Uncertain divides: religion, ethnicity, and politics in the Georgian borderlands
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Dominant western discourse had it that the changes which followed the demise of socialism should be interpreted as a transition to market democracy. As has become obvious in the last five years, this master narrative stands in sharp contrast with the factual processes of change that have taken place in many parts of the post-socialist world. From various sides attempts have been made to account for the poor fit between the transition paradigm and post-socialist realities. Broadly these theories can be categorized in two groups. The first, proffered by neoliberal economists and most international organizations, explains the discrepancies as results of the 'Soviet legacy' which hinders the transition, or by explaining the distortions (away) as temporary side-effects of the transition period. Either way, authors writing within this framework hold that the obstacles may slow down the transition, but that the changes are still pointing to an unavoidable end-stage of Western-style democracies and free markets.

The second perspective, held by some anthropologists and sociologists, strongly criticizes the ideologically informed transition theory held by neo-liberal economists and development agencies. The social scientists argue that one should consider the possibility that the unexpected outcomes are in fact the core-effects of the transition, thus stressing the uncertainty of the direction of change. Provocatively denoting the changes as transitions to for example 'feudalism' or 'demodernized society,' these authors challenge the received wisdom of the master narrative (Verdery 1996; Platz 2000). Because they are less hindered by teleological understandings of post-socialism, they are able to provide better descriptions of the social and political changes in the post-socialist world.

Yet despite its attempt to produce a more refined theory of the sociopolitical change in the 'transition' period, the second theory still falls short because it pays insufficient attention to the reality of transition discourse. Though it rightly argues that the transition paradigm as a teleological construct fails to explain the difference in expected and actual outcomes of post-socialist change, it pays insufficient attention to the fact that the ideology of transition has nevertheless been woven into the language, ideals and actions of the inhabitants of former Soviet Republics, and thus has effected the way they think about, act on and understand economic and political situations. This has occurred, despite the fact that the transition theory is severely faulted. By downplaying this fact, the second perspective disconnects social reality

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1 Among the earliest critics of transition theory were Caroline Humphrey (1991) who described a process of increased control of local potentates on their administrative regions, and Burawoy and Krotov (1992) who argued that the changes were the precise opposite of market formation and were better understood as heightened monopolies.
from transition ideology, thus failing to explore how the two are ultimately linked at the local level.

The dilemma is similar to the one outlined by Ferguson in his *Expectations of Modernity* (1999), which deals with a very different corner of the earth. Based on research in the Zambian Copperbelt, Ferguson provides a convincing critique of the myth of modernization – of which the transition paradigm can be considered a condensed form – by making a useful distinction in the meaning of the word myth. The first meaning corresponds with popular usage of the word and refers to a “false or factually inaccurate version of things that has come to be widely believed” (ibid. 13). This aspect of myth forces Ferguson to attempt a deconstruction of the modernization myth, to show its fallacies and its ideological basis. The second meaning of myth refers to its social function, as “a cosmological blueprint that lays down fundamental categories and meanings for the organization and interpretation of experience” (ibid. 13-14). Although as a theoretical construct the modernization myth needs to be deconstructed, as a cosmological blueprint it has continuing importance for social life. On the basis of this argument Ferguson points to the need to turn the modernization myth into an ethnographic object. Of Ferguson’s twofold mission – to deconstruct grand narratives and to turn these into ethnographic objects – the last one seems to be especially pertinent for studies of post-socialist change.²

A second and related suggestion that underscores the importance of taking up the dual task of criticizing the modernization myth and exploring its continued influence can be deducted from an argument provided by the Comaroffs. In their article *Millennial capitalism: First thoughts on a second coming* they connect the issue to the changing nature of the state. They argue that despite the fact that nation-states are under attack, they “appear, at least in their exterior forms, to be more similar than ever before” (2000: 326, italics original). This insight directs attention to the issue of how these similar exterior forms and underlying changes are related. The issue is particularly relevant in the former Soviet Republics where the blueprints of neoliberalism were often eagerly embraced by local elites – however usually for very different reasons than was assumed by those advancing it.³ It is to these seeming contradictions that I wish to point attention in order to explore the interconnection between the myth of transition and post-socialist reality.

The present situation in Ajaria, Georgia’s southwestern Autonomous Republic, strikingly shows the discrepancy between transition rhetoric and social-economic reality, as well as the continuing obsession with the ideals of the transition by the inhabitants of Ajaria. To capture this relation between imaginations and social reality I will center my discussion on what I call “the social life of empty buildings.”⁴ In

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² Others, most notably Verdery (1996), Burawoy and Verdery (1999) and Wedel (2001), have written convincing critiques of the transition paradigm.

³ See especially Janine Wedel’s *Collision and Collusion* (2001), which provides a thorough analysis of the ‘chemical reactions’ resulting from the collision of neoliberal ideals and post-socialist reality.

