Between the public and the private

Socialism, capitalism and street socialisation in Georgia

Costanza Curro

Introduction: Everyday practices and the public/private divide

This chapter investigates street hangouts known as birzha (‘stock exchange’ in Russian). Birzha is a form of male street socialisation which has been prominent in Georgia since Soviet times. Birzha is made up of young men sitting, chatting, drinking, exchanging items and securing various deals at street corners or other open spaces in urban neighbourhoods (although, as we shall see, the phenomenon has rural origins). Birzha is a ‘school of the street’ at which young men learn the foundational principles of Georgian manhood, but it is also deemed to be the initial step into a potential criminal career.

This practice outlived the fall of socialism and navigated the troubled 1990s and the years following the 2003 Rose Revolution. At each of these recent historical stages, birzha has adapted to and counteracted different moral, social, political and economic orders. In different ways, these orders saw street hangouts as an eyesore in the framework of attempted modernisation projects from the top down – whether from a socialist or neo-liberal capitalist perspective.

Drawing upon research conducted in Georgia in 2008–2009, 2014 and 2017, as well as on the analyses by Georgian and international media and of relevant literature from social and political science, this chapter investigates transformations of birzha against such dramatically changing backgrounds. This analysis casts a light on the resilience and response of everyday practices embedded in specific moral, cultural and social grounds to different political and economic regimes, focusing in particu-
lar on the rise of neo-liberalism in the region as a purportedly successful doctrine to fix the flaws of post-communist societies.

My research identifies birzha as an ambivalent practice between the public and the private spheres. Following Lofland’s reference to the *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary of the English Language*’s definition of ‘public space’, I understand the ‘public’ as what is ‘accessible or visible to all members of the community’. This definition does not apply only to physical, but also to social spaces, as well as to practices, institutions and resources. By contrast, the ‘private’ is accessible to and useable by only certain individuals and groups (for example, the family and the house as private space *par excellence*), and under certain conditions (such as payments for private education or private healthcare).

The ambivalent position of birzha between the public and the private realms is empirically illustrated by three instances. First, birzha hangouts flourish between the public streets of the neighbourhoods and the private space of the house. Second, mainstream political narratives throughout Georgia’s recent history (in particular, since the 2003 Rose Revolution) have associated the informal networks of ‘private’ friendship and comradeship created at birzha with crime and corruption, which, especially during the 1990s ‘transition’ to market capitalism, had a strong grip on the public sphere of politics and economics. Finally, private relationships of trust, reciprocity and mutual responsibility underpinning birzha have worked as a fundamental form of psychological, social and material support amidst political and economic hardship, making up for public institutions’ inability to cater for citizens’ needs.

The political narratives that underpinned the Rose Revolution and its aftermath considered the years between the fall of socialism and the political and social upheaval which brought Mikheil Saak’ashvili to power to be a flawed transition to capitalism and democracy. A system which was corrupt under communist rule outlived the demise of the Soviet Union, reproducing the same dynamics and often endorsing the same people who had served the previous regime. Greedy private interests encroached on public institutions and prevented the efficient delivery of public goods and services to the population. For ‘real’ change to take place and boost the country’s ‘modernisation’, a thorough process of reforms needed to wipe out all the poisonous legacies of socialism and its immediate aftermath. Inspired by Western neo-liberalism, these reforms attempted to establish clear boundaries between the public and the private and targeted not only politics and economics, but also people’s cultural and moral values, as well as everyday practices in which Georgian citizens engaged. While favouring private initiative and minimising the
role of the state in economic affairs, the post-revolutionary government aimed to make public institutions transparent and accountable, and strengthened the rule of law and the image of the state as the main source of authority and order.\(^6\)

In this context, \textit{birzha} was out of place for two main reasons. First, street hangouts of young men lying about, drinking and engaging in dubious deals were at odds with the image of a clean and safe place and a rapidly modernising society, which the government wanted to transmit to its own citizens as well as to foreign observers, donors and policymakers. Second, practices providing informal support for people’s everyday life would no longer be needed with efficient public institutions and a secured private sphere in which a market economy could flourish. A strong rule of law and a lively and flexible economy would create order and wealth for the ultimate benefit of all citizens.\(^7\)

However, the bold neo-liberal reforms which the government implemented to modernise the country, and the authoritarian stance which social practices at odds with this project were dealt with, dismantled social security across society and undermined citizens’ trust in the post-revolutionary political institutions’ actual democratic and transparent nature. Deep inconsistencies at the heart of the government’s modernisation project became increasingly apparent, eventually leading to the defeat of Saak’ashvili and his United National Movement (\textit{Ertiani Natsionaluri Modzraoba}, or ENM) in the 2012 and 2013 elections.

