

Ghia Nodia

A Year at the Wissenschaftskolleg



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The life of many intellectuals in my part of the world (I mean post-Communist countries, especially those that have not been considerably successful since the regime changed) is quite different from that of our Western colleagues. Unlike the latter, we cannot take our institutional environment or the positions we occupy within it for granted, because the

traditional academic system collapsed or became obsolete (together with many other things). Hence we have been trying both to create a new institutional environment for ourselves and to do some scholarly work within it. My Western colleagues operate within fairly stable and closed academic systems but long to change the world; we long for stable and solid environment where we can do our intellectual work quietly, but we can hardly survive without trying to change something around us.

Going to the Wissenschaftskolleg was a chance to escape from this ambivalence and recapture my lost identity of an ivory tower intellectual – although I was well aware that I had to divide time between my responsibilities vis-à-vis a think tank I lead in Georgia (I could carry out some of them through e-mail) and my research. I did not achieve as much as I planned to, but was partly reassured by a small survey that I conducted among fellow-Fellows, who almost invariably answered my question, “How was this year for you?”: It was wonderful, probably the best (or one of the best) year of my life, I got lots of work done, but still less than I intended. Probably the conditions here are so good, and the staff works so hard in order to relieve us of all our problems save for concentrating on our research, that this gives rise to utopian expectations: we think that in a place like this, anything can be accomplished.

My research agenda (probably, reflecting the above ambiguity of my status) also happens to be double: on the one hand, I follow my natural propensity to broad theoretical issues, namely the attitude of bonds of ethnicity, of the idea of the nation and the ideology of nationalism to those ideas that make it possible for the liberal democracy to be the dominant paradigm of the political order of modernity. On the other hand, I write a lot on the processes in Georgia and the region of the Caucasus. One can say that the latter is the application of the former, or that my theoretical ideas are at least in part due to my attempts to understand complicated processes (normally called “processes of transition”) in my own country and the region around it.

At the Wissenschaftskolleg, I worked on both topics. My general attitude to the problem of nationalism is that although there are obvious tensions between the values of nationalism on the one hand and democracy and liberalism on the other, the former can be understood only in an inherent correlation with the process of political modernization, which includes universal dissemination of the liberal-democratic order (although democracy and liberalism are two separate principles, in the context of political modernization they should be considered as two components of a single political model). To say the least, nationalism (which I primarily understand as the ideology of the nation-state) is an unavoidable by-product of

the spread of liberal democracy as a universally valid model of political order.

Here I focused more on the mechanisms of the *dissemination* of democratic order and its relation to nationalism. The inherent relation between nationalism on the one hand and liberal and democratic values on the other is overlooked because democracy and liberalism are treated predominantly as *normative* theories. As such, they do not require nationalism; rather, normative understanding of liberal democracy considers nationalism primarily as an impediment. But if we want to talk about the *reality* of liberal democracy, about how democracy and liberalism spread and develop on this particular planet in this particular period of time that we usually call “modernity”, I believe we cannot understand this without reference to nationhood and nationalism.

Today, liberal democracy is the only political model claiming universal validity; it is almost taken for granted in the part of the world that calls itself “civilized”. But this is a very new development, and not very long ago democrats considered democracy something much more fragile and exceptional and were much less optimistic about its prospects. The modern model of liberal democracy was created under quite specific circumstances and in a specific area of the world, north-eastern Europe. Afterwards, it was widely spread through mechanisms of transplantation (like European social-political-economic “code” being transplanted to “new” continents of America or Australia) or imitation (including imposed imitations). The dynamics of democratizations by way of imitation are very different from “home-grown” ones. In particular, preliminary construction of ideal models of the desired political system – ideologies – plays an especially big role in the process. It is here that nationalism emerges as a carrier of political modernization, even if a controversial one. Democratizations by way of imitation require enlightened elites that want to implement “progressive” ideas on the one hand, but also polities, political communities that should be molded to serve as the underpinning of the new order. Democratizing ideologies need to have both the “enlightened” aspect of implementing the most glorious values of mankind, but also the populist aspect to mobilize masses against the *ancien régime*. This makes two major modern populist ideologies – nationalism and socialism, that both foster democracies and impede them – indispensable or unavoidable.

During my stay at the Wissenschaftskolleg, we were all reminded that the topic of nationalism is very current in its various manifestations. In 1998–99, Germany had to struggle with deep economic problems, such as unemployment; despite this, the greatest public interest was attracted by issues that may be broadly defined as those of nationalism: public debate between Martin Walser and Ignaz Bubis about attitudes toward the Ger-

man past, and the project of revamping citizenship law in Germany. This showed that even in developed, established democracies like today's Germany, issues like participation in the national polity – and the terms of such participation – are still as current as ever. I could not help putting some of my thoughts on the Walser-Bubis debate on paper, though I did it in the form of a German language exercise for my wonderful teacher here, Eva Hund. On the other hand, this was the year of the NATO action in Kosovo: something that could become a turning point in Western attitudes to ethnic cleansing. I could not refrain from expressing my ambivalent attitudes toward it (in *die Tageszeitung*) and co-organized with my colleague Andrei Markovits a discussion among Wiko Fellows on the topic.

I also worked on a number of topics related to political and social processes in Georgia – and my stay was quite productive in that sense. In particular, here I wrote my chapters of the book about the response of the Georgian society towards recent dramatic transformations that I am going to co-author with Professor Theodore Hanf. I also wrote three other articles on various aspects of Georgian developments that have been or are to be published in different volumes.

I started this small paper by saying that I cannot take the institutional environment of my research for granted. I could not get rid of this habit while in Germany either. I know that a number of Wiko Fellows of previous generations were so impressed by the excellent conditions for research that this institution provided that they tried – sometimes with the Wiko's help – to establish something more or less similar in their home countries. I could not resist the same temptation. With the kind help and encouragement of my hosts, I developed a project for an institution for the three countries in the Caucasus that would encourage advanced research in social sciences and humanities. So with good luck, hard work and adequate assistance, my stay at the Wissenschaftskolleg may have other results as well.