

# Moving West at Any Cost?

*Occidentalism and U.S. Public Diplomacy among a  
New Generation in Post-Revolutionary Georgia*

Niclaes Grønneberg Løken



Master's Thesis

Department of Social Anthropology

UNIVERSITY OF OSLO

May 2016



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# Abstract

Since the 2003 Rose Revolution, the Republic of Georgia has undergone political upheavals as part of aspiring to become a more modern and Western nation. The recovery from a transition to capitalism and Georgia's geopolitical conflicts involving Russia, however, have proven obstructing factors in this prolonged endeavour.

Based on approximately 5,5 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Batumi, a cosmopolitan city within the Autonomous Republic of Ajara, the thesis is concerned with how the Georgian youth generation currently relates to the United States as an epitomised notion of the West. The U.S. diplomatic presence in Georgia is significant relative to other former Soviet republics: since the late 1990s, it has contributed to socio-economic development, aid assistance, and nurtured good bilateral relations.

The case study's institutional locality is the *Batumi American Corner (BAC)*, a local branch of the American Corners Program which serves the overarching purpose of U.S. public diplomacy: to build mutual understanding between the countries in key areas such as culture, English language, and education. Through the use of both participant observation and in-depth interviews, I investigate how my informant group experience and thus conceptualise the United States based upon their regular participation in club sessions held by American expatriates and other activities.

As I argue, American culture is not the only reason why my informants decide to spend their time there: they utilise the BAC as a *social arena* to e.g. practice their English speaking level and build a range of skills. Moreover, by considering the BAC as a stimulating environment which conveys Western ideals the institution also serves an U.S. agenda of influencing Georgian youth in a pro-Western direction. But while the informants conceptualise the United States as a country in which they can live out everyday desires, related to their situation as youths, influential political and moral structures contribute to elicit ambivalence in their views. In reference to relevant empirical studies and secondary sources, I show that this ambivalence is not only a local phenomenon, but which can be transferred to other structural levels.

Being an inherent traditional and orthodoxly religious society, Georgia remains a complex buffer zone between East and West. By providing comparative approaches including the history of Western presence in Ajara and local adults' life histories about their adolescence, the thesis aims to open a thoroughly contextualised perspective on how the Georgian youth generation currently relates to the United States and the West, situated in a part of the world that is turning more unstable.



# Acknowledgements

First of all, this thesis would not have been the case without my seven informants' consent, patience, and dedication. I would therefore like to express my deepest gratitude to your participation, the sharing of yourselves, and introducing me to Georgia which never ceases to fascinate me. You are a great bunch of youths and I enjoyed our company throughout the period of my fieldwork. I wish you all the best and good luck in your future. Thanks also go to the Batumi American Corner's (BAC) hospitality while conducting my case study and Ketia Asatashvili for being available for an interview at the U.S. Embassy. *Didi madloba, ch'emi megobrebi!*

I am sincerely grateful to my supervisor Dr. Odd Are Berkaak for his invaluable inspiration, guidance, and witness throughout these two life-changing years. I regard our cooperation as very successful. My gratitude is then extended to Nino Inaishvili, Ruslan Baramidze, and Nino Saprashvili for helping me out with various practicalities in Batumi. Moreover, thanks go to Svend Waage and his family for accommodating me with both local guidance and company while I stayed in Tbilisi. Sopho Balanchivadze, without your dedicated consular assistance in the process of renewing my visa the fieldwork may have been compromised. Thank you.

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## List of Recurring Acronyms

BAC	Batumi American Corner
CIE	Center for International Education
ETI	Education and Training International
OSF	Open Society Foundations
OSGF	Open Society Georgia Foundation
USDS	United States Department of State
USG	United States Government



# Chapter 1: Introduction

*“Hi! You must be Nicholas?” A girl my own age in a brown leather jacket approached me with a welcoming greeting, as I was standing at a bus stop on the busy Rustaveli Street. Her name<sup>1</sup> was Melissa, and she was an American expatriate<sup>2</sup> engaged in the Fulbright Program, teaching local students in English at Batumi University.<sup>3</sup> There was a cold, sunny breeze in the air this January day and I had arrived in Batumi about a week before, following a one-night stopover in Istanbul. Soon afterwards, Melissa took me for a brief sightseeing tour and helped me out with some practical errands, before she had to go prepare the day’s club session at the American Corner, based in the public library. I had never heard of the institution before, so my curiosity was aroused. As she knew what I was interested in and that I was looking for potential localities, she invited me to come over and observe the club session at 4pm. Later that day, I made my way through the old library corridors towards what seemed to be a classroom. “Hey! You made it after all!”- Melissa exclaimed in surprise. Some Georgian youths were already sitting at the tables. As I discreetly found myself a seat, and attracted a little attention as I did so, it felt as if I had entered some distant American enclave.*

This thesis is concerned with how a cross-section of Georgian youth, living in a politically autonomous region and modern-oriented port city within the Republic of Georgia, experience and conceptualise America<sup>4</sup> as a predominant manifestation of the West in a *post-Revolutionary*<sup>5</sup> perspective. Based on approximately 5,5 months of ethnographic fieldwork in the city of Batumi and the application of anthropological methodology, this is a study of how a new generation deals with a perpetual Westernisation process in a former communist country that is traditional and orthodoxly religious. It is a study of how America represents a modern alternative which can fulfil some of their everyday desires and aspirations, a *mirroring* conception of themselves; and how the United States’ significant diplomatic presence endeavours to gain the support of young people at a grass-roots level. It is, at the same time, a study of how a structurally complex and geopolitically contested region that has been exposed to Western presence throughout history, elicits ambivalence

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<sup>1</sup> All real names in this thesis are anonymised following standard ethical practice (ASA 2011: 5).

<sup>2</sup> An interchangeable term for expatriate is *volunteer*.

<sup>3</sup> The university’s full name is *Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University*. I only use ‘Batumi University’.

<sup>4</sup> I mainly use ‘America’ or ‘American’ in emic terms, and the ‘United States’ or ‘U.S.’ in political terms.

<sup>5</sup> This concept refers to the period of political upheavals and Westernisation in post-Soviet Georgia – from the 2003 Rose Revolution, through the presidency of Mikheil Saakashvili (2004-2013) – and up to the present day.

about America among the youths, based upon their local circumstances. Finally, the study will open up a contextualised perspective on the current relationship between this generation of Georgian youth and the United States.

Batumi (or Batum) is a city located in the farthest southwestern region of the Republic of Georgia along the southeastern coast of the Black Sea, only a 20-minute drive south of Turkey. Populated by approximately 180,000<sup>6</sup> inhabitants, with a mixed ethnic and religious demography, the city is also the regional capital of the *Autonomous Republic of Ajara*.<sup>7</sup> Georgia is located in the Southern Caucasus and borders, respectively, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Turkey, and the Russian Federation. The institutional case study for this thesis was conducted at the *Batumi American Corner (BAC)*, a local branch of the U.S. Government (USG)-funded *American Corners Program*. The main diplomatic purpose of the programme is to build mutual understanding between the United States and the respective host countries where it is established – in the key areas of culture, English language, and education. Young people are the primary target group, but the institution and its resources remain accessible to the general public. The U.S. embassy in each country administers the finances of the programme and is responsible for providing physical space, technical equipment and material resources, as well as local staff, and external speakers. The BAC cooperates with other U.S. organisations present, facilitating extracurricular programmes and information on educational opportunities in the United States.

As this thesis will make evident, the United States remains a primary reference for the West among the informants. This is consistent with the choice of the BAC as the locality for the case study: the informants are predominantly exposed to cultural and material content that is related to America; this is also true on a structural level, as the United States continues to have a strong diplomatic presence in Georgia. In this regard, it is important to clarify that throughout the thesis, America serves as an *epitomising* notion. The United States thus remains a particularised manifestation of the West with which the youths feel a close association in their cosmological orientation. While I will predominantly refer to America in the thesis, a second reference to ‘the West’ is necessary in specific sections, where the contextual

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<sup>6</sup> Population numbers vary depending on the source. These numbers are drawn from: <http://batumi.ge/en/?page=show&sec=1>

<sup>7</sup> The region’s name is also written Adzhara, Ajaria, Adjaria, Adjara, Adzharia, Achara, and Acharia. I have decided to go forward with the usage in Khalvashi’s (2015) study.

association is explicitly made by interlocutors or myself, with the purpose of broadening their perspectives (e.g. particular topics and questions addressed).

## **Personal Motivations and Main Research Questions**

For several years, I have been interested in the former Soviet Union and in particular the Caucasus region. My main concern has been how different Soviet societies have changed socially based upon their respective cultural and religious characteristics. This interest culminated in turning my attention to Georgia while researching my MA project; the country is relatively unknown to Westerners in general, but I had been monitoring it politically for some years. Two aspects of Georgia particularly interested me: first, the country's historical and cultural complexity, which I found appealing; and second, its rapid progress towards a pro-Western orientation relative to other former Soviet republics, as well as its resilience to the Russian threat of regional influence. Having decided on Georgia as my field, I settled upon Batumi as the study's locality, for reasons of both safety <sup>8</sup> and the city's cosmopolitan character, which made it suitable for the purposes of my research.

I then did research on topics that reflected both my personal interests and contemporary concerns. Since most existing anthropological research on Georgia was mainly concerned with the post-Soviet <sup>9</sup> period, I increasingly became interested in how Georgians had experienced the Westernising upheavals that had occurred since the Rose Revolution – particularly among the younger generation, who had been the architects of that movement. Being closely associated with these changes, I also became curious about how they experienced the significant Western influence in their everyday lives. My motivation was increased by the fact that there was only a narrow repertoire of post-Soviet studies in Norwegian social anthropology, and few studies about the youth segment in Georgia. In this particular case study, I pose two main research questions that limit my focus of interest and that will be discussed in the concluding section of the thesis. They are as follows:

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<sup>8</sup> At the time of the fieldwork, official travel advice was to avoid travelling in the proximity of the breakaway republics Abkhazia and South Ossetia due to the geopolitically tense situations.

<sup>9</sup> I have narrowed this concept down to the period between the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the Rose Revolution in 2003.

- 1) *How does the Batumi American Corner (BAC) contribute, as a social arena, to the construction of the Georgian informants' conceptions of America and their future aspirations? Are these conceptions based on a temporality or continuity?*
- 2) *How does the U.S. public diplomacy strategy applied in Batumi correspond with both the informants' and the United States' expectations of it?*

## **Theoretical Framework**

For this case study, the theoretical framework will primarily encompass central fields within both anthropology and sociology. I apply two approaches in my investigation of the BAC as a social arena. First, I have found Berger and Luckmann's (2000) phenomenological and Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga's (2003) spatial theories fruitful means of gaining an understanding of how the informants experience America at the BAC and regard the institution as a social arena. Second, then, to understand how the BAC works as a grass-roots U.S. *public diplomacy* asset and how it influences the informants' conceptions of America, I have found the theoretical perspectives of Nye, Jr. (2004) and Rugh (2014) useful. Lukes' (2005 [1974]) view on power as affection underlies both. These two approaches, moreover, require a *grounded theoretical* foundation, in order to understand how both the informants and the United States interact within the institutional format of the BAC. Bourdieu's (2010 [1977]) practice theory and 'Goffmanian' (1990 [1959]) symbolic interactionism have been helpful in revealing behavioural patterns and power relations.

In my investigation of the informants' conceptions of America, Carrier's (1995) concept of *Occidentalism* has proven analytically useful as a means of understanding how people relate to and conceptualise the West. Some additional theoretical approaches can be usefully applied in order to understand how these conceptions are implied by the complex structural and cultural circumstances in Batumi. The first relates to the way in which America remains an *abstract* manifestation of the West, since none of the informants have actually been there physically, but have only heard of or perceived it. Through their regular participation there, the BAC remains one of several manifestations. Lévi-Strauss' (1983 [1969]) classic study of mythical thought in the Amazon provides an interesting structural perspective on how people relate to abstractions that run counter to their own society and culture. The second relates to the way that America remains a manifestation of *modernity* for the informants. In a

traditional and religiously orthodox society such as Georgia – although Batumi is regarded as more liberal in this regard – modernity has significant effects that Bauman (1991) elaborately theorises. The theoretical framework in this case study will thus mainly consist of phenomenology, power, and modernisation theory.

## Methodology and Ethics

### Access, locality, and informant group

When I arrived in Batumi, I was well prepared. Having done extensive research and been in touch with several anthropologists who had conducted fieldwork there previously, I made contact with a native adviser at the *EducationUSA Batumi Advising Center*<sup>10</sup> at the university. She helped me out with practical issues and soon introduced me to Melissa, an American *English Teaching Assistant (ETA)* on the *Fulbright Program* who taught local students English at the university. Initially, I spent several weeks with an open mind to get an overview of the field and potential localities eligible for the case study. The turning point came when Melissa invited me over to observe one of her club sessions at the BAC, which particularly caught my interest. As there were few other localities that were congruent with my focus of interest, and as other arenas involving young people posed several practical issues, it was not long before I narrowed my focus to the BAC, because it was Anglophone and had a scheduled character (Okely 2013 [2012]: 22-23, 52). These elements were crucial because I didn't speak Georgian and wanted a feasible case study throughout the period of my fieldwork. I did try to find a language course in Georgian, but while this was a difficult issue, I realised it would have been overly time-consuming.

Having decided on the locality, I then asked Melissa and Sopho, the *BAC coordinator*, to help me recruit a group of youths who would be happy to participate in the case study. I gave them a set of criteria, with a view to obtaining a mixed selection, socially and by gender, in order to achieve greater diversity in the data material and thus make it possible to gain a vivid understanding of the research issue (Barth 1999: 82-83, 89). I ultimately ended up with seven teenage informants: three boys and four girls aged between 13 and 17. They were all Batumi natives, had fairly good spoken English, and came from different socio-economic backgrounds. They all went to

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<sup>10</sup> This is a local branch activity within the *Center for International Education (CIE)*, which is a non-governmental organisation (NGO) and representative of the *EducationUSA* in Georgia.

public or private schools and most regularly spent time at the BAC. As my initial informant focus had been on older students, the decision to concentrate on younger informants required me to readjust my approach as a foreign anthropologist. However, it turned out to be an advantageous change as I realised that younger Georgians actually spoke better <sup>11</sup> English. I then presented the project and myself to the informants, who showed varying reactions, ranging from indifference to curiosity. My first impression was very promising. Levan, one of the boys, soon became a gatekeeper and our relationship increased my access to group interaction (Agar 2008 [1980]: 110-111; Fangen 2010 [2004]: 59, 62, 67; Frederiksen 2013: 22-23).

### **Positionality and reciprocity**

The selection of young people as my informant group required me to remain conscious of my own position in relation to them. The fact that I, as a male foreign anthropologist, had featured girls did actually not pose any obstacles when it came to my interaction with them in the public sphere – a limitation that Frederiksen (2013: 23) acknowledged in his study when by himself in Batumi. To a certain degree, depending on their respective personalities, the girls could be as curious and open-minded as the boys, in some cases even more so. I found it easy to converse with the youths because of their decent English speaking skills. Where gaps did appear in our linguistic or human mutual understanding, I decided to let them elaborate their point of view while remaining a patient listener until we eventually reached a common bridge (Wikan 1992: 466-467, 476). Moreover, I had to be aware of the fact that narrowing my focus to the *youth* segment had implications for the data material. This ethnographic representation therefore remained partial owing to several factors, such as inadequacy (e.g. the absence of young adults or a comparative study in a rural community), the power relationship between anthropologist and informants with respect to age, and the degree of objectivity. My approach would be implicated by the methodology and subjectivity, thus evoking *situated* and rational knowledge from these youths' vantage point (Clifford 1986: 7, 13-15; Haraway 1988: 583, 589).

In order to maintain trustful and substantial long-term bonds with the informants – crucial in terms of maintaining a consistent data collection – I soon realised that I would need to enter a reciprocal relationship with them. The informants were

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<sup>11</sup> The generation born in the late 1990s was exposed to reforms in the Georgian school system following the 2003 Rose Revolution, in which English language education was emphasised.



generally very interested in my Norwegian background, and asked me many questions throughout the fieldwork. As I had a profound interest in Georgia myself, I found that measures such as continuously showing off basic phrases in Georgian were highly appreciated within the group, increasing their will to share more about themselves (Fangen 2010 [2004]: 60; Okely 2013 [2012]: 125). This reciprocity became an important way of maintaining the youths' interest in me. Another significant issue was my determination to avoid being perceived as an *authority* figure. The setting of the BAC club sessions resembled a classroom, which required me to take certain measures as a foreign anthropologist – such as sitting among the youths at the back of the room and not conducting formal teacher-style presentations like those given by Melissa or Josh, her co-facilitator serving as an *English Education* expatriate in the *Peace Corps*. I therefore decided to position myself as a 'researcher-friend'. In the informants' eyes, I remained, on the one hand, a Norwegian researcher interested in their relationship to the BAC and America, and on the other, their older foreign friend who wanted to learn more about Georgia. This approach prevented me from turning into 'one of the Americans'. As previous studies have shown, insufficient consciousness of the researcher's positioning in relation to his or her interlocutors has compromised the anthropologist's neutrality and thus the data material collected during the fieldwork (Briggs 1970: 33-36; Broch 2003: 192-193; James 1996: 317).

### **Main methodological strategies**

As Emerson et al. (2011 [1995]: 15, their emphasis) accurately argue, "(...) *what* the ethnographer finds out is inherently connected with *how* she finds it out (...)." The respective methodological strategies I applied have been decisive for ensuring quality, representation, and context in the data material. The first of my main strategies was to conduct participant observation. Throughout the fieldwork, I observed Melissa and Josh's club sessions at the BAC every Tuesdays and Thursdays, with some variations due to cancellations. The purpose here was to collect *epistemological* knowledge on the club sessions in their emic and detailed context: the conception of America mediated, the behaviour, dramaturgy, and their power relationship in between. While I openly took field notes during the club sessions, I limited my jotting while in the private presence of my informants to avoid appearing ignorant. After each field session, I then processed the jottings into elaborate field diaries back at my apartment, where I could review the data material

at a certain distance (Emerson et al. 2011 [1995]: 35-37, 56; Fangen 2010 [2004]: 73; Geertz 1973: 9-10, 14).

In addition, I occasionally spent time with the informants in the city centre after the BAC club sessions ended or any time they were free, most often in small groups. These observations lasted an hour on average and featured interaction such as small talk on different topics of mutual interest. The hangouts were mostly limited to wandering around in public, since any suggestion of e.g. going to a café was turned down without any further explanation. From early on, I created a private group on Facebook that we continuously used as a common channel of communication and organisation. To keep the informants informed along the way, I posted some Q&As<sup>12</sup> that addressed the project and my role as an anthropologist. The second strategy I applied was to conduct in-depth interviews with the informants, both individually and in pairs. The interviews were all taped and conducted in English, in two separate sessions, each covering a different topic: how they related to the BAC and how they conceptualised America. I made a verbatim transcript of each interview, which would inevitably have provided a more accurate picture if they had been allowed to express themselves in Georgian. I also conducted in-depth interviews with the other actors involved: Melissa and Josh, Sopho (the BAC coordinator), and Ketil, the *American Corners Georgia coordinator*<sup>13</sup>, located at the U.S. Embassy in the capital of Tbilisi. The main purpose of both hanging out and conducting interviews with the informants was to observe whether there were any significant discrepancies between their interaction during club sessions and while they were hanging out with me in public outside these (Goffman 1990 [1959]: 17, 26; Hoëm 2001: 56-58).

About halfway into the fieldwork, the informant group's availability to spend time with me outside the BAC club sessions started to decline. Their common explanation was that they simply didn't have time due to their busy daily schedules. Soon, I realised that I wouldn't be able to collect much more informal observation data, although I remained very flexible myself. However, one must not forget that they were youths with their own everyday concerns after all (Frøystad 2003: 46-47; Mead 1928: 264-265). This turning point required me to find other ways to collect data that

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<sup>12</sup> Acronym for *Questions and Answers*.

<sup>13</sup> The purpose of this interview was to get an initial structural overview of the programme's activity in Georgia. I have decided to use the coordinator's real name as an exception, seeing as she is a diplomatic official.

would prove fruitful. Because my focus was on how youths experienced and conceptualised America today, I became curious about how adults had done the same when they were adolescent. After a couple of rounds, revisiting theory and the data material collected at this point for ideas, I ultimately decided on life histories as the third strategy. I recruited four native academics in Batumi as interviewees, two men and two women: of these, one gender pair had lived their adolescences in the Soviet and the other in the post-Soviet era. The purpose was to provide historical context for the two interview sessions (Mintz 1979: 20, 23; Wadel 1991: 160, 168).

### **Urban fieldwork: Field breaks and privacy**

The fact that the fieldwork was conducted in an urban setting posed some challenges and opportunities for my methodological approach. The reason I decided to conduct the case study in an institutional locality was because of my inability to pursue a holistic representation owing to the city's large scale (Frøystad 2003: 45-46). I lived by myself in an apartment complex close to the city centre, making it possible to maintain a high degree of flexibility, restore myself after each field session, and enjoy a social life with friends. Although I could probably have lived in a Georgian host family throughout the fieldwork at a lower cost I decided not to do so, mainly because it would compromise my privacy, as socialisation was the expected norm. If I had let myself be 'adopted' as a foreign guest into a family speaking minimal English, the dilemma I would have been left with would have been the issue of unconditional privacy versus an authentic native experience. Having considered these matters, I felt confident in my decisions. The need to fulfil the expectations of two roles would probably have been very exhausting (Briggs 1970: 21, 23-25, 42-43).

In between the case study, and because living in Batumi for a long period of time felt slightly constricting, I decided to travel comprehensively in Georgia. I would occasionally go on a trip, say one weekend a month, to different destinations. I was often by myself, but also went with other American expatriates of my own age who were working in the Peace Corps, serving their engagements in local communities across the country. These trips, along with the networking, that developed as a *snowball effect* after I formally accessed the BAC, offered an enriching dimension for two reasons. First, it allowed me to distance myself from the field in both physical and analytical terms, simply taking a break; and second, it broadened the horizons of my knowledge about Georgia to learn from the expatriates who were living in host

families and volunteered <sup>14</sup> for a term of two consecutive years. However, these social relationships remained informal and the insight that accumulated throughout the period of my fieldwork was contextually utilised (Fangen 2010 [2004]: 53, 124).

## Ethical Considerations

The first ethical issue concerned in the case study is the fact that I decided not to ask my informants for written consent. All of my informants were instead *informed* about the project, which seemed sufficient, as they were indifferent to any formalities. They displayed the same attitude when, for instance, I told them that I was going to anonymise their real names. However, this indifference might be explained by their position as young people, who lacked any comprehension of what ethnographic research entailed (Fangen 2010 [2004]: 191; Frederiksen 2013: 24). The reason why I ultimately opted not to ask for written consent stemmed from an early meeting I had with two native academics, one of them an anthropologist, who strongly dissuaded me. Their main argument was that, as Georgia had been a former communist society, people tended to view the government with great scepticism, so the step of asking the informants' parents to sign any formal document would probably have compromised their chances of participating. Based upon this valuable emic advice, I concluded that informed consent was a sufficient precondition (ASA 2011: 2).