After an overview of my research methods, this chapter presents \textit{birzha} in its historical, cultural, spatial and social dimensions. I highlight the ambivalence of this practice as a fundamental institution for young male Georgians coming of age, but also as a semi-criminal phenomenon. I also analyse the blurred boundaries between public and private physical, social and political spaces along which \textit{birzha} develops. Second, \textit{birzha} is investigated in its ambivalent relationship with the cultural, social, political and economic order of the socialist era and the 1990s. The Soviet regime officially condemned \textit{birzha} as a practice at odds with its principles. Yet, particularly in its late years, the system tolerated private practices and networks which catered for citizens’ needs vis-à-vis a public sphere characterised by endemic shortage and political authoritarianism. In the 1990s, organised crime and corruption took over public institutions, while sheer poverty and civil and ethnic conflict ravaged the country. In this context, \textit{birzha} played a vital role in the neighbourhood’s life to facilitate informal access to goods and services, which the official system failed to provide. However, \textit{birzha} was also ‘part of the problem’ inasmuch as links between
street hangouts and the criminal world, which paralysed political and economic institutions and plagued society with violence, were apparent.

Third, the chapter discusses the post–Rose Revolution modernisation project and its attempts to establish clear-cut boundaries between the public and the private as an essential source of transparency, order and prosperity. This project identified birzha as opposed to the idea of law-abiding and hard-working citizens (and youth in particular) which the post-revolutionary political elites had in mind. Confident in its own popularity, the government dealt with birzha in an arbitrary way, targeting street hangouts with extreme harshness. However, failure to improve the life conditions of a large part of the population, and the oppressive nature that citizens increasingly ascribed to the government’s attitudes and actions, alienated people’s support from Saak’ashvili’s leadership, uncovering contradictions in the post-revolutionary modernisation project.

In the conclusion, I highlight the resilience of birzha in today’s Georgia, which indicates that the implementation of bold neo-liberal reforms, coupled with the arbitrary use of power against unwanted individuals and practices as a way to modernise the country, did not deliver the expected results. In a morally, culturally, socially, politically and economically fragmented context, many Georgian citizens still rely on ties developed through everyday practices to access material and non-material goods. These ties are often endowed with higher trust and respect than official institutions, which have largely failed to empower many people in their economic well-being and democratic participation, providing just a partial alternative with respect to the previous systems.

**Researching birzha**

My interest in birzha began in a fortuitous way. I was doing research in Tbilisi in 2008 and 2009 on a different topic and was being hosted by a family which lived in a residential neighbourhood on the outskirts of the capital, mostly made up of middle- and low-income households. I noticed that teenagers and young men hanging out in the streets were a permanent feature of that and other areas of Tbilisi. Residents referred to such gatherings, which seemed inseparable from the neighbourhood’s physical and social landscape, as birzha. Regardless of people’s various degrees of involvement in street life, knowledge of street norms was widespread among the neighbourhood’s inhabitants. Stories and gossip about events concerning the local birzha circulated widely among locals.
Ordinary residents’ acquaintance with birzha was essential for the outcomes of my research. ‘Second-hand’ information was provided by people detached from birzha in time and space, such as older men recalling their youthful experiences or mothers and wives worried about men wasting time in the street. Thanks to these respondents, I could partly counterbalance the limits imposed by the almost exclusively male access to birzha. Moreover, due to the status of birzha as a phenomenon more or less close to the criminal world, many of my friends and acquaintances warned me to stay away from ‘those issues’. Birzha was considered, if not a dangerous business, at least a despicable reality with which respectable people (especially if female and a foreigner) should not get mixed up in. The association of birzha with semi-legal and illegal activities also meant that birzha members tended to be suspicious of a stranger’s interest in their street community and therefore not keen to disclose information.

The analysis presented here is based on three main methods: (partial) observation of birzha as a feature of several of Tbilisi’s neighbourhoods; perceptions and definitions collected in conversations with young male friends and acquaintances (aged 16 to 27), who were more or less closely related to birzha, but did not necessarily think of themselves as being part of it; narratives of birzha provided by outsiders (and, in some cases, former insiders), such as older men and women of all ages.

