Establishing the End of the Soviet Union as a Temporal Boundary. Perspectives from Georgia’s Greek Community

Concha Maria Höfler
Kontakt

Viadrina Center B/ORDERS IN MOTION
Europa-Universität Viadrina
Große Scharrnstr. 59
D-15230 Frankfurt (Oder)

www.borders-in-motion.de

Dr. Andrea Meissner
Wissenschaftliche Geschäftsführerin
Tel: +49 (0)335 5534 2880
meissner@europa-uni.de

Coverbild:
Ehemaliger Grenzübergang Frankfurt (Oder) / Słubice
©Heide Fest

Zitation:

Lizenz:
Textinhalte freigegeben unter Creative-Commons-Lizenz Namensnennung 4.0 International
(Details siehe creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0)

ISSN 2569-6025

Datum der Veröffentlichung: Juli 2019
Abstract

In interview conversations with self-identifying members of Georgia’s shrinking Greek community, consultants regularly contrast aspects of their life that have changed profoundly since the end of the Soviet Union, thereby establishing the end of the Soviet Union as a temporal threshold relating today to a very different yesterday. Based on an ethnographically informed conversation analysis of 49 semi-structured interview conversations, this article aims to further our understanding of what the end of the Soviet Union means to my consultants, contributing a sociolinguistic perspective to current debates in the field of Border and Boundary Studies. I will take two analytical perspectives, both of which highlight different important aspects. Firstly, I follow the metaphor of family breakdown that emerged in the interviews as having occurred on two levels. On a community level, this breakdown of the Soviet “family of nations” is narrated for instance in terms of rising Georgian nationalism. This is perceived as challenging consultants’ belonging to the Georgian nation state and as drawing new boundaries. On an individual and very tangible level, consultants communicatively have to come to terms with their own families being put under strain through family members’ migration to Greece. Secondly, I follow the tidemarks left by the Soviet yesterday in independent Georgia’s today and how consultants use them to position themselves and their community.

Keywords: temporal boundaries, Greeks in Georgia, minorities after the Soviet Union, ethnographically informed conversation analysis
Table of contents

Establishing the End of the Soviet Union as a Temporal Boundary. Perspectives from Georgia’s Greek Community

1 Introduction ........................................................................................................................................... 1
2 Greeks in Georgia .................................................................................................................................. 2
3 Temporal boundaries ............................................................................................................................. 5
4 Differentiating “today” from “yesterday”: the end of the Soviet Union as a “family breakdown” ................................................................. 7
4.1 Particularisation and rising nationalism ......................................................................................... 8
4.2 Emigration: “they were all close, and now I’m alone” ................................................................. 13
5 Tracing “yesterday” in “today” .............................................................................................................. 16
6 Discussion: From seemingly clear differentiations to complex boundaries ........................................... 20

Acknowledgements .................................................................................................................................. 22
References ................................................................................................................................................ 23
About the Author ................................................................................................................................... 27
1 Introduction

It is not very controversial to say that the end of the Soviet Union is to be seen as a temporal threshold, a “turning point” before and after which political, economic and social realities are “different”. However, rather than taking this notion for granted and treating it as “simple”, I will show how this temporal boundary is established in interview conversations and how my interlocutors from Georgia’s Greek community make it relevant in relating their lifeworlds and positionings to an outsider from Germany. In 49 semi-structured interview conversations with self-identifying Greeks in Georgia, consultants made and unmade social, spatial and temporal boundaries throughout our conversations, speaking at length about their family history, (self-)identification and belongings. The end of the Soviet Union is established regularly as a crucial temporal boundary, profoundly altering consultants’ (im)possibilities for belonging. The transformation from the Soviet Union to the independent Georgian nation state challenged previous identifications as SOVIET CITIZENS by discarding the foundations of much prior knowledge about the world as well as points of identification, and establishing new frames of belonging. At the same time and on a very personal level, the massive emigration of Georgian Greeks fundamentally transformed the social life of all of my consultants, leaving many feeling profoundly isolated.

After providing the historical background to this transformation as well as Georgia’s Greek community in section 2 and setting out my theoretical approach (section 3), I will take two analytical perspectives that elucidate different aspects of this temporal boundary. The first perspective (section 4) follows the contrast that is established by creating TODAY in opposition to a very different YESTERDAY (cf. Tilly, 2004) and by portraying these temporal categories as clearly different. In taking this perspective, I will explore a metaphor frequently used in the interviews: that of narrating the end of the Soviet Union as an instance of a FAMILY BREAKDOWN. As I will show, this can be observed on a metaphorical level, where rising nationalism in the 1990s is given as an example of how the Soviet “family of nations” disintegrated (cf. section 4.1). At the same time, this is how consultants speak about the very tangible breakdown of nuclear families and close knit communities that took place when their family members emigrated (cf. section 4.2). The second analytical perspective I take (section 5) is concerned with following Soviet traces and tidemarks in independent Georgia (cf. Green, 2009), exploring how they pose both challenges and at the same time afford new belongings.

---

1 Categories established as relevant are set in SMALL CAPS throughout. Note that I will often refer to spaces, countries and national affiliations without typographically highlighting that they are not natural givens. This, as well as my choice to not mark the labels “Pontic”, “Urum”, and “Greek” unless they are constructed in the analysed excerpts, is a concession to readability rather than a claim that these categories are in any way less constructed than others.
2 Greeks in Georgia

The present paper stems from a larger research project on the Greek community in Georgia², which took as its starting point what is most obviously intriguing about Georgia’s Greek community – their self-identification as GREEK, despite great differences in terms of the heritage varieties they either still speak or that were spoken in their family: Pontic Greek or Caucasian Urum, a Turkic language.³ Not only does this mean that community members need to communicate in a third language when talking to one another (mostly Russian or Georgian, rarely Standard Modern Greek) – but in the context of the Southern Caucasus, “Greek” and “Turkish” are also frequently perceived to stand for their speakers’ religious affiliation, categorising the former as “Christian” and the latter as “Muslim”. Countering the modern nation state’s assumptions about how national affiliation and language competence might relate to each other, being a competent speaker of a Greek variety is not necessarily considered to be the central defining attribute for being GREEK (Höfler, 2016, 2018). In many cases and across various conversational contexts, consultants verbalise their GREEK self-identification in terms of tracing it through their ancestry, their complex historical migration trajectories, as well as through their “resilience” in holding on to the religion they all share: Orthodox Christianity (Höfler, in prep.; Sideri, 2006; Zoumpalidis, 2016).

Notably, their self-identification according to religious criteria has been in accordance with governmental systems of categorisation from the outset of consultants’ community narratives. These usually begin in the early 19th century in the Ottoman Empire, where Orthodox Christians, regardless of their language use, were grouped in the millet-I-Rûm, a category that would come to be re-analysed as “Greek”.⁴ Following their (forced) migration from the mid 1820s onwards, the Russian Empire – itself no stranger to ordering systems based on religious affiliation – adopted the Ottoman categorisation. Later, policy-makers in the Soviet Union drew heavily on ethno-national categories established in the Russian Empire and, in case of the “Greeks”, perpetuated the previous categorisation.⁵ National categories were then related to each other in a complex hierarchy and carried forward not only in registries based on census data, but from 1932 onwards in the Soviet internal passport, expressing a “cultural technolog[y] of rule” (Hirsch, 2005), which was very much felt in everyday life:

“Every Soviet citizen was born into a certain nationality, took it to day care and through high school, had it officially confirmed at the age of sixteen and then carried it to the grave through thousands of application forms, certificates, questionnaires and reception desks. It made a difference in school admissions and it could be crucial in employment, promotions and draft assignments.”

(Slezkine, 1994, 450)

Thus, the Soviet Union recognised “Greek” (self-)categorisation and furthermore enshrined membership in this category in internal passports. Importantly, nationality was

² The impact of current transformational processes on language and ethnic identity: Urum and Pontic Greeks in Georgia, led by Konstanze Jungbluth and Stavros Skopeteas and funded by the VolkswagenStiftung, as part of which I completed my PhD on Identifying as Greek and belonging to Georgia: Processes of (un)making boundaries in the Greek community of Georgia. This paper is based on one of the analytical chapters.