The second ethical issue concerns the fact that I was conducting the case study in a *governmental* institution. While an anthropologist can never be entirely objective, it is nonetheless his duty to remain critical towards the biased parties involved and the settings that are the grounds for collecting data material. In my position as a 'researcher-friend', this approach was crucial in order to maintain my neutral integrity in relation to the informants, since they observed how I interacted with the American expatriates in their presence (ASA 2011: 10; Fangen 2010 [2004]: 63, 66). The third ethical issue I would like to address is that the informants, like most young people today, made excessive use of their smartphones and loved to display themselves on social media. As I wanted to keep our relationship in the public sphere anonymous, this required me to retain a control of the *selfies* they took that

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<sup>14</sup> The Peace Corps' framework conditions promote the idea that the expatriates should become immersed in the local community where they are deployed. This means acquiring acceptable language skills, earning an equivalent monthly wage to e.g. local teachers, and using cultural exchange as a bridge towards understanding.

involved me as well as them, making sure that they remained untagged<sup>15</sup> or at least ensuring that there was no connection with our real names. However, had I decided to completely refuse their everyday request to take and share pictures, it might have compromised our reciprocal relationship (ASA 2011: 3, 5; Okely 2013 [2012]: 92).

## **Outline of the Thesis**

*Chapter 2* of the thesis will look at the locality of the case study, the BAC, and the field itself on multiple levels: Batumi, Ajara, and Georgia. As a precondition for understanding the locality and the field, each part of the chapter will include relevant contextual perspectives. The three following chapters are empirical ones.

In *Chapter 3*, the informants' experience of America will be investigated from the perspective of the BAC as a social arena and a locus of public diplomacy. The data material presented was collected from club sessions, hangouts on the streets of Batumi, and observations from school visits to the rural Ajaran highlands.

*Chapter 4* takes a plunge into the historical roots of the Western presence in the region of Ajara, as a strategic crossroads between East and West. The primary data material is life history narratives given by four native adults, which will provide context on how people related to the West in both the Soviet and post-Soviet eras.

In *Chapter 5*, I will investigate the informants' various conceptions about America, as a predominant reference for the West, based upon the data material collected from the two in-depth interviews. This chapter is concerned with how their cosmological views are influenced by local and personal circumstances.

*Chapter 6* concludes by first discussing the two main research questions in light of both empirical examples, secondary sources, and the contextual common threads I have drawn in the thesis. Finally, the chapter offers some reflections on the relationship between the Georgian youth generation and the United States.

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<sup>15</sup> On Facebook, you have the option of tagging user profiles (involving real names) in photos that are uploaded.

## Chapter 2: Field, Locality, and Context

*“Euro-Atlantic integration has been and firmly remains Georgia’s foreign policy priority. We believe that our national security and lasting regional peace can be achieved only through our strategic partnership with the United States, and through our integration into NATO. We have demonstrated both political and technical readiness for advancing to the next stage of integration with NATO. Now the ball is in the West’s court.”*<sup>16</sup>

– Giorgi Kvirikashvili, Prime Minister of Georgia

*“Georgia is not just a country. It’s a fabric of different Caucasian tribes.”*

– Zaza, Georgian friend in Batumi

This chapter concerns the particular field and locality that form the basis for the case study. From the outset, the BAC and Georgia may seem like very foreign entities to the average person. The first is part of a USG organisation that is predominantly distributed across Second and Third World countries; the latter is a post-Soviet country still in the midst of the complex process of becoming an independent and prosperous nation, after 25 years of hard recovery from capitalist transition and domestic power struggles. Only in recent years has Georgia made headlines in mainstream news owing to its pro-Western orientation and troubled relations with Russia. The significant factor in this matter is the closer political partnership between the United States and Georgia compared with other former Soviet republics – although that has become an ambivalent matter in light of recent events.

In detailing the field and locality, this chapter is not only seeking to provide a better contextual understanding for where the case study has been conducted and to illustrate the inherent complexity of Georgian society. The main purpose of following a central ethnographic ideal is to widen the scope, so that the data material collected from a local vantage point throughout the thesis can be brought into a larger holistic coherence (Okely 2013 [2012]: 17, 20-21). The first part deals with the BAC as a locality. I will describe what it looks like, what it offers, its everyday activities, and regular clientele. I will also elaborate on the social field of U.S. organisational activity in Batumi and Georgia, to explain the purpose of its existence and the wider political context. These organisations do not only exist to display American culture and values: they all represent the concept of public diplomacy and their goal is to obtain

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<sup>16</sup> Part of a speech Kvirikashvili gave while on visit to the Atlantic Council in Washington DC on October 30<sup>th</sup> 2015. He was Foreign Minister at the time. Statement drawn from: <http://tinyurl.com/hj9lhga> (compressed URL)

support for U.S. interests in Georgia, as a strategic buffer zone between Russia and the West. Thus, their very presence has both symbolic and geopolitical connotations.

The second part will present the regional field of Batumi within Ajara. Just as Georgia has undergone significant upheavals at a national level since independence, so, too, has Ajara in its own way. The region's geopolitically peripheral location has contributed to shaping not only public discourse and power relations, but the cultural, religious, and demographic fabric as well. Significant ethnographic studies will also be presented. The third and final part is concerned with the Republic of Georgia from a national perspective. For centuries, the country has represented a crossroads between East and West. By elaborating on contemporary political history and international relations, with a particular emphasis on the Rose Revolution, this part seeks to show the dynamic and complex nature of Georgia. Ultimately, then, the reader will hopefully have a better contextual understanding of the field and locality.

## **The American Corners Program: A Pawn in the Great Game**

### **Programme overview and the BAC**

The American Corners Program is part of the USG's broad range of organisations, whose main purpose is to develop and nurture American interests abroad. The organisation is part of U.S. public diplomacy strategy, on which I will elaborate later in this section. The American Corners Program was established in 2000 by the U.S. Department of State (USDS)<sup>17</sup> and is financially administered by the U.S. embassy in the respective host countries. Since its launch, the programme has built up a total of 400+ American Corners distributed in local communities worldwide. In a 2009 report<sup>18</sup> submitted to the U.S. Senate Committee of Foreign Relations, reassessing public diplomacy strategy on several continents, the programme was judged to be a helpful supplementary component in remote areas that lacked a U.S. diplomatic presence. However, it was regarded no substitute for other initiatives, owing to inconsistent subsidisation and the employment of local staff rather than embassy personnel or serving expatriates (Lugar 2009: 1-3, 23).

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<sup>17</sup> The Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) is the responsible executive branch within the USDS.

<sup>18</sup> I have decided to go forward with Rugh's (2014) reference of Richard G. Lugar as the report's author.



Figure 1: Part of the BAC's interior during the period of fieldwork (Photo by the author)

The U.S. embassy is responsible for providing the American Corners with physical space, technical equipment, and local personnel to run the daily services. The main purpose of the programme is to promote mutual understanding between the United States and the respective host countries, in key areas such as culture, English language, and education in America. There are currently nine American Corners distributed in cities and rural communities across Georgia. Each locality is allocated funds by the USDS on an annual basis, according to relative factors such as participation statistics, local scale, and the diplomatic prioritisation of public diplomacy in Georgia. Since it is impossible to establish American Corners in most of rural Georgia, the embassy introduced the *U.S. Embassy Bookmobile* in 2013 – a locally staffed bus serving as an extension of the programme. The bus makes occasional visits to communities, offering social activities and material resources.

The BAC is located in Batumi city centre on the junction of *Abashidze* and *Pshavela Streets*. It is accessible to the public and is based in a medium-sized room located in the western wing of the *Akaki Tsereteli Public Library*, which also contains a large collection of books in Georgian and Russian. The opening hours are from Monday to



Sunday, 10am to 7pm. The institution has two large tables with about twenty chairs, a vast English book collection in different genres (novels, broad academic literature, language-testing syllabus, travel guides, and much more) as well as popular international magazines, computers, a TV set, video games, and a combined scanner/printer. The desktop computers are beside the three large windows facing Abashidze Street. All visitors are allowed to borrow the material resources, use the computers, and surf the Internet using the free Wi-Fi provided. On the walls and tables, symbols such as flags and posters representing the U.S.-Georgian partnership are overtly displayed.

While all kinds of people visit to the BAC, the institution mainly targets youth, and this group accounts for the main visitor clientele. As Kemp (2009) shows in his feature report on an American Corner in Slovakia, much of the programme's success lies in its appeal to youths, who represent future generations, and its use of innovative and effective methods to stimulate interest in America (ibid. 18-19). On an everyday basis, though, you would also tend to find a few adults reading or using the computers in a calmer setting. At a desk by the entrance, sit the BAC coordinator, Sopho, and a couple of assistants from the library personnel. Sopho is mainly responsible for organising and announcing <sup>19</sup> weekly activities, producing reports on participant statistics and handling the logistics of the vast material collection. While no American expatriates are permanently staffed at the American Corners, they are encouraged to help out with some activities as a supplement to their primary duties. The U.S. embassy also helps to arrange web chats with embassy officials and occasional visits by external speakers (Fialho 2013: 3, 5).

While I was conducting my case study, from January to June, Melissa held an *Eco Club* every Tuesday and Josh led a *Literature Club* on Thursdays, both starting at 4pm when the youths usually ended their school day. The former focused on civic and environmental issues, and the latter on American popular culture. These clubs were the primary focus of my participant observation. A typical club session would start with one of them giving a Power Point presentation on a certain topic, and the group would then be divided into mixed teams to carry out related written or creative tasks. All formal discussions were conducted in English as a norm. Before ending each session at around 5pm, the teams would present their findings to their co-

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<sup>19</sup> The BAC's official Facebook page remained the institution's main public communication channel.

participants. The BAC also serves as a community arena that occasionally hosts other events involving different participant groups, linked to Georgian and international public holidays, and extracurricular activities. Few ethnographic studies have previously paid attention to the programme, yet Grimes' (2003) field study of American Corners in neighbouring post-Soviet Russia shows that they play a significant role in conveying reliable information about different aspects of America, and are more highly valued as social institutions than the existing public libraries established by the government (ibid. 56-58).

### **The U.S.-Georgian partnership since independence**

The unusually close political partnership between the United States and Georgia has long historical roots. While both of its Caucasus neighbours, Armenia and Azerbaijan, have leaned considerably more towards Russia, Georgia did not share the same enthusiasm, having waged two wars in the early 1990s and, since then, faced a growing threat of regional influence from Russia. When Georgia became independent, the United States had no initial diplomatic interest in the Caucasus. The region was torn by conflict and recovering from a demanding transition to capitalism, making the Americans reluctant to interfere for fear of causing the situation to deteriorate. Mutual support for a bilateral relationship increased, however, when the former Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze entered Georgian politics in 1992, and Russia's conciliatory regional role started to diminish. The Clinton Administration had, moreover, its sights on the strategically important Caspian Basin, with its vast petroleum resources. This turn of events persuaded the United States to keep the Caucasus region stable (MacFarlane 2013: 80-85).

The relationship continued well into the 2000s following the Rose Revolution in 2003, when the ousting of Shevardnadze was prompted by uproar over allegations of election fraud. Mikheil Saakashvili, a Columbia-educated lawyer who represented an impatient younger generation of Georgians, was elected as the country's next president the following year. He promised a democratic revolution through a series of liberalising political reforms with a pro-Western orientation that were embraced by the Americans. The relationship between the United States and Georgia would soon develop into one that emphasised military defence, regional stability, and the latter's prospect of becoming a future NATO member. As a sign of Georgia's commitment to pursuing this aspiration, the nation soon became a top military

contributor to ISAF <sup>20</sup> operations in Afghanistan. However, as the conflict in South Ossetia involving Russia escalated, war <sup>21</sup> was inevitable. This significant event in particular complicated both the U.S.-Georgian partnership, and Georgia's aspirations to progress in its commitment to pro-Western integration (MacFarlane 2013: 86-88).

In the aftermath of the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, the bilateral relationship began to shift to an asymmetrical one owing to the parties' differing mutual expectations. As the United States had decided not to give Georgia military support in the conflict, Saakashvili was left discouraged. However, the Americans had good reasons for adopting an ambivalent approach, owing to critical developments in his government over recent years. Only a year before the lead-up to the war, he had repressed a public demonstration after placing the remaining independent TV channel under the control of his own political circles (MacFarlane 2013: 88-91). On the other hand, though, the Americans saw the necessity of maintaining control of the region as a buffer zone with Russia. The document that best illustrates the nature of much of the two countries' relationship in the present day is the *U.S.-Georgia Charter on Strategic Partnership*, signed in 2009, which has since been deemed manifest evidence of American support for Georgia. The United States therefore perceived it as a solid management tool. However, since President Obama took office and Saakashvili lost the 2013 elections, U.S. diplomatic efforts in Georgia have decreased significantly (MacFarlane 2013: 92-94; Mitchell and Cooley 2010: 10).

### **U.S. bilateral assistance and public diplomacy in Georgia**

U.S. socio-economic support for the nation-building efforts whereby Georgia sought to become a sustainable and independent country started in 1993, along with the involvement of several NGOs, when Shevardnadze returned from his earlier Soviet premiership. But because Georgia was dealing with wars on two fronts, violent power struggles, and widespread corruption throughout the 1990s, the allocated funds were misused for politically biased purposes. However, the bilateral support was increased when Saakashvili came to power following the Rose Revolution, and was provided predominantly by two U.S. government agencies, the *U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)* and *Millennium Challenge Cooperation (MCC)*. In the

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<sup>20</sup> Acronym for *International Security Assistance Force*.

<sup>21</sup> Russia politically supports South Ossetia's respective goal of independence from Georgia. The 2008 war was the second in this region since post-Soviet independence.

period between 1992 and 2010, U.S. support comprised \$3,37 billion, making Georgia the largest foreign aid recipient in the context of the United States' entire support programme. Key priority areas on the U.S. agenda have since been economic growth, peace and security measures, as well as adequate humanitarian aid (Mitchell and Cooley 2010: 43, 45; Nichol 2013: 29, 37).

In his book, *Power: A Radical View*, Lukes (2005 [1974]: 19, 24-25) addresses three dimensions in the concept of power. While the first focuses on behaviour in decision-making with observable conflict, and the second on non-decision-making with the power of setting an agenda for imminent or forthcoming issues, he defines the invisible third dimension in the following way: "(...) A may exercise power over B by getting him to do what he does not want to do, but he also exercises power over him by influencing, shaping or determining his very wants." (ibid. 27, his emphasis). In the political context of Georgia, the U.S. Embassy in Tbilisi aspires to encourage public support for U.S. interests and political goals through key efforts that include communicating culture, political values such as democracy, and foreign policy (Nye, Jr. 2004: 10-11). This is facilitated both at individual (NGOs and organisations) and governmental levels, where information-sharing remains a powerful tool for public appeal. However, the way the Americans exert what is termed *soft power* influences public opinion and the scope of action. For instance, Georgian youth may embrace American popular culture, but dislike its foreign policy in the Middle East. In the end, it is argued that diplomatic success ultimately relies on a balanced exercise of soft power as a complement to military presence (ibid. 14, 31, 107, 128, 147).

In independent Georgia, the United States was not a pioneering actor in Western public diplomacy. The *Open Society Foundations (OSF)*<sup>22</sup> had been privately founded in Hungary in 1984 by American philanthropist George Soros, and soon spread across communist Europe. Its main commitment was to promote democracy by providing banned Western information in public institutions. One noteworthy achievement was that eight of these countries, influenced by their respective foundations, accessed the EU through the 2000s. The *Open Society Georgia Foundation (OSGF)*<sup>23</sup> was established in 1994, and by 2014 financing for its activities had amounted to \$80,000,000, focusing on key areas such as health, governance, human

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<sup>22</sup> Information on this organisation drawn from: <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/about/history>

<sup>23</sup> Information on this organisation drawn from: [http://www.osgf.ge/index.php?lang\\_id=ENG&sec\\_id=124](http://www.osgf.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=124)

rights, the media, and civic society (OSGF 2014). As will be shown later in the thesis, the OSGF office in Batumi played a major role in providing youth with access to Western information during the 1990s, when the region was subject to a post-Soviet authoritarian regime.

The two most significant USDS public diplomacy organisations in Georgia and Batumi are the Peace Corps and the Fulbright Program. Since former U.S. president John F. Kennedy established the Peace Corps in 1961, its purpose has been to build mutual understanding between the United States and its host countries at a grass-roots level. In 2014, 130 expatriates were distributed in local communities across Georgia, serving in three expatriate programmes: *English Education*, *IOD*<sup>24</sup>, and *Peace Corps Response*<sup>25</sup> (Peace Corps Georgia 2014: 1-3). The programme remains the most comprehensive in Georgia today. In 1946, former senator J. William Fulbright established the Fulbright Program<sup>26</sup> via legislation in the U.S. Congress. The main purpose of the programme is mutual educational exchange, emphasising English teaching and scientific research. Both organisations are grant-based, meaning that the expatriates may apply for funding on independent projects that benefit their host communities. A final NGO that cooperates with both these and the BAC is the local branch of Center for International Education (CIE)<sup>27</sup>, partially supported by the USDS. Facilitated by trained native advisors, its main purpose is to provide students with information on education in America and to arrange English language testing.

## **The Black Sea Crossroads with the West**

### **Batumi: Cosmopolitan with a Soviet touch**

Batumi is Georgia's third-largest city and is very different from the more traditional cities of Tbilisi, the capital, and Kutaisi. The city has a subtropical climate and is topographically located in between the Black Sea and the mountainous Ajaran highlands. On an annual average, the winters are almost snowless and the summers humid, yet it is infamous for being one of the rainiest cities in the world. A wide beach boulevard featuring palms and outdoors cafes runs the length of the long

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<sup>24</sup> Acronym for *Individual and Organizational Development*.

<sup>25</sup> Former Peace Corps expatriates, usually adults, who have now returned for a shorter engagement.

<sup>26</sup> Information on this programme drawn from: <http://eca.state.gov/fulbright/facts-and-common-questions>

<sup>27</sup> Information on this NGO drawn from:

<https://educationusa.state.gov/centers/batumi-center-international-education>

pebbled beach with both walking and biking lanes. The city skyline consists of miscellaneous buildings, ranging from a single skyscraper to international luxury hotels and imposing monuments. The port serves a large industrial area, handling vessels, cargo trains, and several commercial ferries connected to Southern Ukraine. The city centre is best described as a cosmopolitan melting pot of architectures and cultures, with a touch of an old European city. There are several green parks, a Venice-style piazza, a Turkish quarter, restaurants offering world cuisine, and an Islamic mosque, among other curiosities. The outlying area of the city consists mostly of residential districts, featuring old communist-style apartment complexes and building sites under construction. Illustrating Georgia's pro-Western orientation, all public buildings display the EU flag, although the country is not a member.



*Figure 2: An overview of central Batumi (Photo by Malgorzata Kopczynska / TrekEarth.com)*

Batumi has been shaped by foreign powers over the centuries, but was particularly influenced by the tug of war between the Russian and Ottoman empires in their quest for territorial expansion. The main reason for this is the city's strategic location as a Caucasian crossroads, making it an important Black Sea trading port and explaining its mixed demographic composition (Khalvashi 2015: 49). Following independence from the Soviet Union, Ajara seceded from the rest of Georgia and became subject to the authoritarian regime of Aslan Abashidze, who advocated regional autonomy. Although he maintained good relations with the Georgian



central government in Tbilisi throughout the 1990s, he was ousted in the wake of the Rose Revolution and was forced to flee into exile in Russia. In his efforts to turn Georgia westwards, Saakashvili then decided to transform Batumi into the country's centre of tourism and foreign investment (Frederiksen 2013: 36). Today, both the city and Ajara are undergoing rapid development, mainly by Turkish investors, attracting Turkish citizens to settle there for work. As during the Soviet era, Batumi remains a particularly popular resort for Russians and Ukrainians, but more Western tourists are now also visiting.

Previous ethnographic research about Batumi has mainly been concerned with the transformative implications of public discourse since the Rose Revolution. In his study of how peer-group young men experience this transformation, Frederiksen (2013) shows how they find themselves stuck in a socially marginalised temporality, and lack future aspirations. The main reason for this is the seasonal<sup>28</sup> nature of their means of making an everyday living, and it causes the men to descend into an alternative world of boredom, alcohol, and idolisation of a Soviet criminal fraternity (ibid. 7, 65, 180). Moreover, the government's 'overwriting' of the city, in order to erase the Soviet and Abashidze periods in favour of modern façades, does not necessarily coincide with public needs. Khalvashi (2015) investigates the nuances of this opposition in her study of how she observes Orthodox Christians and Muslims as *affective publics*, based on their peripheral location within Georgia and how they construct national attachment through body, space, and time in everyday life. She argues that modern manifestations such as public monuments erected post-independence, e.g. the *Medea statue*, evoke connotations of the historical past and an imagined future, as well as inciting tensions in Ajaran identity politics (Frederiksen 2013: 30-31; Khalvashi 2015: 23-24).

### **Ajara: Diverse and contested borderlands**

The only<sup>29</sup> autonomous region in Georgia, Ajara, borders the Georgian regions of Guria and Samtskhe-Javakheti, as well as the far northeastern region of Turkey. Ajara's vast topography is distinct from that in the rest of the country: first, in the southwest, you have cosmopolitan Batumi; in the mountainous eastern highlands

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<sup>28</sup> Batumi is a popular tourist resort in the summers, but foreign visitor numbers are low throughout the year.

<sup>29</sup> Georgia regards Abkhazia as its second autonomous republic, but this issue remains disputed due to the region's current geopolitical situation.

lies the village of Khulo, the Muslim centre; and in the north is the tourist resort of Kobuleti. The subtropical climate Ajara shares with neighbouring Guria yields a rich harvest of citrus fruit. Ajara is subject to the Georgian national government, but has its own regional government, flag, and coat of arms. In the highlands, both Turkish and Norwegian <sup>30</sup> hydropower companies cooperate on building infrastructure to supply the surrounding villages with electricity, which is still a scarce resource in rural areas. Moreover, the region is culturally and religiously diverse: Ajara is home to Georgia's largest Muslim minority, in part owing to its geographical proximity to Turkey, and there are also significant groups of Apostolic Armenians, Jews, and Orthodox Greeks, as well as the Georgian Orthodox majority. The two main transportation channels in the region are Batumi Airport, which is connected with several Central European destinations, and a Tbilisi-bound high-speed railway.