Birzha: Moral values and social norms of Georgian street communities

Birzha refers to groups of male teenagers or young men who meet regularly in urban open spaces such as squares, courtyards and playgrounds. The Russian word literally means ‘stock exchange’. In Georgian, birzha is used colloquially; in the Dictionary of Georgian Slang, the term is defined as an ‘open-pit gathering of idle youth’.8 The reference to the financial world may sound ironic as generally participants are economically inactive (students or unemployed). However, birzha is where valuable exchange of social capital takes place.

Another meaning of birzha from nineteenth-century Russian slang denotes a place where people line up in hope for a temporary job.9 Similarly, ethnographies of the post-Soviet space (in this case Lithuania) indicate that a group of men waiting in the street for informal short-term employment is called a ‘darbo birzha’, the formal Lithuanian term for ‘unemployment agency’.10 The little literature available on the topic describes birzha as a pervasive phenomenon among urban male youth,
a pivotal stage in the process of identification within local communities, as well as a potential initial step into a criminal career.\textsuperscript{11}

In the context of Georgia, the understanding of \textit{birzha} is disputed. According to several participants, \textit{birzha} is neither exclusively male and juvenile nor peculiarly urban but is widely considered to be a phenomenon of rural origins, which was successfully urbanised. Literary sources point to the pre-Soviet institution of adoptive brotherhood (\textit{modsmeoba}), in which spiritual kinship serves as the basis for social and political allegiances between Caucasian highlanders.\textsuperscript{12}

Today, \textit{birzha} is visible in the streets and squares in urban neighbourhoods, \textit{ubani} in Georgian (sometimes also referred to as \textit{kvartali}, from the Russian \textit{kvartal}). \textit{Birzha} spreads across the urban space, penetrating liminal areas. In the urban landscape, liminal spaces or ‘interstices’\textsuperscript{13} are zones that ‘are essentially away from a “public gaze” [sic] whilst simultaneously situated within a public space’.\textsuperscript{14} Liminal spaces occupy a ‘minoritarian’ position with respect to other spaces that are ‘either more institutionalized, and therefore economically and legally powerful, or endowed with a stronger identity, and therefore more recognizable or typical’.\textsuperscript{15} Yet, liminality produces identities, practices, norms and power relations in its own right.

In the neighbourhoods of Tbilisi, variously sized groups of men populate the thresholds between house and street, between family and state: street corners, playgrounds, stairways, courtyards, block gates, cellars and basements. As a phenomenon pervasive in spaces which are neither public nor private, \textit{birzha} lives in the tension between the private realm of domesticity and close relationships and the public sphere of the state and other official institutions. As will be discussed below, the moral, cultural, social, political and economic structure of \textit{birzha} has generated practices that have represented an alternative, and often an opposition, to Georgia’s official system at various stages of the country’s recent history.\textsuperscript{16}

\textit{Birzha} is defined as the principal school for masculinity, which marks an essential stage in the transition from teenager to manhood.\textsuperscript{17} For males, membership in \textit{birzha} comes as a birth right, regardless of ethnicity, religion or socio-economic status.\textsuperscript{18} Inclusion is conditional on compliance with street norms, whose pivotal points are honour, honesty, manly attitudes and respect for the elderly, and which are predicated on a rigid hierarchy of identities and roles. The fundamental authority in the \textit{birzha} hierarchy is the \textit{dzveli bich’i} (‘old boy’), a young man aiming for a career in the criminal world.\textsuperscript{19} His key features are an utter disregard for official rules and authorities, mastery of street norms, proneness to using
violence to solve conflicts, and prison experience. Dzveli bich’i status is regarded as the first level of a criminal hierarchy which culminates in the figure of the ‘thief-in-law’, k’anonieri kurdi, a semi-mythical kind of bandit that has its origins in Stalin’s labour camps and developed in various forms across the Soviet Union.20

In my research, I came across flexible meanings of birzha, which transcend the narrow reference to semi-criminal street gangs. In the perspective of several of my participants, birzha partially overlapped with dzmak’atsoba.21 Dzmak’atsoba is a stronger and manlier relationship than the neutral ‘friendship’, megobroba, and refers to the link with a dzmak’atsi – from dzma (‘brother’) and k’atsi (‘man’). In the words of Giorgi (42, profession unknown), a dzmak’atsi is ‘more than a friend, more than a brother’. The strongest kind of dzmak’atsoba is with your ‘friend from childhood’ (bashvobis dzmak’atsi), and according to Giorgi, ‘it’s a friendship that should last forever, and it’s really sad if you lose this mate’. A dzmak’atsi is someone to whom ‘you can entrust your mother, your sister and your wife’. But if the mutual loyalty is betrayed, even such an important friend can become the most despised foe. In Giorgi’s view, ‘when a dzmak’atsi lets you down and betrays your trust, he ought to be killed. In my life I have learned that almost nobody is worthy of being called dzmak’atsi’.