³ Note that this etic differentiation according to language use is not something community members necessarily share or welcome.

⁴ For excellent accounts of what Ottoman categorisations and rule did and, perhaps more importantly, did not do cf. Barkey (2008); Içduygu et al. (2008).

turned into a purely hereditary attribute, due among other factors to having officially
discounted the importance of religion for anything including belonging and having de-
coupled national affiliation from competence in one’s *rodnoy yazyk* “native language”
(Arel, 2006).6

After Georgia’s independence from the Soviet Union, it bestowed citizenship upon all of its
residents,7 and stopped recording nationality in passports or making it relevant for access
to services. Russian had not been a state language in Georgia but had been widely used,
especially among members of its sizeable minority communities, many of which were
still struggling with Georgian into the 2000s (Wheatley, 2009b). The Georgian Orthodox
Church played an important role in the movement for Georgian independence. Similar
to the other Orthodox Churches, the Georgian Orthodox Church is perceived as symbol
of the Georgian nation state (Fuchslocher, 2010; Suny, 1994) and retains a tremendously
influential position in Georgian society and public discourse today. Establishing their
Orthodox Christianity as the central attribute for their being GREEK, Georgian Greeks
conform to the dominant public discourse that inextricably links national to religious
categories – casting “Georgians”, “Greeks”, and “Russians” as (closely related types of)
ORTHODOX CHRISTIANS, “Armenians” as APOSTOLIC CHRISTIANS and “Azerbaijianis” as
MUSLIMS. It is only in their “co-ethnic” migration destination Greece that Georgian Greeks’
(self-)identification is challenged and denied, either in everyday interactions or more re-
cently also officially, in terms of not being granted Greek citizenship (anymore). Similar to
post-Soviet Germans’ experiences upon arrival in Germany from the early 1990s onwards
(Hess, 2010), recognition in and belonging to Greece is based on (accentless) competence
in Standard Modern Greek (Hionidou, 2012; Kaurinkoski, 2010), while post-Soviet Greeks’
Orthodox Christianity is discounted as relevant.

Emigration of both Pontic and Urum speaking Greeks from Georgia was dramatic: of close
to 100,000 Greeks recorded as living in Georgia in the last Soviet census of 1989, only
5,500 remained when the most recent census was carried out in Georgia in 2014 (Geostat,
2016).8 Broadly speaking, Greeks with a family history of speaking Caucasian Urum today
live mainly in the capital Tbilisi and in villages of the rural district Ts’alk’a. Greeks with
a family history of speaking Pontic Greek used to live in three villages in Ts’alk’a, and
today remain in rural Tetrits’q’aro, villages in the western Georgian regions Ach’ara and
Samtskhe-Javakheti, as well as in the port city Batumi. In the springs of 2013 and 2014,
my Georgian colleague Nika Loladze and I travelled to all these places and spoke to 49
self-identifying Georgian Greeks. Our semi-structured interviews covered community and
family narratives of the community’s past and present migrations, their life trajectories,
as well as language use, and sense(s) of belonging.9 Interviewees could choose either Rus-
sian or Georgian as the interview language.10 23 of our interviewees still speak or have a

6 The latter came to mean something closer to “language of one’s ancestors” than one’s “first
language” or “language at birth” (Grenoble, 2003; Pavlenko, 2008).
7 Contrary to the Baltic republics, for instance, who linked citizenship to competence in the respec-
tive new state languages (Hogan-Brun, 2005).
8 Not all emigrants were Greek: Georgia experienced a net loss of roughly 1 million of its inhab-
itants since 1989 (Geostat, 2013, 22). Many, though by no means all, emigrants were members of
national minorities (most notably Russians, Ukrainians, Azerbaijanis, Armenians, Jews, and Kurds),
raising the percentage of ethnic Georgians from 68.8% in 1989 (Geostat, 2013, 22) to 86.8% in 2014
(Geostat, 2016, 8).
9 Being a mixed-gender team of both a national “insider” (Nika Loladze) and an “outsider” (myself)
played an important role in getting interviewees to explicitly explain their lifeworld to the outsider,
while the insider’s presence ensured that they would not be “misunderstood”.
10 I am grateful to Anno Chkhaidze, Ani Chutkerashvili, Sophio Gachechiladze, Gvantsa Jishkariani,
Nino Ushikishvili and Mariam Varazashvili for their invaluable help in the transcription process.
family history of speaking Urum (age range: 19-77, average age: 43.9, 13 female, 10 male).
26 interviewees still speak or have a family history of speaking Pontic Greek (age range:
19-81, average age: 50.5, 14 female, 12 male).
Crucially, having a family history of speaking one or the other heritage language is
not closely linked to how interviewees position themselves and their community, or to
whether they would encounter difficulties in Greece (Höfler, 2016; Höfler, in prep.). Like
for other inhabitants of Georgia, there is a notable difference between rural and urban
spaces, however. Furthermore, the rural areas inhabited by Greeks have fared differently
since the beginning of Greek emigration. The villages inhabited by Pontic Greeks in West-
ern Georgia have seen little internal migration, and cohabitation with ethnic Georgians
is portrayed as harmonious. Rural Ts’alk’a, on the other hand, has seen a great influx of
internal migrants from other parts of Georgia (Wheatley, 2006), which Urum Greeks living
in the region portray as threatening, as we will see in section 4.1 below.
Comparing competence levels in the languages most commonly spoken in the commu-
nity, Russian clearly takes the lead in the interview corpus with only two consultants not
assessing themselves to be competent speakers (95.9% competent speakers). Both heri-
tage languages Urum and Pontic Greek taken together come in second, with 40 speak-
ers (81.6%) stating high competence. Notably, both heritage languages are not only still
spoken, they are also passed on to the next generation, even by our younger consultants.
Given the seclusion of rural areas until quite recently and the fairly high average age of
our interviewees, Georgian does not fare badly at all with 36 competent speakers (75.5%).
This is particularly remarkable since rural minorities in general are still said to be lacking
competence in Georgian, which is usually taken to threaten Georgia’s territorial integrity,
especially where Armenians and Azerbaijanis are concerned (Wheatley, 2009b). Standard
Modern Greek (SMG) is with 18 competent speakers (36.7%) the least spoken relevant
language in the corpus.11
How is the “Greek” experience of the end of the Soviet Union different from the “Georgian”
one? Importantly, the experience of economic collapse, emigration, political instability,
and even (civil) war in the early 1990s affected all citizens of Georgia. Two things distin-
guish the “Greek” experience: Firstly, the extent of emigration is much higher for national
minorities, as can be observed in the fact that 95% of Greeks left Georgia. Secondly, a
profoundly unsettling factor for minority communities with “co-ethnic” migration des-
tinations in Western Europe is the experience of – for the first time in several hundred
years – having their and their community’s belonging challenged and negated in every-
day interactions, or even by the state itself (cf. contributions to Čapò Žmegač et al., 2010;
Hess, 2010). While these changes did not take place overnight and/or simultaneously,
taken together, they amount to such a fundamental difference “before” and “after” that
in our interview conversations they are usually condensed and attributed to the tempo-
ral boundary interviewees establish the end of the Soviet Union as. Thus, while expert
knowledge on developments in Georgia since independence will rightly argue for a more
finely grained periodisation of the last 28 years, this does not coincide with consultants’
narratives of and allusions to these changes. Instead, their complexity is reduced to one
very clear temporal boundary. In the interviews, I responded to this “too simple” clarity
by following up with questions about interviewees’ experiences of specific phases. In this
paper I foreground their sense-making rather than imposing my own.

---

11 Similar numbers for Russian, Georgian and SMG are reported in an unfortunately no longer
accessible study by Eleni Sellà-Mazi and Violetta Moisidi (“Sociolinguistic study on the areas of
use of Urum and the attitude of the speakers towards the language”, 2011), although they only
interviewed competent Urum speakers.
3 Temporal boundaries

Generally, I understand borders and (not only temporal) boundaries as multidimensional and complex textures of interrelated differences (Gerst et al., 2018; Schiffauer et al., 2018). This complexity also holds for those boundaries that are portrayed as “simple” and “clear” as the end of the Soviet Union in my interview corpus. Boundaries are furthermore in “a constant state of becoming” (Brambilla, 2014), which highlights the processes at work in (un)making, understanding and experiencing boundaries. This processual understanding of boundaries lends itself to an analytical approach that focuses on the interactions in which boundaries are drawn, negotiated, challenged or dissolved. Tracing our joint sense-making in the interview conversations, I employ an ethnographically informed conversation analysis (Deppermann, 2000) that elucidates the in situ establishment of social reality as a co-production of all interlocutors – a co-production the interviewer(s) cannot be written out of.