In his multi-sited fieldwork, Pelkmans (2006) uses three separate case studies to show the complexity with which Ajarans across the region have remapped social and cultural boundaries following the 1988 border opening. In Sarpi, a village that straddles the border between Georgia and Turkey, he shows how, after decades behind the Iron Curtain, residents' expectations about Turkey as their conception of the West, and the longed-for reunion with their counterparts on the other side, turned out to be a rather disappointing affair (ibid. 20-21). In Khulo, he investigates the 'us' and 'them' relationship between Georgian Orthodox Christianity and Islam that revived following independence. A strong sentiment prevails in the Georgian Orthodox Church that, because its followers represent the religious majority in Ajara, it has a greater claim on the national identity of 'Georgianness' than the Muslims (ibid. 93-94). In a final Batumi case study, Pelkmans shows how the Abashidze regime constructed empty façades during the 1990s in order to create future optimism among residents. This illusion revealed first, that modernity was a continuously perceived matter, and second, that it only became beneficial in the political elite. However, this strategy evoked ambivalent sentiments in the public discourse (ibid. 196-197, 206-212).

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<sup>30</sup> The *Clean Energy Group*. For more project details, see: <http://www.cleanenergygroup.no/project.php?id=1>



## Let's Have a Toast to the God-Given Land!

### Georgia: Cultural and geographical overview

There is saying about Georgia that when God was distributing land to the peoples of the world, the Georgians were busy holding a traditional feast, a *supra*, in His honour. When He heard about this, He was delighted and decided to award them the most beautiful land of all. To this day, the Georgians are very proud of their country, whose position as a crossroads between East and West has placed it at the mercy of history throughout its existence. Both before and since the unification of several small kingdoms under the 12<sup>th</sup> century Bagrationi Dynasty, Georgia has faced threats of conquest from surrounding empires and religions. Strong sentiments about defending such a tiny country therefore persist, unrestrained, to this day. Georgia is a small but – as with Ajara – highly diverse country in several respects. Most of its regions have their own distinctive cuisine, folk songs, and dress. The Georgians are also renowned for being very hospitable. The east has a dry continental climate and includes the region of Kakheti, the cradle of winemaking, with a history dating back 8,000 years. Meanwhile, the capital of Tbilisi is a bustling, timeless melting pot on the banks of the river *Mtkvari*.

In the north lies the immense Southern Caucasus mountain range, including the tallest mountain in the region, *Mt. Kazbek*, with an elevation of 5,047m, on the border with Russia. While the northeastern area has good facilities for alpine skiing, the northwestern part has the most highly populated village in Europe, Ushguli. Both are among the most popular tourist sites in Georgia. The inland city of Gori is the birthplace of the notorious Soviet leader, Joseph Stalin. In the south, where the climate is as dry as in the east, the charming towns of Borjomi and Akhaltsikhe offer popular tourist sites, such as the medieval complex of *Rabati* and the ancient cave city of *Vardzia*. Georgia is also a prime destination for those interested in monasteries and remote villages, as they can be found everywhere. When you reach the western part, the climate turns humid and subtropical. The second-largest city of Kutaisi is today home to the new Georgian national parliament. Along the Black Sea coast, beside charming tourist resorts and the largest botanical garden in the former Soviet Union, the cities of Poti and Batumi serve as the main hubs for the country's port activity.

### **The post-Soviet independence period (1991-2003)**

It is important to consider the country's recent political history since independence in order to understand the point at which Georgia has arrived today. On April 9<sup>th</sup> 1991, Georgia became the second of the former Soviet republics to declare independence. However, independence came at a bloody price: two years earlier to the day, Soviet troops had been deployed on the streets of Tbilisi to repress pro-democracy protests. Once independent, Georgia found itself literally in a state of chaos. Not only did the nation struggle with the capitalist transition to a market economy, but internal ethnic conflict also sparked wars on two fronts: first in Abkhazia and later in South Ossetia. Zviad Gamsakhurdia, a philologist and human rights advocate since the 1970s, was elected the first post-Soviet president. Together with co-dissident Merab Kostava, Gamsakhurdia had been one of the most prominent voices advocating Georgian independence. However, despite his populist approach to ordinary people and his emphasis on national revival, the increasingly authoritative presidential role and his inability to handle domestic issues combined with his strong anti-Western sentiments would soon have a major negative impact on his public support (Jones 2013: 22, 52-53, 58, 63, 67).

Gamsakhurdia was found dead under suspicious circumstances in 1993. Following Shevardnadze's entry into Georgian politics the previous year and his subsequent election as president in 1995, people perceived the former prominent Soviet minister as a man of integrity and balance. However, as it turned out throughout the 1990s, circumstances were against him. Despite his efforts to consolidate political forces to build democracy in Georgia and introduce the concept of civil society, the state remained weak and the national economy crumbled. For example, ordinary Georgians preferred to trust their patronage network over the state, which lacked the capacity to monitor the activity of such informal networks. (Jones 2013: 76, 79, 111-112, 134). Moreover, many people in the rural districts felt a closer attachment to Gamsakhurdia's romanticised conception of Georgian nationhood before post-Soviet modernisation. As Shevardnadze continued to have troubled affiliations with two criminal bosses, organised mafia networks and widespread corruption soon constituted strong forces that weakened the state and rule of law. Unlike his predecessor, Shevardnadze favoured both inter-ethnic and Western reconciliation (ibid. 78, 90, 142, 216).

## **The Rose Revolution and Saakashvili's presidency (2003-2008)**

Georgia was now close to becoming a failed state. In the early 2000s, public discontent over Shevardnadze's inability to deal with the country's domestic issues and his actions to suppress anti-government protests grew significantly (Jones 2013: 137-138). Two political organisations soon found themselves united against Shevardnadze: *Kmara!* ('Enough!'), a student organisation funded by the OSGF, which brought the younger generation onto the political stage; and the *National Movement*, fronted by the charismatic Saakashvili and his collaborators in the Georgian political elite, Zurab Zhvania and Nino Burjanadze (Manning 2007: 171, 200; Øverland 2004: 223-224). When electoral fraud was then exposed in the 2003 parliamentary elections, public resentment culminated in large-scale street demonstrations and inevitably led to the Rose Revolution. The masses, armed with roses, ultimately caused Shevardnadze to be deposed. Dubbed as a rite of passage in Georgian post-Soviet history, the Rose Revolution joined the ranks of other *colour revolutions*<sup>31</sup> that later followed throughout the decade (Manning 2007: 171, 202).

Saakashvili was almost uncontestedly elected president in 2004 and subsequently embarked on his quest to reform the Georgian state. These reforms were mainly concerned with eradicating corruption in the police force and state bureaucracy, rebuilding infrastructure, and moving closer to the West. Two other significant reforms that were implemented between 2004 and 2005 were laws on both higher (university) and general education levels. The laws introduced stricter university admission criteria, higher teacher salaries, and a new school curriculum with an emphasis on English education. Alongside U.S. public diplomacy efforts to support the latter reforms, the Georgian government also launched its own<sup>32</sup> comprehensive project in 2010. Owing to the variable quality of Georgian schools, a 2006 study of university students showed that 80 % were dependent on private tutoring (Jones 2013: 141, 212; Manning 2007: 202; UNICEF 2010: 2). In a society as traditional and patriarchal as Georgia, however, Saakashvili's quest for modernisation faced several issues. The most important of these included his inability to control the patronage

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<sup>31</sup> This concept refers to large-scale public events, predominantly in post-Soviet or post-communist countries, that result in significant democratic and liberally oriented political upheavals, with mixed results. Previous examples are the 1989 Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia and the 2004-2005 Orange Revolution in Ukraine.

<sup>32</sup> *Teach and Learn with Georgia (TLG)*. The project recruits English teachers from abroad, who live in local communities for one academic year, with the main purpose of improving English skills among the Georgian public. As of 2015, 47 expatriates participated in the project (TLG 2015: 5-7).

networks that undermined the state, to provide social security and health services, or to deal with gender inequality. He also failed to decrease the big wealth gap between urban and rural communities (Jones 2013: 177, 207-208, 255).

### **The 2008 Russo-Georgian War and post-war implications (2008-)**

Following his election as president, Saakashvili aspired to improve the formerly ambivalent relations between Georgia and Russia. While he was able to maintain a balanced relationship, a series of incidents occurred, such as the 2006 Russian wine embargo and the escalation of Russia's anti-Western rhetoric aimed at Tbilisi. One of the pretexts here was the disunity at the 2007 NATO summit in Bucharest, which discussed Georgia's *Member Action Plan (MAP)* to become a future member (Asmus 2010: 138-139; Jones 2013: 248; Mitchell and Cooley 2010: 62-63). This series of incidents caused friction and led to armed conflict in South Ossetia in August 2008. Although the cause of the war remains disputed, Russia's version is that it deployed troops to protect South Ossetian citizens from Georgian aggression against villages and Russian 'peacekeepers'. The five-day war ultimately forced the weaker party, Saakashvili, to abstain from further action (Mitchell and Cooley 2010: 13).

Losing the 2008 war with Russia was a major blow to Saakashvili's presidency. While it did not intervene militarily and avoided risky confrontations, the United States did provide assistance in dealing with the large IDP<sup>33</sup> crisis that emerged, and continued the defence partnership despite deterioration in the climate under president Obama. Interestingly, a 2009 survey showed that 54 % of Georgians favoured improving relations with Russia regardless of U.S. backing (Jones 2013: 244, 249-250; Mitchell and Cooley 2010: 48-49). Asmus (2010) concludes of the war that the outcome had far-reaching geopolitical implications for the relationship between Russia and the West, and argues that it was part of Russia's *divide and conquer* strategy, aimed at obstructing the Western integration of pro-Russian regions such as South Ossetia (ibid. 217, 221-224). When Saakashvili lost power following the 2013 elections, he fled the country and currently remains wanted<sup>34</sup> on charges back home. In 2015, he was appointed Governor of the Odessa region in Ukraine. Georgia's future remains uncertain, and I therefore claim that the significance of this thesis lies in investigating

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<sup>33</sup> Acronym for *Internally Displaced Person*. Georgia faced similar crises following the wars in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the early 1990s: the 2008 war created a total of 270,000 IDPs (USAID 2012: 16).

<sup>34</sup> See for instance: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/07/15/mishas-mission-impossible-odessa-saakashvili/>

the young generation's relationship to the West in the context of a post-Cold War world that is turning increasingly unstable.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> I refer to the events of Russian aggression that followed the *2013-2014 Euromaidan protests* in Ukraine: the annexation of Crimea, and the sieges of the Luhansk and Donbass regions by pro-Russian separatists.

## Chapter 3: America – Experience and Influence

*The mornings always involved the same extra wake-up call: construction noise. It felt as if the city was under construction 24/7. After doing my regular workout and checking Facebook for any announcements about today's club session, I would catch one of the buses bound for the city centre in the afternoon. I had to learn the bus schedule by heart, as it was not available anywhere. Several marshrutkas<sup>36</sup> rushed past me, picking up local residents heading for work or on everyday errands. The packed buses often reminded me of my foreignness, with people staring at me and sometimes giggling during the 10-minute ride along bumpy cobblestone roads. Another occasion when I would feel this foreignness was during my weekly grocery shopping at the local supermarket, when some employees would send me strange looks unambiguously saying, "Why in the world are you here?"*

*Before the club sessions started at 4pm, I would most often make some necessary purchases or go for lunch. As I walked towards the library entrance, the square American Corner logo featuring the stars and stripes offered a revealing symbol, and the windows facing the streets were transparent for public display. After a short walk to the left down the silent hallways, the BAC interior soon came into view through the glass doors. I said "Gamarjoba" ("hello") to the library staff and Sopho, the BAC coordinator. About 10-20 minutes prior to the start of the club session, the room filled up with youths arriving straight from school, while some adults would sit by the computers. An atmosphere of liveliness and curiosity would soon develop as I found a vacant seat at the back table in the corner, unpacking my notepad. Meanwhile, Melissa or Josh would be getting ready to catch the youths' attention; a peek into the world of America was about to unfold in the hour ahead.*

This chapter is concerned with how the informant group experience America, in particular based upon their participation with and spare time spent at the BAC, which is considered to be one of the main sources of this experience. In our investigation here, participant observation was conducted during the *Eco Clubs* on Tuesdays and the *Literature Clubs* on Thursdays, from 4pm to approximately 5pm. On a number of occasions, there were deviations from the ordinary schedule due to visits from external American guest speakers dealing with related miscellaneous topics, some of which also feature here. However, we should not assume these club sessions to be the informants' only cultural horizon for what America is about from

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<sup>36</sup> Minibuses working as shared taxis, a transportation system that is widespread in the former Soviet Union.

their local vantage point. As youths, they interact with other sources of information and experience as well, which will be elaborated on later in the thesis. Beside the club sessions at the BAC, I also had several opportunities to hang out with the youths on the streets of Batumi after they finished school. Based upon conversations consisting of small talk on different topics, this particular context was more informal and provided interesting, if limited, insights into how they related to the world. The hangouts were conducted for comparative purposes, to identify any eventual discrepancies between the interaction I observed during these club sessions and their behaviour when they were not in the presence of the two American expatriates (Hoëm 2001: 56-57).

In our investigation, we are concerned both with how the informants experience America based upon their participation, and the social structure and power relations crystallised in this social arena. The BAC is not only an arena for pure socialisation or for learning new information about America: it is also a space that provides the youths with exclusive resources for social mobility. In the first part of the chapter, I investigate how the informants construct the BAC as a social arena in their everyday lives. In the second part, I investigate the power relations that are elicited between the American expatriates and the informants, which stem from a particular social structure. The U.S. public diplomacy strategy applied in Batumi will, moreover, be illuminated in this regard. Both parts of the chapter draw upon observational and interview data with the related actors, during and outside the BAC club sessions.

## **The BAC as a Microcosm and Social Arena**

### **The setting prior to the club sessions**

The setting in the BAC club sessions would most often follow the same formula, regardless of whether it was an *Eco* or *Literature Club*. When I arrived there myself, usually around 10-15 minutes prior to the start of the club sessions, a few or a good number of youths might already be present. Melissa or Josh would arrive a little before or at the same time as myself, in order to have some time to deal with technical practicalities whether it was setting up a Power Point presentation or some other equipment. However, since Sopho started her workday at 10am when the BAC opened, she had most often rigged up most of this in advance. I made sure I was sitting among the informants, as this made it much easier to communicate. While I

was unpacking my notepad, the rest of the participants would continuously arrive straight from school, kissing their friends' cheeks before finding their random seats. As the time got closer to 4pm, the atmosphere would gradually turn noisier. The youths would usually sit in their regular peer groups, chatting in Georgian, giggling, and fiddling with their smartphones: checking Facebook, listening to music, and playing mobile games. On a weekly average, about 20-25 participants would show up, the majority of whom were participants in the *Access Program*, a programme I will elaborate shortly. Even more would come on special <sup>37</sup> occasions. Sopho would be working with daily tasks, while other visitors would be using the computers.

### **The significance of English native speakers**

"Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four... three... two... one!" The *Eco Clubs* would start in the same way, with Melissa gesticulating and counting down from ten until she had caught the youths' attention. In two of the sessions, she taught them about presentation techniques, writing keywords on a whiteboard about subjects such as finding a topic, structure, and practice. Her attitude was friendly and confident. As she proceeded she would ask clear questions about where they would research for information (which websites they would use etc.), how they would handle the audience, and how they would prepare a summary. Of my informants, Daliko, Nona, and, in particular, Levan and Tamar were more eager to answer her in English than the other participants present. In the meantime, other visitors would enter and leave the room, causing distraction among them. Since the participants were soon due to give a presentation in small groups on American presidents, Melissa gave them some time to work on that project. The groups, whose members were often mixed by gender and by whether or not they were affiliated with the Access Program, would then converse in Georgian and giggle as they worked. When their presentations were given some weeks afterwards, I got an impression that there were varying levels of confidence and English pronunciation.

The BAC was one of two institutions in Batumi I knew of that were regarded as English-speaking in terms of their formal activity, the other one being the local branch of the *Education and Training International Ltd. (ETI)*.<sup>38</sup> The observations

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<sup>37</sup> I refer predominantly to the events at the BAC, which featured American guest speakers.

<sup>38</sup> ETI is a private British company that provides English training and consultancy services in former Soviet republics. Information on this company drawn from: <http://eti.uk.com/node/87>



presented above fit into a pattern of formally contextualised interaction that I observed at other club sessions. Whenever the participants were conversing with Melissa or Josh, e.g. answering questions and giving presentations, they would do so in English. While working in groups on the other hand, the youths would converse in Georgian. Nona is a shy 15-year old girl who is among my informants, has strong opinions and is an aspiring singer. A noteworthy point is that both she and Levan were enrolled in the *FLEX Program*<sup>39</sup>, a USDS programme in which youths can compete through several rounds to win a year of high school studies in the United States, living in a host family. In the academic year 2014-2015, 45 out of the 800 students admitted to the programme were Georgians. As Nona illustrates below, the opportunity to practice her English with native speakers is a resource that is unavailable to her in her school system, and this is highly valued:

N: At first I needed to practice English speaking like this. So I was always shy to speak English. And... I just wanted to see and look how others were speaking. Then when I came here I started to speak English. So for my future job, it's very good.

Q: *I see. But do you feel it is easier coming here to speak English than other places? What about in your class at school?*

N: In my school if I say true... We are not studying English. Our teacher... (giggling) is very... Our teacher doesn't know English.

Several informants told me that they gradually became more confident about speaking English when they first started participating at the BAC, for the reason identified by Nona – namely that English education is largely downplayed in Georgian schools. Levan, on the other hand, highlights the significance of having access to an international English teaching syllabus and being able to acquire skills through different activities that would prove future relevant in study and work life:

L: For instance, there are some books about the SAT and TOEFL<sup>40</sup> tests. These are preparation books to apply for international English exams. And these books are very beneficial for me (...). It's a very good opportunity to self-develop yourself. Like, to improve some skills as I said. Like, for instance, communication skills and public speaking skills. It's really important because (...). These skills are used in your career and also in your personal life.

When arguing that they didn't study English properly at her public school, Nona explained to me that the teachers' *pronunciation* was very bad and that she, as the

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<sup>39</sup> Acronym for *Future Leaders Exchange*. Information on this programme drawn from: <http://exchanges.state.gov/non-us/program/future-leaders-exchange/details>

<sup>40</sup> TOEFL and SAT, among others, are standardised English language tests for non-native speakers.

other of my informants confirmed, preferred to attend the club sessions to practice her English with native speakers. Irakli is an intellectual and a busy member of my informant group who didn't participate as much as the others. He substantiates Nona's argument, placing further emphasis on the issue of native accent in different interacting sources, such as communicating with the Americans and the media:

- I: When you come to the American Corner, you develop with a lot people that come from other countries as you, from Norway, and Melissa from America. And you study from their speech. Your ear becomes familiar with the other people's speech and also for the other students, and you hear different voices every day (...). And most of people... For example, my friend, he studied English from TV.

This tendency, for young people to have a particularly good ability to speak English based upon their exposure to English interaction from channels such as the BAC and the media, was something I perceived throughout my fieldwork. As I spent time hanging out with the informants in the streets, I soon realised that they also perceived me as a native speaker because of my accent, and that consolidating their English practice with me beyond the club sessions was regarded as a vital feature in our reciprocal relationship. The benefit for me as an anthropologist, on the other hand, would then be the opportunity to practice my own English speaking skills. Moreover, it seemed that this interaction pattern was mutually reciprocal and meaningful for the informants when applied in an informal context, such as hanging out. Put frankly, I represented a resource they desired (Eder and Corsaro 1999: 526; Okely 2013 [2012]: 48-49; Wikan 1992: 467, 476).

The strategy that Nona and Levan outline suggests that the social structure the club sessions offer in their institutional context allows the youths, in their participant role, to construct the BAC as a meaningful, and thus legitimate arena in which linguistic knowledge can be accumulated on a continuous basis (Berger and Luckmann 2000: 91, 104, 106). Furthermore, the fact that some of my informants (such as Levan and Tamar) replied to much more questions and expressed adequate reasoning in English is indicative of two significant findings based upon my observations. First, that the social structure rendered from the club sessions produces a *habitus*: their relatively above-average accent in English can be seen as a symbolic manifestation of cultural competence, which they can make use of in the future. A second substantiating finding is that these occasions could be perceived as a performing 'front stage', allowing them to show off and seek recognition for their English skills in front of the other participants (Bourdieu 2010 [1977]: 72, 95, 186; Goffman 1990 [1959]: 32, 37).

### **The Access participants: Figureheads of U.S. public diplomacy?**

In 2004, the USDS initiated the Access Program <sup>41</sup> whose main purpose was to provide foreign youths aged 13-20 from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds with better prospects for their future life. This involved English language skills, knowledge about America, and exchange opportunities. The programme also targets talented students in each cohort and, once they are enrolled, it covers all the necessary costs. In Georgia, *PH International* <sup>42</sup>, a transnational organisation consisting of professionals from the Balkans, United States, and the Caucasus region implemented the programme. Currently, it has taken on about 250 young people aged 13-17 in different regions; each cohort enjoys two years of mandatory after-school teaching, summer camps, and different enrichment programmes. These are hosted in appropriate institutions such as the American Corners, in close cooperation with both Peace Corps and Fulbright expatriates. Other aims in the programme include the stimulation of critical thinking and self-confidence. In Georgia, the programme is supported by not-for-profit organisations *AMIDEAST* and *FHI 360*.

A significant majority of the youth clientele participating in the BAC club sessions were enrolled in the Access Program, including Tamar and Daliko from my informant group. While Tamar was a down-to-earth and determined girl, Daliko was calm and reflective. They both expressed gratitude about being enrolled in the programme for several reasons. Not only because they get the chance to learn English and discover more about America, but also in terms of socialising with co-participants and the help they receive from the Americans with formal tasks. However, Daliko acknowledges that their enrolment as participants is conditional and depends on their attendance:

- T: I attend three times a week. Three times a week and why? Because it's a special programme for children who can go with private tutors and improve their knowledge with tutors. And, like, write this application and then they consider it (...). I think it is... How can I say... It's a good achievement in my life at this moment. Because I love Access, I love the Access kids. I love its teachers and they are really helping me to improve my knowledge. English knowledge.

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<sup>41</sup> The full name is *English Access Microscholarship Program*. I only use 'Access Program'. Information on this programme drawn from: <http://exchanges.state.gov/non-us/EnglishAccess>

<sup>42</sup> Information on this organisation drawn from: <http://www.mes.gov.ge/uploads/PH%20International%20in%20Georgia.pdf>

- D: I think the Access Program is really important because I learn a lot of new things that I never had heard of before. And now I realise that – how can I live without knowing this? If I don't show up five times they will kick me out from this project. But it's not the main reason. I really like to come here.

