, flooded the city thanks to scraped visa regimes and the investment-friendly environment. The city, in this light, was touted as the cultural and touristic "miracle" of the country and as the Las Vegas of the entire Black Sea Region, promising to bring more jobs and better life-styles.

The massive new investments in the construction and tourist sector, however, have not generated the expected economic abundance and sufficient income for ordinary residents of Batumi. The state-driven sectors of the economy—tourism and construction—required the able-bodied and the technically well-educated specialists in the city. However, many residents of Batumi, including unemployed artists, lacked the necessary capital and skills to adapt to the new economic demands. This inability to adjust created a discrepancy between the projected future the government imposed on the urban space of Batumi and people's lived realities, producing popular resentments against the government and exacerbating ethno-nationalist sentiments mainly oriented against the increasing number of Turks in the city.

The built and modernized environment of Batumi in this way resonated not with hopes for a better future, but with ambivalence about the present and nostalgia for the Soviet past. It was not that the artists or other ordinary citizens of Batumi bemoaned the end of Abashidze's rule or the collapse of the Soviet Union. Many of my informants, in fact, recognized that things have improved in Batumi and that the country's independence entailed a certain expense. However, costs for this change seemed too overwhelming. Anxieties mainly revolved around the continued privatization of state-owned buildings—like the publishing house in the city center of Batumi—which were seen as the last hope for the Soviet generation of photographers or writers to fulfill their professional goals and earn minimum salaries. With insufficient employment and retirement benefits, many residents, including middle-aged and elderly artists, in this way started to seek their fortune across the border in Turkey,

others have turned their houses into small hotels, restaurants, or shops, while some lethargically roamed the city knocked out by alcohol or cheap drugs.

The parliamentary elections of October 2012, which brought down the Rose Revolution government after almost ten years of rule, has in this way been seen as a popular reaction to the discrepancy between the future visions of Batumi and the actual lives of its residents. However, my research, based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork among unemployed artistic circles in Batumi, revealed that many middle-aged people continued to be skeptical about the post-election developments, creating even more uncertainty and despair. As one of my informants put it, “nothing is happening in the city anymore, new buildings are not being constructed, new jobs are not being created.” Photographers of Batumi highlight this uncertainty through their photographs and keep certain memories alive in fixed and yet undoubtedly selective ways.

A Captured Past

“I processed and printed photos in this laboratory during Soviet times. This was a very good time for me, as I had a steady salary and published photos in various Soviet newspapers. You see this picture taken in old dolphinarium, right? People look much happier in this photo, don’t they? Maybe they are not as well dressed as today but their faces are much calmer and happier. Now, a new dolphinarium was constructed, but I cannot even afford to go there.” Zuri, a seventy-year-old Megrelian man who was born and raised in Batumi, recounted these and other highlights of the Soviet past while he showed me a few remaining photos from his personal collection. He worked in the photographic laboratory for forty years located on one of the central streets of Batumi. In the 1990s the state ceased funding the photo laboratory and Zuri managed to open a small shop instead together with other painters and photographers. They started to make commercial banners for different shops and restaurants emerging in the city. However, the business was unreliable and it did not bring in enough money to maintain the shop, pay taxes and distribute salaries. It was in this shop that Zuri invoked his memories and photographic images to fix “happier” images of the past and to contrast it with the present.

The relative abundance of artistic or photo laboratory work in Batumi was due to its direct provision from Moscow. Largely an urban phenomenon, photographic laboratories and studios were the kind of privilege that only industrial cities of special cultural or economic significance enjoyed. Amateur photography and photojournalism in this way became one of the effective tools throughout Soviet Union to depict the successful achievements of the socialist state and to promote images of the thriving

cultural and economic lives of Soviet people. State-funded photographic practices however often served to conceal hostile labor conditions in factories, forceful deportations of various ethnic groups and exerted a great deal of censorship on images. In Batumi thousands of Greeks were deported to Central Asia in the 1950s and many laborers suffered from poor working conditions and low salaries. But rather than reflecting the contradictions entailed in the state-encouraged practice of photography, memories of many amateur or professional Soviet photographers in Batumi went back only to happier times and places. My informants only invoked those photos or memories which depicted the availability of jobs, the vibrant social and cultural lives of people—like those happily clapping in the old dolphinarium—or achievements of Soviet Georgian sportsmen, workers or artists. Zuri’s evocation of photographic images thus was both a means of capturing the past—which was not fully real—and to understand the present, which was not entirely certain.