As Giorgi’s words indicate, trust is pivotal to personal ties within birzha, and to relationships between dzmak’atsi in general. These relationships oblige one to be totally honest with other birzha members, take responsibility for oneself and face the consequences of breaking street laws. Severe violations include deceiving or betraying birzha members, especially collaborating with the police or other state institutions; verbally offending or physically attacking another birzha member or somebody close to him (particularly a female member of his family); and letting down a dzmak’atsi and failing to respect older residents of the neighbourhood (whether or not affiliated to birzha). Yet, solidarity between dzmak’atsi is also intertwined with (sometimes physical) competitiveness between birzhas from different neighbourhoods and even members of the same birzha. Success in enhancing one’s position among peers is linked to cunning behaviour, proneness to risks, mastery of street laws and strong ties with influential dzveli bich’i or the neighbourhood’s elderly.

Relationships in the street are regulated by reciprocity. Birzha is informed by ongoing exchanges of material and non-material items. The term indicates multi-directional giving and taking, and business deals, both small and large, take place in the street. Sharing is a common feature: members of the street community are expected to circulate ciga-
rettes, clothes and other belongings among peers. Since *birzha* mostly consist of young people, who usually do not own much, sharing is of high importance. Those who are better off than others (even if only temporarily, because they have found a short-term job or have taken a loan or received a gift from friends or family) make their resources available to the group.

Money can be used to purchase drinks and food, to pay for a taxi for a trip out of town, to feast in a restaurant or to go out to clubs or bars. In Tbilisi, a widespread custom is to buy fresh beer directly from the local brewery on the banks of the river Mt'k'vari and treat fellow *birzha* members to it, together with dry smoked fish and rye bread. One can often spot groups of men drinking beer on the brewery’s premises, sitting on the pavement or on the parapet by the riverside. Others take large plastic bottles full of beer back to their neighbourhoods and share it with friends while sitting outdoors.

*Birzha* is a fundamental institution for young Georgian men to create close relationships with their peers across their neighbourhoods. These relationships are based on mutual trust, total dedication and honesty towards street communities, and a willingness to share goods, feelings and experiences with other *birzha* members. Streets and squares of Georgian cities and towns are the stage for equitable exchanges, through which young people come of age sharing moral, cultural and social values. However, while the exclusive and often hierarchical structure of *birzha* establishes strong ties within street communities, it cuts out other members of society. Furthermore, the more or less tight links between *birzha* and organised crime throughout recent Georgian history have contributed to create an image of street communities – variously emphasised by political authorities and partially resonating across the population – as idle and lost youths who encroach on public space for their murky and selfish business. The following section discusses the key features of the ambivalent relation between *birzha* and the official system in the Soviet era and throughout the 1990s.

*Birzha* under socialism and in the 1990s

In Soviet and post-Soviet times up to the Rose Revolution, *birzha* occupied the ‘grey zones’ between public and private social and physical spaces. The Soviet-type social and political structure envisages ‘the realm of officialdom’ on the one hand, including the ruling elite, *apparat* and *nomenklatura*, and ‘the domestic realm of family and friendship’ on the
other hand, resting upon kinship ties, intimacy networks and shared value commitments. Yet, in between there is a “social realm” encompassing the enormous and complex domain developing between the top level of the Party-state and family and friends networks – that is, the domain of work, routine administration, and “official” associational life. Only on the surface is this intermediate space organised through ideological, meritor-ocratic or authoritarian principles; its core structure develops ‘along lines of bargaining, reciprocal favours, mutual dependencies, networks of connections, dissimulation, circumvention of regulations and procedures’. Although emerging from the private space of family and friend relationships, this ‘private-public realm’ or ‘second public’ is at the same time clearly separated from the official public.