Although I learned that they received two to three after-school lessons a week from Melissa and Josh, I decided not to conduct participant observation during these classes, but rather to concentrate on the club sessions, which could provide adequate data material in one consistent setting. The reasons for this methodological approach were that I would have needed parental approval for the participants to be featured and that my presence would probably have been more influential in this more intimate setting (Geertz 1973: 9, 10, 17-18; Okely 2013 [2012]: 77, 95). During my observations at the club sessions, I noticed significant elements that distinguished the Access participants. First, they were most often seated in a group at the table opposite the one at which non-Access participants were seated – the only exception being when they were mixed up during group activities. Second, their behavioural pattern was in certain respects different from that of the non-Access participants.

Although they attended most club sessions, the Access participants were nonetheless the most *reserved* participants, both in terms of answering questions in English asked by Melissa and Josh, and in providing adequate reasoning for their answers, which often just consisted of plain keywords. This would probably be consistent with the varying levels of their English speaking skills. On a number of occasions, the boys in particular would struggle to concentrate on the topic they were being lectured on during the club sessions. Instead, they preferred to pay attention to other things, such as chatting with peers or fiddling with their smartphones – behaviour that, when spotted, was reprimanded by Melissa and Josh. Both Tamar and Daliko avoided such behaviour, actively participating and working to acquire better English speaking skills. These observations, along with the informants' accounts of their role as Access participants, imply a contradiction. While the youths are regarded as privileged, they still display more reserved and *restless* behaviour than the non-Access participants.

On the one hand, the Access Program is idealised as a “special programme”, in which the participants gain exclusive access to additional knowledge (e.g. on American culture) and communication skills (e.g. English language and critical thinking), and can utilise this for upward social mobility – such as admission to

prestigious universities and the acquisition of jobs that demand such skills. Since the programme is offered at the BAC, this also suggests that the arena itself serves a beneficial purpose in this mobility, similar to the role represented by the settlement house in Whyte's study of Boston street corner gangs (Goffman 1990 [1959]: 45-46; Whyte 1993 [1943]: 94, 98, 104). On the other hand, most of the Access participants that I observed did not express this kind of idealised picture through their behaviour. Two significant aspects cannot be neglected in this respect: the structural element<sup>43</sup> that this particular group of participants inhabits; and the fact that I didn't observe the Access classes, which might represent a different 'stage' for them. It is, however, interesting to notice the discrepancy between how the Access Program was conceptualised as an exclusive resource for enculturation – and the observation that the average Access participants actually performed less actively than the non-Access participants – despite being given access to these resources and encouraged by the Americans to actively participate during club sessions (Goffman 1990 [1959]: 114, 129; Hoëm 2001: 56, 58).

### **The BAC as a stimulating environment**

One Saturday, Levan invited me along to hang with him and some of the informants at the BAC. He had told me that most of the youths spent a lot of time there outside the club sessions, when they didn't have to follow instructions. Levan stood out both as an active participant during the club sessions, with above-average English speaking skills, and as an organiser who often influenced others. In this way, he naturally soon became a key informant for me (Whyte 1993 [1943]: 21, 266). When I arrived, Gocha was already sitting by one of the computers watching viral videos. The youngest of my informants, at age 13, he had an innocent charm to him and had befriended most of the youth clientele. Levan suggested that we could play some of the American board games and picked one from the bookshelf. We ended up playing several games, rapidly replacing one after another; each featured different activities, such as word play, miming, and construction. The mood between us was relaxed, as we laughed and talked about all sorts of things. Gocha and Levan were especially enthusiastic, seemingly having played the games many times before. At the outset, I regarded this as just one of their trivial activities at the BAC. However, after I had taught them some Norwegian phrases following an *Eco Club* not long afterwards, the

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<sup>43</sup> I refer to the fact that participants were enrolled partially because of their socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

informants almost casually suggested that we played board games before heading outside for a walk.

As Levan explains below, the BAC's distinctive social environment stimulates youths to spend their time there for both everyday commitments and for leisure. Daliko, an Access participant, favours the opportunity that allows her to learn about different aspects of America and that this knowledge triggers her motivation. In this way, the combination of a social environment involving peers and cultural stimuli, including a 'stage' during the club sessions where participants can show off their linguistic skills and knowledge, suggests that hanging out at the BAC becomes an everyday *ritual* which generates experiences and a sense of prestige to it, which thus contributes in the youths' own identity formation (Erikson 1977: 87-89, 113):

- L: The American Corner is a relaxing space. A space where you can come with your friend and talk about different things. A place where you can have fun with board games. A place where you can research. Work on your homework, work on your assignment. And the American Corner is a place where you can meet new people. So the American Corner has lots of functions.
- D: I would say learning about American history. Learning new words every time... For instance, if we have talked about New York and I want to know more about it, I go home and read a lot about it. As I get more information about this country [the United States], the more I want to go there.

I therefore concluded that the board games did not only constitute a part of the BAC's vast material resources accessible to the youths. The activity of playing board games was also a manifestation of the social structure, which motivated them to hang out together in this particular space where they could play these particular games and learn English simultaneously. As per Ingold's (2000) concept of *taskscape*, as the youths spent time at the BAC while socialising with their peers – whether watching a movie, preparing a joint school presentation on the computers, or simply playing board games – all these activities located meaning in their everyday lives while they hung out there (Ingold 2000: 199, 208; Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003: 13-14, 16). By being invited to play board games despite my age difference, I was able to immerse myself in their vantage point rather than just observe as an outsider. My interaction as a participant in this particular ethnographic moment allowed me to learn two things. First, I discovered more about the social dynamic between the youths in an informal context, without the American expatriates' presence; and second, I could understand how they found the institution attractive and why they

spent time there instead of in other public spaces in Batumi (Eder and Corsaro 1999: 522; James 1996: 315, 327-328).

This suggests another interpretation of the BAC as a social structure, namely that it can be perceived as a desired institutionalised space where the youths can hang out without any parental presence. In Mead's (1928) classic study of adolescent girls on Samoa, she shows how girls perceived the missionary boarding school as a social institution, where they could withdraw from parental authority in the household (ibid. 158-159). While most girls decided to go on with a traditional life, what stimulated some to attend the boarding school was two-fold. First, the fact that the girls' religious lives were *institutionalised*, enabling them to collectively socialise with other peers. One of the preconditions for their admission was that they subjected their sexuality to missionary control – a conflicting deviation from the traditional life. Second, the fact that the school represented a Western orientation of their lifestyle, such as pursuing a career outside the traditional local community and learning English, as exemplified in the girl Lita's case (ibid. 161-171). Other contemporary ethnographic studies of youths hanging out in different urban public spaces, like malls, substantiate this strategy by showing how they attribute symbolic meaning to these identity-forming spaces because they are able to interact and spend leisure time with peers, as well as retreat from parental presence in an autonomous environment. In this light, other stimulating aspects of the BAC as a public institution take on added significance: the free admission, its specific target group, and its central location in the city centre of Batumi (Berger and Luckmann 2000: 98-99, 117; Lieberg 1995: 722, 728; Spilková and Radová 2011: 566, 577, 583).

## **Power Relations and the Influence of America**

### **The issue of classroom discipline**

“Okay guys, let's get started. Welcome everybody and thanks for showing up in the cold weather.” Josh would start his *Literature Clubs* with a determined and calm demeanour, serving as an icebreaker. As I sat at the back of the room. Josh wrote the day's headline on the whiteboard, 'Nobel Prize Winners', and added some keywords below. He then divided the participants into small groups and handed them a prepared fact sheet. They were now supposed to gather as many facts as possible within 10 minutes – a model Josh called 'World Café'. One representative from each

group was then supposed to rotate and present their findings in English to the other groups at three-minute intervals, before all groups competed in a final trivia quiz. As the youths reviewed their sheets, Josh inspected them continuously while I made some observations. “You know; the activities need to be adapted. If it’s getting too hard, they easily become demotivated. If it’s getting too easy, they’ll get bored. You need to find a balance through it,” he told me in a confidential manner. Shortly thereafter, he walked over to Tamar and Daliko’s group, having overheard them speaking in Georgian, and reminded them about conversing in English. Josh has held club sessions as a Fulbright expatriate in several Kazakhstani American Corners prior to his current engagement, his experience handling classrooms in a cross-cultural setting was evident.

At the other table, one of the boys on the Access Program discreetly fiddled with his smartphone. Josh immediately reprimanded him, telling him to put the phone away and stick to working on the fact sheet. In a later *Literature Club*, Josh would reprimand the same boy for his lack of concentration and carelessness while being asked questions, warning him that he would be marked absent if it happened again. Josh turned to me in between his inspection. “Such activities stimulate them to think outside the box, in terms of giving summaries and presentations. Still, the school system is a little stuck in the Soviet era,” he said and explained that Georgian teachers often teach without making their pupils *reflect* upon the knowledge taught. When the time was up, he told each group to present their findings and subsequently asked some relevant questions. Several of the youths responded eagerly in chorus, almost as if they were competing to provide the ‘golden truth’. Some, predominantly Access participants remained reserved, however. Now, close to 5pm, you could sense a restlessness among the youths before Josh concluded the club session over schedule. As Josh and I were chatting before leaving, he took the trouble to show me the Peace Corps system, in which he regularly registered attendance data on Access participants.

As I noted from several *Eco* and *Literature Club* observations, the power relations were influenced by the social structure. Melissa or Josh were in a teacher position and the youths were the young audience, just as in any classroom. However, these institutionalised relations need to be investigated further to go beyond their stereotype. Drawing upon her previous experience as an English teacher in Estonia



and Taiwan, Melissa told me that she encountered similar issues every week during the BAC club sessions as she did while teaching local students at the university:

M: Over there [Estonia and Taiwan] people have more of a, sort of an introverted, more quiet attitude and are very respectful toward their teachers. So I didn't have a lot of problems, sort of, managing a classroom (...). But in Georgia, when I first came, I had such terrible problems managing classrooms. Students were talking, answering their phone in class, you know... Coming in and out, coming 15 minutes late. And yeah, so adapting to the local culture and like understanding things behind it that I didn't understand before really helped my classroom management.

While seated at the back of the room opposite Melissa and Josh, I soon noticed that my presence in the congregation also seemed to be being taken more or less for granted during the club sessions. This allowed me to experience the club sessions from the *youths'* vantage point. The 'fly on the wall' approach, combined with the frequency of my observation on a weekly basis, consequently allowed me to observe the approximate nature of the club sessions and adequately grasp situational moments that elicited the power relations in this particular context (Geertz 1973: 14; Okely 2013 [2012]: 80-81). The club sessions presented above show several of these moments and suggest two aspects of the power relations. First, through the maintenance of *discipline* as a strategic tool in their position <sup>44</sup>, the expatriates succeeded in both rationalising and reproducing the authority needed to convey their intended conceptions of America. Second, this strategy had not only a symbolic, but also a bodily manifestation as well. When the expatriates demanded certain performances (e.g. speaking English in groups), and reprimanded certain behaviour, (e.g. fiddling with smartphones), the continuation of the disciplinary action involved an embodied behaviour pattern. I also observed how the Americans' formal attitude changed after the club sessions, when the youths chatted with them (Bourdieu 2010 [1977]: 78, 165-166; Goffman 1990 [1959]: 37, 43, 81; O'Neill 1986: 45-46, 57).

### **A rural perspective on classroom discipline**

As cited in the *Literature Club* presented in the previous section, I was struck by Josh's claim that the typical Georgian classroom was "a little stuck in the old Soviet system" when it came to the style of teaching. When I also heard Melissa's concerns about teaching students at the university, this made me curious about what a native classroom setting would be like, and whether certain characteristics could provide further context for the BAC club sessions. Fortunately, an opportunity to experience

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<sup>44</sup> I here refer to the age difference from the youth clientele and their background as Americans.

this soon arose. Early on in the fieldwork, Melissa had introduced me to a Peace Corps Response expatriate named Susan who co-taught along with her at Batumi University (Fangen 2010 [2004]: 59). Susan was in her 60s and had previously served in the Peace Corps, first as a young woman in Africa, and most recently in Ukraine prior to her arrival in Georgia, where she would be staying for six months. In the wake of the 2013-2014 Euromaidan protests and subsequent events, the entire branch was evacuated, which prevented her from finishing her engagement. I soon established contact with Susan and was later invited to her host family, who lived a couple of blocks away from my apartment. I felt very well received<sup>45</sup> in the family. Since the host father had extended family up in the village of Keda, I signalled my desire to come with them and experience rural life. Soon, I was invited to join in.

It was a rainy Wednesday morning when I met up with Susan and her host family in their apartment at 9.30am. The family's oldest son, Akaki, aged 10, was coming with us. His English pronunciation was among the best I had heard so far. Susan told me that this was mainly because he spent a great deal of time playing video games and watching viral videos on YouTube. We drove eastwards out of the city, climbing up into the foggy, green hills. As we entered the steep valley, the landscape started to remind me slightly of the Amazon. On both sides, there were small settlements and it took about 45 minutes of driving before we parked alongside the road next to a pink building. This was the first school we were visiting, where it turned out that the host father's mother worked as a teacher. She greeted us before we were invited inside for a tour. I took care to show off some of the phrases I'd learned in Georgian so far to the staff's enthusiasm. The hallways were dead silent and the interior was in clear need of renovation. Akaki joined Susan and me as we were invited into three classrooms with pupils in different grades to inspect their activity. The teachers welcomed us and some of the pupils said "hello" in English with enthusiastic expressions, indicative of the fact that there were few Westerners around. I noticed to my surprise elements such as laptop computers in one of the classrooms.

As we seated ourselves at the back to get a glimpse of what the class was like, the constant noise from chatting pupils was overwhelming. What was striking, however, was that it did not fade despite the female teacher's efforts to start the class. "Notice just how much small talk the teacher allows while she's speaking," Susan told me.

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<sup>45</sup> I learned that bringing a gift when invited home to a Georgian family was considered a cultural norm.

We stayed for about ten minutes before leaving, and being met by a number of pupils in the hallway, waving “hello” at us. Our next stop was the school where the host mother taught. It was located off the road in a residential area where poor living conditions were evident from the corroding façades. Susan asked if I want to join her for an English class that was about to start. She had told me beforehand that she had taught English at home in California for 20 years, and finds teaching abroad interesting. The teacher welcomed us and we were seated by the desk, in front of the pupils (in a higher grade than the earlier groups) before she started the class. Only a little whispering was actually heard from the back and the pupils were told to look something up in their British textbook called *Inspiration*. Suddenly, Susan interrupted and asked to continue the teaching, which the local teacher looked obviously happy with. I observed Susan from the desk as she wrote English vowels on the chalkboard, and assisted with the writing tasks she assigned. The pupils seemed very excited by her: you could tell that they liked their teacher being replaced by an American.

Barth (1999) argues that “(...) comparison across diversity allows us to establish dimensions of variation, thereby establishing the dimensions of our very description of the phenomena we study.” (ibid. 89). The purpose of these visits was mainly comparative and intended to provide context for my primary data material from the BAC. The observations made in the rural classrooms substantiated both Melissa and Josh’s accounts of their everyday experience. The discipline that was imposed during club sessions at the BAC was almost entirely absent in the rural classrooms, and this suggests that discipline was a tendentious issue. With the exception of the class in which Susan taught, this tendency was apparent regardless of whether or not the teacher happened to be an American. While the Georgian school system has gone from being a secluded institution with underpaid teachers to becoming modernised, with parental democracy and higher standards, the significant socio-economic disparity between rural and urban communities cannot be ignored as a factor that probably prevents the fruits of transformation from being harvested nationwide (Jones 2013: 212, 255). However, being able to observe a classroom setting outside the BAC, I was not only left with a better understanding of the field, but also the need for the expatriates to maintain discipline, as a strategy necessary for retaining their authority during the club sessions.

## **The BAC coordinator as an ambiguous intermediary**

From the very beginning of the case study, Sopho, the BAC coordinator, became a central intermediary actor between the American expatriates, my informants, and me on an everyday basis. Sopho is a 29-year old Batumi native. Having graduated from Batumi University with a BA in English Language and Literature, she soon got the job as BAC coordinator without any other relevant experience, and has held the position for the four ensuing years. She told me that her English studies were decisive for her qualifications and describes the generally tough job market for young graduates. Her salary is paid by the Municipality of Batumi. Besides her daily organising and communication tasks at the BAC, representing a link between the institution and the U.S. Embassy, she emphasised that the weekly socialisation with the youth clientele remained a significant feature of working in this position:

- S: I like to communicate with them and I hope they like it too. I'm friendly with them and I always try to help them if they need my help. I always support them. If they need to discuss any topic or write a recommendation or anything, I'll help them out.

Sopho told me that she would undertake annual training programmes, workshops, and occasionally other enrichment programmes along with her fellow local American Corners coordinators. She had, for instance, recently been to Vienna along with coordinators from over 18 different international American Corners. While she acknowledged that it wasn't as easy attracting the youths to participate in all the activities – even when they had promised to do so – she argued that the BAC's position in the American Corners Program in Georgia was dependent on certain factors. Moreover, she told me that because of the prominent <sup>46</sup> status it had gained over the years and “strategic” location, not yet reflected by the current space, the Americans were actually planning on expanding the facilities in the near future:

- S: So this is one of the great ways with the volunteers. They help us and this is really great. Great because students like to have contact with them, especially foreigners. And it's more... The main benefit is you speakers, English speakers. You are all attractive to them. And really, they do a great job for them. I'm really interested about how it [the BAC] will look after the expansion. It will be a space where kids can get new things that really will help them in choosing their future profession.

To my informants, Sopho was an important everyday social actor they could relate to more informally than Melissa and Josh, with whom they only maintained a minor social relationship. Based upon observations from my everyday presence and photos

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<sup>46</sup> I learned from my interview with Ketii, the American Corners Georgia coordinator at the U.S. Embassy, that the BAC was regarded among the top three American Corners in Georgia. High attendance was a main factor.

uploaded on some of the informants' Facebook profiles <sup>47</sup>, it became clear that Sopho was closer to several of them – both as a contact while at the BAC, and, in some instances, a friend who would hang out with them outside the club session, in other informal contexts. Just as the youths interacted a lot with Sopho, they maintained a more professional approach toward Melissa and Josh, who are dependent on Sopho to prepare and conduct their club sessions. Josh regards her positive efforts as BAC coordinator as a motivating factor for him:

J: Sopho is a very motivated, excellent American Corners coordinator. She's very open to the ideas that I have, and she also creates a lot of fun and great activities for people [at the BAC]. And so when you have a motivated colleague you're working with, you know... That helps keeping me regularly motivated.

Sopho's relationship with me as an anthropologist in the field would best be defined as a research assistant. We were about the same age and her position was important in terms of my ability to access the BAC as an institution: not only because of her efforts, along with Melissa, to select potential informants for the case study and give me a good introduction, but also because she provided me with information that kept me updated on a daily basis (Agar 2008 [1980]: 79-81; Okely 2013 [2012]: 142-143). In a few instances, we briefly discussed some ethical issues, such as my concern about the photos she would publish following club sessions. However, one cannot ignore the fact that she inhabited a dual role. While remaining a predominantly social figure for the youths at the BAC, she also represented U.S. interests through her position. Lukes (2005 [1974]) defines this kind of power in social life as the "(...) agents' *abilities* to bring about significant effects, specifically by furthering their own interests and/or affecting the interests of others, whether positively or negatively." (ibid. 65, my emphasis).

### **Public diplomacy as a strategy of influence**

One of the *Eco Clubs* in late March was about gender equality. At either end of the bookshelves in the room, coloured posters saying 'Past' and 'Present' had been hung up. Melissa wrote the claim 'A woman can be president' on the whiteboard. The participants were instructed to take a physical stand on certain claims presented, depending on whether they thought they belonged in the past or present. She asked them a rhetorical question. "Just because me and Levan are best friends, does that

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<sup>47</sup> While I was initially reluctant to add my informants on Facebook, I soon realised that it was more or less expected of me for two reasons. Not only did having Western friends on Facebook seem to be regarded as prestigious, but it also became a confirmation of our mutual friendship (Okely 2013 [2012]: 145, 150).

mean that we have to have the same opinion?" The others mumbled "no" in chorus. The claims presented were mainly concerned with how people regarded the position of the female gender in Georgian society. Other examples included 'A woman should focus on having children', 'Girls are not good at math', and 'Women cannot handle stress in governmental or business positions'. The informant girls, even Access participants who wouldn't usually be that active, were particularly engaged. A majority of the youths chose 'Past' when taking their stands, to indicate that they had no place in present-day Georgian society. For a moment, the act seemed staged.

When the claim 'Women do not have to work hard in school' was presented, I suddenly noticed that Nona placed herself under 'Past' while all the others were on the opposite side. "I think girls study easier than boys, they study very well," she said. "OK, so I can sense some girl power here?" Melissa responded baffled, probably not expecting Nona's brief divergence from the others. Another interesting response arose with the claim 'Girls should finish school before getting married'. From what I've learned so far, this illustrated the fact that the claim touched upon a sensitive issue in Georgian society. About everyone placed themselves under 'Present' and Tamar gave the following for standing there: "For the girl, it is a shame not to get married in some cases." Levan was also very involved in the activity, advocating that the threshold for Georgian women to succeed today was lower than it had been before. After Melissa had presented numerous claims on the whiteboard, she asked whether they thought it was useful to listen to each other's opinions. The participants nodded back at her in confirmation before they left.

As Melissa, Josh, Sopho, and the American Corners Georgia coordinator would collectively argue, the BAC was not supposed to be a *political* institution. However, taking into consideration a number of factors such as the significant U.S. diplomatic presence and the social structure, it would be naïve not to consider the BAC as having a capacity to influence and nurture U.S. interests at the grass-roots level targeting Georgian youths (Lukes 2005 [1974]: 27-28, 70; Whyte 1993 [1943]: 100). In the *Eco Club* presented above, it becomes evident that Melissa was not only interested in their opinions. Given the BAC's status as a social arena, the fact that she was approaching the youths<sup>48</sup> with questions that had implicit moral undertones could be

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<sup>48</sup> I refer to the fact that youths are in an impulsive and identity-seeking phase, and could potentially be easier to convince about changing their minds than adults.

viewed as an imposition of Western beliefs and values. This camouflaged strategy was perpetuated in other club sessions as well, and whether on American content or civil society issues, the participants' subconscious and consensual demeanour would suggest that they identified with the message (Lears 1985: 569, 573-574). Prior to my arrival in Batumi, the BAC had arranged a rally on domestic violence, and later in the fieldwork, a *Literature Club* held group activities to promote *Earth Day*, an annual worldwide environmental event. Both domestic violence and the environment remaining hot topics in Georgia, consider how Tamar and Levan, respectively, regarded these two events:

- T: We have a strong motivation to go rallying because... You know... In Georgia, there is much domestic violence. And we told them [Melissa and Josh]. The Americans helped us telling people that it's bad by showing them some posters, and we showed them that violence is bad. All by ourselves.
- L: Of course it [Earth Day] changed my views about the environment. Because Josh had talked about *Carbon Footprints*.<sup>49</sup> And... He said that when we waste our energy it pollutes the Earth. And it hurts the entire environment. So on that day, on Thursday, I decided to turn off the TV when I didn't watch TV. And turn off the lights when it was not necessary.