Turning to temporal boundaries, two concepts in particular have proven helpful in analysing consultants’ boundary (un)making: firstly, focusing on the boundary’s relationality, and secondly, exploring the traces and tidemarks left by a previous (social) order. With regards to the former, it is supposed that borders and boundaries do not only divide, but that they also relate entities on either side of the boundary to each other and across it (Lamont and Molnár, 2002; Tilly, 2004; Karafillidis, 2009). These relations crucially depend on the perceptions and positionings of those involved in un/making the boundary in question. In the interview corpus, the most salient relation across the temporal boundary is established by contrasting ways of living.12 As we will see (in section 4), the experiences narrated as having happened “before” and “after” the temporal boundary are portrayed as being “impossible” on its respective other side. The experiences possible in both “Soviet” and “post-Soviet” times are thereby not only internally homogenised and differentiated from each other (Hirschauer, 2014), their proclaimed “impossibility” on the other side is key in establishing a boundary rather than a differentiation. Interestingly, it appears to be not so much a question of layers of stacked differences – for instance political, social, linguistic, religious – (as per Haselsberger, 2014) that gives this boundary its strength, but the portrayed incommensurability of the contrasted ways of living and communality, as we will see in the excerpts.

The second concept that helps analyse consultants’ temporal boundary un/making is that of the abounding traces and tidemarks of the Soviet past. These traces and tidemarks are not only made relevant by interviewees in our conversations, they also shape wider discourses around categorisation and belonging in independent Georgia, as set out in the previous section. Envisaged to highlight the temporality of boundaries by conceptualising them as traces and tidemarks of “some kind of past activity” (Green, 2009), this concept delivers more than the ever important task of situating categories and boundaries in their historical context (Hirschauer, 2014; Wimmer, 2008). Their ability to “appear anywhere, and [to] be imagined as much as seen or drawn” (Green, 2009, 15) makes tidemarks particularly amenable to non-topological boundaries. In the particular relations they establish, traces also complicate the perception of a “simple” temporal boundary, in the case at hand by highlighting those aspects of previous ordering systems and lifeworlds that are slower to change. In our conversations, they thus work against the narratively established relations of clear contrast between YESTERDAY and TODAY. In Georgian discourse,

they shape negotiations concerning citizenship, educational reform or language policies (Berglund, 2016; Wheatley, 2009a). They might still ask why the end of the Soviet Union is established as such an unambiguous and strong boundary? This question appears especially pressing when seen in light of the political, social, economic, and cultural complexity involved in transforming the Soviet Union into its 15 successor states, a multi-dimensional process in which little clarity is discernible. As hinted at in the previous section, one explanation for establishing such a “simple” boundary might lie precisely in the complexity of the transformational processes and their impact on consultants’ lives. Further to the excerpts analysed in the next sections, this emerges from another observation: Consultants do usually not narratively “get close” to the temporal boundary itself. In fact, many interviewees choose to speak about the early 1990s as little as possible, often in statements one might summarise with “it was difficult, now it’s okay”. A careful analysis of longer stretches of conversation (cf. Höfler, in prep.) suggests an interpretation of the early 1990s as a precariously liminal phase, experiences of which are not easily (or at all) articulable (Turner, 1987). In our conversations, those consultants, who do speak about these processes cope with this profound uncertainty by establishing a “simple” and “clear” temporal boundary, thus reducing unsettling experiences into a more manageable “before” and “after”. As with narratives in other contexts, the narrative excerpts analysed in the next sections are not simply a case of consultants relating their lifeworlds to their interlocutors: Crucially, narrators (re)tell their story to themselves as much as to their listeners (Günthner, 2012; Lucius-Hoene and Deppermann, 2004). They thus reduce the complexity of their experiences both to themselves and to their interviewers. Telling and sense-making fall into one. Georgia’s Greek community has so far attracted rather sparse research interest, focusing mostly on questions surrounding historical trajectories and cultural sense-making (Melikishvili and Jalabadze, 2016; Sideri, 2006, 2007, 2012), interethnic conflicts in rural Ts’alk’a (Wheatley, 2006), migration patterns (Loladze, 2016), or processes of language contact and change (Skopeteas, 2014; Zoumpalidis, 2014; contributions to Höfler et al., 2016). As with research focusing on other minorities in post-Soviet countries or the post-Soviet space in general, the end of the Soviet Union and the profound transformations it brought about regularly feature as the backdrop to post-Soviet developments (Agadjanian, 2001; Pavlenko, 2008; Skvirskaja, 2010). How these complex processes are established as a temporal boundary is not usually investigated, however, the temporal boundary is instead taken for granted. From a perspective that assumes processes of differentiation and boundary making to be crucial to understanding any social order, this is a grave omission. Unless we understand how this boundary is drawn and why it is so relevant to consultants that they establish the end of the Soviet Union not as fuzzy but as a very

13 Further temporal perspectives to take on the end of the Soviet Union would be to explore how polity-time is negotiated in relation to consultants’ everyday lifeworlds (Hurd et al., 2017), or whether Georgia and Greece are constituted as different time-spaces that migrants and their families would have to deal with (Leutloff-Grandits, 2017). Neither are made particularly relevant in the interviews, however, and thoroughly analysing the migrant experience in Greece is beyond the scope of this paper (but cf. Höfler, in prep.).

14 This process in itself did not even approximate clock-time simultaneity, with Lithuania declaring independence in March 1990 and Kazakhstan as late as December 1991.

15 Another way consultants might conversationally resist articulating their experiences is to refer to the knowledge they share about this time with Nika Loladze, or to position me as “enough of an insider”, so that they would not have to tell me about it in detail.

16 On the desideratum of exploring the interplay between boundaries’ certainty and their uncertainty in contemporary research on borders and boundaries, cf. Banse (2018).
clear temporal boundary, we miss an important part of the post-Soviet experience. Finally, creating temporal boundaries in interaction has also not been explored from a conversation analytical perspective: While temporality in interaction is an important topic, it has for the most part remained concerned with temporality within the interaction itself (cf. contributions to Deppermann and Günthner, 2015) rather than outside of it. The following analysis contributes an interactional perspective on the construction of the end of the Soviet Union as a temporal boundary.

4 Differentiating “today” from “yesterday”: the end of the Soviet Union as a “family breakdown”

In this section, I will examine the metaphor of likening the end of the Soviet Union to a FAMILY BREAKDOWN, which emerges with some frequency in how consultants make sense of this transformation. Before turning to these intricacies, however, I provide a few remarks on what is most frequently contrasted across the temporal boundary thus established. Apart from the breakup of the Soviet Union and the emigration of family members, the single most relevant contrast between TODAY and the Soviet YESTERDAY is the experience of political and economic stability, especially in the later decades of the Soviet Union, with the instability following its dissolution. In the political sphere, this went hand in hand with rising nationalism and civil war, as explored in section 4.1. Economically, the experience of full employment during the Soviet Union, in particular, is contrasted with later unemployment by all consultants who were not too young to have been of working age at that time. Other ways in which everyday life is said to have been organised differently include free education, pensions affording a life without poverty, affordable cost of living, and the possibility of travelling the length and breadth of the Soviet Union at little cost. In rural areas, consultants also deplore the agricultural decline and the dissolution of the sovkhoz and kolkhoz structures, in which many Greeks are narrated as having held prestigious positions.