In socialist systems, the public sphere largely overlapped with the state, and only activities controlled by the authorities were allowed publicly. In this context, the grey zones between public and private inhabited by birzha formed a niche relatively free of the system’s regimentation. Birzha was an alternative form of youth association to those promoted by Soviet authorities, such as the Young Pioneers and the Komsomol. In contrast to public images of socialist youth as the most active part of the population in realising the collective goals of Soviet society, birzha valued loyalty to personal ties more highly than loyalty to the state and the Party. Images of hard-working and healthy Soviet youth clashed with the perceived inactivity and debauchery of birzha members.

In Soviet cityscapes, ‘open “public” spaces [were] perceived as something alien and belonging to the state, not to the inhabitants’, turning an ideal ‘everyone’s space’ into ‘no one’s space’. Birzha catered for a different kind of collective interaction in urban spaces, as a way in which ‘ordinary residents appropriated public places beyond the mainstream paradigms and master narratives of the city image’. By carving out social and physical grey zones partially spared from state control, birzha created spaces for those young men to whom socialist symbolic and material power was alien. However, while ideologically stigmatised by official authorities, birzha was hardly subject to actual repression from the Soviet state. The latter (especially in its later years) in fact tolerated informal networks and practices grounded in grey zones between the public and the private, inasmuch as citizens’ access to informal means ‘enabled the system to function and made it tolerable’.

When the Soviet Union came to an end, in Georgia the public sphere of politics and the economy was taken over by the private interests of organised criminal groups or paramilitary squads. They infiltrated and paralysed the state, which prevented public institutions from fulfilling...
Corruption became pervasive in all aspects of public life, from politics and business to education, from the police to the health system. The blurred lines between public and private encouraged the abuse of public resources for the benefit of private interests. While pointing out the greed of corrupt politicians and businessmen as a major cause of the country’s miserable conditions, citizens themselves often resorted to petty bribery as the easiest, and sometimes the only possible way to secure essential goods and services.

The physical and social public space was ravaged by violence and decay. In a neighbourhood life of struggle and sharing, birzha had a prominent role. It facilitated access to goods and services which the shortcomings of official institutions otherwise made unattainable, moving easily within and across boundaries and merging the public with the private. In addition, birzha was a way for young men to cultivate ideas and practices of masculinity in a context in which unemployment, heavy drinking, criminality and drug addiction severely challenged men’s ability to live up to the traditional male role of breadwinner and wise and honourable member of the community. On the one hand, many young men referred to being part of birzha in the 1990s and circumventing official rules as a form of protest against the system. On the other hand, birzha was linked to the criminal world, which had considerable political and economic power. As a result, in several citizens’ perspectives birzha stood out more as an expression of, rather than a form of, resistance to corruption and violence.

Clearing grey zones: Birzha after the Rose Revolution

Following the political narratives that surrounded the Rose Revolution, the system which developed out of the Soviet regime in the 1990s was democratic and capitalist in theory, but in fact offered no real alternative to what went before. Corruption and the prominent influence of organised crime in the political and economic sphere prevented the creation of accountable public institutions and a lively public realm in which citizens could participate. The development of secure private property and business, which would boost a market economy, was also hampered.

The post-revolutionary political leadership, which ruled the country from 2003 to 2012, envisaged the ‘transition’ from socialism to capitalism and democracy as a movement from backwardness to modernity. Transparency, as the opposite of the corrupt ‘private use of public good’, was the banner under which the government implemented reforms which
aimed to get rid of ambivalent grey zones in politics, economics and the law. Following core neo-liberal principles, a vast process of privatisation and deregulation went hand in hand with a radical restructuring of public institutions and services, such as the police and local authorities.\(^{40}\)

The modern and transparent society framed by post-revolutionary political narratives stood in opposition to the blurred boundaries informing citizens’ relationship with the state and the rule of law. These narratives depicted the Georgian population as pervaded by a ‘culture of informality’, which supposedly affected all social mechanisms. People’s habit of circumventing formal rules to ‘get things done’ was not a by-product of institutional inefficiencies, but a way of thinking that had corrupted citizens’ moral principles. In an interview with the German filmmaker Stefan Tolz in 2013, Saak’ashvili attacked his people’s way of relating to official rules, stressing that dramatic changes at the institutional level must go hand in hand with a radical transformation of the population’s moral and cultural ground:

