POPULAR CULTURE
IN THE POST-SOVIET REGION.
AMERICANIZATION OF THE POLITICS
IN GEORGIA

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ABSTRACT: The aim of this article is to analyse the influence of popular culture in the post-Soviet region with particular attention to the Americanization of politics in the Republic of Georgia. This region with the states that emerged after the dissolution of the USSR is particularly susceptible to the influences of alien cultures, which is connected with renouncing the homogenous Soviet culture and non-reconstruction and non-restoration of national cultures. Nowadays, the role of the dominant culture is played by popular culture based on the Western model; this culture is largely responsible for supplanting national culture in the post-Soviet states. Americanization of the Georgian culture in visible mostly in the process of mediatization and in the way election campaigns are conducted. This thesis is supported by the analysis of parliamentary elections held in 2004, 2008 and 2012.

KEYWORDS: popular culture, Americanization, the Republic of Georgia, the post-Soviet region, mediatization of election campaigns, principle of the lowest common denominator

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INTRODUCTION

The post-Soviet region is a widely understood group of states that emerged from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. From the geographical and cultural perspective it is possible to divide them into five groups: the Baltic states (Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia), the Eastern Europe states (Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine), the Central Asia states (Kazakhstan, Kirgizstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan), the Southern Caucasus states (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia) and Russia. This enumeration is made to show simultaneously the ethnographical diversity and the cultural cohesion that still existed in 1991. In this context, an interesting question is in what way the culture of these states was shaped after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. As Dwight Mcdonald notices (2002: 16) "the USSR is even more a land of mass culture than is the USA".

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union values on the political, economic and cultural level were redefined. Suddenly, an area homogeneous in many respects was at liberty. Therefore, a question about its subsequent fate is justified. The issue of the cultural evolution of the post-Soviet area as the object of research is brought up mostly in the context of the anthropology of individual subregions and the transformation of the political systems of the former soviet states. Establishing a distinct link between popular culture and politics through its Americanization is one of the purposes of this article. However, the main purpose of this article is to analyse the possible impact of mass culture on the post-Soviet region (in the modern world, Western culture – represented mostly by the American culture and, to a lesser degree, the Anglo-Saxon culture – is regarded as the dominant culture).

The aim of this article is to demonstrate the existence of a strong influence of American culture over the political culture of Georgia. In the broad sense, this phenomenon concerns the dominance of popular culture and a gradual supplanting of the national culture, while in the narrow sense it allows us to recognize the influence of the mass culture, for example, through the mediatization of election campaigns. Processes of mutual penetration of the spheres of culture and politics are also clearly visible, so the use of the principle of the common denominator is justified. The appropriate method to conduct a cultural study of such a type is content analysis. The most crucial matter for verification of the proposed thesis are the conclusions drawn from the analysis of the election campaigns conducted in the Republic of Georgia during the parliamentary elections in 2004, 2005, and 2012.

This research is based on the deliberations concerning the degree of Americanization of Georgian politics. The changes, which took place after the dissolution of USSR and subsequently after the Rose Revolution determined new vectors of the Georgian internal and foreign policy and also influenced cultural and social redefinition. Opening up to the Western political, economic and cultural influence brought about a change in the social and political sphere. This process, initiated in 2003, provided a new quality in the way politics is practiced in Georgia. It is possible to clearly distinguish the influence of the culture of the United States, which is particularly characteristic for the societies in the liquid modernity (Bauman 2011) or even the postmodern societies (Bauman 1989; Bauman 1991; Bauman 1993; Bauman 1997; Lyotard 1984). Americanization of Georgian politics is visible mostly in the process of mediatization and in the way election campaigns are conducted. An excellent example of the growth of that influence are the parliamentary elections (held in 2004, 2008 and 2012).

POPULAR CULTURE AND POLITICS. THE ROLE
OF THE PRINCIPLE OF THE LOWEST COMMON DENOMINATOR

According to Antonia Kłoskowska (1981: 460), popular culture, also called mass culture, is a term for "the actual wide circulation and reception of standardized content, however without determining the character of this content, its class provenance, address and ideological position". Thus, it is such a culture which simultaneously is universally available and universally received. Meeting both conditions simultaneously is necessary, because in the times of mass media and access to all cultural sources, popularity is an indicator of reception.