All these processes are often summed up in the assertion that people lived “well” in Soviet times, as for instance by EM, an elderly woman living in rural Ts’alk’a: vse prekrasno my zhili “we all lived splendidly” (EM, 0:21:20). Importantly, all positive characterisations of a predictable and flourishing life are employed with hindsight and against the backdrop of consultants’ experiences of the turmoil that collapsing institutions and civil war brought to all ordinary citizens of newly independent Georgia in the early 1990s. The image of “stability” and the “brotherhood” invoked for the Soviet Union thereby serves as

17 Note that this is also the perception of the two interviewed Pontic Greeks who were deported with their families to Central Asia during WW2.

18 Note that this is not confined to Greek or indeed other minority experiences but is something that comes up time and again in everyday conversations – especially but interestingly not necessarily limited to those an interested foreigner might have with older interlocutors.

19 All consultants have been anonymised and provided with arbitrary acronyms. Choosing “real” names for them is next to impossible, unfortunately, as both first and surnames are highly coded for national affiliation in the Southern Caucasian context. My interview partners have names that would be categorised as Greek, Georgian, Russian or “internationally Christian”. While this plays no role in their official categorisation and self-identification as Greek, my choosing such a name would be an act of assigning them to national categories.

20 The transliteration of Russian follows the BGN/PCGN standard (National Geospatial Intelligence Agency, 1949/2017), that of Georgian the Georgian national system of romanization. In running text, the original is italicised, free translations are given in quotation marks (“ ”).
a backdrop against which the subsequent insecurities appear even more unsettling. No less crucially, it must be noted that establishing the Soviet Union in positive contrast to what came after does not entail consultants in any way questioning the legitimacy of the Georgian nation state or make them less committed to portraying themselves and their community as “loyal Georgian citizens” in all conversational contexts.

4.1 Particularisation and rising nationalism

First, remember that neither the perceptible particularisation and rise in nationalism, investigated here, nor the large scale emigration of Georgian Greeks to Greece and Cyprus explored in the next section were unique to Georgia’s Greek community. Both, however, challenged my consultants in new ways that are reflected in how they talk about their identification and belonging in our interviews many years later. In addition to the economic stability attributed to the Soviet Union, another feature frequently made relevant concerns the “closeness” of all people regardless of their ethno-national background: the metaphor of the SOVIET FAMILY. I will first explore this sense of familiarity; the issue of (in)stability will be discussed afterwards. The communicative method (Sacks, 1992) of contrasting a “better then” with a “difficult now”, as well as the metaphor of the SOVIET FAMILY, emerge quite clearly in the interview with LP.

At the time of the interview, LP is 26 years old and lives with his wife and children in a small village in rural Ts’alk’a. Before excerpt 1, he explains to us how “now” brata ne znayut “brothers don’t know each other” (LP, 0:10:53). If not even siblings “know” each other, they have no means of establishing when their support might be needed and also have no means of finding support when they are in need themselves. “Now”, thus, is not a time of dependable social cohesion. LP finds an image for how this lack plays out in every day life, explaining that if he fell on the street “now” nobody would have the basic civil grace to help him up; people would instead try to push him even “further down”.21 My colleague Nika Loladze (NL) asks for clarification whether this holds just for Greece, which we had just spoken about, or vezde “everyhwere”, to which LP answers vezde (LP, 0:10:58-0:11:09). He then goes on to contrast this “now” with a much more sociable “then”.22

---

(1) All were like brothers (LP, 0:11:12-0:11:33)

1 LP: seychas takoe vremya (-) esli est’ esseskie vremya fi brat/ brata now such time if exists Soviet time and brother brother

2 znal (-) sosed sosedaza znal knew_M neighbour neighbour knew_M

3 CH: [mhm] [mhm]

4 NL: [mhm] [da] yes

---

21 This recourse to what is portrayed as the most basic rules of civility and solidarity in order to show how bad either “the times” or some “other people” have become is something we will encounter again in excerpt 2. It is also how consultants frequently communicatively deal with challenges to their self-identification, for instance in Greece (cf. Höfier, in prep.).

22 [ ] indicate that two interlocutors speak at the same time; “h indicates the drawing of breath; : indicates vowel lengthening; (-), (–) and (—) indicate short pauses of increasing length; (()) bracket para- and non-linguistic utterances. CH refers to myself, NL to Nika Loladze. Excerpts are first given in their original language with a word by word translation into English, and following that a free translation into English. The default language of the analysed excerpts is Russian, Georgian turns are marked by a preceding (kat).
Establishing the End of the Soviet Union as a Temporal Boundary.

The contrast is made between “the present” and “Soviet times” (1). In the latter, both siblings and neighbours “knew” each other (1-2). In the context of his previous characterisation of the contemporary, this “knowledge” may be interpreted as encompassing a certain degree of mutual care. In the next step, he extends this image of supportive familial and neighbourly conviviality to one in which someone’s ethno-national affiliation played no role and was therefore not used to disrupt the harmony of living together (5-8). Intriguingly, he does not mention a “Greek” person in his list, but every other “nationality” living in the rural Georgian district Ts’alk’a at the time of the interview: “Georgian”, “Armenian”, “Ach’arian”, “Svan”, and even “Azerbaijani”. It is remarkable that he mentions “Ach’arian” and “Svan” members of this “amicable” community, because both groups of Georgian internal migrants were settled in Ts’alk’a just before, or even after, the collapse of the Soviet Union and massive Greek emigration. By including them in this list, he establishes the potential for a harmonious community including even those perceived groups who were not living in Ts’alk’a at the time and who he describes in many other sequences of the interview in terms of (violent) struggle and even fear.

Two noteworthy things happen here. First of all, by stressing the harmonious relationships of “everybody” who could conceivably have lived in Ts’alk’a during Soviet times, he elevates his recollection to the level of an almost utopian vision of peaceful interethnic conviviality. Secondly, the perceived “groups” he usually positions as being essentially different, in ways not allowing rapprochement,23 are in this sequence positioned as mere

23 For instance by attributing “aggressive” and “uncivilised” behaviour to “Ach’arians” because of their “Turkish blood” (LP, 0:37:14-0:37:50).
“victims of circumstance” and thereby not essentially different. This contrast in how these “groups” are portrayed as having lived together “during the Soviet Union” versus how he talks about their relationship “today”, establishes time – and in particular the end of the Soviet Union as a turning point – as the crucial factor for changing social order in Ts’alk’a. This friendly coexistence introduced in lines 5-8 is taken to another level in line 10: vse kak brat’ya byli “all were like brothers”, thereby extending the close and supportive relationships he attributes to familial collectives at the time to a larger collective. Note that in this excerpt the level of commonality remains ambiguous: It could either remain on the local level of communal relationships, as introduced by bringing in the neighbours in line 2 and by mentioning “groups” living in the area. Or it could reference larger contexts, extending the cherished “family relations” to a Georgia-wide collective or even one encompassing all Soviet citizens.

Following excerpt 1, LP goes on to explain that “now” everybody has to look after themselves, resuming his grievances about individualisation and isolation. The sociability of the Soviet times serves as a nostalgic point of comparison without, however, explicitly criticising “capitalism”, which is done by some – older – interviewees. What does become clear in excerpt 1 is the comparison of the Soviet Union with a FAMILY, which is described as having “broken down” in many interviews. This is not particular to the Georgian Greek context: Maisuradze and Thun-Hohenstein (2015) offer a rich historical analysis of the FAMILY metaphor in the Soviet Union with Stalin as the patriarchal father figure, otets narodov “father of the peoples” (Thun-Hohenstein, 2015).24

References to the SOVIET FAMILY are often employed to explain conviviality across national categories, as in excerpt 1 or excerpt 2 below. This is usually achieved by using kinship terms, for instance in line 10 in excerpt 1. Indeed, my kak brat’ya zhili “we lived like siblings” is one of the most frequently heard characterisations of the Soviet Union by consultants old enough to have conscious memories of that time. Focusing not so much on feelings of emotional closeness, two consultants in their early 70s very explicitly liken the mechanisms of “governing a state” to the mechanisms of “heading a family”. They first jointly establish that a “strong head of the family” would have “everything at home”, which one of them then follows with i sem’ya uzhe ne sem’ya razval tak i gosudarstvo “and [when] the family is no longer a family, it breaks down, like the state” (SC, 0:17:15).25

While uttered in a conversational context, in which SC ascribes a certain “headlessness” to current Georgian politics, it is the Soviet state and FAMILY that are here said to have collapsed due to a lack of political leadership.