But everybody has to pay [taxes], it’s [not] something that has ever been heard of here. Or when everybody had to put seatbelts on, unheard of in our part of the world. Or nobody could take bribes, you know, very unusual. And you know when you ask people say, even today when we did opinion polls and you ask people: What is a crime? People say: ‘Oh killing somebody is a crime, raping is a crime, not paying taxes not really a crime, I mean just taking bribes, oh well, he has to feed his family, right? This official, he took like 500 euros, so what a big deal.’ People were saying that in opinion polls. Overcoming that I guess, that takes a couple of generations.\(^{41}\)

Many studies of both Soviet and 1990s Georgia discuss citizens’ alienation from political institutions as a crucial factor in determining the spread of practices that circumvent official norms.\(^{42}\) It is argued that ‘state laws have been avoided not only because they were bad but because the population could manage better without them’.\(^{43}\) The Rose Revolution, as depicted in collective narratives, political analyses and media coverage, was expected to reverse this trend, and ‘perhaps for the first time in Georgia’s modern history, establish the congruity of private and public well-being’.\(^{44}\)

In the communist era, the mistrust which informed the relationship between state and citizens stemmed from the perception of public institutions as the expression of a hostile power. In the 1990s, the public sphere of the state, rather than representing the ‘common good’, was seen
by citizens as the arena in which greedy officials fought for their private interests, neglecting the miserable conditions of a large part of the population. The Rose Revolution pledged to make the public realm, embodied by state institutions, finally accountable.

The modern public and private, which represented a radical alternative to the socialist system and its poisonous legacies, were to be inhabited by modern individuals. The ideal citizens of post-revolutionary Georgia were patriotic but also cosmopolitan, independent, ambitious and law-abiding. People’s everyday practices mattered for defining social profiles that fitted, or did not fit, the country’s radical renovation. Social practices had to conform to modernisation narratives, embodying trust in institutions, respect for the law, an ambitious way of thinking and an efficient lifestyle. Most importantly, people’s practices were expected to stick to the clear-cut division between the public and the private.

For a number of reasons, the post-revolutionary government identified birzha as one of the main targets of its modernisation project. First, birzha was a blatant expression of the despised features of the past: petty crime, over-drinking, drug use and inactivity. Second, birzha and the criminal world competed with the state for moral, social, political, legal and economic authority – especially among the youth, whom the government had placed at the forefront of the modernisation project. An indication of the popularity of street life and the criminal world among young people is the fact that 25 per cent of Georgian schoolchildren interviewed in 1993 declared that they wanted to be thieves-in-law when they grew up.

Third, young men who hung out in public spaces, getting drunk, talking loudly and negotiating dubious deals, spoiled the image of cleanliness and safety which the government wanted external observers and visitors to see. Birzha embodied liminal use of public spaces, transcending the divide between the public and the private which the political leadership aimed to establish as a fundamental sign of the country’s modernity.

The zero-tolerance approach taken by the government aimed to remove undesirable practices, of which birzha was a paradigmatic expression, and those who engaged in them from the city’s physical and cultural landscape. In his 2006 address to parliament, Saak’ashvili referred to the tough policies being implemented against petty crime as aiming to ‘clean our streets of this rubbish’. The Georgian Criminal Code was reformed to include harsher sanctions against petty theft and minor drug-related offences. During Saak’ashvili’s rule, many of my young male research participants were worried about the increasing presence of police patrols (p’at’ruli) in the streets. Some people avoided going out at night,
even to the local shop. This behaviour was motivated by the belief that young males hanging out after a certain hour in certain areas were suspicious. Data confirm the government’s repressive stance against people and practices considered unsuitable to the modernisation project. The harsh sanctions imposed for petty crime during Saak’ashvili’s presidency led to the prison population becoming one of the highest per capita in the world.51

**Conclusion: Everyday practices as the alternative?**

The political order brought about by the Rose Revolution presented itself as the only real alternative to the flaws of the communist system, which had endured the fall of the Soviet Union and had precipitated the country into poverty, crime and conflict throughout the 1990s. Post-revolutionary political narratives identified the blurred boundaries between the public and the private as an essential feature of these flaws and the main hindrance to the country’s modernisation. Transparency and order were the foundational pillars not only of a projected modern society, politics and economics, but also of modern citizens’ moral and cultural ground.