⁴ This phrase and thus the title stem from Appadurai’s seminal work *The Social Life of Things* (1986). Like the approach advocated there I focus on how the empty buildings are ‘consumed’ and
Ajaria, not only are buildings the most conspicuous expressions of how groups envisage the new era, but also, because of their visibility and because of their emotional attachment they are very important in legitimizing and criticizing the present. Moreover, the construction projects reveal links between the state and private sectors as well as the intertwining of politics and economics. In short, they display the processes of change, real and imagined, and reveal how the appearances of similarity and the adoption of transition discourse influences the process of change and understandings of change in post-soviet Ajaria.

**Multiple transitions**

Indications suggesting that Ajaria is becoming part of the global community confront visitors right after they pass the Georgian-Turkish border. Road signs in English welcome the traveler to the Autonomous Republic of Ajaria. Privately owned companies advertise their names in French or English, like the Black Sea Maritime Bank, hotel Montpellier or the business center Riviera. One of the few exceptions is the inscription Didi Banki, left untranslated from Georgian perhaps because ‘Big Bank’ would sound too arrogant. The signs are often grammatically incorrect and sometimes unintelligible even to English-speakers, suggesting that the hint of ‘newness’ the sign provides is more important than its information. Even state employees wear goretex jackets saying Police, Security or Customs, despite angry reactions from nationalists who claim that these jackets not only strike a blow to the Georgian language, but also that the alphabet used is unintelligible to the majority of the people. New economic and political projects are celebrated as conforming to ‘European’ or ‘International’ standards and the newest technological achievements in Ajaria are presented as steps towards the completion of the ‘transition.’ The daily news is presented in Georgian and in Russian, but since TV-Ajaria is transmitted by satellite and according to the political leaders being watched all around the world, the news is also presented in English, German, and Italian.

The new dynamism of this former Soviet periphery is very obvious in terms of economic activities and consumption. Since the opening of the border with Turkey, Ajaria’s capital Batumi has been transformed into an important trading center between Turkey and the Caucasus. The opening of numerous clothing shops and grocery stores with imported goods perhaps reflects the opening of markets, whereas their closures several months later proves the working of fierce market competition. Privatization of housing, the opening of markets, the adoption of European legal

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The differences between the Georgian, Cyrillic, Latin and Arabic scripts makes the use of alphabets a useful vehicle to convey public messages. In Ajaria the Georgian script is used most widely. Russian (Cyrillic) is slowly disappearing but still used in some economic and political domains. The Arabic script is reappearing in rural areas where Islam experienced a partial revival. The Latin script is used in connection to business and trade, and increasingly in use by state structures.
codes and the installation of democratic state-structures, all indicate a transition towards a Western-styled market democracy. But each of these indicators proves problematic when examined closer. The market is only ‘free’ to those with the right connections, while privatization has often meant expropriation of public property. There are no analyses available concerning the extent of these misappropriations. However, every inhabitant of Batumi can give ample anecdotal evidence. The term privatizatsia was in common speech ‘jokingly’ referred to as prikhvatizatsia, which combines the words for privatization and grabbing. And as far as the introduction of democratic principles of government is concerned, at this point it should suffice to mention that the leading party of Ajaria received between ninety and a hundred percent of the votes during the last three elections.\(^6\)

The darker sides of the ‘transition’ are just as striking and just as new as the signs of progress. New indeed is the presence of mass poverty in the street. The numerous people trading loaves of bread, homemade pastries or boxes of cigarettes is a phenomenon that was unknown before, like the day laborers waiting on corners for the next job. On the outskirts of town (the micro-raions), one stumbles through damaged streets which are flanked by privatized apartment buildings that look even shabbier than in socialist times. Occasionally however, one passes a high fence behind which a new villa is hidden. The contrasts point to the rising economic inequality between the majority and the new rich. But these are only temporary side-effects. So the government claims.

The rapid changes following the demise of socialism have challenged familiar spaces and shaken social relations. In Ajaria’s capital Batumi, these changes are intimately related to the break down of centralized economy, and equally important, to the opening of the nearby ‘Iron Curtain’ with Turkey. Next to these changes – or related to them – are the changes in the position of Ajaria within the Georgian Republic. Although its status as ‘Autonomous Republic’ has its origin in the early days of Soviet rule, this status meant fairly little during the larger part of the twentieth century when Ajaria was an integrated part of the Georgian Soviet Republic. During the decade following the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, its position changed rapidly. Of central importance to this change were the power struggles in the national center and civic strife in various parts of Georgia between 1990 and 1993. This period saw violent conflicts in the Georgian autonomous republic of Abkhazia and the autonomous oblast South Ossetia, but also enabled the regional political elite of Ajaria, centered on its leader Aslan Abashidze, to extend its power basis (Aves 1996: 41).\(^7\)

During the second part of the 1990s the Ajarian government managed to gain control over the most important economic assets of Ajaria and to suppress all

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\(^6\) During elections in 1999 informants mentioned deficits of voting ballots (despite a 99 percent turnout), manipulations of election results by local election committees and outright demands to village authorities to guarantee 100 percent turnout for Abashidze.