As Melissen (2005) explains, public diplomacy differs from other related political concepts such as propaganda and lobbying. First, the approach is more covert and does not target any specific group. Second, it promotes cross-cultural bridging and two-way dialogue. It is, moreover, not conditional on the political sphere, but is applied by other powerful actors such as international corporations (ibid. 12, 15, 18). In Georgia, however, the United States does not simply exert public diplomacy within a much more holistic context of its exercise of power. Post-fieldwork, I learned that the U.S. Navy would not only dock<sup>50</sup> vessels in Batumi annually, but that military personnel would also make official visits<sup>51</sup> to the BAC and speak on miscellaneous related topics. These *hard powered* actions might be perceived by Russia as a provocative manifestation of the American, and thus NATO, 'empire' in a territory in the Black Sea where it also exerts a significant military presence. Ultimately, it is argued that both the desired effect of U.S. influence and maintaining decent diplomatic ties depend on a balancing combination of soft and hard power

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<sup>49</sup> "The amount of greenhouse gases and specifically carbon dioxide emitted by something (as a person's activities or a product's manufacture and transport) during a given period." Definition drawn from: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/carbon%20footprint>

<sup>50</sup> Information on this activity drawn, see for instance: <http://agenda.ge/news/44997/eng>

<sup>51</sup> Information on this activity drawn from: <http://cne-cna-c6f.dodlive.mil/uss-mount-whitney-participates-in-an-american-corners-discussion/>

capacities (Lutz 2006: 594, 598; Nye, Jr. 2004: 110, 116, 147). Since I was studying a politicised institution, this required me to maintain a neutral approach towards the informants and avoid letting my data material be influenced. While I was unable to disguise my background as an anthropologist, I did not express any political views (Fangen 2010 [2004]: 165-166). Broch (2003) argues moreover that “A confrontation involving members of so many groups of people representing strikingly different ideologies is interesting for its own dynamics. But it also brings forth serious methodological problems for an observing anthropologist.” (ibid. 178).

There is another interesting aspect in this regard. Public diplomacy is not only a structural top-down mechanism; it is driven by young American expatriates on the ground who have independent opinions and future aspirations. This was the general experience I had while travelling in Georgia, meeting expatriates from almost all over the United States and from all sorts of different backgrounds. But when I asked Melissa if she thought young Americans today were cross-culturally oriented and adventurous, she was careful to stress that this assumption was a conditional matter:

M: It depends on the part of the U.S. you're from. So for instance in Nebraska, I went to like a small liberal arts school. And where I went to school, definitely everyone's really interested in cross-cultural things like that because my university promoted it a lot. But if you go to a big state school and you're feeling, you know... More sort of ethnocentric, this makes everyone want to live in the U.S. So no, I would say people are interested, but not all are willing to take the full step of getting the experience.

Behind the façade of good intentions in supporting Georgia, it could be argued that there is a sentiment of American *exceptionalism* in this approach. As Ceaser (2012) shows, the United States has had long-standing political traditions – particularly within conservative circles – of portraying itself as an exceptional country with a mission to promote liberal values worldwide. This mission has both philosophical and religious undertones, almost to the extent of being divinely ordained. However, what the Americans want to promote is actually universal features that other Western countries could have mediated (ibid. 6-8, 10). It has, moreover, been questioned whether expatriates operating through different U.S. organisations actually exercise the craft of public diplomacy. While organisations such as the Peace Corps work towards primary goals similar to those of embassies in building mutual understanding, there is still a difference, as the Peace Corps strategy entails conducting this approach at a personal level, with developmental traits and detachment from the diplomatic mission. Since they are regarded as credible actors



in the communities where deployed, it is argued that, with greater embassy efforts, Peace Corps expatriates could do a better job of fulfilling U.S. public diplomacy goals, while retaining their independent position (Madeley 2011: 227, 236, 240).

### **The popularity of external speakers and Levan's diplomatic role**

While I was staying in Batumi, I had the opportunity to observe two occasions featuring American external speakers, both concerned with education in America. One of these presentations was called the 'American high school experience', in which the guest speaker was a U.S. Army colonel and teacher at an Arizona high school. At the time, he was carrying out a temporary engagement at the U.S. Embassy in Tbilisi. Not as many youths showed up on this occasion. He started by asking them what they associated with America, and received responses ranging from "freedom" to "Dunkin' Donuts". They were stunned when he told them that approximately 2,000 students attended his high school. He added that the school had a 90 % Hispanic population, and showed more photos in the Power Point of teachers in colourful and funny postures. Another fun fact was that the school's principal recorded a video message for the students to watch in their classrooms every morning. Amazement shone from the youths' faces as it was revealed to them that America was so much nicer and bigger. The man went on to tell them about the social activities the school offered students, emphasising the significance of sports and girls' potential to succeed. "You know, it's not the military that makes America great. It's the diversity," he told them rhetorically. After the main part, Levan asked if Georgian students could to be admitted to high schools. The man said this was not a possibility in his school, but encouraged them to use American Corners to learn more. As the presentation ended, curious youths surrounded him to ask questions.

The U.S. public diplomacy strategy is complex and diverse, dependent on both local circumstances and diplomatic relations with the host country. According to Rugh (2014), the most significant *post-9/11* changes with implications for the U.S. embassies in their approach to communicating with foreign publics involved both the adoption of more stringent security measures and the use of social media as a new and vital channel for providing information in order to advance U.S. interests (ibid. 223-224). From mainly targeting the given population's elite, the modern approach now places youth and Muslims at the top of the priority list, for two reasons. Not only because they are more open-minded to and readily influenced by foreign impulses, but also

owing to strategic <sup>52</sup> concerns (ibid. 54-58). As non-Americans working at cross-continental U.S. embassies illustrate, complex historical and political factors do influence how the Americans adapt, and how effective they are in achieving their public diplomacy goals – from the 1999 NATO bombing of Serbia to health issues related to imported food in South Korea and deteriorated infrastructure in Sierra Leone (Bajzer 2011; Elisa 2011; Huh 2011). U.S. reluctance to interfere in the 2008 Russo-Georgian War has remained the cause of political disputes between Georgia and the United States.

I soon realised that Levan was deeply engaged with other extracurricular activities beside the BAC club sessions. I was also fortunate enough to be invited along on one of his volunteering missions for EducationUSA – a trip to the farthest northwestern city of Zugdidi, where he and a friend volunteered during the *U.S. Education Alumni Fair*. This was a major annual event in Georgia where students from all over the country assembled in a given city (which rotated each year), where they were provided with information and seminars on education in America. At least one U.S. Embassy representative would also be present. On arrival, we walked into one of the public schools, which was the event's venue. In the lobby, numerous American universities were represented by American alumni students, expatriates, and local staff, all ready to catch the attention of the students who were wandering around. Each university had a stand with roll-ups, mostly depicting the campus and cities in appealing fashions, and the representatives would answer curious students' questions. Levan and his friend quickly put on their EducationUSA T-shirts and ran off to help where necessary, enthusiastic and clearly familiar with the routine. After wandering around and attending one of the seminars held by local employees myself, it became quite clear that this had to be one of the most anticipated annual events for Georgian students. The event was definitely designed to tempt them to go abroad one day.

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<sup>52</sup> The United States has placed substantial focus on its public diplomacy efforts in the Arab world, where a significant share of the population is sceptical about U.S. foreign policy (Rugh 2014: 56-58).



Figure 3: A Georgian student receives information from students at the University of Montana during the 2015 U.S. Education Alumni Fair (Photo by Zugdidi American Corner / Facebook.com)

Through his voluntary work for EducationUSA – a significant organisation in the U.S. public diplomacy efforts in Georgia – I perceived Levan’s role as carrying out a diplomatic errand for the Americans, although he is primarily motivated by good intentions and the desire to inform his peers about the opportunities available to them. Not only does he contribute to nurturing the comprehensive U.S. soft power machinery in multiple arenas, but he is, at the same time, a convincing pro-American personality with very good English speaking skills. His regular training at the CIE and activity at the BAC both serve as significant resources in this regard. Through his acquisition of such skills, Levan is therefore not what I would call an average Georgian youth. As Lukes (2005 [1974]) argues in first-person, if he “(...) can achieve the appropriate outcomes without having to act, because of the *attitudes* of others towards me or because of a favourable alignment of social relations and forces facilitating such outcomes, then my power is surely all the greater.” (ibid. 77-78, my emphasis). By joining Levan on these occasions and showing interest in activities he considered meaningful, I did not just learn more about U.S. public diplomacy in practice. The serendipitous opportunities also provided me with observations on

how he performed this diplomatic role in settings other than the BAC club sessions (Emerson et al. 2011 [1995]: 4, 15-16; Okely 2013 [2012]: 77, 142).

## **Concluding Remarks**

In this chapter, I have investigated how the informants experience and are influenced by America, primarily through their participation during the BAC club sessions. By illustrating this with participant observation data, we are first able to understand how the BAC's social structure renders it a meaningful arena, explaining why the informants prefer to spend time there instead of elsewhere in Batumi. The BAC is not only a relaxed social space, where they can have access to material resources and do their homework, read, or play video games. As highlighted by the Access Program in particular, the institution is embedded in the youths' toolkit of social mobility: practicing English with native speakers, enhancing skills relevant for their future, and learning about higher education in America. Moreover, the BAC is part of a comprehensive public diplomacy strategy in Georgia, working at a grass-roots level to accumulate support for U.S. political interests among youth. This is achieved not only by Melissa or Josh conveying Western beliefs and values during the club sessions, but also by making American culture attractive and inviting external speakers. However, the power relations that are created by the BAC's social structure illustrate how this strategy is contested by local issues such as classroom discipline, a far-reaching problem in Georgian schools. Following Chapter 2, which shed light on the structural expectations of U.S. public diplomacy, this chapter has attempted to show, ethnographically and at a grass-roots level, how this strategy works.

In the next chapter, I investigate the historical roots of the Western presence in Ajara. In an effort to animate these roots, I present life history narratives four adult academics provided about their adolescence. The main purpose is to provide comparative context for the field and primary data material at the BAC.

## Chapter 4: The Roots of Western Presence

*“Whatever form it takes, a life story always brings order and meaning to the life being told, for both the teller and the listener. It is a way to understand the past and the present more fully, and a way to leave a personal legacy for the future.”*

(Atkinson 2002: 125-126)

In the previous chapter, we gained a better understanding of how the youths experience America at the BAC, both as a social arena, and via the power relations elicited by a particular social structure. The chapter also offered a comparative example, showing how the Americans apply the strategy of public diplomacy in Georgia, in settings other than the BAC. In this chapter, I am concerned with how the Western presence is not just a post-Soviet phenomenon: we can trace this influence in the historical roots of Ajara. Presenting biographical narratives given by four Georgian academics in Batumi who lived out their adolescences in two historical eras not only enables us to understand how certain conceptions and manifestations of the West played out in people’s everyday life; there is also value in contextualising these narratives with the informants’ present experience as well. The West has a long tradition of presence in Ajara, being heightened following Georgian independence.

The life history or biographical approach in anthropology can provide fruitful contextual data, supplying primary data material collected from participant observation and in-depth interviews. An interlocutor’s life history contributes with both personal experiences and interpretations, outlining a particular cosmology that contextualises present issues of concern, in a mutually constructive relationship with the interviewing anthropologist (Atkinson 2002: 122, 125). However, there are implications and preconditions involved in this approach. As Mintz (1979) argues on the significance of broader cultural knowledge: “(...) many life histories lose some of their value because the fieldworker lacks sufficient knowledge of the community and culture within which the informant lives, (...)” (ibid. 20). The fact that I conducted these life history interviews after the two in-depth interview sessions with my informants enhanced my own assumptions in this regard. Moreover, the anthropologist should remain conscious of the life history’s intention and the representativeness in the study itself – in my case, the selection of *adult academics* –

and at the same time emphasise the contextualised dimension that the life history elicits (Atkinson 2002: 134-135; Mintz 1979: 23).

The first part of the chapter is concerned with the historical roots of the Western presence in Ajara, with Batumi as an important hub. This is a history that dates back to ancient times, when surrounding empires struggled for centuries for geopolitical influence and the acquisition of valuable resources. Other significant features are Ajara's strategic location in the southeastern corner of the Black Sea, and the socio-cultural and religious diversity of the region. Outlining these historical roots and showing that the United States wasn't the first Western superpower in Georgia adds to the comprehension of the field's character in relation to this case study. The second part of the chapter is especially concerned with how the West was experienced and conceptualised by Georgian natives originating from Batumi, who all spent their adolescences in one of two historical eras: the Soviet or the post-Soviet. Finally, the adolescents give their current perspectives on the American Corners Program and the Westernisation of Georgia. The biographical value of the data material presented will let the reader access past lives and circumstances, in an effort to contextualise how the informants experience and conceptualise the West *today*.

## **Historical Overview of Western Presence in Ajara**

### **Ancient and pre-Soviet conquests (1,000 BC-1918)**

While Ajara was not officially embedded as a part of the transcontinental *Silk Road*, it could, according to its historical background, have fit perfectly because of the region's cosmopolitan character. For centuries throughout history, the region was literally squeezed by a stand-off between the two Black Sea superpowers, the Russian and Ottoman Empires, while also remaining a locus of international attention. The region's cosmopolitan origins can be traced back to the first two millennia BC, when documentation shows that the very first settlements there started trading with its neighbours. Trade, in particular with Turkey, has played a significant role in terms of both the foreign influence and coexistence. Following a Roman presence in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, the Ottoman Empire started expanding its territorial influence in the areas bordering Ajara, and later gained control of the region between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, despite the attempts of Georgian kingdoms

to seize back territories. The pattern seen in ancient<sup>53</sup> times has been repeated in succeeding eras as well.

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Russian Empire seized control over most of Georgian territory. The inevitable clash in Ajara culminated in the Russo-Ottoman War, fought between 1877 and 1878. Following the Russian victory, the Ottomans ceded power in the region, but still kept a sphere of influence. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the city prospered, following recognition of Batumi as an important seaport in the Black Sea region, and the pipeline connection for Caspian oil reserves starting from Baku. The internationalisation of the region increased substantially in response to interest from European petroleum companies, as well as the multi-ethnic immigration of Jews, Armenians, Greeks, and other peoples seeking work in the growing industries. During Tsarist rule, and later in the wake of the great political destabilisation that followed the 1917 Russian Revolution, the Russians encountered resistance from the Muslim Ajaran movement fronted by the public figure, Memed Abashidze. Their agenda was to claim recognition of Muslim cultural heritage and transform Ajara into an autonomous Georgian republic. The Ottomans briefly regained control in early 1918, before stepping down because of the allied victory in World War I. In the political vacuum that then emerged, two significant events occurred: a British expeditionary force occupied Ajara, and, on a national level, the social democrat faction declared the first independent Georgian republic (Khalvashi 2015: 49, 56-57, 60; Mikaberidze 2015 [2007]: 89). This history illustrates Ajara's dynamic character.

### **The post-WWI British occupation (1918-1919)**

Following independence, the central government in Tbilisi strongly advocated the integration of Ajara into Georgia. At the time, president Noe Jordania initially supported Memed Abashidze's advocacy of both the region's distinctiveness as predominantly Muslim from the rest of Christian Orthodox Georgia, and the public discussion of local issues within the region. However, Abashidze's strong underlying rhetoric about granting Ajara more autonomy from the rest of the country met with objections back in Tbilisi (Khalvashi 2015: 60-61). In late 1918, when Georgians had barely digested their recent independence, the British made their way into Ajara and replaced the now morally weakened Ottoman forces that had occupied the territory for a brief period. Following allied victory in World War I, there were two main aims

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<sup>53</sup> Information on this history drawn from: <http://batumi.ge/en/?page=show&sec=2>

to the British Caucasus strategy: seizing control of the important Black Sea pipeline, and keeping the axis forces out. *The Transcaucasian Railroad* was also of major infrastructural importance in the geopolitical remapping. In Ajara, the British proclaimed a protectorate with the presence of military troops and soon established the British Council in Batumi. It is noteworthy that, during this period of occupation, the Committee of Muslim Georgians founded a local parliament and installed Memed Abashidze as its chairman in 1919. The political discourse at this time was mainly concerned with incorporating Ajara into the rest of Georgia (Khalvashi 2015: 61; King 2008: 170; Mikaberidze 2015 [2007]: 186, 685).

In his book *The Ghost of Freedom: A History of the Caucasus*, King (2008) shows how the British presence in Ajara can actually be traced back to the Crimean War in the 1850s, when they fought the Russian Empire and deployed command ships that patrolled the Black Sea. The region was of great significance to the surrounding superpowers, both in terms of territorial conquest and control over resources. Despite the allied victory in the war, the British Empire had other far-reaching geopolitical concerns to deal with beyond establishing a long-term strategic influence in the Caucasus. But, just as the then War Secretary Winston Churchill advocated in 1919 with the British advance from Baku towards the Black Sea, the purpose of their mission was to support the efforts of democratisation in the region, and not defend the countries against the Russian imperial threat (ibid. 90, 170-171). Consequently, the occupation of Ajara would later turn out to be a brief one. Because of the losses during World War I, the British Government's desire for territorial control decreased, and in 1920, it ceded Ajara back to Georgia. With the advance of the Red Army, the Caucasus soon fell under Soviet sovereignty. In a compromise aimed at dealing with the Ottoman claim to Ajara, the Russians co-signed the *Treaty of Kars* in 1921, which granted the region's autonomous integrity within the then Georgian SSR<sup>54</sup> and granted the Muslim population's civil rights. The treaty was, however, concerned solely with drawing territorial lines and did not represent any mutual peace agreement between the parties (Khalvashi 2015: 19; Mikaberidze 2015 [2007]: 397; Smith 2009).

### **Soviet Ajara and Turkey as a conception of the West (1921-1991)**

The preceding overview illustrates how Ajara has continued to be a territory contested by the surrounding Eastern and Western imperial powers throughout the

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<sup>54</sup> Acronym for *Soviet Socialist Republic*.



centuries of its history. Following the withdrawal of the British as a direct Western presence, and the region's subsequent incorporation into the Georgian SSR as an autonomous entity, Ajara became sealed off from the surrounding world. Yet it retained its distinctive geopolitical, religious, and socio-cultural position. Given its location on the Soviet borderlands, the history of animosity towards Turkey as a threat to regional integrity – and now the nearest Western frontier – also continued while Georgia was under the control of the Kremlin. As I will show, Turkey wasn't the only conception of the West in these borderlands during the Soviet era. Over the decades Batumi became a multicultural city inhabited by peoples from the Caucasus and Mediterranean regions and remained a popular tourist resort for citizens from all over the Soviet Union (Frederiksen 2013: 35). The establishment of the border at Ajara, which was further consolidated in the Soviet era was, however, not a quick fix, and had implications for both social life and people's everyday conceptions. The ethnographic case study below shows how this situation was experienced by sharing a border regime.

In the village of Sarpi, located in the south-westernmost corner of Georgia, the Soviet authorities closed the administrative border in 1956 and divided it geographically down the middle. In the preceding decades, stages of fortification had been executed top-down. The division was quite significant: not only did Sarpi become physically divided between Georgia and Turkey; it also became a bordered symbolic manifestation between the Soviet Union and the West. The village soon became contested territory, divided along ethnic and religious lines, starting with Soviet surveillance of villagers and the repression of the Laz<sup>55</sup> people, as measures to pacify the borderlands and clear them of opposing political forces (Pelkmans 2006: 25-30, 33, 36-37). In the mid-1980s, after 32 years of this status quo, Gorbachev's *Perestroika* reforms led to the border between Ajara and Turkey being opened, although with increased socio-cultural boundaries. Relatives who had been forcefully divided for decades had become alienated from each other and had constructed differing conceptions of how those across the border lived. The reality proved disappointing. As Pelkmans (2006) shows in one of his visits to a Georgian family, the introduction of the West and family reunions were perceived as rather ambivalent affairs. On the one hand, the standards of living were seen as civilised; on the other, the Soviet

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<sup>55</sup> The Laz is an ethnic group that inhabits both the Georgian and Turkish border zones. In the Soviet times, the Laz identity was reinforced to distinguish them from Ajarans and as a response to the authorities (Pelkmans 2006: 21, 69-70).

representation of the Turkish as an inferior people and materiality as the source of ‘Western civilisation’ led to scepticism (ibid. 71-73, 81, 86). This case study suggests that the Western presence also involved a socio-cultural dimension.

## Biographies on Western Presence in Ajara

### Life histories from Soviet Batumi

#### *Narrative one: Besarion*

In the Soviet era (1922-1991), Georgia, like other countries incorporated into the Soviet Union, was marginally exposed to Western influence in both its social and intellectual life, owing to the politburo’s authoritarian policy of keeping citizens loyal to the communist ideology. However, as we shall see, this ban on the West was not watertight at all times. Of the two interlocutors I interviewed on their adolescences during the Soviet era, Besarion was the only one with whom I had to use a translator, as he didn’t speak any English. A Georgian graduate student I befriended<sup>56</sup> agreed to help me out. Besarion is a retired chemistry professor in his early 60s, but still works as an academic at Batumi University. A native of the region of Racha, he – like many of his peers – joined the *Komsomol*, the widespread political and hierarchical<sup>57</sup> youth organisation subject to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. After graduating from school in Kutaisi with good marks, he was subsequently conscripted by the Red Army to serve away in Belarus. After doing his military service, he spent nine years working and conducting research in a plastic factory in Moscow before finally returning to Batumi in 1988. Throughout the 1990s, he climbed through the academic ranks, maintaining a particular interest in the relationship between seawater and calcium, and his publications received international attention. He recalls how the authorities imposed anti-Western sentiments in everyday life:

- B: During the Soviet Union, there was massive anti-capitalistic propaganda. All foreign connections with the West were forbidden at that time. I was told not to speak English as well because they [the authorities] didn’t like it and were afraid that people would go abroad. So after school I quit studying English. I was told that I had to be twice as good to be half of what they [Westerners] were. I was told to concentrate on myself. And that’s why people today are frightened and discredit this personal focus.

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<sup>56</sup> The student was not directly affiliated in my study. The methodological implication of having the interview translated to English was that the accounts suffered some inadequacy in the recollection.

<sup>57</sup> I learned that children would have to perform well in school from early grades. As you climbed the ranks, you would eventually qualify for Komsomol membership and be given a symbolic red tie to wear.

In Batumi, there was limited access to English literature and only a few censored Western movies were shown in cinemas. In schools, the teaching of the English language was restricted to the early grades. In a seemingly nostalgic manner, Besarion went on to draw a parallel between the past and present with the respect to work. While the Soviet era provided a safety net, the present situation marks a significant contrast:

B: There were almost no unemployed people [back in the Soviet era]. I mean, there were no young people who didn't have a job either. Because if they didn't have a job and the police would find them hanging around in the streets, they would have a few conversations with them and they would be sent to find a job. And now one must fight for one's existence. No one helps you find a job. Capitalism is something that won't give you anything without the profit. So you need to take care of yourself.