Mass culture is based on two concepts complementing each other. The first of them is the theory of the formation of masses understood as atomised mass societies. Therefore, the quantitative criterion is fulfilled, even though there is no accurate definition that would specify the numbers required for the mass receipt of culture (Kłoskowska 2002: 96–97). The second concept refers to the civilizational transformation, during which a modern, industrial society was transformed into a postmodern society. It is based mostly on consumerism, individualism and globalization (Fiske 1984; de Certeau 1984; Gans 1999; Lowenthal 1968; Mukerji, Schudson 1991). The distinctive features of the postmodernity are: a universal access to information, the wide influence of mass media, and a multitude of available media. Thus, it fulfils the second criterion, the condition

of standardization of the cultural content that is created and transmitted. One of the first definitions of the term mass culture was created in the 1950ˢ by Dwight Mcdonald (2002:19), who claimed that:

> mass culture is a dynamic, revolutionary force, breaking down the old barriers of class, tradition, taste, and dissolving all cultural distinctions. It mixes and scrambles everything together, producing what might be called homogenized culture […]. It thus destroys all values, since value judgments imply discrimination. Mass culture is very, very democratic: it absolutely refuses to discriminate against, or between, anything or anybody. All is grist to its mill, and all comes out finely ground indeed.

Interestingly, a similar conclusions was reached by Richard A. Peterson (2005) more than fifty years later. Summing up the research on the changes in the art recipients, and thus the culture recipients as well, he noticed a certain regularity concerning the mass audience characteristic for the postmodern society. The category of the popular culture remains unchanging – it is an offer intended for everyone and possible to be accepted by everyone. However, this change made the few, elite recipients become part of the masses; at present, they are ready to consume all products of culture, not only of a highbrow culture, but also of the popular one (Bauman 2011: 18–19):

> we see a shift in elite status group politics from those highbrows who snobbishly disdain all base, vulgar, or mass popular culture […] to those highbrows who omnivorously consume a wide range of popular as well as highbrow art forms.

In the times of mass society, mass media, mass culture and mass education the politics also became mass. Mutually interpenetrating processes of popularization, mediatization and tabloidization considerably affected the phenomenon of political communication. Politics, similarly to culture, became popular and available to the widest possible circle of recipients. The function of the intermediary between the atomised society and elite world of politics was taken on by the media. Dorota Piontek (2011: 68–84) distinguishes three main functions of mass media in political communication: the function of creating the agenda, the function of positioning and framing, and the function of creating media visibility. Thanks to fulfilling these functions, a symbiotic cooperation of politics and mass media is possible as an integral part of the popular culture.

Mass culture in particular influenced the standards of political communication. Simultaneously, it creates a fictional image of politics, distorted by the media and the politicians themselves (Piontek 2011: 111–115). Defining popularity as the most important goal and not as a means of striving for power led to the celebritization of politicians and familiarized society with the private life of their families (Piontek 2011: 143–150; Piontek 2009: 167–179). Mass culture is also an excellent background for taking political action. It is hard to imagine a better context than an indistinct, standardized political landscape (Piontek 2011: 116). Adapting political programs to the needs of all social groups, taking all interests into account, and satisfying all pressure groups (Piontek 2011: 117–120; Kolczyński 2008: 272–321) enables politics itself to meet all of the conditions of popularity.

Popular culture and politics share the principle of the lowest common denominator. It seems that in the postmodern society both culture and politics represent the same low level. The idea of the middlebrow assumes that all content is purposefully simplified so that it can effectively reach the widest possible group of recipients (Paterson 2006; Friedland, Shah, Lee, Rademacher, Atkinson, Hove 2007: 31–50; Winthrop 1967: 359–380). The application of the principle of finding the common denominator predominantly consists in the analysis of: categories of occupations, media use, consumer practice, public behaviour and indicators of civil and political involvement (Fiske 2011; Friedland, Shah, Lee, Rademacher, Atkinson, Hove 2007: 31–50). It allows us to distinguish many similarities – cultural indicators, the application of which guarantees a safe, wide reception from the mass audience. Simultaneously, the mainstream passes over the extreme positions, which do not correspond to the adopted pattern.