So far, portraying the end of the Soviet Union as a FAMILY BREAKDOWN has allowed consultants to contrast close conviviality and strong political leadership ascribed to Soviet times with precarious individualisation on the one hand and leaderlessness in the sphere of political and economic decision-making on the other. Another frequently mentioned aspect of how the end of the Soviet Union impacted consultants’ everyday lives is the issue of rising nationalism in the newly independent Georgian nation state. In narrating how their lives have changed since the end of the Soviet Union, 14 consultants bring up the natsional’nyy vopros “national question”26 as having arisen in the early 1990s, and most of them link it to the presidency of Zviad Gamsakhurdia, independent Georgia’s first president. Bearing in mind that many consultants choose to avoid direct statements and narratives about this time, the fact that almost a third unambiguously speak about their

24 Cf. also Sideri (2006, 109-113) on the establishment of that metaphor.
25 Note that the STATE AS FAMILY metaphor is among the metaphors frequently used across contexts to refer to – also Western European – states (Ringmar, 2008), and that being part of such a FAMILY is usually taken to be positive (Musolff, 2016).
26 Incidentally echoing the title of Stalin’s first political essay: Marksizm i natsional’nyy vopros “Marxism and the National Question” (Stalin, 1950).
Experiences in the early 1990s in terms of “nationalism” makes this an important topic. Although I directly ask about it, no consultant mentions “nationalism” or discrimination on ethnic grounds as something existing during the Soviet Union, speaking instead about that period using the already-explored FAMILY metaphor. Consultants also deny that explicit discrimination on ethno-national grounds takes place “today”, making narrated experiences of nationalism an important marker of the end of the Soviet Union as a temporal boundary.

It is the supra-national Soviet FAMILY that is threatened by an official rhetoric proclaiming грузия дlia грузин “Georgia for Georgians” (a phrase uttered by 9 consultants in this context), thereby in a way categorising former “family members” as no longer belonging. The following excerpt exemplifies this FAMILY BREAKDOWN, and importantly sees the protagonist of the narrated story defend herself adroitly. AM is a 49-year-old Urum Greek university-educated former inspector who lives in Tbilisi and cares for her children at the time of the interview. Before the excerpt, we talk about life in the Soviet Union and to my question of whether “life was different” for members of different ethno-national groups she explains at length how this culminates in a family comparison: "[we] lived together and were like relatives" (AM, 0:07:25). The present – or rather the time of Gamsakhurdia’s presidency in 1991-92 – compares rather unfavourably:

(2) Georgia for Georgians (AM, 0:07:38-0:08:27)

1 AM: my tak drug druga khodili stoly nakryvali e i vsë a seychas ‘h we so each other went_PL tables covered_PL and everything but now

2 seychas to’ko poshlo грузия dlya gruzin (-) now only came_N Georgia for Georgians

3 CH: [hm] [hm] (-) da/ yes

4 AM: [armeniya] dlya armyan (-) azerbaydzhan dlya azerbaydzhantsev (1) Armenia for Armenians Azerbaijan for Azerbaijans

5 razlichie [poshli (-) ukazyvat]/ tebe (-) differences came_PL point_out_they to_you_2SG

6 AM: mne naprimer lichno skazali (-) po-g, po-russki ne razgovarivay ya me for_example personally said_PL in_G in_Russian not speak_2SG I

7 s podruzhkoy razgovarivala vykhodila iz magazina ‘h a ya skazala ya with girl_friend talked_F came_out_F from shop and I said_F I

8 krome russkogo znayu eschë pyat’ yazykov apart_form_Russian know_I more five languages

9 CH: ((chuckles)) /da/ yes

10 AM: [a:] (-) ty mne skazhi chto ty mne predlozhish’ [krome] svoego and you me tell_2SG what you me offer_2SG apart_from own

11 gruzinskogo yazyka no tak nel’zya [tak] nel’zya ponimaesh’ Georgian language but so must_not so must_not understand_2SG

12 CH: [hm] [hm] hm (-)

13 NL: kogda eto sluchilos’ sego_a when this happened_N tod_”

27 However, some consultants consider it “normal” for members of the titular nationality to have slight advantages, for example in looking for jobs.

Establishing the End of the Soviet Union as a Temporal Boundary.
Line 1 sees the end of AM’s description of the Soviet Union as a time of friendship and hospitality, which she contrasts with “now”, the time of allocating “nationalities” to a corresponding “national territory” (2-4). She first mentions the most salient gruziya dlya gruzin “Georgia for Georgians” (2), and then rewords this formulation twice, substituting the names of the other two South Caucasian nation states – Armenia and Azerbaijan – and their titular nationalities, which also happen to be Georgia’s most numerous national minorities (4). In her account, the razlichie “differences” (4) poshli “came” (5), i.e. they were not there before people started to actively look for them and “point them out” (5). She emphasizes this divisiveness by narrating a small story (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou, 2008) that happened to her lichno “personally” (6). According to this, she was told po-russki ne razgovarivay “don’t speak Russian” (6), as she was coming out of a shop with a girlfriend, with whom she had been conversing in Russian (7).

AM first defends herself by addressing the person reprimanding her and expounding the full breadth of her linguistic repertoire, namely speaking another five languages apart from Russian (7-8). Even in multilingual Georgia, this is somewhat extraordinary, which I acknowledge with a chuckle (9). This repartee could have been the end of the small story. AM does not leave it at that, however, but rather proceeds to turn the table, as it were, and to reprimand her attacker for not “having anything to offer” krome svoego gruzinskogo yazyka “apart from your Georgian language” (10-11). That this “offer” refers not only to the attacker’s assumed limited linguistic repertoire is made clear in the following, when she also scolds that person for not behaving well. The repeated tak nel’zya “you mustn’t (behave) like this” (11) is a very strong reprimand, and one not usually directed towards another adult. This is not softened by how she ends her story: ponimaesh’ “do you understand?” (11). Using the second person singular closes a narration in which she shows herself to be superior to her attacker both in terms of linguistic repertoire and in manners, the latter in a way so far beyond the level of her attacker, that it is apparently legitimate to lecture them like a child on proper demeanour. Narrating this story in this way in an interview situation, is also a way for her to deal with an incident, in which she feels having been treated “unfairly” both in terms of judging her linguistic expertise and in how compatriots should behave towards each other (cf. Günthner, 2012; Lucius-Hoene and Depermann, 2004).
In line 13, NL asks for clarification about the time when this episode took place, asking whether it is a recent event. Answering him, AM switches easily from Russian to Georgian and back, demonstrating her mastery of both languages. Interestingly, she duplicates both sentences: “not now” is uttered first in Russian (16), then in Georgian (17), the description of the time as “Gamsakhurdia’s period” first in Georgian (20), then in Russian (22), our main interview language. NL aligns himself with her switch by switching himself and with her statement by assessing the period she brings up as one in which such an event might have taken place. In Russian, the language she can be reasonably sure that I also understand her, AM adds the information that this was the time when the natsional’nyy vopros “national question” was raised (24) and repeats the phrase from line 2: gruziya dlya gruzin “Georgia for Georgians” (24-26). Notably, it is NL’s request for clarification that leads AM to a finer grained periodisation by establishing a difference between “now” and the early 1990s. That she does not do so immediately points to her perceiving the temporal boundary marked by the end of the Soviet Union as the relevant one.

Following excerpt 2, AM goes on to explain that she personally never encountered any substantial problems due to her high level of spoken and written Georgian, and that there are so many umstvenno otstalye “mentally retarded” people (AM, 0:08:52) that one should not pay too much attention to them. Whether this less than favourable mental condition is evoked merely for people evaluating language competence to be important for belonging to Georgia and who also “misbehave” like the attacker in her narrative, or whether she puts “nationalism” per se down to this mental condition remains unclear.\footnote{Conversations with Georgians in Georgia and with members of the German minority in a number of post-Soviet countries point towards “nationalism” being associated across the post-Soviet space with “low education” generally. AM thus appears to draw on a discursively readily available evaluation of people perceived as “nationalistic”.}

What becomes very clear is that she positions herself as intellectually more resourceful – through mastering six languages –, able to defend herself when challenged, and in the morally superior position to educate those who she perceives to be failing in terms of their social conduct. It also clearly emerges that she assesses the carefree SOVIET FAMILY as a thing of the past, destroyed by the rise of the “national question”, which is said to have emerged after the Soviet Union and more precisely during the time of Zviad Gamsakhurdia’s presidency.