It becomes evident from the recollections above that, in retrospect, Besarion views the growing Western influence in Georgia as a double-edged sword. Throughout my fieldwork, particularly in conversations with Georgians from generations other than those of my informants, I noticed there was a generational divide in terms of how people viewed the Westernisation process. In her study of Soviet nostalgia in Gori based on recollections from one elderly female interlocutor, Gotfredsen (2014) shows that this concept has a temporal dimension. Not only is there a desire to reinstate the communist past because of the social security that it ensured; in this context, nostalgia is also closely related to the present in terms of being situated in a marginalising socio-political discourse that endeavoured to erase the Soviet past following the Rose Revolution (ibid. 262-264). As a student who performed well, Besarion was able to go abroad on several occasions, to Egypt, Poland, and Estonia. On the question of how he experienced the West, he highlights an episode in 1977 while in Tallinn. Although Estonia was Soviet too, it was located in a region that was Westernised in his view. He recalls how his nationality was regarded as a dress code:

B: So we went to this restaurant. There was a big queue outside. But the restaurant was almost empty. They didn't let Russians enter. We then came and knocked the door. I started speaking Georgian and the waiter inside began to speak in his own language. And in the end, the waiter asked where I was from. When I answered in Russian that I was from Georgia, he opened the door and let us in. And then he kind of announced that I was a visitor from Georgia. By speaking Georgian, I was allowed to enter and do everything.

While Besarion expressed satisfaction with living in Soviet Georgia despite his trips abroad, he retained a nuanced and reserved view about the transformation that his

country had undergone since independence. However, as will be shown in the next narrative, some of the Western influence did also elicit attitudes of reluctance.

*Narrative two: Khatuna*

Khatuna is a woman in her 60s, working as an international education advisor at Batumi University. A Batumi native, she is both a trained archaeologist with a PhD from Tbilisi State University and a Candidate of Historical Science since Georgian independence. Prior to her current post, which she has held since the late 1990s, she was a researcher at the university with a significant engagement in the OSGF and other related projects. Alongside her advisory work, she is interested in domestic cultural heritage and has been affiliated with several EU-funded socio-economic projects in Ajara. Like Besarion, she noted the marginal access to English literature and the restriction on learning English in schools, but she enjoyed reading the few books she could get her hands on. On the other hand, there weren't any public spaces in Batumi where she could spend time and express her views openly. In her adolescence, however, the shift in sentiment towards the West was anticipated with the introduction of foreign socio-cultural trends in the late 1960s:

K: This was the Beatles period. The band was very popular, but I wasn't fond of such. I preferred classical music. I think in my class... We studied and needed to apply which university we would like to attend in this period. And then this bad influence appeared. Drugs, drug users. But otherwise, their attitude to the West (...). So maybe it was connected with the bad influence in this way.

Drugs weren't the only modern feature of Western influence that would bother Khatuna later in life. While she regards the Westernisation that followed the Rose Revolution in 2003 as generally positive in terms of socio-economic development, she also gives an example of how it actually contests Georgia's traditional integrity:

K: I'm against gay marriage for example. I don't care what they [the West] want to do, but there's too much show off (...). I don't want that the young generation, youths or children, to share such beliefs. I'm against it. People think that it has a bad influence. They become like, "Oh, the U.S. and Western countries are against family relations, traditions, and (...)." It becomes not acceptable for them. And then they influence others with that, "If you want Western, so this is gay marriage" or something.

It becomes evident that Khatuna's vantage point, in line with Besarion's nostalgic sentiments, involves some strong reservations in her general relationship to the Westernisation of Georgia. This is mainly related to sensitive issues with implications for aspects related to tradition and value. The symbolic clash between tradition and modernity in Georgia has many facets, among them a material one, which Manning

and Uplisashvili (2007) have investigated. In their semiotic study of ethnographic beer branding, they show that this process represents a kind of “dual lineage.” At the same times as the brand marketers draw on national conceptions of Georgia and traditional methods of production, they also boast of their use of European technology. The authors argue that this is a cosmological manifestation of Georgia’s ambivalent relationship, based upon its location: on the one hand, the country wants to retain its traditional integrity and authenticity, while at the same time, it wants to become more closely affiliated with Europe to look like a modern country (ibid. 626, 637, 640). As we now head over to the post-Soviet narratives, the situation shifts from subjection to Soviet authoritarian control to the no less authoritarian regime in Ajara following Georgian independence. While the country is thrown into turmoil, the public window on the West becomes even more immediate and multi-faceted.

### **Life histories from post-Soviet Batumi**

#### *Narrative three: Natia*

I had befriended a young German teaching assistant in Batumi, and was introduced to the ETI Office through one of his native students. While looking for potential interlocutors who could provide post-Soviet narratives, from independence in 1991 until the Rose Revolution in 2003, the student helped arrange an interview for me with Natia. She is a 35-year old teacher-trainer working at the ETI Office and holds a PhD in English Philology. In addition to her primary work at the ETI, she teaches schoolchildren in two nearby Ajaran villages. Having been enrolled into the Komsomol during her childhood, she recollects what it was like to grow up in Georgia following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. As the political struggles to build an independent nation unfolded, people’s everyday lives changed for the worse. She refers to the closures of Soviet factories and the way the transition to capitalism forced people to look for jobs elsewhere, often by migrating abroad:

- N: Factories stopped and people had to find other jobs to survive. And a lot of people started to move towards the West. I mean, live in several European countries as immigrants and get a job. And anyone who were lucky to have relatives in the West, especially in Batumi where a lot of Greek people lived, they left. Almost everyone. Greeks, Jews... Because their countries of origin accepted them to come. So people understood that we had no job opportunities here. It was, as we now call it in Georgian, the ‘Dark Period’, because of the enduring lack of electricity.

In her adolescence, Natia enjoyed reading the little English literature available, between all the bookshelves of communist literature written in Russian, deriving

from a bygone era. Other media channels gradually started to be accessed by a minority of the public, such as Western music and the British version of the MTV Channel, which literally served as a televised window on the West. Throughout her youth she wanted to learn English. Although she was later offered an exchange place at Helsinki University in Finland for performing well in school, she was ultimately denied<sup>58</sup> this opportunity by her parents. As the years went by and although conceptions about the West remained an abstraction for people, conveyed through reading a book or watching TV, she noticed that Batumi's location was beneficial:

N: Western countries were something far away, but which remained contestant. I now recall that a lot of people were sailors. And their job allowed them to travel abroad. When they came back, they brought some shampoos, very rare newspapers, and things we couldn't get here. I could get my hands on it which was very interesting.

She goes on to elaborate on an event that received publically attention, illustrating the early stages of the close relationship between the United States and Georgia:

N: There were symbols. For instance, the American flag was worn as a necktie and different badges were also popular. I remember that it was a kind of holiday [feeling] when American ships occasionally docked up in the port of Batumi (...). And U.S. Navy soldiers came to the seaside park where everybody tried to make contact. I remember exchanging little presents with them. And it was really cool. You could get cassettes of some famous Western singer in this way.

Q: *That sounds like an interesting event. But did the ships dock up every year?*

N: In the summer time. I remember a few ships coming each summer.

In retrospect, an interesting comparative case from the Cold War when considering these annual encounters between the U.S. Navy soldiers and Batumi residents as a cultural 'shop window' is the *1959 American National Exhibition* hosted in Moscow. The exhibition was the most comprehensive project ever in U.S. *cultural*<sup>59</sup> *diplomacy* and was supposed to provide Soviet citizens with insight into everyday America, mediated by Russian-speaking American guides, with a 400,000 square feet display of consumer goods (Mickiewicz 2011: 138). The ambitious goal was to make American democracy and capitalism attractive. In a post-Soviet analysis, it is argued that misconceptions and the symbolic character of the exhibition explained why it elicited such a mixed response from the Soviet public (ibid. 142-143, 171). While Khatuna had mentioned that sailors would come back with smuggled Western goods

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<sup>58</sup> As I learned from my informants as well, parents are hesitant about letting their children go abroad for different reasons, such as for study or work.

<sup>59</sup> Cultural diplomacy is regarded as a specialised type of public diplomacy.

in her Soviet adolescence, this happened in a more discrete manner, and could not match the developments that occurred in the 1990s. In one way, the docked ships and consumer goods could be interpreted as the early stages of American public diplomacy. But as we shall see in the second post-Soviet narrative, the West faced a contested reception.

*Narrative four: Giorgi*

A third interlocutor affiliated with Batumi University, Giorgi is a 36-year old Senior Researcher with a PhD in History, but has retained an anthropological interest in religion and cultural heritage for some time. Also a Batumi native, he is of partial Russian descent. In addition to his research in Ajara and holding a position in the Ajaran Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, he has also undertaken scholarships in Europe and Georgia-based NGOs over the years. He recollects a Batumi overwhelmed by the nepotistic and corrupt regime of Ajaran leader Aslan Abashidze, a situation of deprivation in stark contrast to present circumstances. Not only was the city constructed in a way that, according to him, resembled a *Potemkin village*<sup>60</sup> – entirely deserted beyond two streets in the city centre; the Western influence introduced by organisations and scholars was also limited by the authorities. While there appeared to be a vacuum of foreign influence in Ajara, he recollects two Western-oriented spaces that were nonetheless given special permission to operate:

- G: The regime didn't need any critical sphere of discussion inside its territory (...). After 1993, all different social spaces where you could think independently or critical were closed. I remember only two spaces. First of all, maybe in the university computer centre. Here you could use computers for the Internet, but only one had connection. And the second space was the Open Society Foundations office in Batumi. There it was free access to the Internet. This was one of the biggest centres where we could work with Western (...). Some skills, persons, professors or we could find literature, or something special. As I know, there were two or three similar spaces, but they were not influential.

Because of the circumstances and limited access to the Internet, he argued that people didn't start to think differently about the West until the early 2000s. Learning English was also limited throughout the 1990s and only accessible if you had money:

- G: In the Open Society Foundations office, it was only five and later ten computers. You understand, only a small portion of students and professors were able to use them. They needed special skills for using the Internet because no one knew what it

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<sup>60</sup> “An impressive facade or show designed to hide an undesirable fact or condition.” Definition drawn from: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/potemkin%20village>

was, how to use it, or what you could find. They had special courses (...). As I remember, maybe 200 or 300 people were involved in this situation. In this period, as I know, for studying everyone needed money. I spent a lot for studying English.

As George Soros obviously experienced resistance from the communist governments in each of the countries where he established a foundation, the specific local contexts continued to contest the reception of democracy and transparency, even after the Iron Curtain dissolved. As McLaughlin and Trilupaityte (2012) show, Soros's reputation had consequences for his scope of action in the respective local contexts where he operated. While the KGB had perpetually denounced him as an 'American spy' since the 1980s, Soros's good reputation in post-Soviet Russia later deteriorated, when his criticism of former president Boris Yeltsin's policies went public. Moreover, his role as an investor started to come into conflict with his political activism (ibid. 437-438). In post-Soviet and more Western-oriented Lithuania, he enjoyed a better reception. But although Soros was endorsed in the 1990s, his agenda following Lithuania's 2004 accession into the EU started to be questioned in public. The allegations concerned his influence, which was perceived as dividing and even obstructing democracy-building (ibid. 438-439). The local context of post-Soviet Ajara was a complex one as well. Although it became clear that the authoritarian regime was enforcing control of any foreign influence that could potentially contest its power, and that Aslan Abashidze's allegiance with Russia clashed with president Saakashvili's agenda, in a contractionary sense, the empty façades and grand monuments erected in Batumi during his regime gave the impression of taking Ajara *independently* towards a modern and European future (Khalvashi 2015: 24; Pelkmans 2006: 209, 211).





Figure 4: Europe on display in Batumi in 1998 (Photo by Boris Naneishvili / Panoramio.com)

### Perspectives on Georgia's Westernisation

I was careful to ask each interlocutor for their view on the Westernisation of Georgia and the role of the American Corners Program in particular. While it became clear that all were generally positive about this process, as a driving force behind the country's rebuilding and prosperity, they expressed nuanced views in their different narratives. Only Besarion and Khatuna, both adolescents in the Soviet era, expressed significant concerns. Natia first regarded the Rose Revolution as a decisive event in post-Soviet Georgia, but noted the lack of U.S. diplomatic efforts in the rural areas:

- N: I believe that since Saakashvili came to power, we started to become an independent state (...). Sharing experience, whether it is with the U.S. or any European country that have succeeded (...). And then your country adapts to the situation. I think these American Corners should have been present in my youth. But if you really want to have an impact, you should go to the rural areas. There they struggle with reading and have a lot of special ability kids. Moreover, we as teachers struggle with our students' lack of motivation.

In following his previous view on capitalism, Besarion had a more sober approach:

- B: Every country has its own cultural values. And people have to build their lives in accordance with culture and traditions. I think they [Georgia and the United States] have special ties. The aid Georgia is getting from the U.S. is not to be wasted and shouldn't be put in some private people's pockets. It should rather be devoted to economic and cultural growth. The American Corner is a good idea. I like that the

programme has opened in different corners of the world because then people can speak English and connect with each other.

According to Khatuna, a pragmatic focus in the partnership would prove beneficial:

K: I think it's a difficult process. But I like of course this U.S. role in everyday life. We need knowledge. Western knowledge. But how can we use this help – this is another question. They [the Americans] could do more in the diplomatic way, not focus straight on people's attitudes. People become crazy. Rather, social development and solidarity... And education (...). It is more valuable in this way. We have to start from this and then maybe society can decide on it. The American Corner is a very good resource for development. But Sopho needs more people and activities.

Finally, Giorgi highlighted the complex character of Georgia's Westernisation:

G: Georgia has today a powerful civil society. Now, a lot of people think critical. Everything is based on Western influence and of course the U.S. has a special policy in Georgia. I think it is a very good way because we Georgians changed our meaning about corruption. On the other hand, as you know, our traditional church has a big influence in this country and sometimes speaks bad about the Westernisation. Also, Western countries don't work more clearly when we have a problem with Russia. We need more clear policies about this. I think if the American Corner was opened 15-20 years ago, it would have proven more powerful and helpful for us.

## Concluding Remarks

This chapter has outlined the historical roots of presented life histories that reflect on the Western presence in Ajara. As noted in the first part, the location of Ajara by the Black Sea has made the region subject to geopolitical and religious struggles involving the surrounding empires – and even Western regimes such as the British. Throughout history these complex circumstances have inevitably shaped the contemporary character of Ajara. In the chapter's second part, the four life history narratives offered by the adult Georgian academics aimed to animate history with personal experience of the Western presence in both eras. Drawing a parallel between their adolescent experience and views on the current Westernisation in Georgia, it appears that their view depends on how tangible this process is perceived as being in relation to Georgia's political and socio-cultural integrity. While abstract and almost mythological conceptions created under contested circumstances led to curiosity in the Soviet and post-Soviet eras, the West is now incorporated as a vital asset in Georgia's rebuilding and future. Thus, the U.S. presence has implications for how people across different generations perceive this interference. In this regard, the investigation of the historical roots and life histories presented provides greater contextualisation for both the field and the main research questions addressed.

The next chapter will elaborate on the informants' conceptions of America. Following in the tracks of Chapter 3, this section aims to link experience and influence based upon their participation at the BAC, as well as other everyday sources, to show how certain conceptions on America are generated. The cosmological picture that the informants draw is not unproblematic, but attributable to several concerns. In a larger context, we would be able to illuminate the relationship between a new generation of Georgians and the United States in a post-Revolutionary perspective.

## Chapter 5: America – Images and Ambivalence

*“Ambivalence is a common reaction to the United States, and where there is ambivalence there is scope for policy to try to improve the ratio of the positive to the negative dimensions.”*

(Nye, Jr. 2004: 53)

*It was just past 8pm when I met up with Levan and Daliko outside the cable car station in the port area, next to the busy Chavchavadze Street. The first impression was that the station exterior would not be out of place in a ski resort. They generously paid for my ticket, and soon we were on our way up the hillside in one of the gondolas. We joked and giggled about everyday stuff as we glided over the darkened residential district, before reaching the plateau. In between our chatting and enjoying the magnificent view of the city skyline, Levan told me that the technical university, Batumi’s only skyscraper, had been sold to Turkish investors and would become a hotel. “So what do you think is going to happen to it?”, I asked him. He shrugged his shoulders and argued that the government lacked the commitment needed to fulfil its grandiose visions. “You know Donald Trump? He was supposed to build a hotel here as well, but I think he dropped it,” he sighed.*

*Down on the street again, we strolled along the boulevards chatting. While Daliko remained a little reserved, Levan showed me a couple of buildings with majestic façades around us. “I don’t see the point with them. They seem to have no use!” As they told me about their media preferences, from smartphone fitness apps to Western TV series, we arrived at the Ali & Nino statue, which they wanted to show me. There was a chill breeze in the air as we continued along the beach boulevard exchanging questions. I learnt that part-time jobs were difficult to come by for young people and commented that they were fortunate to have the opportunities provided by the Americans. “Yeah, it’s really good. The government down here doesn’t put that on their agenda itself,” Levan said and reeled off the initiatives in town. As we passed the university, we parted company and headed our respective ways home.*

In the previous chapter, the historical roots of the Western presence in Ajara were presented along with a comparative view on how Georgian adults experienced and conceptualised the West in Batumi during their adolescences in either the Soviet or post-Soviet eras. That chapter provided additional contextualisation for this case study. This chapter is concerned with how America is conceptualised by the informants, based upon their participation at the BAC and local circumstances.

My methodological approach to collecting this particular data material involved conducting two in-depth interviews with the informants, both individually and in pairs, depending on their preferences – one in late March and the next in late April. While Chapter 3 drew upon material collected from the first interview called ‘The American Corner and You’, this chapter is predominantly concerned with the second interview I carried out: ‘The Georgian and American/Western’. This focused on how the informants viewed America and the West in different respects, and also encouraged them to draw comparison with their native Georgia. Through the answers they gave and their subsequent discussions with me, it became clear that the generalisation that all Georgian youths are pro-American is nuanced. Although the informants were positive about the U.S. presence in terms of the political and developmental support for Georgia, the fact that America constituted a driving force in their everyday lives seemed to lead to some reservations on certain issues. These concerns were not based just upon their moral convictions, but were rooted in their socio-economic, cultural, and religious circumstances. As shown in the following section, the ambivalent nature of their conceptions is not only relevant at a grass-roots level, but is a permeating characteristic in contemporary Georgian society.

In the first part of the chapter, I will start by outlining the premises, the cultural horizons, of the informants’ conceptions. While we acknowledge that the BAC plays a major role in influencing their views on America, other everyday information sources also complement this institutional experience. The chapter then goes on to elaborate the informants’ views both about the U.S. presence in Georgia since the Rose Revolution, and about America in general, providing personal examples that substantiate these views. In the second part of the chapter, the ambivalence evoked by some of these conceptions will be investigated. The analytical case of Georgian and American ‘freedom’, a recurrent conceptualisation that lies at the core of the informants’ conceptions, will prove fruitful here. This section shows that ambivalent sentiments are also elicited about the modernity inherent in the Western influence. Finally, the reader should gain an understanding of the main features of the informants’ conceptions about America, vital for grasping the complexity of the field and the dynamic of the U.S. public diplomacy strategy in Batumi.

# Beyond the Façade: Conceptions about America

## Cultural horizons of conceptualisation

### *The Batumi American Corner (BAC)*

In a globalised and technological age, Georgian youths in present-day Batumi were no exception to the rule in having vast access to different sources of information on America. Taking into consideration the developments in both transparency and infrastructure since the Rose Revolution, combined with the significant gap between urban and rural communities, Georgia was home to 483,000 wired broadband users nationwide by 2013, and Ajara to 24,838 by 2012, according to a statistical <sup>61</sup> survey. As noted in Chapter 1, the informants and other Georgian youths I came across used Internet and social media very extensively in their everyday lives. This illustrates the fact that they obviously also had access to information about America that was non-institutional in character. They were therefore not restricted to a single social arena, such as the BAC or classroom teaching given in the Access Program, e.g. in contrast to the exclusiveness of the missionary boarding school among Samoan girls (Mead 1928: 164-165). While there are other complementary or influencing sources the youths enact in their construction of America, we cannot dismiss the significance of the BAC as one of the main sources. Consider how Levan and Daliko regard the institution as a cosmological focal point:

- L: Of course it influences a lot. And club sessions at the American Corner draw a picture in my brain of how the West looks like. And what are the main values of Western society.
- D: I think that... People start thinking about some things they [the youth clientele] never thought about before. They make parallels between Georgia and America – what they want to take from America and what they don't want to take.

The cultural horizons that are constructed at the BAC are not static in institutional terms, but penetrate into both the individual and public spheres. As Levan illustrates below, one of the *Literature Clubs* on African American history made him more aware about reprimanding others for expressing certain opinions that were quite common:

- L: We watched some movies and did some reading, and you know... When we learned about Martin Luther King, for instance, I was changed because I started to call black people "African American" people. And when someone in my classroom said that these people are "black people" and they were saying some bad things, I warned them and said that you have to call them "African American" people.

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<sup>61</sup> Statistics drawn from: <https://idfi.ge/en/statistics-of-internet-users-in-georgia>

Q: *I see. So you think that the definition of “black people” is illustrative of why Georgia is different from Western societies?*

L: Yes, “black man” – it means a very bad thing in Georgian.

Irakli, on the other hand, thinks that the BAC is an important asset in fulfilling his personal aspirations about settling in America later in life. This suggests that the BAC is not only an arena where the cultural horizons of America and the West are cultivated in both individual and collective beliefs but is perceived as a mobilising springboard in which the available resources are utilised for personal benefit:

I: I really get inspired here. In the first place, I had a dream of living in America since I was six years old (...). I think that in the future, I will develop my speech maximally. And maybe I will... I hope that I will attend Harvard University and that everything I have studied will help with the life in America.

The accounts presented confirm that the BAC is a major source for constructing cultural horizons of America and the West in Batumi. This can be attributed to the vast public access to resources and the participation in *Eco* and *Literature Clubs*. The clubs add authenticity because the American expatriates are regarded both as native speakers, *and* natives with first-hand socio-cultural knowledge. But as we have seen, the social dimension of the BAC that stimulates the youths to spend time there outside the club sessions, adds to the picture. These two features, authenticity and socialisation, can be argued to constitute driving forces in the youths’ stated preference for the BAC as a social arena (Berger and Luckmann 2000: 69, 77, 84). But as an attractive space in the youths’ construction of their cultural horizons, the BAC is also a constraining space, which exerts control over the resources and information accessible (U.S. related). By regarding the youths’ legitimisation of the institution as a meaningful space, America’s manifestation of the West is thus perceived as hegemonic, and serving the political interest of the United States, retaining a *naturalising*<sup>62</sup> position (Bourdieu 2010 [1977]: 164; Lears 1985: 573-574, 577).