The idea of the middlebrow in politics is applied in a similar way to the actions taken in the field of culture. Politicians, wanting to win and maintain popularity, adapt the message of their political programme to the framework set by the mass media. Antonina Kłoskowska (2002: 288) notices that in spite of many possibilities and a broad cultural offer, the mass society eventually turns to the popular, averaged message:

> From the wide range of the influence of standardized content it transpires that identical elements of the mass culture reach diversified audience, composed from groups and individuals with different intellectual qualifications, interests and tastes. Organisers of mass culture seek the common denominator for this diversity. If they do not want to give up the mass reach of their message, they must find the form

and content that suit, at least to a certain degree, a considerable part of the potential audience. The principle of the common denominator is, more or less consciously, acknowledged in all conditions of mass culture organization; it can, however, be carried out in various ways.

The relations between the mass media and politics are dynamic and allow for deriving mutual benefits. The growing influence of the media on creating the political reality and on the mass society justifies its extreme prominence (Mazzoleni, Schulz 1999: 247–261; Wojtkowski 2012: 26–30). The dominating model relies on politics and the media mutually spurring each other into action – politicians gain a speaking tube essential to the popularization of their ideas and the media gain their primary source of information (Stromberg 2004: 265–284). As a result of convergence, the new media are becoming the basic mass media in political communication. The universality and availability of the Internet at the same time causes that information becomes more universal and accessible.

In the times of the postmodern society and mass culture, the way politics is carried out underwent changes. We observe the disappearance of elitism, celebritization of politicians, and the consolidation of the position of mass media as the means of conveying all content. The connection between politics and popular culture is particularly well visible during election campaigns. In this context, referring to the principle of the common denominator is aimed at showing the most significant feature common to the politics and the mass culture – simplification.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE POST-SOVIET SPHERE. CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY OF "THE NEAR ABROAD"

The dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics brought the most significant change for the international situation. However, did an equally deep transformation occur in the cultural sphere? The immense area freed after 1991 stretches out on two continents – Europe and Asia. Its diversification from the national, political, economic and cultural point of view seems to be unquestionable (Epstein, Genis, Vladiv-Glover 1991). Yet, for several dozen years it was effectively sovietized, which in the moment of the USSR dissolution contributed to the creation of several independent states that were to a large extent homogeneous from the cultural point of view.

The former post-Soviet societies could act in two ways: the first possibility was to reconstruct and restore their own national culture (which was often anachronistic and remained undeveloped for many years), the second possibility was to take a foreign culture on as the dominant culture (Mucha 1999). Choosing the first alternative was burdened with many problems and the need for building a new national identity, while choosing the second alternative assumed the adaptation of a foreign cultural system to the existing conditions. The majority of the former Soviet republics decidedly leaned towards the possibility of adapting a foreign culture. In relation to contesting the Russian politics, culture, philosophy, and science, the Western culture, especially the culture of the United States, was adapted to the existing reality.

The choice of the American model of mass culture allowed for a fluid passage from the Soviet mass culture to the Western one. The values emphasized and main interests of the society changed; however, the rule of simplifying and popularizing content according to the principle of the lowest common denominator remained. Richard Hebidge (1988 [in:] Strianti 1998: 39) pays attention to the causes of the interest in American popular culture:

American popular culture – Hollywood films, advertising images, packaging, clothes and music – offers a rich iconography, a set of symbols, object and artefacts which can be assembled and re-assembled by different groups in literally limitless number of combinations. And the meaning of each selection is transformed as individual objects – jeans, rock records, Tony Curtis hairstyles, bobby socks, etc. – are taken out of their original historical and cultural contexts and juxtaposed against other signs from other sources.