4.2 Emigration: “they were all close, and now I’m alone”

This section will examine the dissolution of my consultants’ immediate families and communities through emigration. 21 of the 49 consultants have personal experience of migration, which for some was always intended as seasonal. Importantly, there is not a single consultant who does not talk about at least some of their close family members emigrating. In addition to their self-identification as being GREEK, this experience of “staying behind” unites all of my interviewees. Loladze (2016) carefully delineates how most consultants speak about emigration as a decision made on the basis of economic considerations, v poiskakh luchshey zhizni “in search of a better life”, as IA (0:25:35) aptly put it. As explained in section 3, this is a conversationally precarious topic, which interviewees frequently relate to the Georgian-German team of outsiders in as brief a manner as possible.\footnote{For an in-depth discussion cf. Höfler (in prep.).}

The FAMILY BREAKDOWN is told on two levels: That of local communities and that of immediate family members; more often than not they are closely intertwined. A characteristically explicit answer is given by LP to NL’s question how his life changed kogda...
“when the Greeks started to leave”: *luchshe ne sprosit’ brat luchshe ne sprosit’ eto ochen trudnaya veshch* “better don’t ask, brother, better don’t ask, this is a very difficult thing” (LP, 0:23:28-0:23:38). Declaring this a topic better not spoken about, he launches into a fairly long explication of the negative effects the emigration has had. This not necessarily in terms of emotional attachment but in terms of the palpable “danger” he feels himself exposed to in the rural region of Ts’alk’a at the time of the interview. He derives this “danger” from the numerically small group of Greeks left in the region, who would not be able to “put up a fight” in the case of physically violent inter-ethnic conflict. Even though the internal migration of Georgians from Svaneti and Ach’ara into Kvemo Kartli is a process that took place mostly subsequent to Greek emigration (Wheatley, 2006), many consultants talk about the two as closely related.30 This is frequently related to the numerical distribution of members across the communities, as in the case of DP who sums up a small story with: *nashikh netu nashikh malo ikh mnogo chto delaesh’* “there are none of our [people left], our [people] are few, theirs are many, what can you do” (DP, 0:15:24). By her and a few other consultants, this numerical distribution is portrayed as threatening in the sense of rendering them physically “defenseless”. Interestingly, while this is an evaluation mostly (self-)attributed to older self-identifying Greeks, both LP and DP are in their late twenties at the time of the interview.

Apart from such “strategic” considerations, consultants talk about the loneliness they felt and feel due to their family members’ and friends’ migration. DG sums it up in a short “before and after”, telling us which villages her relatives used to live in before emigrating, an account she closes with: *byli vse ryadom i seychas ya odna* “they were all close, and now I’m alone” (DG, 0:13:05). DG also provides us with a rare emotional account just prior, when I ask her how she feels about the emigration:

> (3) It’s very difficult (DG, 0:11:28-0:11:39)

1. DG: trudno ochen’ trudno kogda govoryu s nim po telefonu mne plaket’
   difficult very difficult when talk, I with him on telephone me to cry

2. khochetsya skuchayu ochen’ trudno
   wants miss, I very difficult
   ‘it’s difficult, very difficult, when I talk to [them] on the phone I want to cry, I miss (them), it’s very difficult’

She first characterises her relatives’ being gone as “very difficult” and then explains that she feels like crying when she talks to them on the phone. Importantly, this emotional state is not something that she felt “before” and that has softened with time, as one might imagine. On the contrary, *kogda ‘when’ in the phrase kogda govoryu s nim po telefonu “when I talk to [them]31 on the phone” (1) is a generalisation, implying “every time when” (Pomerantz, 1986). Overall, DG characterises herself as being “lonely” and “left behind” against her wishes. This has not made her want to emigrate herself, however. She makes this very explicit and tells me that she would not leave Georgia unless forced to do so, as this is the place she considers “home”, where she belongs and where she took her “first steps” (DG, 0:12:21-0:12:36). While few consultants are as candid as DG in talking about their personal losses to someone they in many cases have only met shortly before the in-

30 Note that LP is the consultant who, in excerpt 1 speaks highly of the inter-ethno-national harmony of the Soviet Union.

31 s nim is masculine singular and translates to “with him”, from the context of speaking about a number of her very close family members having emigrated, the last one mentioned being her daughter, it is likely that plural s nimi “with them” was intended.
terview, many join her in expressing their belonging to Georgia in a similarly explicit way. In doing so, the metaphor of BEING ROOTED is not only mentioned explicitly or alluded to with some frequency, it also helps to understand the process of emigration as one of painful “uprooting” and one that many consultants express not wishing to go through themselves (again).

There is another way of dealing with the emigration that I want to discuss briefly. MP explains the last wave of Greek migrations in terms of an essential characteristic he ascribes to his in-group: my lyudi kak kochevники kochuem “we are people roaming like nomads” (MP, 0:07:57). This essential “nomadism” is how he makes sense of what he perceives to be a certain “pointlessness” in how often members of his in-group move from place to place. This “pointlessness” emerges from the other attributes he ascribes to his community a little later:

(4) History repeats itself (MP, 0:08:15-0:08:26)

1 MP: vezde lyudi rabochie rabotayut rabochie lyudi [vezde]
   everywhere people workers work they workers people everywhere
2 CH: [hm]
3 MP: trud stavyat svoy dom stroyat ostavlyayat i ukhodyat [v drugoy]
   labour put they own house build they leave they and go they in other
4 mesto
   place
5 CH: [hm]
6 NL: [mhm]
7 MP: /tam/ opyat’ samoe [opyat’ ta ta vsya istoriya povtoryaetsya/
   there again same again that that whole history repeats_self
8 NL: [mhm opyat’ s nachalo]
   again from beginning

Excerpt 4 starts with MP characterising his in-group as being hard working vezde “everywhere”, i.e. no matter in which situation or on which national territory they find themselves (1). Based on the conversation immediately preceding and following this excerpt, lyudi “people” refers to “Greek people” in this segment. In line 3, he describes exactly what he means by being “working people”: They put in work, build a house – and thereby “a life”, as this is how MP and many other interviewees characterise a “successful life” – and then leave again for another place. According to him, in the new place opyat’ samoe “it’s the same again”, i.e. people settle in and “build a life”, before ta vsya istoriya povtoryaetsya “this whole history repeats itself” (6), which NL aligns himself with (7).

Note that he makes this central for GREEK category membership in this conversational context, but not in others: later on, MP stresses the length of his community’s living in the area as a factor blurring the boundaries between GREEKS and GEORGIANS. It is, thus, not only the context of the interview setting itself that matters, the immediate context of an utterance also plays an important role (Arendt, 2011).
MP thus describes his in-group as never making full use of the life they have “built” for themselves in any place, as they leave and start from scratch somewhere else instead. It is thereby less the necessities of coping with a collapsing political and economic system that he perceives as the driving force behind his community’s “roaming”, but an essential trait of being GREEK. As this makes it somehow inevitable that GREEKS migrate – and some stay behind – this might be analysed as a way of finding an explanation in the interview situation. A little later he talks about his life without his family being “lonely” (MP, 0:09:28). Seen in this context, excerpt 4 may therefore be read as a way for him to reframe the emigration in essential rather than personal terms, making it perhaps easier to cope with on a personal level.

The loneliness MP and DG talk about directly and many other interviewees only hint at is also expressed in the way LP and DP talk about the changed demographic in the region of Ts’alk’a and the concomitant vulnerability they perceive themselves and their community to be exposed to. Taken together with the changes discussed in the previous sections, the dissolution of the SOVIET FAMILY through political and economic changes and rising nationalism (not only) in Georgia and the subsequent massive emigration of (not only) Greeks led, then, to the breaking up of very real and tangible families for all of my consultants.