There is another interesting identity aspect in this regard, namely that the BAC constitutes a space where the informants can *perform* some sort of ‘Americanness’. I would like to highlight the broad repertoire of American cultural events attended by the youth clientele, arranged by the BAC throughout the service year. While I wasn’t able to observe most of the events owing to practical<sup>63</sup> issues, the BAC’s

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<sup>62</sup> In a definition by extension, I refer to the United States being perceived a hegemonic conception of the West.

<sup>63</sup> I refer here to my regular domestic travels and the fact that many events were hosted prior to my arrival.

official Facebook page offered a useful compensatory overview in my post-fieldwork investigation (Fangen 2010 [2004]: 184-185). These events would feature archetypical public holidays such as Halloween, Fourth of July, and Thanksgiving; but also American-style versions of Valentine's Day and Christmas. Throughout the period they volunteered, Melissa and Josh would help would out with arranging most of these events and offering expert knowledge. Based on the posts on Facebook, events like these seemed to attract a lot of enthusiastic youths. The BAC would be decorated with colourful ready-made banners or posters, playful joint activities would take place, and everyone present would wear related symbols. In his study of curing séances among the Kaluli people in Papua New Guinea, Schieffelin (1985) argues that performances construct symbolic realities by "(...) socially constructing a situation in which the participants experience symbolic meanings as part of the process of what they are *already*<sup>64</sup> doing." (ibid. 709, my emphasis). Two interesting parallels can be drawn from the performance aspect of the curing séances and these cultural events if we pay attention to their common dialogic and dramatic elements. First, as 'expert mediums', Melissa and Josh were preconditioned to stimulate the youths' mood and curiosity for these events in order to secure their participation and intended cultural construction. Second, the degree of influence that underlies these club sessions is dependent on the specific character of the youths' constructions (ibid. 713, 719-720).

### *The media and popular culture*

As well as spending time using the material resources at the BAC, the youths told me that they would spend a lot of their spare time at home consuming traditional and digital media. Their habits predominantly included surfing the web, watching TV or movies, listening to music, and reading books. I also learned that their media habits were dependent on the context. While Internet access remained a scarce resource in general, my informants told me that they all had wired access at home, and weren't dependent on using the free Wi-Fi network at the BAC for either homework or leisure purposes. Daliko had told me of her obsession with the *Vampire Diaries* TV series, and Tamar was no exception in embracing Western TV series, although she acknowledged that three close friends of hers preferred Russian series:

T: I like some Western TV-shows. And some soap opera, series like that. You know what I mean? One TV-show is called *Pretty Little Liars*. It's a kind of detective show. And I love this series and I'm watching it in English as well. I'm often listening to songs and watching movies from America. I love the American TV-shows very much.

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<sup>64</sup> This cultural experience complements their everyday exposure to American culture and beliefs at the BAC.



While most of the informants were mainly into mainstream Western media, whether the Internet or TV shows, Irakli had a more expressive approach to his spare time, telling me about his hobby of creative writing as a tool for broadening his scope:

I: I am writing games for children and participates in the *GENIUS Olympiad*<sup>65</sup> and games like these.

Q: *What kind of games do you write? Which topics?*

I: Mostly, I write action and logical games.

Not everybody consumed predominantly Western media and popular culture. Daliko told me, for example, of her passion for Russian music and dance. Nona, on the other hand, watched mainly Russian TV on the few occasions when she had time, and when asked why, she justified it with an interesting example based upon her family's own preferences. As it turned out, the preference for TV shows and channels wasn't based only on entertainment value, but also on the *informative* accuracy:

N: Because Russia is closer – closer to us. Nowadays, we must know what is happening in Russia and what is happening in Georgia. So they are showing Georgia on Russian TV and sometimes America, because the American government is present in Georgia.

Media and popular culture are central everyday sources in the construction of the youths' cultural horizons. What distinguishes these particular channels from the BAC, is that they are based on individual and not bureaucratized conditions, such as those we find in institutions, which serve an agenda for controlling influence (Nye, Jr. 2004: 52; O'Neill 1986: 56). As the Internet and social media constitute the dominant share of their everyday media habits, access to and flow of information on America and the West are unlimited features that, in turn, have the inherent potential to contest the information conveyed by institutions such as the BAC. However, as we can see from the accounts above, preferences are also shifting there. Pilkington (2001) argues that in post-Soviet Russia, the way youth relate to the West has changed. From being a domain of authenticity in the Soviet era, cultural influence through consumption and the media has now shifted to being treated as peripheral and physically stimulating (ibid. 85, 90). Pilkington shows this for example with music, as a medium for relating to global and local cultural forms in a complementary fashion. While youth enjoy listening to Western dance music or its

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<sup>65</sup> This is an international U.S. sponsored competition in which secondary school students can apply in different creative and development-oriented categories, and which also promotes environmental sustainability. Information on this competition drawn from: <http://www.geniusolympiad.org/index.php/about-us/genius-philosophy>

rhythmic pleasures, they consider the lyrics expressed in Russian rock music to be of more semiotic and meaningful value (ibid. 90, 93). Consider Nona's example – the awareness in her family of watching Russian TV news to monitor Georgia's situation; this can be perceived as a response that is congruent with developments in the country over recent years, such as the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, and the dynamic change in the climate. As the United States remains a strong presence in Georgia, Nona's family might prefer to collect accurate information on Russia's next moves.

### *Public arenas and events*

The final source that some of the youths referred to in the construction of their cultural horizons of America and the West was other public arenas and events that were available in town. The common denominator for these arenas and events is that they are related to the U.S. public diplomacy. The local branch of the USAID is one of these arenas, a centre located at Batumi University. The organisation has partnered with Georgia since independence and remains a substantial current presence; as a USG accessory its 2013-2017 strategy in key areas such as public health, economic growth, and democratisation aspires to "(...) allocate new USAID development resources over the next five years to achieve the goal, *Georgia's democratic, free-market, Western-oriented transformation strengthened and sustained.*" (USAID 2012: 6, their emphasis). In addition to a popular trivia quiz that was held in Georgian every week at the university, Tamar told me that she would occasionally participate in the organisation's scheduled activity along with friends. She elaborates on the institutional format in comparative terms:

- T: Yeah, besides the American Corner there's also this USAID Centre where you can go. You can present something or you listen to presentations that will help us improve our knowledge. The USAID Centre is free and you can go there presenting anything you want (...). In the American Corner, there's presentations only about the English language, America, and so on. But here, you can hold a presentation in many, many topics. For example, American history, equal rights... And people are more informal.

As I learned from Melissa amongst others, the university was a public arena for all sorts of events. On the other hand, most of them formed part of U.S. public diplomacy efforts, e.g. a week-long summer camp for English practice which was later held for students in June. Daliko and Gocha mentioned a particular event that they had participated in here the other day: a lecture given by a visiting Afghan-American scholar. The agenda was not explicitly focused on America, but addressed

the topic of religion based upon the scholar's personal experience as an immigrant U.S. citizen. They both regarded the event with enthusiasm and as very interesting:

- D: He was from New York City, a man named Muhammad. He's a Muslim and he came to give us a speech. It was very nice because he was talking about that you should hug each other, that you should be very positive... He grew up in a very poor family and there was no school in his village. Still, he became a big man.

Levan, being already actively engaged with the opportunities provided by U.S. public diplomacy efforts, told me that the summers in Batumi were for the most part a boring affair for young people. First, they had a very long summer vacation away from school, and second, there weren't many public recreational activities in town. Last summer though, he took great advantage of the opportunities available:

- L: You are forced to relax throughout the summer. These entire three months... But last summer was very active for me because I was involved in two summer camps, both with EducationUSA and the American Corners Program. So other vacations except the summer turned out very passive.

It started to seem as if there were some few spaces where you could access Western influence in Batumi, spaces that you would probably know about either through your peers or information provided at the BAC. As the accounts given by Levan and Tamar illustrate, both the USAID Centre and the summer camps are judged to be attractive because they enable the informants to pursue their desire to learn more about America and the West beyond the BAC, as well as socialise with their peers. It is also interesting that the two summer camps Levan participated in were regarded as compensating for the boring summers and the lack of recreational activities. However, these camps had a *pre-set* agenda, serving the intention of cultivating support for America among young people (Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003: 13-14; Lukes 2005 [1974]: 86). Events like the lecture Daliko and Gocha attended suggest that the informants seek to construct their cultural horizons based on *nuanced* perspectives and opinions, beyond those conveyed during the BAC club sessions. Since the lecture addressed religion, a sensitive topic in Georgia, such events could be viewed as potentially contesting Western beliefs and values. These arenas and events, regarded as meaningful, constitute a re-territorialisation of *where* America and the West are constructed on their horizons (Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003: 29).

### **On the post-Revolutionary U.S. presence in Georgia**

It became apparent that the comprehensive U.S. presence in Georgia, one that has remained dominant following the Rose Revolution and more notable than in other

former Soviet republics, represented a cultivating force in the informants' everyday lives. Although they generally favoured the U.S. presence itself, either military or diplomatic, they did not express or seem concerned with any explicit political views. Other Georgians I encountered and discussed these issues with throughout the fieldwork expressed mixed opinions, however. Levan and Daliko both regarded the U.S. presence as a positive asset in changing public opinion in more tolerant and independent direction:

L: So yes, I like that the United States helps Georgia because Georgia really needs help from the United States. To change Georgians' view on certain things that they consider very badly. And the United States helps to change these views. Besides the American Corner, the United States has no direct impact on my life.

D: The Americans think that you should stay in your own opinion. And this is good, because many people change their opinion because the teacher or someone else says that things are as they are.

From my interview in Chapter 4 with Natalya, one of the Georgian academic adults who also worked as a teacher in Ajaran villages surrounding Batumi, I learned that the schools in these areas experienced significant challenges with access to teaching resources, English education, and lack of motivation. In considering this first-hand experience, Irakli argued that the U.S. presence would not only be able to provide these resources, but would contribute to broadening students' cosmological scope:

I: The students will then understand how life goes on outside of their country. Maybe some of the villagers don't have a lot in their budget for going abroad. Because exactly in the village, they don't earn much salary. And I think it would be better for them to study how life is in different countries, like Western societies. And maybe they will be encouraged and innovative to work harder, to go study in the city, and maybe go abroad one day. And also, in the villages, they have too much free time.

The sentiment appearing in the particular accounts presented above illustrates that modern America represents a part of the solution to Georgia's current issues as a traditional country. This is not a naïve and clichéd interpretation, but a fairly common thread I traced in the informants' different views. From a structural perspective, it could be suggested that the youths construct a cosmological world in their minds, in which America and the West constitute a *binary opposition* to their native Georgia. The fact that the premises for their views are based on both accumulated information and the U.S. presence rather than experience gained from having been abroad to America suggests an interesting parallel to the anthropological study of mythic thought. While both premises can be interpreted as complementary in their common understanding of America and the West, the U.S.

presence in Georgia can be perceived as a cultivating force, implying a subverting and naturalising transition <sup>66</sup> from a traditional to a modern belief system over time (Lévi-Strauss 1983 [1969]: 12, 98, 164). However, while the Georgian government approves of this presence as part in the country’s political agenda of pro-Western orientation, some studies illuminate several complex circumstances in other societies. While the Philippines and South Korea have continued to approve of the U.S. military presence despite mixed public opinion, social protest movements have mobilised in opposition to it. As the main objection to this militarisation concerns the undermining of national sovereignty, U.S. foreign policy is often scapegoated (Huh 2011: 113, 120-121; Lutz 2006: 602-603).

As I noticed the general concern that has prevailed in rural areas, combined with the informants’ views on the contributions the United States could make, I became curious about which particular issues they preferred to advocate. The informants were then asked which topic they would choose for an imaginary presentation in a village classroom. It became evident that most involved issues that had actually been dealt with during club sessions at the BAC, with the purpose of raising awareness:

<b>Informant</b>	<b>Presentation topic</b>
Levan	Gender equality and early marriage
Tamar	Distance between schools and homes
Gocha	American society and culture
Nona	Encouragement of self-confidence
Tinatin	Low school education level
Irakli	Public health issues
Daliko	Early marriage

*Figure 5: Table showing topics the different informants would advocate in a village classroom.*

### **What’s hot and what’s not about America**

So far in my analysis, I have investigated the cultural horizons that constitute the premises of the informants’ conceptions. Moreover, their views on the U.S. presence in Georgia have been presented. But although it would appear from the outset that the informants generally had a relaxed view in favour of America and the West, they

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<sup>66</sup> The specific metaphor I refer to is the raw/cooked axis investigated in Lévi-Strauss’ (1983 [1969]) analysis.

expressed quite carefully-thought-out opinions about the traits they did or did not favour when I interviewed them. It should be noted that, as the interview placed an explicit focus on America, the responses were guided in this direction. I also realised that the views of two informants represented peripheries on the scale of opinion: while Irakli maintained a very pro-American view, Nona seemingly remained the most reserved member of the group. This will be illustrated in the following. First and not surprisingly, American culture was probably regarded as most appealing. Tamar told me that all the cultural aspects she discovered and learned at the BAC increased her motivation to go abroad:

T: I love American culture. But not only American, I love English culture too. And so when Melissa and Josh are telling us some stories, for example about St. Patrick's Day, and I feel (...). I like it and it helps. We learnt about St. Patrick's Day in our History classes in Georgian at my school. I then told them that I already knew about this. It's my dream to go abroad somewhere in America, in which there are native speakers who speak English. And also, when we are listening to their culture, I want to see castles, buildings, and so on... Its really interesting to me.

Levan favoured the American belief and value systems. During the *Eco Club* on gender equality in which he participated actively in taking stands on the claims that were presented, I had already noticed his diplomatic opinions on the topic. Although he missed a greater emphasis on the male gender in the Western system, he consistently idealised its general perspective on gender equality:

L: Americans are hardworking, responsible, and maintain good viewpoints. They are hardworking because I think Americans are very hardworking. Responsible, I think they are very responsible: if they promised to do such and such, they will do that. Because it's very important to them. And then the third was... Views (...).

Q: *You mean in terms of how Americans view certain things?*

L: For instance, they... Their viewpoints on different things are very properly organised. For instance, tolerance is very valuable to them. Democracy is very valuable to them. Equality is very valuable to them and things like that.

Returning to the peripheries in the scale of opinion among the informants, Irakli was the one who most explicitly favoured America in several respects. Illustrating the discrepancy between the countries, he placed a particular emphasis on mentality and behaviour. It was almost as if he regarded Westerners as role models for Georgians:

I: I think that the Western mentality is (...). And here people are like, "I want this, I want this" (...). And they are always fighting in big crowds, even in the Georgian parliament. They can't talk to each other normally. They finish it off with a fight. It's not good really. Also, children are looking at that and other people as well. And some

people are too much aggressive. But... In Western life, they are more proper persons. Their behaviour is kind and they solve problems [in a proper manner]. Not like here.

Carrier (1995) regards the concept of *Occidentalism* in an anthropological context as the "(...) studies of the ways that people outside the West imagine themselves, for their self-image often develops in contrast to their stylized image of the West." (ibid. 6). Occidentalisms elicited in particular groups of people are products of essentialising these images within a social structure, and are instrumental in influencing people's beliefs and actions. It is also argued that local contexts and selected manifestations of a dialectic nature constitute central premises in the construction of these stylised Western images (ibid. 8, 11, 26). If we perceive America as the incarnation of a sacred symbol, as Geertz (1973) puts it, it is argued that both moral (e.g. Western beliefs/values) and aesthetic dimensions (e.g. the attractiveness of the culture) boost America's power of influence (ibid. 127-128, 134). For instance, let us consider the dialectic relationship between the categories of 'traditional' and 'modern' – a common thread in all conceptions when the informants compare America with their native Georgia. Since this dialectic can be traced in Bourdieu's conceptualisation of power relations as personal or impersonal in French-Kabyle social reproduction, it can therefore imply discourses of negotiating identity, as investigated in practical <sup>67</sup> Occidentalism in Greece (Herzfeld 1995: 222-223, 229; Reed-Danahay 1995: 66).

Occidentalism is therefore a fruitful operationalising concept that can be applied in the various conceptions the informants outline. What is interesting is how these are reflected in their self-image. The informants retained reflexive undertones in the way they generally expressed their views on America and the West: the picture was not black and white. In other words, they never discredited their own origins and the significant differences that were inherent in the two inquired sets of societies and cultures. As I noticed during the interviews, some of the informants did not downplay their concerns about particular issues that conflicted with their own moral convictions. This might be consistent with the way their social and religious upbringings influenced them, even though the informants generally had secular and independent views. Tamar used an interesting metaphor about America's international role. In relation to the concept of 'freedom', which will be investigated

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<sup>67</sup> Herzfeld (1995) applies a consumerist approach in his analysis of this discourse, placing emphasis on cultural features such as taste, in which the Greeks' definition of 'tasteful' resonates with being Western (ibid. 222-223).

more closely in the second part of this chapter, Tamar expressed her concern about how Americans and the United States, as a global superpower, enjoyed their freedom in certain respects with ambivalent undertones:

T: I don't like that Americans sometimes have too much freedom and that they are doing whatever they want. They're naked, for instance. Something they don't care about. And this is bad (...). I like the freedom that the Americans have. But I don't like their freedom too. Because they have more freedom than we have and everything. They're killing people. In America, it is the highest murder rate (...). And this freedom does not mean freedom. That's bad freedom.

For Gocha, a more trivial feature distanced him from American culture. While he was explicitly fond of other aspects, food not only represented a core feature of his native Georgian culture, but also of how he related to nutrition. I considered this paradoxical, considering that most Georgian traditional dishes also contained a lot of calories. At the same time though, I did not dispute that it was very delicious:

G: So for me its Georgian (...). Georgian food is better. Because the Americans... On holidays, they have good food. But now they're eating more fast foods. Yeah, because they don't offer much time to cook [proper] meals anymore.

At the other pole, opposite to Irakli, Nona was not that impressed by either the U.S. cultivating a presence in Georgia, or America as the predominant manifestation of the West. To me, she was probably the one who both explicitly and implicitly, depending on the occasion, questioned the influence of America. In the account given below, note the connoting dichotomy between 'us' and 'them':

N: It's not a very big difference between the Georgian and Western. But sometimes it feels like the Western is... How to say... Sometimes I don't agree with the Western (...). Westerners think more, "Freedom and peace!" But in reality, it's not that easy.

Q: *How does the Western mode of thought conflict with yours?*

N: It can always be, like, you know... No one is like, "Oh, free!" and... We Georgians have rules, life rules. We know them. They are not written, but we know them. And... We will go with that and maybe we can't change it. Westerners only say, "Oh, freedom, freedom – peace, peace!" We can't change that we're like that. So they think if we make posters and go outside in public saying, "Oh, freedom!", it will change word [public opinion]. It's not like that.

The U.S. state, represented by its repertoire of public diplomacy initiatives such as the BAC and other organisations under the auspices of the USDS operating in Batumi, is a dominant actor in shaping the informants' conceptions of America. But as Nye, Jr. (2004) stresses with respect to the complexity of soft power, the contextualisation of American culture as a medium among Georgian youth is closely



related to how people perceive the way the United States both exerts its global foreign policy and political values, such as democracy or human rights. In other words, this implies aspects that contest the conception of America that is, for instance, conveyed during club sessions at the BAC, and that overshadows conceptions of other Western countries. On the other hand, access to e.g. the Internet can compromise the bureaucratic control and potentially expose the façade of these conceptions (Melissen 2005: 24; Nye, Jr. 2004: 11, 41). Conceptions of ‘the others’ can also undergo paradigmatic shifts, based on where the state decides to direct its focus when constructing these conceptions. In his examination of *Report to the Storting No. 36*<sup>68</sup> in 1984-1985, assessing Norway’s humanitarian aid assistance in African countries, Tvedt (1990) shows how the state shifted its strategy away from focusing on socio-economic development in the 1960s. The approach now is more concerned with making political change<sup>69</sup> and exerting Western ideological influence, thus interfering with national sovereignty and risking neglecting aspects in the definition of poverty. In this regard, the emphasis is on which particular *conception* the USG is empowered to elicit in relation to foreign publics worldwide (ibid. 44, 48, 58, 80).

## **“Freedom is Shopping Alone”: Ambivalence about America**

### **The case of Georgian and American ‘freedom’**

In the Georgian national anthem, *Tavisupleba* (‘Freedom’), which was adopted in 2004 together with a new flag following the Rose Revolution, the lyrics<sup>70</sup> of the first verse run: “Our icon is the homeland, Trust in God is our creed, Enlightened land of plains and mounts, Blessed by God and holy heaven. The freedom path we’ve learnt to follow, Makes our future spirits stronger, (...)” Notably, the lyrics convey an overarching sentiment of independence and nationhood. However, freedom is another central symbolic connotation in the message itself. As the informants continued to elaborate on their respective views, I realised that freedom was, to a great extent, incorporated in the way they conceptualised America and the West. Other Georgians in other generations that I conversed with articulated the idea that ‘freedom’ was inscribed in the current public discourse, in terms of how people related to the surrounding world. That issue will be investigated later in this part. As

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<sup>68</sup> The report’s full name is *St. meld. nr. 36 (1984-85): Om enkelte hovedspørsmål i norsk utviklingshjelp*.

<sup>69</sup> One of the report’s arguments is that, in order for the humanitarian aid strategy to succeed, it must pursue change in the hierarchical organisation between the African elites and the subordinate classes (Tvedt 1990: 69).

<sup>70</sup> Translated lyrics drawn from: <https://www.president.gov.ge/en/Georgia/Symbols>

far as the informants were concerned, it was not the case that they felt completely stuck back home; rather, it was a matter of idealising America and the West as alternative worlds where they could have things they *desired*. This elicited a characteristic sentiment of ambivalence among the informants, which will be illustrated in the examples below.

### *Structural impacts on public independence and morale*

First, I want to highlight how this ambivalence plays out in Georgian society. This structural perspective could provide some insight into why the informants' views are being partially biased. Levan illustrated this when comparing how Georgians and Westerners perceived heterogeneous orientations and stereotypes:

- L: People in the West think very freely. So they think outside the box. They think outside the frames. Georgian people don't think freely. They think within the frame.
- Q: *Okay. Do you think this is a generational issue? I mean, to me, a lot of people make connotations with the Soviet past.*
- L: Of course. The main difference in terms of freedom is that Georgian people like stereotypes and don't like to break these, rather than people in the West.
- Q: *So stereotypes are more valued in Georgian society? Can you give some examples of such stereotypes?*
- L: For instance, people in Georgia, they don't like people with different [e.g. sexual] orientations. They don't tolerate people with different orientations.