\(^7\) For more extensive discussions on the consolidation of economic and political control by the Revival Party see Derlugian (1995) and Hin (2000).
political opposition within the autonomous republic. Bearing this in mind, it would be logical to conclude that transition rhetoric as used by the political elite bears no relation to the actual economic and political processes in Ajaria - except to veil the political and economic interests of the elite. Indeed, in terms of actual socioeconomic changes there is little indication of alterations in the direction of neoliberal and democratic ideals.

The situation in Ajaria thus vividly shows the paradox that I outlined in the introduction. On the one hand, we see new flows of images, ideals, goods and people that all suggest changes in political and economic life. On the other hand, we witness the persistence of nepotism and state control. Yet it must be seen that the apparent continuities are embedded in new and different contexts and have ultimately different consequences. The continuities have gone hand in hand with far-reaching changes in the flows of images and goods. These new images and goods are incorporated, modified and re-interpreted in the stream of social life.

If transition to a market democracy isn’t occurring, then what does this adoption of ‘Western’ images and rhetoric by the state mean? On one hand they can clearly be seen as veils that hide political and economic interests. But are these only superfluous images that aim to legitimate the interests of the regime? What do the images mean for the citizens of Ajaria? What do they suggest for the changing sociopolitical contexts in which they are embedded?

The amalgamation of newness with the interests of the new elite is best visible in the new construction projects that are (claimed to be) carried out by the state. The importance of construction is already visible in the name of Abashidze’s political party, The Union of Democratic Revival. Revival has to be taken quite literally, or as one informant put it: “Aghordzineba [Revival] means building up. With that name they like to show off. They say that while in other regions destruction continues, they do the reverse.” In the party brochures ‘revival’ is explicitly linked to long lists of new constructions. The numbers of new churches, schools, culture houses and hospitals are all mentioned, and the exact height and length of new bridges is proudly described. Pictures of the new soccer stadium, tennis-court, the kindergarten and new factories are presented not only in the brochures, but are also for sale as postcards on many street corners. In some cases, the act of constructing seems more important than the actual use of the buildings.

Emptiness

One building project that figures prominently in discussions about progress and development in Batumi is the new kindergarten. Its central location, near the harbor and on one of the main roads, ensures that this ‘sign of progress’ is highly

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8 A visual tour showing many of the mentioned images can be made on “The Official Web-site of Ajaria” at http://www.taboo.ru/adjara/.
visible to both the inhabitants of Batumi and visitors to the city. The kindergarten is actually only one of the projects being realized in this part of town. In the immediate surroundings many houses and other buildings have been torn down, and transformed into construction sites or spacious parks. The ‘ultramodern’ kindergarten rises out from behind ornate fences catching the attention of those who pass it. Together with Misha, the architect, I visit the site. The large playground is quiet and peaceful, perhaps because of the large old tree in the middle, perhaps because of the sterility of the new pavement. The building itself is bright white, white being the color of Batumi as Misha reminds me. The interior is overwhelming. Standing inside the entrance hallway one can see up to the glass ceiling some twenty meters higher. Sunlight shines onto the white walls, the marble staircases and the floors of polished natural stone. In the center of the hallway are several neo baroque sculptures - Roman images of white marble, decorated with silver and gold.

Both sides of the hallway lead to rooms designed for play or sleep, as well as to some other facilities for the children. Upon entering the rooms I first pass the dressing rooms which have green, red and yellow lockers for every child. The playroom has German wood floors and contains regularly placed sets of tables and chairs. Vertical blinds hang in front of double glass windows. The bedrooms are equally well equipped with wooden beds and colorful sheets, all properly made for the children. Misha then shows me the other facilities, first the kidney-shaped swimming pool with sea-blue tiles, complete with a footbath to be used before entering the dressing rooms. The kitchen is equally well equipped. All the utensils and furnishings are shiny and new. They are imported from Europe, I am told. Misha leads the way to the second building.

The second building is a renovated structure that used to be the old kindergarten. It is less conspicuous in form, but what used to be concrete and wood has been covered by marble and natural stone or replaced with plastic and aluminum. The rooms for computer-education and the language lab, where children can practice foreign languages with the aid of earphones and instructors, are located here. Last but not least we enter the director’s rooms. In the center of the main office is a heavy wood desk with a leather coach for the director. Chairs are placed on the sides of the room for visitors. The room leads to a private bathroom. Misha explains that the director’s room initially would have had its own shower, but that it had been decided that this was not really necessary. Still, the small kitchen and the guestroom make it hard to pity the future director.