5 Tracing “yesterday” in “today”

Which tidemarks from the Soviet YESTERDAY mark the independent Georgian TODAY? An all-too easy answer would claim that “everything” that happened in Georgia after independence and in other post-Soviet countries was heavily influenced by the Soviet way of organising political, economic, social, and cultural life. While Soviet influences are of course undeniable in Georgia and elsewhere (cf. Hirsch, 2005; Maisuradze and Thun-Hohenstein, 2015; Suny, 1998), treating everything as a Soviet tidemark leaves the analytical concept meaningless, much like when every difference is taken to be a boundary. I will therefore explore those traces more closely, which might help us understand how my consultants position themselves and their communities in independent Georgia in 2013-14. In a way, consultants’ mourning of and longing for supportive communities and a “caring state” acting like a “head of family” is a trace of an (idealised) memory of a better past that, based on the frequency with which it was articulated, might be analysed as collective (Assmann, 2008). As mentioned before, this does not mean that they would in any way question the authority of the Georgian nation state. Far from it, consultants regularly position themselves and their community as GOOD GEORGIAN CITIZENS, for instance in terms of their language competence, as discussed below.

The first trace I want to elucidate has to do with Soviet nationality policies. Secondly, I will take up the question of language competence, focusing on Russian and Georgian for reasons of brevity. As outlined in section 2 above, the Soviet system of categorising its citizens according to their “nationality” was not only very elaborate but also enshrined in official documentation that was relevant in everyday life. The knowledge arising from this everyday nationality is precisely the type of knowledge consultants refer to when they – fairly seldom, but always very matter-of-factly – speak about their GREEK national affiliation as being easily discernible from their documents. In the conversation with IS, for instance, a Pontic Greek man in his 50s living in rural Tetritis’q’aro, myself and Nika Loladze need to do a fair amount of explaining before he even comprehends my question: Whether he considers it necessary to speak SMG in order to consider himself Greek. His answer is brief: oni posmotryat dokumenty chto ya grek (-) chto ob etom eshchë govorit’ “they see in the documents that I’m Greek, what more is there to speak about this?” (IS, 0:34:40), which is followed by all of us laughing. Although Georgian passports no longer
Establishing the End of the Soviet Union as a Temporal Boundary.

list their bearers’ nationality as anything other than “Georgian”, IS’ surname ending on -idi is in the Georgian context clearly marked as “Greek”.

OP, another Pontic Greek man in his early 60s living in Batumi, makes the link to the Soviet Union explicit:

(5) It was written in my passport (OP, 0:30:56-0:31:36)

1 OP: vsyu e: zhizn’ prozhil e: v etom v: gru_ e: (-) e nu (-) v sovetskom
    whole life lived_M in this in Geor_ well in Soviet
2 /soyuze/
    Union
3 NL: /da/
    yes
4 OP: da ??h i:: e u menya v pasporte bylo napisano grek (-) ya znal chto
    yes and at me in passport was written Greek_M I knew_M that
5 ya grek
    I Greek_M

1 OP: all my life I lived in this Geor. well in the Soviet [Union]
3 NL: [yes]
4 OP: right? and in my passport was written Greek, I knew that I’m Greek

OP explains that he has lived his vsyu zhizn’ “whole life” (1) in a space he starts to refer to as “Georgia” but then corrects himself, referring to the “Soviet Union” (1-2). During this “long time”, he carried a passport stating his national affiliation as grek “Greek” (4). In the sequence captured in this excerpt, it is both his “whole life” and the official document that inform his knowledge about his national affiliation: ya znal chto ya grek “I knew that I was Greek” (4-5). Importantly, in this account OP’s national category membership is not a matter of choice or emotions, or open to any kind of doubt, since an official document like a passport is not subject to interpretation but “proof” of its holder’s belonging. A “long” time span and everyday practices of governmental categorisation thus collude in carrying forward a system of hereditary national categorisations, which painfully collide with category systems in Greece, as he goes on to tell us.

Notably, this Soviet trace of organising belonging is not questioned in Georgia.33 Having recently begun to work with German communities in a number of post-Soviet countries, I have observed a similar picture emerging: Their (self-)identification is enshrined in passports and recognised in successor states of the Soviet Union, but not necessarily in the “co-ethnic” migration country Germany. Especially in the face of armed conflict, it cannot reasonably be argued that the post-Soviet space had stayed a homogeneous time-space (Hurd et al., 2017; Leutloff-Grandits, 2017). This Soviet trace of discerning national affiliation appears to remain shared, however, even though it has lost and continues to lose (some of) its strength in everyday interactions in those post-Soviet states – like Georgia and Kyrgyzstan, but unlike Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan – that no longer note “nationality” in their citizens’ passports.

Turning to the second Soviet tidemark, while my consultants’ being GREEK is not challenged in Georgia today, we saw in excerpt 2 that one particular trace was, namely AM’s use of the Russian language in public. I will here focus not so much on how the Georgian

33 With the exception of rural Ts’alk’a, where different processes are at work that I analyse in greater detail in Höfler (in prep.).
language was and is used as a nationalising symbol, but more on how some of my consultants relate their competences in Russian, the most spoken language in the sample, as a post-Soviet legacy.

In rural Ts’alk’a, SC, a 71-year-old Urum Greek retired police officer who lives partly in Greece and partly in Georgia on a seasonal basis, and his similarly aged friend FD remind us of the importance Russian still has as an international language.

(6) Russian connects nations (SC, 0:47:50-0:48:26)

1. CH: "hi and kakoy yazyk samyy glavnyy dlya vas" (1)
   and which language most main for you
2. SC: russkiy
   Russian
3. CH: [russkiy]
   Russian
4. NL: [russkiy]
   Russian
5. SC: da (1.5) samyy glavnyy yazyk russkiy
   yes most main language Russian
6. CH: hm (1) khorosho (-)
   well
7. SC: ne tol’ko dlya menya a v postsovetskom prostranstve
gosudarstva chto not only for me but in post-Soviet space states what
   byli vezde russkiy yazyk
   were everywhere Russian language
8. CH: mhm
9. FD: nu eto kak vot kak vot kak angliiskiy [((incomprehensible 1.5))]
   well this as here as English
10. SC: [svyazyvayushchiy yazyk e narod][y]
    connecting language nations
11. CH: [da]
    yes
12. FD: v postsovetskom (-) etot gru-e russkiy byl mezhdunarodnyy [vse]
    in post-Soviet this Geo Russian was international everybody
13. CH: [mhm]
14. FD: vot seychas tozhe (-) priedet iz germanii dopustim v gruziyu on
    here now also comes from Germany suppose we to Georgia he
    po-russki govorit
    Russian speaks
15. SC: [da]
    yes
16. CH: [mhm] da (-)
    yes
17. FD: kto-to vot e:: negr priedet on tozhe po-russki govorit (1)
    someone well Negro comes he also Russian speaks
18. SC: russkiy
    Russian

34 For an excellent introduction cf. Suny (1994).
Establishing the End of the Soviet Union as a Temporal Boundary.

SC answers my question (1) calmly with russkiy “Russian” (2), which NL and I echo (3-4). SC repeats his answer in a full sentence (5). Notably, he does not take up the link to his personal situation or emotions which I had introduced with dlya vas “for you”, to which the answering pair would have been dlya menya “for me”. His answer is thereby not restricted to the sphere of his personal situation, opinions or emotions, but rather references a more general hierarchy of “important languages”. This he makes explicit in lines 7-8, when he clarifies that his statement is indeed ne tol’ko dlya menya “not only for me” but rather holds for the post-Soviet space as a whole, as vezde “everywhere” Russian was spoken.36 FD chimes in supportively, searches for an example and finally compares Russian to English (10). SC goes on to define Russian as a language “connecting nations” (11), thereby creating a space of shared commonality exceeding mere possibilities of communication. Almost trivially, the space thus established is much larger than SC’s own community or any one of the fifteen successor states of the Soviet Union, including Georgia. In creating a community of communication geographically congruent with the Soviet Union, SC positions himself squarely within the Soviet discourse of creating a Soviet community superseding national ones.37 FD explains that russkiy byl mezdunarodnyy “Russian was international” (13) with a slight slip of the tongue, when he starts to say gruzinskiy “Georgian” first, before correcting himself to russkiy. The first example he gives for this still being the case shchas “now” uses a national affiliation present in the interview, namely my German one (15-16). His second attempt at explicating this “general rule” is to construct an “even more unlikely” example: A black person would also speak Russian, when coming to Georgia (19). Here, as in other instances in the corpus, a person perceived to be phenotypically “very different” is adduced in order to construct an “extraordinary” example. The implication being that if the characteristic (action) in question also holds for someone so “extraordinarily different”, it must be “generally true”, thus establishing an extreme case (Pomerantz, 1986).38 Without commenting on FD’s contribution, which in many cases in the interview included very clear disagreement and lecturing FD, SC finally closes the explanation of their joint elaboration by repeating russkiy (20).

