

Interview with Emzar Jgerenaia

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What challenges does contemporary Georgian society face? Why is the degree of civil activity so low? These and other issues – such as political attitudes, societal expectations, sociological surveys and their influence on public opinion – were discussed in a Tabula interview with sociologist Emzar Jgerenaia.

- How would you evaluate the state of Georgian society today, its place in a general, global context?

I would evaluate the Georgian nation as a lagging nation, a lagging society. It has a very short experience of independent political life. The independence of the First Republic of Georgia [1918-1921] was ephemeral; civil society did not have time to form. Thereafter, during the communist epoch, the country was ruled from above, no civil movement existed. Consequently, we have a low capacity of civil activity, voicing protest, self-organization. Let us look into our culture – for example, in the literature of the Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries – and find out what worked then for Georgian intellectuals. At the same time, we can trace the [contemporaneous] intellectual movement in Europe to see what was going on in their universities. The difference is stark. Among ideas mainly expressed then in poetic language in our culture, one can also find social ideas, but not questions. Questions which, for example, [British philosopher Thomas] Hobbes raised during those times, were never raised in Georgia – not even questions about how and why [social] order exists.

- Are these questions absent today as well?

Those who are theoretically responsible for raising these questions, for engaging in intellectual dialogue on these issues, do not actually debate. Everything is politicized: Independent intellectuals who can speak as representatives of a sphere – as scientists and not as supporters of a political party or movement – are in short supply. Everyone, including intellectuals, may have a certain political zeal, fondness or interest, but they fail to neutralize it. The room for people rising above that is small; no one speaks, so to say, “objectively,” if such a thing is possible in social sciences. One aspect of a lagging society is precisely this: our society has never argued about issues of order, freedom. The problem is that the order in our country has always been established from above; Georgia was the colony [of Russia], then part of the Soviet Union, etcetera. Some feeble movements for independence were observed, but they often were of a spontaneous, unplanned nature. I would say those were still more political than social movements.

- What is the tendency, in your opinion? Is that situation changing?

Today, the order in Georgia is again established from above. It is established by the government.

Let us assume there is no strong political center that exercises its power on the society. What will we get? We will see that the society lacks any capacity to self-organize. Our culture is of that type. What we are good at is organizing funerals and weddings, at managing grief and happiness. This is a society that expects order from above. Consequently, the authority understands “order” as maximum control. The society protests against that, but the state cannot offer any alternative order.

In some sense, the state uses that situation; it offers a certain type of order to the society. The society does not accept that order because it does not actually participate in its creation. The order is not “mine” when I do not participate in its creation – or even when I have only the illusion that I do. For example, there is much talk that the government should not make decisions concerning issues of development, about the architecture of a city, and that that is the business of professionals and society.

- Does that mean that any step-up of the activity of society should be initiated by the state?

A wise government should care about strengthening social initiatives. Some signs of that can be seen. For example, friendships in high-rise residential buildings have been set up and the [Tbilisi] Mayor’s Office has allocated some funds for tending our doorways on a cooperative basis. Something has been done, but the involvement of the society in this undertaking is very low. Society is not interested in communal space used by all. They voice protest against the handover of squares and gardens to private persons, complaining that “gardens are taken away from people.” Say, the society, some spearheads, declares that they will look after it. It will turn out that they will fail to take care of it. Hence, the only solution remaining is either to give all this to a private person or to return it to the state to manage. The low degree – and, often, the absence – of self-organization is carte blanche for the government to exercise maximum power over the society. Saying that “power is excessive” means that



we, the society, enable the government to have that power. The government thinks that it must arrange the environment if there is no one else able to do that. The government is loaded with numerous such obligations which are the business of the society, not the government. Hence, the prospect of development [of civil society] is very limited.

- Have any changes been observed in this direction in the past few decades?

I cannot cite any significant example which would enable me to illustrate that the society has been changing, developing interest. No movement can be observed which is geared toward the creation of a common public good in which the state is not involved. That is the problem.

- Let's elaborate on that topic: You have noted that civil activity, civil society is weak; surveys also show a low trust toward and awareness about even non-governmental organizations. That is not true when it concerns the pre-Rose Revolution period, when civil society was stronger. What has changed since then?

What we used to call and still call "civil society" was a civil society [created] from above. Non-governmental organizations were a movement of intellectuals, a movement of those people who learned how to interact with foundations, how to write project proposals, etcetera.

- Such people exist today as well. Why are they weaker?

For a variety of reasons: Many activists of the civil society moved to the government after the Rose Revolution. And this has happened when our country is not rich in [human] resources. It is an utter illusion that resources are vast. Looking at the political spectrum of today, one can see that there cannot be large resources on the opposite side – say, on Bidzina Ivanishvili's side.

- However, it is still possible to evaluate Ivanishvili's choice.

Yes it is, but the choice itself is very limited. Today, the larger resources belong to the government.

As regards trust toward non-governmental organizations, there are pre-Rose Revolution sociological surveys which show that some trust toward non-governmental organizations existed then, but it was not very high.

- Awareness about non-governmental organizations must have been higher. That is also an indicator of their activity, isn't it?

One of the indicators is the following: One must be known to be trusted, but one may be known but not trusted. Non-governmental organizations and social movements are not something that resulted from internal boiling, discussion and reflection of the Georgian society itself. They were something imported, brought in from the outside. Hence, ordinary Georgians say that they are Masons; [NGOs and social movements secretly] serve someone else's interests. We are not a society organized on principles of rationalism.

- In one of your interviews, however, you said the tendency is that society is becoming more rational.