In parallel, Victor Terras points to the great potential of the post-Soviet Russian culture (Epstein, Genis, Vladiv-Glover 1991). In the future, it is a viable alternative for Western culture and the Islamic culture that is gaining more and more influence. One should also remember the aspirations of the Russian Federation to become a global power as the legal and international successor of the Soviet Union manifest themselves mainly in reference to the region called "the near abroad", that is to the former Soviet republics. The Russian language and the cultural legacy of the USSR exerted extreme influence on the entire post-Soviet area and in spite of turning to the West, these states are not able to easily introduce pop culture to their systems.

THE PRESENCE OF THE MASS CULTURE IN GEORGIA

Georgia regained independence with the dissolution of the USSR in 1991. However, considering the uncontested hegemony of the Russian Federation that lasted in the region of the Southern Caucasus for over a decade, it should be emphasized that the Georgians regained their independence as recently as in 2003. After overthrowing the regime of President Eduard Shevardnadze in the cause of the Rose Revolution there was a distinct redefining of the development directions of the state. The bloodless revolution conducted by Mikheil Saakashvili, Nino Burjanadze and Zurab Zhvania led to changes not only at the political level, but also on economic and cultural levels as well (Materski 2010: 336–362). As Giorgi Masalkini notices (Czuba 2011), "twenty years ago Georgia reappeared on the world map – once more it found itself in the main course of history. We have long traditions of statehood, and, at the same time, we are a new nation in a new state. Again we become an entity in politics and history".

As the priority state objectives the following were set: accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and establishing close relations with the European Union (see: *Mission, Values and Principles of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; National Security Concept of Georgia*), and a cultural opening to the West. An apparent aspiration of President Mikheil Saakashvili to implement Western standards was visible not only in the political activity – intense changes were made in the sphere of education, culture and science. Interestingly, in Georgia there was an abrupt transition from the Russian culture as the dominant foreign culture to the Western culture also as a dominant foreign culture. Nationalist attempts triggered by the revolution and the political change did not lead to maintaining Georgian national culture as the dominant one.

After the Rose Revolution, the Republic of Georgia was opened for foreign investors. It is especially visible in major cities, such as T'bilisi or Batumi. On the rising tide of fascination with The West, there appeared buildings inspired by modernist architecture, housing financial centres, chain stores of famous retailers or previously unavailable brands. The change concerned also the linguistic sphere – the universally known Russian became passé, using the Georgian tongue was promoted, and participating in the scientific English-speaking discourse at an international level became fashionable among scientists. Also the media underwent the process of popularization and Westernization, but in a peculiar, Georgian way (Czub 2011):

[…] the society is quite peculiar. We are mainly television-oriented. 85% of the information that the Georgians receive comes from television. […] we don't know who is the owner of the three most popular TV stations […] I know that the independence of such media corporations as FOX or CNN can be debatable, however Americans know the owners of these TV stations. If, for some reason they don't like their programmes, they can always choose other stations. In Georgia we don't have such a choice.

Apart from a few "government TV stations" we have a few private TV stations, which broadcast only in T'bilisi. They are unavailable in the regions. In Batumi, for example, we have a private television "25", which is available only in Batumi. Of course, independent media are a foundation of democracy.

The major part in Georgian culture is also played by the Internet. However, it should be emphasized that only television is a medium widely available and popular in society as a whole. The Internet as a plain of operation of the new media becomes more and more popular and readily used, yet it is not available in the entire country.

So, is it possible and to confirm the existence of mass culture in Georgia? In the context of the theory of Dwight Mcdonald, the Georgian culture meets both criteria, the condition of universal availability and the condition of universal reception as well. The distinct influence of American culture should be highlighted. The role of pop culture, Americanization of the media and policies point to the fact that a foreign culture is placed in a dominant position above national culture.

ELECTIONS IN GEORGIA AS AN EXAMPLE OF THE AMERICANIZATION OF POLITICS

An example of Americanization of Georgian politics were the parliamentary elections held over the course of the last 10 years. The timeline is limited on the one side with the Rose Revolution and with the October 2012 election on the other. The analysis of the 2004, 2008 and 2012 elections will allow us to demonstrate the growing influence of the mass culture characteristic for the way politics is conducted in the United States. In the article, only the tools used in campaigns which show the influence of the culture of the United States will be discussed.