---

35 This question is fully intended to make consultants place the varieties they speak into some kind of hierarchical relationship, in order to tease out subtleties that the preceding careful exploration of varieties, competences, contexts of speaking them, emotional attachments etc. would not have.

36 Sadly, there exist no reliable data on language competence over time in Georgia. The emigration of large parts of Georgia’s ethnic minority communities (cf. section 2), who mainly used Russian as inter-communal language of communication, and the promotion of Georgian on all communicative levels of society do point at overall decreasing numbers of Georgian citizens with high competences in Russian.

37 This analysis is supported by SC mourning the dissolution of the SOVIET FAMILY and asserting that the Georgian government “changes so often it doesn’t know what to do” (SC, 0:17:08).

38 This is not the only example where skin colour is used in this way without overtly racist intention, as far as that is possible when using a label that is understood in so many other parts of the world to be so clearly racist. Precisely because it is used to mark an “extraordinary exception” that helps to establish a GENERAL RULE in the corpus with some frequency, it would have been hard to leave out and would unduly gloss over consultants’ sense-making. My way of dealing with this in presenting the analysis is to transcribe the words as they were uttered (negr), to give the direct translation
Overall, Russian is established in this excerpt as a UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE that “everybody” speaks (FD) and as the SOVIET LANGUAGE that has not lost its importance or validity. While not all consultants affirm this tidemark of Soviet language policy as strongly and positively as these two consultants, competence in Russian is widely spoken of as a Soviet legacy – and evaluated as problematic in wider Georgian discourse on minority integration (cf. section 2). Especially consultants without high levels of competence in Georgian express dissatisfaction over this fact, as they perceive it from keeping them from positioning themselves unequivocally as Georgian citizens in their everyday lives. Many consultants who do speak Georgian well underscore that this is an “obligation” they have towards the Georgian state: They evaluate it as the correct way of doing things and are happy to comply.

6 Discussion: From seemingly clear differentiations to complex boundaries

Overall, the end of the Soviet Union is established in the interviews as a clear boundary that indubitably closes off a mostly positive YESTERDAY and opens up a more difficult TODAY. Both remain, however, closely related, for YESTERDAY provides the background, the contrastive foil for TODAY: It appears to be next to impossible for my consultants to talk about their lives in Georgia today without at some point evoking the Soviet Union as a sociocultural, political, and economic reference point – provided they have a conscious memory of the time. Almost a little trivially, it is also complex: While it is established almost as a “clear cut”, after which “everything” changes, crucially not everything does. The traces found in the longing for communal sociability across national differences and a “caring state” or in understanding one’s national category membership in line with Soviet systems of categorisation remain. Furthermore, language competences did not shift as swiftly as “polity-time” would have required (Pavlenko, 2008). On the one hand, this allows those consultants who speak Georgian well to position themselves as “better” citizens of the Georgian nation state than members of perceived groups whose Georgian competence have remained lower. On the other hand, it allowed language competence (and use) to be turned into a new important attribute for category membership, with at least the potential to draw new boundaries and to exclude those who fail to quickly comply with the changed order.

It might be said, then, that the contrast is established as being so sharp because in everyday life things were not only more complicated but profoundly unsettling: While new spatio-political borders fell into place “over night”, closing down old and opening up new possibilities for physical movement and belonging, things like language competence and emotional attachments to certain ways of organising everyday life were and are much slower to transform. Furthermore, the narratively established FAMILY BREAKDOWN and individualisation, both on the metaphorical level that conceptualises the Soviet Union as having been a FAMILY OF NATIONS and on the level of immediate families and communities, saw Georgian Greeks’ (self-)identification as GREEKS profoundly challenged in their...

‘Negro’ in the gloss line, and to put this as “black guy” in the idiomatic translation and when writing about the excerpt, as this appears to be closest to the intended target meaning. Furthermore, in Russian chërnyy ‘black’ is in fact a racist slur when used to denote human beings and is commonly used in pejorative references to “black haired people” of the Caucasus and Central Asia.

39 This might seem like an obvious point, especially as we are here concerned with narrative interviews. Nonetheless, I have had interview encounters in other contexts where consultants chose to start their “family history” at a point in time that allowed them to leave out certain experiences that an outsider might have taken to be constitutive to their self-identification.
“co-ethnic” migration targets Greece and Cyprus, adding another layer of complication. Challenging the notion that it were somehow sufficient to take for granted the end of the Soviet Union as a temporal “turning point” and asking how this boundary is drawn and maintained, the contribution of this paper is threefold. Firstly, focusing on the processes of boundary (un)making themselves, it contributed a methodological approach to the exploration of (temporal) boundaries in interactional data, here in interview conversations, thus making ethnographically informed conversation analysis productive for research on temporal boundaries outside the immediate conversational context. Secondly, I showed how the interviewed Georgian Greeks make sense of the complex transformational processes following the end of the Soviet Union by establishing it as a clear and unambiguous temporal boundary. Notably, this sense-making appears to be at least in some ways shared across other post-Soviet experiences, and by no means restricted to national minorities only. This, thirdly, helped uncover an important theoretical point about the (un)certainty of boundaries that are established as clear, in order to communicatively deal with profound uncertainty. Beyond the Georgian Greek and post-Soviet context, it is both the focus on processes rather than the established (temporal) boundary, as well as the interplay of security and insecurity in boundary processes that will remain important.
Acknowledgements

This research was supported by a Ph.D. grant by the Heinrich Böll Stiftung and the research project *The impact of current transformational processes on language and ethnic identity: Urum and Pontic Greeks in Georgia* led by Konstanze Jungbluth and Stavros Skopeteas and funded by the VolkswagenStiftung. I am grateful to Nika Loladze for our shared fieldwork experiences and ongoing discussions, to the research group “Border and Boundary Studies” at the Viadrina Center B/ORDERS IN MOTION for giving me the opportunity for staying with the subject matter, and to Carolin Leutloff-Grandits, Maria Klessmann, and Ryan Wyeth for their thoughtful comments on drafts of this paper.
Establishing the End of the Soviet Union as a Temporal Boundary.

References


Establishing the End of the Soviet Union as a Temporal Boundary.


About the Autor

Concha Maria Höfler is currently a Postdoctoral Research Associate at Durham University in a project focusing on collective memories and belonging of self-identifying Germans in post-Soviet countries. Previously she worked as a postdoctoral researcher at the Viadrina Center B/ORDERS IN MOTION in the Research Group “Border and Boundary Studies”. Her PhD dissertation “Identifying as Greek and belonging to Georgia: Processes of (un)making boundaries in the Greek community of Georgia” was awarded with a PhD-scholarship by the Heinrich Böll Foundation and carried out as a member of the research project “The impact of current transformational processes on language and ethnic identity: Urum and Pontic Greeks in Georgia” funded by the Volkswagen Foundation.
Bisherige Veröffentlichungen

WP 2018/01
W. Schiffauer, J. Koch, A. Reckwitz, K. Schoor, H. Krämer
**Borders in Motion.**
Durabilität, Permeabilität, Liminalität

WP 2019/02
G. Hübinger
**Europäische Ordnungsvorstellungen nach 1918.**
Theoretische Aspekte und exemplarische Fälle

WP 2019/03
S. Mezzadra
**Sealing Borders?**
Rethinking Border Studies in Hard Times

WP 2019/04
C. M. Höfler
**Establishing the End of the Soviet Union as a Temporal Boundary**
Perspectives from Georgia’s Greek Community