A large part of the population, however, questioned the means by which the government tried to modernise society. Many of my participants were disappointed by the developments of the Rose Revolution not only because of the lack of improvement in people’s socio-economic conditions but also because they perceived state authority as an arbitrary power which made it dangerous to walk in the streets of the neighbourhood after dusk, discuss politics in public, or go to a protest rally.52 The growing inequality brought into place by swift privatisation and deregulation53 went hand in hand with the severe violation of democratic and civil liberties, regardless of the post-revolutionary government’s official rhetoric. This increasingly alienated citizens’ trust in post-revolutionary political elites and in the implementation of political and economic models which these elites believed to be the only viable alternative to the backwardness and lawlessness inherited from socialism and its aftermath.

Theoretical analyses and empirical contributions on everyday practices in post-socialism systems have called into question the fading away of these practices as a form of support resulting from the development of free market and democratic rights, which would provide a political and economic environment able to cater for the needs of all citizens. Instead, these studies have pointed out that, in spite of optimistic expectations, ‘shock therapies’ and subsequent economic policies implemented after
the fall of socialism did not bring about immediate development and well-being for everyone, but in most cases had a devastating effect on the already precarious lives of millions of people. In such contexts, although changing to adapt to different circumstances, everyday practices have maintained their role as a means of psychological, social, political and economic support amidst growing inequality and uncertainty.54

Reforms implemented by the post-revolutionary government aimed to efface the ambivalence between the public and the private and introduce respect for the law, meritocracy, ambition and transparency as foundational values of modern Georgian society. Sanctions and repression targeted those individuals and social phenomena which did not fit this project. Yet, the post-revolutionary government’s vision of the end of ‘transition’ as the demise of grey zones in favour of clear-cut distinctions proved to be inconsistent. Indeed, at the end of Saak’ashvili’s rule in 2012, groups of young men hanging out at birzha had become a less conspicuous feature across the cityscape. Yet, the harsh policies implemented by the government against birzha did not have a long-term effect, and transformations in the prominence and visibility of street communities are more closely connected to increased social and geographical mobility among young people.55 In the years following the United National Movement’s electoral defeat in 2012, birzha has proved to be a resilient practice among many young men coming of age. This happens in spite of enduring hostility from the political authorities and the ambivalent status of birzhas within their own neighbourhoods, in which they are met by residents’ tolerance mixed with suspicion.56

Birzha’s ability to adapt to and outlive different social, political and economic orders indicates that projects of top-down reform of a society have overlooked the importance and strength of everyday practices embedded in relationships of trust, reciprocity and solidarity. These practices develop from ties cultivated in the private sphere of the house, the neighbourhood, and the circle of friends and colleagues, but are also parallel and complementary to public institutions, catering for needs which the official system is unable, or unwilling, to fulfil. The case of post–Rose Revolution Georgia, while grounded in its own specifics, provides grounds for comparison with other countries in the post-socialist space which have experienced the rise of neo-liberalism and the importation of Western political and economic models as the best available options for moving forward from socialist legacies. As the analysis of birzha vis-à-vis the official system indicates, this approach has significant flaws, which call into question the suitability of such political and economic models for the realities to which they have been applied. The top-down implementation of
several post-socialist reforms has often disregarded the role of embedded practices and relationships as fundamental cultural, social, political and economic alternatives to the official system. This obliviousness has contributed to create the fragmentation and marginalisation that different social and political contexts across the region experience today.

Notes


18 Brighenti, ‘Urban Interstices’.


21 Frederiksen, ‘Young Men, Time and Boredom’. See also Frederiksen, ‘Good Hearts or Big Bellies’.


36 Curro, ‘From Goods to Emotions’. See also Frederiksen, ‘Good Hearts or Big Bellies’.
37 Zakharova, ‘Street Life in Tbilisi’.
39 See also Transparency International, working definition of corruption as ‘the abuse of entrusted power for private gain’, applying both to the public and the private sector, https://www.transparency.org/cpi2011/in_detail.
41 Full Speed Westward [Film Documentary/Video], directed by S. Tolz (Germany: Cologne Filmproduktion, 2013).
43 Jones, ‘The Rose Revolution’, 44.
44 Jones, ‘The Rose Revolution’, 44.
50 Curro, ‘Davabirzhaot!’.
55 Curro, ‘From Goods to Emotions’. See also Zakharova, ‘Street Life in Tbilisi’; K. Roberts and G. Pollock, ‘New Class Divisions in the New Market Economies: Evidence from the Careers of


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