Shuttered Present

“I rarely take new photos nowadays. But if I take one, I prefer to depict beggars or new architecture. It’s because the number of beggars have increased in this city, while these new buildings are being built every day.” Gizo, another photographer in his early sixties was standing in front of the corner of one of the newly renovated streets of Batumi while selling his black and white photo collection depicting Russian tourists and post-independence movements in Batumi to passers-by. This was his way of earning money during the summer period when tourists flocked to the city and sometimes took an interest in buying his photos. However, in my numerous conversations with him in front of his picture stand, no one bought a single photo from him. Later he gave up his hopes to make money from selling photos and left for Turkey to work in a tea plantation.

Gizo, like many of his counterparts in the city, used to work in a state-sponsored local newspaper during Soviet times. At the same time he enjoyed working in his studio allocated by the Soviet state. It was in this studio that he took artistic pictures of nude Russian and Georgian women while experimenting with his lighting equipment to create special contours and shades on their bodies. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the newspaper was shut down and his studio was sold on auction in 2007. Gizo did not have enough money to purchase a technologically advanced camera, which would enable him to find another job. This condition forced him to seek his fortune across the border in Turkey.

During my fieldwork, I learned that many people whose lives fell apart after the Soviet collapse were particularly critical toward the modernized urban space

of Batumi and the Rose Revolutionary government's future-oriented visions. These attitudes reflect Sanders and West's valuable argument that "modernity is experienced by many people as a fragmented, contradictory, and disquieting process," which generates the opaque theories on power that it claims to obviate (West and Sanders 2003). It needs to be noted however that the Georgian modernizing project was not a by-product of the high modernist agenda—stemming from the unprecedented progress in science, technology, and economy—which became the basis of the emergence of modern nation-states in the West (Scott 1998). It was more about making the Soviet and postsoviet past forcefully obsolete in the present, which was sought to give a way to the emergence of western modernity and better life-styles in the future. This aspect explains the abundant number of conspiracy theories specifically built around the post-Rose Revolution urban developments in Adjara, as it also meant to marginalize those who did not fit into these future visions. Critical observers thus always would say—"after the Rose Revolution..."—to denote negative aspects of this shift, when in fact the things they talked about have very little to do with the recent changes, but had existed in previous political orders as well. Gizo's invocation of beggars' photographic images in contrast to new architecture is one of the points in case. Concerns about the discrepancy between Abashidze's construction obsessions (like new bridges or empty modern buildings) and the growing number of beggars had, in fact, been a commonplace in residents' descriptions of post-Soviet changes in the 1990s (Pelkmans 2006). However, Gizo chose to zoom into the shuttered present, which enabled him to validate his marginal social position, as he was shut between the nostalgia for the Soviet past and unavailability of the enforced future in the present. Photographs in this way were used to exert social control over one's own life and status and to shape the worldview about the (un)expected twists and turns of the visions of modernity and the future.

Conclusion: Imagined Future

"Many things have been beatified in this city, but nothing will change for people like me. No matter what kind

of government will come, we will always stay like this." It was one of my last visits to Anri—an unemployed Abkhazian painter and amateur photographer in his sixties when he exclaimed these words. His nihilistic way of imagining the future resonated with other artists' expectations about the future in light of recent political changes brought by the parliamentary elections of October 2012. One hundred new factories, long-term and low-interest loans for debtors, and the availability of jobs, which had been guaranteed in the Georgian Dream Coalition's abundant pre-election campaign, remained like unrealized dreams for many residents of Batumi. Anri's comment tapped into these constantly unrealized promises of the government and unfulfilled future paths.

While the promise of the future is permanently deferred, the past becomes constantly idealized. Photographs have a distinct capacity to imprint and enact this tension between the future and the past and in so doing, to highlight the ambiguity of the present. Thus in this article I argued that although photographers try to freeze landscapes and render them stable and veracious, they simultaneously capture their socially marginal positions and the ambiguous qualities of political and urban changes that currently hinge upon them. I analyzed this tension between fixity and flux as well as absence and presence by looking at how an old generation of Soviet photographers visualized and talked about the instable and uncertain aspects of political changes in Batumi and contrasted them to Soviet times, in which they enjoyed relatively privileged social positions. I showed that in this dialogue between photographers' memories and their photographs, the past is kept alive in fixed and yet undoubtedly selective ways. Hence, photographers and their photographic images not only serve to "freeze" past memories, as self-conscious re-presentations, they also try to tame social realities and imagine their futures.

About the Author

Tamta Khalvashi is a PhD candidate in Social Anthropology at the Department of Anthropology in the University of Copenhagen.

Suggested Further Readings:

- Khalvashi, Tamta and Gilbreath, Dustin 2013. Hard Money, Hard Times. Eurasianet Commentary (<<http://www.eurasianet.org/node/67314>>)
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