The first of the indicators of the Westernization of political communication in Georgia is its mediatization. The development of the political marketing methods

allowed for moving the majority of communication from the traditional media to the new media. Nevertheless, the first electionsn the sovereign Republic of Georgia proceeded in the traditional election process. In the region of the Southern Caucasus, characterized by an ancestral-tribal culture, in 2004 the most effective strategy proved to be the organization of election rallies preceded by street protests during the Rose Revolution. They were also affected by the actions of President Mikheil Saakashvili in January 2004. They were widely commented in the media and the universally shared belief that party United National Movement must win in order to "cast mother Georgia off the Russian yoke"[1] indeed led this party to victory. Saakashvili elected for the presidential office built the state apparatus anew, employing young clerks, not involved in previous relations. The senior staff were completely replaced with young people, leaning towards the Western models of democracy. Georgia also received huge financial and military aid mainly from the United States and the European Union.

The subsequent parliamentary election in May 2008 were held earlier than planned due to the difficult economic situation and a series of protests. During the preceding electoral campaign many more tools were used than in the campaign in 2004. Namely, all of the most important mass media were used: television, the Internet, radio and the press (Wojtkowski 2012: 117–138). Among the main American features of the electoral campaigns in Georgia it is possible to show the extending of the campaign duration – Georgian politicians adapted the system of electoral conventions, which were a development over the earlier system of uncoordinated, mostly spontaneous rallies. It is also possible to notice the professionalization of the process of preparing information about the candidates. Moving a part of the information campaign to the Internet allowed for popularizing more elaborate information packages in three languages: Georgian, English and Russian.

The last of the discussed elections took place on October 2012. As a result, the United National Movement, Mikheil Saakashvili's party, lost the power it had held for 8 years. Out of three discussed election periods the last one had undoubtedly shown the influence of American culture on the Georgian politics in a most transparent way. This campaign was professionalized almost entirely, the campaign teams employed specialists in political marketing and spin doctors as well. The pre-election period was characterized by an intensive campaign

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[1] It was one of the many catchphrases of the United National Movement. They were characterized by simplicity and referral to nationalistic slogans.

run by the two most important parties: the United National Movement and the opposition party Georgian Dream. Mikheil Saakashvili and Bidzina Ivanishvili used all conceivable means, from traditional media to the negative campaigning of the opponent. The change happened mostly in the quality of the marketing product – professional companies and graphic designers were employed and high-quality political advertisements were prepared.

SUMMARY

The spreading of cultural patterns based on American popular culture in Georgia had taken place gradually since 2003. Access to the information and analyses allows us to prove the research hypothesis – a considerable of the post-Soviet region is under the influence of popular culture based on the Western model. It is clearly visible on the example of the process of Americanization of Georgian culture and politics.

The aim of this article was to demonstrate the presence of popular culture in the Georgian state. It was possible to clearly identify the process of mediatization of politics, which is one of the components of a broader process of popularization of culture. The models taken from American culture are particularly visible in the analysis of the election campaigns in 2004, 2008, and 2012. It is possible to predict that the process of Americanization shall continue during the presidential election in 2012. Drawing on the Western models of culture and politics is characteristic for the states that emerged after the dissolution of the USSR. Similar tendencies can be observed also in other states from the post-Soviet region; however, in the region of the South Caucasus and Central Asia, the Republic of Georgia is a state that is the most open to interact with the West.

It is extremely difficult to assess the multifaceted and complex culture in Georgia and in the region of the Southern Caucasus, because it is necessary to separate local conflicts and incidents caused by the way of thinking characteristic for the ancestral-tribal culture from the conflict that takes place mainly between Russia and the West. At present, the fate of the potential independence of Georgia is hanging in the balance – we observe a struggle between the mentality and standards characteristic of the countries of "the near abroad" with the vigorous process of democratization. From the period of the Rose Revolution a Westernized popular culture has been developing in Georgia.

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