Nona, on the other hand, followed this comparison in her argument about why Georgia is not free, the fact that the state has taken the autocratic step of repressing public debate. This issue was part of a tendency following the Rose Revolution:

- N: We can't tell everything we think in our minds. If we say anything wrong the police will come. And the state says, "You must not say this." Because, you know... Maybe the government or politicians (...). So I think in America, people are very free. Also, if Americans are writing something on posters, then go in the streets and are saying (...). No one will catch them or put them in prison. But here, if someone says like this... People run after five minutes. Only five people remain with posters. Police will catch them and tell their parents that you came, if they're under 18 years old. The police will say, "Just care about your children!" I think in America; no one will catch people for that.

These accounts resonate well in a larger structure. Moreover, the Georgian Orthodox Church plays a very powerful role in Georgian society, and constitutes a significant force that influences people's identity and beliefs. Many people regard Ilia II, the

church's current leader <sup>71</sup>, even more highly than the country's president, as a figure of socio-political stability in the country. However, the church's currently dominant role is not only inherent in the historical and cultural roots of Georgia. Following the Westernisation process that has occurred in the country, the church has set itself apart, in particular, as an institution opposed to Western influence, both in terms of particular beliefs such as homosexuality <sup>72</sup> and globalisation (Jones 2013: 227, 230, 249-250). With respect to Nona's concern about the freedom of expression issue, the political climate moved in a more chilling direction in the years following the Rose Revolution. From advocating democracy, values, and civil rights, Saakashvili's presidency was involved in several incidents that proved contradictory. Telling examples of state repression included the curtailing of independent public media in 2007, which sparked massive protests in Tbilisi, and the reported 2007-2008 imprisonment of political prisoners in opposition to the government, who were later prosecuted under corrupt premises in the judicial system (FIDH 2009: 4, 46).

#### *Family and the economy as constraining structures*

Influential national structures in Georgia, such as the state and church, were not the only elements that contributed to eliciting ambivalence among the informants. While the church in particular exerted a great sense of spiritual and moral authority, the family was also regarded as an important institution. As a former Soviet society, Georgia's collective social organisation and mode of thought could be explained in terms of people's relationship to the state versus patronage networks, including the family. Daliko illustrated this family loyalty in a comparison with American youths:

D: I think the way Americans are living... In America, when they turn 16 years, they're moving out. For me, it's like... It's strange to me (...). I can go and live alone now if I want. But... I don't think my mum will be very happy about that. Because she wants to take care of me and she... She always cares about what I do and won't do (...). In America, they have more freedom than we. But I like it the way it is. I don't have to have more freedom.

Family is not only a uniting institution, but, as with friends, is regarded as a sphere of socialisation. In this regard, Levan expressed the significant function it had:

L: I enjoy the time with my friends and family. Because I don't like to feel alone. I like to be more socialised and have regular social interaction. You can share emotions.

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<sup>71</sup> The leader's full title is *Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia*.

<sup>72</sup> For more information on these views, see for instance: <http://pulitzercenter.org/reporting/georgia-gay-riots-protest-homophobia-human-rights-culture>

Because I think that... When you keep your emotions within yourself, it makes you very introverted. The family helps you being less introverted.

The social norm of looking after one's family is not the only factor contributing to the ambivalence of looking West. Since independence Georgia has experienced tough economic times that have led to a decline in the labour market and a class-related polarisation. This was not only caused by the 'shock therapy' that Georgia, along with other former Soviet republics, underwent in the 1990s, but also by domestic policies and regional dynamics (Jones 2013: 120, 179, 203). From a local perspective, Frederiksen (2013) shows how his young male interlocutors in Batumi are socially marginalised, both because of prevailing unemployment (except in the tourist season) and the discrepancy with the government rhetoric of development, which has a major impact on their future aspirations. This forces them to find comfort elsewhere, in peer-age brotherhoods and temporal conceptions such as the criminal underworld (ibid. 100, 176-177, 180). Tamar admitted that the economic situation had implications for her family:

T: In Georgia, family is the best thing you have. We need to live with our family because there's also economic problems. We don't have money to go and buy a new flat and live there by ourselves (...). In the summer, as in winter, you should ideally go somewhere else (...). You shouldn't need to stay in your own country, but... In Georgia, there are no possibilities economically. You know what I mean? In terms of the economy, families don't have possibilities to go on vacation in the summer or to Bakuriani [ski resort] in the winter. To ski and have more fun, you know...

The fact that the concepts of family and economy are closely related in former Soviet and communist societies adds to ambivalent sentiments in terms of how people relate to the West. In her study of post-Soviet Moldova, a fairly comparable<sup>73</sup> Eastern European country and buffer zone between East and West, Fürst (2009) tracks a native family's migration to Norway and its efforts to settle over a five-year period. As one of her interlocutors in Moldova illustrates from a structural perspective, the country's efforts to move West is complex in several respects. Not only has there been an identity struggle between the Romanian and Russian-speaking population groups since independence, but domestic policies which have aimed to serve both Russian and EU interests have elicited ambivalent sentiments about an unpredictable future (ibid. 186, 191, 194). In the wake of these developments, this particular family decides to migrate in their pursuit of a more prosperous life and to provide Anna,

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<sup>73</sup> Like Georgia, Moldova is a former Soviet republic aspiring to become a EU member, and remains in conflict with Russia over its territorial integrity in the autonomous region of Transnistria. However, one noteworthy difference is that it elected a communist and pro-Russian president, who remained in office from 2001 to 2009.

the teenage daughter, with a better future than in Moldova. However, the endeavour to integrate turns out to be very hard and not as expected, mainly because of how the parents' sophisticated medical training is undervalued in the labour market (ibid. 201, 218-219). After five years, several factors contribute to Anna's ambivalence. First, she feels bad about her parents' situation and misses her old grandma, who was left behind by herself in Moldova. Although returning would be favourable in terms of future prospects, it is uncertain whether it would be possible to earn enough money to make a living. Second, although she struggles to adapt into Norwegian society in several respects, she feels assimilated enough to say that her Moldovan heritage has dissolved. The implications of transnational migration presented in this study evoke a great deal of ambivalence about taking the step West (ibid. 208, 214-215, 222).

#### *Individuality and the issue of teenage privacy*

As we can observe from the accounts above, the framework of ambivalence predominantly arises from collective sentiments, whether related to love for the family or the country. I soon realised that, as a significant implication, individuality was a desired aspect of the notion of 'freedom' among the informants, which they anticipated that America and the West could provide. In other words, what they expressed was a yearning for more freedom, as youths, from their family. For Nona, this individuality was a desired notion in her most basic errands, like shopping:

N: At first, I would like to tell you that I'm not free in Georgia.

Q: *Why do you think that is the case, Nona?*

N: I think because, I'm 15 years old and I'm like... My parents are concerned about everything. Maybe when I grow up, I will be in Tbilisi for studies. When I will attend university, I will be alone and be independent. So I think it will be better. But I don't think... Freedom is only... Doing what you like. Freedom is like when you know what you really need and when you know what's best for you. Freedom is going shopping alone or buy something, or even have money. That means to be free.

In the context of individuality versus the collectiveness inherent in family and religion, America and the West are commonly perceived as manifestations of modernity imposed on a traditional society. As Bauman (1991) argues, modernity implies ambivalence because of its aspiration to enforce order on the basis of fragmentation. This process causes *estrangement* of the individual. He illustrates this in the contemporary example of how the Jews were treated in Nazi Germany, being forced to assimilate into the calculated reconfiguration of society and simultaneously denounced for their self-conception as ambivalent outlaws (ibid. 15, 109, 120-121). If

we consider the informants' conceptions of America as being shaped on the basis of their family and religious upbringings, the possibility of being ultimately estranged from their families could be an apparent concern when it came to pursuing desired Western assets such as individual freedom. To the informants, situated in an impulsive life-phase, America works as an everyday privatising force for both their ambivalence and, simultaneously, youth liberation (ibid. 59, 212, 223). Moreover in her study of *gaijin*<sup>74</sup> advertisements, Creighton (1995) shows how the West privatises the Japanese public ambivalence that is elicited by these mood-based ads. While these conceptions of Westerners are regarded as attractive in consumerist terms, they also constitute both a cultural clash and a moral threat to the inherent traditional integrity of Japanese society (ibid. 138-139, 144-145). In line with Nona's concerns about her parents looking after her, Irakli places parental nagging and society's normative approach at the very core when he's distinguishing between Georgian and American 'freedom', from a youth's perspective:

- I: In Georgia, your freedom is "good" when your parents call you every 5 minutes and ask, "Where are you?" That's freedom here. In America, you can do whatever you want, then come home and that's freedom to you. Also, when you are hanging around in the streets here, for example at 11pm, the police can ask you, "Why are you here. Why are you so late outside?" And you know... That's called freedom.

Obviously to me, several of the informants seemed a little tired of the consequences of living in a society as collectively oriented as Georgia. For them, their American counterparts were conceptualised as enjoying an individual freedom they desired in their everyday lives. As Tamar elaborates below, this yearning for individual freedom and less nuisance from their family is associated with one of the very core features of youth life: the issue of privacy. While she is not hesitant in opposing it, her argument is a quite telling indication of what this collective structure implies:

- T: We are afraid of what we want. For example, if I would kiss my boyfriend in the streets and my aunt is around, you know... Someone who sees me will go tell my parents and so on. But Americans are really free. They're doing what they want and don't need to worry if somebody thinks badly of them. I think that in Georgia, it's perceived as a shame. Because when girls have a boyfriend, they are trying to make it a secret. And you can't kiss in the streets because that's always considered a shame. When I get a boyfriend, I won't make it a secret. Because it's not really a bad thing, you know... In the West, they just don't... Don't care about what others think about them. But in Georgia, we worry what our neighbour will think about us all the time.

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<sup>74</sup> "A foreigner in Japan." Definition from: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gaijin>

The accounts above reveal some cargo-cult-like characteristics in the informants' conceptions. They are anticipating America and the West based on their personal desires: to pursue success in their future studies and work life, be happy people, and escape from harsh socio-political structures. In other words, they appear to yearn for the Western cargo which can help them and that they can't have at home. We can trace this claim to other comparable societies. As Lindstrom (1995) elucidates: "The collapse of communist governments in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, and associated attempts to cultivate capitalist economies, have precipitated cargo cults all over Europe." (ibid. 46). In Romania, Verdery (1996) explored the social impact of the comprehensive pyramid scheme <sup>75</sup> *Caritas* had between 1990-1994. As people invested vast amounts of their personal savings in this scheme, she shows how it was perceived by people as a window that would bring hope and prosperity during the 'shock therapy'. Part of *Caritas*' success lay in how it actually exploited the moral ambivalence inherited in the public conceptualisation of money (ibid. 172, 175, 185, 189). In neighbouring Bulgaria, Smollett (1993) shows how the cargo-cult-like idealisation of America in early 1990s political discourse, was based upon conceptions of America as a model Western society. These conceptions were instrumental in two respects: first of all, as articulated in election campaigns that were partially sponsored by the USG, in overshadowing the EU's dominant investments in Bulgaria; second, in boosting young people's yearning to move West through media exposure to American content and external lectures at universities. For youth, the envisioned wealth represented a break with the past (ibid. 9-12).

## Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, I have investigated the informants' respective conceptions of America and the West, and explored them in a broader context. By mapping the cultural horizons that constitute the premises for constructing these conceptions to their views on different related issues, both in terms of the U.S. political presence and external influence and to the sentiments of ambivalence that are incorporated in these conceptions, we are better able to understand the youths' relationship to America. Moreover, analysis of Georgian and American concepts of 'freedom' crystallises just how complex this ambivalence is. Not only do the youths yearn for

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<sup>75</sup> "A dishonest and usually illegal business in which many people are persuaded to invest their money and the money of later investors is used to pay the people who invested first." Definition from: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pyramid%20scheme>

future success and individual freedom, but their lives are incorporated into socio-economic and religious structures inherent in Georgia, as a traditional post-Soviet society, which imply certain constraints on their conceptualised freedom. To the youths, as contextualised with other comparative studies, the West and America represent a desired and mirroring alternative that they cannot have at home. As the ambivalence of Western modernity is also closely linked to national attachment in Ajaran public discourse (Khalvashi 2015: 23), and that ambivalence exists in national structures and has been a mutual sentiment in the U.S.-Georgian partnership since the 2008 war (Jones 2013: 230, 249-250; MacFarlane 2013: 94-95), this sentiment found among the informants locally can be transferred to other structural levels of society.



## Chapter 6: Conclusion

On February 9<sup>th</sup> 2016, almost one year after I started the case study, the brand ‘new’ Batumi American Corner was opened, following closure throughout the summer vacation and a tremendous makeover. The ceremonial opening was co-hosted by U.S. Ambassador Ian Kelly, and several prominent figures of the Ajaran leadership. Judging by the photos on BAC’s Facebook page, the transformation of the interior was like the difference between night and day: the locality had expanded significantly within the library proper, making it more spacious; it now featured colourful wall art and furniture in an American-inspired styles; it also had a multi-purpose stage, iPads and creative crafting kits. The pretext for the BAC’s allocation of funds to this expansion was its recent selection by the USDS as a *Tier 1* American Corner – one of ten others in Europe. In his speech <sup>76</sup> on the opening day, Ambassador Kelly stated that the “(...) project was a perfect illustration of the strategic partnership that the United States and Georgia enjoy.” The recent expansion and this statement are thus illustrative of the fact that the BAC remains a vital part of the U.S. public diplomacy strategy in Batumi, and that the city is suitable for cultivation of Western influence.



Figure 6: Part of the ‘new’ BAC’s interior (Photo by Batumi American Corner / Facebook.com)

<sup>76</sup> Statement from: [http://georgia.usembassy.gov/news-events/emb\\_news2016t/acb\\_opening.html](http://georgia.usembassy.gov/news-events/emb_news2016t/acb_opening.html)

In Chapter 1, the overarching inquiry was to investigate how a new generation of Georgians relates itself to America at a grass-roots level in Batumi. The backdrop of this endeavour was the Westernisation process, ongoing since the Rose Revolution in 2003, and the historically close political partnership between Georgia and the United States. By providing ethnographic insight and comparative context, I have sought to show the complex and ambivalent nature of the younger generation's relationship to America; how the BAC represents a significant asset in the U.S. public diplomacy strategy in Batumi; and how predominantly pro-American conceptions are constructed. However, these claims need to be discussed in certain analytical respects. This conclusion will first discuss the main research questions addressed in Chapter 1, by exemplifying with findings and relevant research. Finally, I address some reflections on the relationship between Georgian youth and the United States.

In Batumi, the BAC is one of a kind, both in terms of the recreational environment and the opportunities it offers. However, the institution is regarded as more than just the 'coolest corner in town'. First of all, the BAC's particular *social structure* is a premise for the informants' decision to spend their time attending club sessions and hanging out there. Phenomenological and spatial theoretical approaches illuminated this preference well. In their interviews, this became evident as they highlighted the possibility of accessing English material resources while being able to socialise with their peers, which made the space stimulating for both recreational and homework purposes. As an ethnographic moment in the participant observation, the board game session I had with them added a playful dimension to their preference, which made me understand how they regarded the BAC beyond the club sessions.

Moreover, a second premise of the BAC's distinctive position in Batumi is how it is regarded as a *social arena* among the informants. I showed this in how they valued the club sessions conducted by Melissa and Josh, and having the opportunity to practice their English with native speakers, which they saw as compensating for the lack of quality and poor pronunciation in their own school system. In linguistic terms, this was a recurring sentiment I noticed during my fieldwork. Another example of how the BAC is utilised as a social arena is the way the Access Program gives the chosen young people a more extensive offer than the club sessions, in terms of English practice and knowledge about America. By considering the examples above from a behavioural perspective, and maintaining an observational focus on

club sessions, I was able to perceive them as mobilising tools for acquiring skills and symbolic capital in this classroom setting. I will now discuss the data material presented in Chapter 3 and Chapter 5, respectively.

In the examples of the *Eco* and *Literature Clubs*, I showed how the BAC represents a significant cultural horizon of America and the West. These club sessions open a window on America that provides the participants with first-hand socio-cultural knowledge. By directing attention in the interviews to club sessions I hadn't participated in myself with the informants, I learned that some of the topics they learn about are also asserted in the public sphere (e.g. the demonstration about domestic violence and the *Literature Club* on African American history). Aside from the fact that American culture enjoys great support, an investigation of the BAC's range of activities on its Facebook page showed that it is also a space in which the informants can play out some kind of 'Americanness'. However, there are a couple of contesting factors that need to be considered. The media channel, particularly the Internet, and other arenas or events (e.g. the Afghan-American lecturer), has the power to shape views and thus contest the conception of America that is conveyed at the BAC. Thus, the influence is not limited to a bureaucratic and spatial framework.

Second, constraining factors such as the economic situation and family commitments elicit ambivalence (e.g. moving out versus the issue of privacy) in relation to the informants' potential to fulfil their future aspirations<sup>77</sup> and live out the desired features of a modern society, as mirrored in their conceptions. Thus, I argue that this ambivalence is an outcome of both *cultural* ambivalence and *adolescent ambiguity*. Since these aspects of the informants' lives are regarded as private, I believe the mutual reciprocal relationship we cultivated in the context of the fieldwork, as well as my non-authoritative approach, influenced their level of trust in me. In a comparative consideration of Frederiksen's (2013) study of how his interlocutors immerse themselves in the conception of criminal underworlds, I argue that these constructed conceptions of America remain only a matter of *temporality*. While the BAC does indeed, constitute a social arena and spatial manifestation – as well as being a predominant cultivator of their conceptions in Batumi – the complex circumstances of the field ultimately limit the experience of America to interaction in

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<sup>77</sup> As shown in Chapter 5, some of the informants addressed their aspirations of studying or working in America. We should bear in mind that the BAC remains a major facilitator of information on U.S. educational opportunities.

this institutional format. However, the BAC is a significant asset in the informants' social mobility, enabling them to develop and enhance a range of beneficial skills that they cannot acquire in school.

Since the Rose Revolution in 2003, the United States has had an almost free hand in its endeavours to exert soft power in Georgia, which is consistent with the national government's pro-Western and positive sentiment in public. As the contextual perspectives in Chapter 4 showed us, Ajara is a region that has historically experienced a Western presence, from the British occupation to annual visits by U.S. Navy sailors mainly owing to its strategic location by the Black Sea. It is therefore no coincidence that former president Saakashvili decided Ajara should be Georgia's gateway to garnering Western interest in Georgia. However, the exclusive life history narratives I presented made it clear that the West was viewed with mixed sentiments depending on context and moral convictions. Moreover, these data also parallel the informants' current ambivalent sentiments. As McLaughlin and Trilupaityte (2012) show, the specific local context in post-Soviet societies is often a complex and dynamic matter. In this regard, Ajara's historical roots and geopolitical position facilitate much of the welcoming environment that currently benefits the United States' diplomatic outreach.

Chapter 2, and particularly Jones' (2013) thorough analysis of Georgia's political history and the current socio-economic situation, substantiate this latter argument. The most decisive turning point in the U.S.-Georgian partnership indisputably came after the 2008 Russo-Georgian War: not only was the partnership degraded by asymmetrical expectations and a change in American diplomatic priorities, but the relationship with Russia was also destabilised along with later developments<sup>78</sup> in the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, thereby obstructing the potential and desired prospect of NATO membership for Georgia. This geopolitical situation prompted the U.S. decision to retain its presence in this strategic buffer zone. It also illustrates why the research inquiry of this thesis requires adequate and thorough contextualisation. I also argue that my occasional travels and networking with American expatriates, who experience this political dynamic in their communities on an everyday basis, contributed to an increased emic understanding of the field itself.

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<sup>78</sup> I refer to the multiple occasions in which Russia has improved its relations with both regions. See for instance: <http://www.rferl.org/content/putin-law-abkhazia-georgia-treaty-south-ossetia-agreement-tibilov/26829932.html>

The U.S. public diplomacy strategy in Georgia is a far from unproblematic matter at a grass-roots level. First, as shown in Chapter 3, the issue of poor classroom discipline during the club sessions compromises the effect of influence. One evident example is how Access participants, particularly targeted for influence through the provision of extra privileges, were the most reserved and noisiest participants in the club sessions. While the intention is to provide teenagers from disadvantaged backgrounds with better future prospects, this observation might suggest that the preconditions have a counterproductive effect on the U.S. agenda. Reviewing the public diplomacy framework, one example of this claim is how American *culture* is regarded by the participants as having a greater appeal than beliefs and efforts to convey a pro-American conception. Moreover, the comparative insight collected from the school visits in the Ajaran highlands illustrates how poor classroom discipline is a recurring issue in the school system, shedding contextual light on the club sessions at the BAC.

Second, while all of the informants express an overarching opinion in favour of the U.S. presence and influence, and regard the BAC as space for personal development, I have shown in Chapter 5 that some of this modern influence is morally questioned (e.g. the liberal American lifestyle and the country's international role). In considering both Nye, Jr. (2004) and Rugh's (2014) framework for achieving the desired effect of U.S. public diplomacy (e.g. by targeting youth and support for American culture and political values), I argue that the strategy applied in Batumi under the given circumstances <sup>79</sup> corresponds well with U.S. expectations; in their respective roles both Sopho (the BAC coordinator) and Levan work as accessories in this machinery. To a significant degree the strategy also conforms with my informants' expectations, regardless of their ambivalent sentiments and anticipation of views about U.S. expansion in rural areas. By providing an authentic space where they can live out their desires about America, while being able to socialise with peers, the BAC remains a spearhead institution. However, in line with Lugar's (2009) pinpointing of the American Corners program's shortcomings, I argue that the continuity of expatriates actively volunteering in these spaces constitutes a core element in the success of the U.S. public diplomacy strategy. The contextual <sup>80</sup> value of cross-cultural sharing is a powerful tool at a grass-roots level, making it possible to

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<sup>79</sup> I refer to Georgia's pro-Western orientation, traditional integrity, and complex geopolitical situation.

<sup>80</sup> I emphasise two features: the actors' young age, and the fact that expatriates serve long-term engagements.

blur political agendas that could deteriorate the intended image. Since there weren't any immediate plans to replace Melissa and Josh as fully engaged expatriates, this argues partially <sup>81</sup> against the *continuity* in the informants' experience of America.

The new and upcoming generation in Georgia finds itself at a historical crossroads: never has Georgia's desire to integrate into the Western sphere been higher. Since the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, however, the geopolitical climate has changed, which both obstructs Georgia's future aspirations and challenges the U.S. political position. What this thesis has endeavoured to show from the vantage point of the youth in Batumi is that the United States is considered a key actor in the process of making Georgia a prosperous and Westernised nation. Moreover, the grass-roots U.S. public diplomacy contributes to both expanding the young people's global horizons and offering them life opportunities. Thus, maintaining a solid grip on this generation remains a significant precondition for the total achievement of Western integration. In the meantime, though, Georgia's state of flux and unpredictability will never cease to fascinate me.

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<sup>81</sup> This is what I knew when ending the fieldwork. In the aftermath, however, I learned that some Peace Corps expatriates serving in Georgia would on an *occasional* basis pay the BAC a visit and give short presentations.







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