Yes, but this is based on economic rationalism. People who were born and died in the Soviet epoch never counted money. Today, the economic situation impels people to count [their money]. People of my generation are not rational in spending money, but I have students who plan their budgets in a rational way. Economic rationality may become a foundation of rationality of some other type, but our culture is still not of a Western-type. In contrast to that culture – where an individual has an awareness that he/she is the centre of the world and is able to change everything around him/her – the attitude here is that others will come and create change [for them]. That is the wrong attitude. No one else can create you from the outside. Our society needs more self-made-men – people not burdened by the past, so to speak.

- How do such people emerge?

They are within the society; they have achieved certain success in their respective spheres of activity – life forces them to become self-made individuals. It is such people that must be counted. In Western society, for example, there is no room for success among those people who have not had careers and who, all of a sudden, become heroes as if they were fairytale personages.

Yet another problem of our culture is the attitude toward property – not only the issue that the government intrudes and restricts someone's property. If that is true, I am not surprised. In our culture, property does not represent a value. For example, when a child steals fruit from the garden of a neighbor, that action is regarded as "childish." The child is not taught that that is someone else's property and cannot be infringed. Where that type of order is imposed from the outside, and is not

the result of our internal labor, we oppose it with animosity and fight against it.

- In this interview, you just mentioned a "political spectrum." In one of your earlier interviews, you said that the society cannot see an alternative political center. Has the situation changed in this respect, in your opinion?

According to my observation and some surveys, Bidzina Ivanishvili's political movement is an alternative political force for a certain segment of the society even though it is comprised of such people whom we know well, including from Shevardnadze's milieu. How the economic capital will be translated into the political capital, or what motives drive citizens, is another issue. For example, an ordinary citizen has an expectation that a person with a huge amount of money can change his/her life overnight and that he/she will get some benefit.

- Does that mean that requirements and expectations toward a leader, in general, are irrational?

Yes, it does. The requirements of voters are still irrational. He [Bidzina Ivanishvili] spent a certain amount of money for the society, but that does not mean that he will change everything radically overnight. Change can mean something bad and radically good as well. Society must be cautious and rational; it must not feed itself with illusions.

In general, a modern Georgian has numerous myths in his/her head. For example, I am sure that many entertain the illusion that the "Soviet paradise" may be resurrected. Time can never go backward, but the experience remains – the one that my generation acquired in the Soviet period and which proved completely useless in terms of civil activity.

- We touched upon the coming elections. A topical issue in this regard concerns public opinion polls. It often happens that various sociological research centers provide different findings and ratings. How much do these findings influence public opinion and what are the indicators that will help people identify which survey is reliable and which is not?

Trust is a key element of Western societies. Institutions there enjoy a high degree of trust. For example, when I need to go to the hospital, I choose a hospital with a high rating. When I choose a university, I trust the results of a survey, the ratings. It is in that way that we lag behind. We do not trust systems and institutions because these institutions do not have our strong respect.

Figures and statistics seriously affect people. For example, an Internet survey is not representative or reliable, but if its findings are presented [in a certain way] they will influence society. To manipulate sociological data is easy. One group may use findings for its own aims, yet it is difficult to detect the degree of that manipulation. Not everyone is interested, at a professional level, in the methodology applied in a survey. Statistics are often conflicting and generate mistrust toward those institutions. I am sure that the coming elections will be, in some sense, a battle of sociologists too. We will obtain starkly different findings. Surveys must be conducted by qualified scientists, institutions based on accepted and acknowledged methodology.

- What is your take about the relationship between the state and the Church and tendencies existing in this area? This topic has become very pressing lately, especially with the uproar about the Oshki and Ishkhani monasteries.

That relationship is quite tense. However, the state and Church need each other in some way. The state may need the rating of the Church, while the Church may need loyalty and certain assistance from the state. But the Church can refuse the benefit it receives from the state if someone else meets requirements – and in often cases, greed – of the Church.

I think, when it comes to ethnic minorities and civil rights, the Church has more imperialistic and non-civic views whereas the modern Georgian state has more civic views. Emphasis on ethnicity has been gradually disappearing from the rhetoric of politicians; nationalistic expressions, statements of a purely Nazi nature cannot actually be heard any longer. The society is also more or less vigilant not to allow such expressions. In general, Orthodox Christianity is socially undeveloped – it does not have a set of social guidelines. It does not have a doctrine about what sort of relationship it should have with the state and society. We do not know the views of the Church about social life, social justice.

- You mentioned ethnic minorities. Is the Georgian society tolerant, in your view?

Georgian tolerance is a huge myth that everyone – the government, society, nation state – needs. We invented myths about having democracy in the Twelfth Century. Societies of our type fervently look for pillars of support in the past in order to find a basis for the present situation.

- However, the myth of "tolerance" must also have had a basis.

The basis of that myth is considered a fact – that Tbilisi houses, side by side, synagogue, churches of different confessions, mosque, etcetera. When these religious buildings were built, the phenomenon known as "nation state" did not exist.

Nationalism is strange to monarchy – a monarch is everyone's monarch; [a monarch] will stretch out his/her hand to anyone who will recognize his/her sovereignty. Since we did not have a nation state [when Tbilisi religious buildings were built], we do not know whether or not we are – or were – tolerant.

The majority must step back and cede when it comes to minority ethnic groups. Such awareness does not exist. That is perceived as an offence.

We have failed to establish a system, an order. We do not have a strict, carefully weighed, thought-out concept of order. Accordingly, we have no idea what freedom means. We understand “freedom” as arbitrariness while “order” is understood as a violent control. Hence, schools have resource officers who restrict youths' antisocial behavior, which is perceived by the society as violence against their children. If we removed that [control of resource officers], we would end up with delinquent youngsters because neither they nor their parents would be able to generate and establish social order. Freedom, for our society, means impropriety, while government order is understood in its maximum sense. Those perceptions conflict with and contradict each other.

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