According to Misha, the kindergarten is meant as a pedagogical experiment, a place where children can fully develop themselves. The transparency of the building, the large windows and the glass ceiling lessens the divide between the rooms and the street, so that children can communicate with the surroundings. “This kindergarten,” Misha tells me when we leave the site, “will make sure that the children will be well prepared for life in the new world.” (field notes, September 2001)
The kindergarten incorporates the newest technology and assets that should prepare children for a life in the modern world. But this claim was discomforting, and my first impression was that the luxuriousness of the rooms, the staff-cabinets and the entrance hall would fit in an office building better than in a kindergarten. The computer-rooms and the language-labs moreover, hardly seemed useful for children aged four to six. But these are just side-remarks, they are unimportant because of the simple fact that the kindergarten is devoid of children. None have been admitted since the construction was completed two years ago and there are no signs yet that this situation will change.⁹

It is important to point out that the kindergarten is not an isolated case but is representative of much of the new constructing going on in Ajaria. In all three Ajarian villages where I spent time I stumbled on new empty buildings. In the border-village Sarpi a new “shopping-center” was erected in 1997 to outdo the shabby-looking stalls formerly used by villagers for trading. However, the larger part of this “shopping-center” remains empty and, due to lack of maintenance, the first signs of decay are already visible. In the mountain village Ghoromi I regularly passed the new k’ult’uris saxli (culture house), which was inaugurated by Aslan Abashidze in 1999 but since then has never been used. In Khulo, a district center in the interior of Ajaria, the new hospital and nursing home proudly showed the emblem of the Revival Party, but medical services continued to be provided in the old building next to it. In Batumi, it was not only the kindergarten but also the renovated university and the prestigious business-center Riviera that remained empty.

The emptiness of these buildings was difficult to understand. Millions of dollars had been spent but the buildings had no apparent function. Sometimes, the empty buildings seemed simply a result of bad top-down planning. The kindergarten, for example, was not only empty but seemed also unfit for children of the proposed age. Are these buildings then to be understood as remainders of the old regime, as a legacy of centralized decision structures? Even if in some cases one could point at concrete reasons for the delay of their usage, the sheer number of empty buildings prevented one from seeing them simply in terms of bad planning and organizational problems.

**Biographies of emptiness**

Construction of the kindergarten started during summer 1998 and was completed one year later. The exact reasons for its construction remain somewhat obscure. Some say that the former kindergarten was getting too old or too small to cover demand. The old kindergarten, which continued to function until 1998, had room for 100 children, only slightly less than the 130 children that are supposed to fill the new one. Because the old building housed the most prestigious kindergarten in

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⁹ The constructions were completed in summer 1999. The presented description is based on visits to the kindergarten in September 2001.
Batumi, the city council urged the architect to spare it. Misha would have preferred to tear down that building as well, but instead it was renovated. The result is nevertheless satisfactory to him. The new corpus is built where there once was a canteen for workers and several small houses, "more like huts than real houses," Misha adds, "so this is a great improvement for the city."

**WHOSE EMPATINESS IS IT?**

My first visit to the kindergarten (July 2000) was part of an organized tour for foreign visitors that intended to show the progress being made in Ajaria and to present its political leadership in the most favorable light. While we walked through the rooms, the tour-leader presented her one-directional explanation. The kindergarten, she said, "is built by our leadership to improve the level of education in Ajaria. As you can see, everything is built according to international standards, using only materials of the highest quality. ... It represents the great love of our leader batoni Aslan Abashidze for children." In the brochures of the Revival Party, the kindergarten is presented as one of the accomplishments of its rule, thus leaving little room to doubt to whom the credits for this achievement should go. Most people whom I asked about it also told me that it was Abashidze who had financed it, sometimes adding, "Who else has such money anyway?"

However, the issue of financial flows and control over these buildings was more complicated than the answers suggested. In another case I tried to find out who had financed the renovation of the – not entirely empty – synagogue. The president of the Jewish association told me that Aslan Abashidze financed the construction. I asked him carefully if it was Aslan’s money or money from the state budget, or if there were perhaps others who had contributed. His harsh reply made the inappropriateness of that question clear. "Listen, when a friend gives you a wonderful present, would you ask him how he got the money to buy it? Or who had helped him to buy it? Of course not, that would be an insult." The reply indicated that not only is it wiser not to ask certain questions in Ajaria, but also pointed at the personalized nature of politics. This last aspect was even clearer in his subsequent comment when he added, "Besides, even if others would have paid for it nothing would have been realized anyway."

In the case of the kindergarten I was more successful in finding people who were willing to talk about financial matters. Misha had been involved in the whole process of construction, knew the approximate amounts put into the kindergarten and was willing to talk about it. The project cost a bit over 2 million US dollars. This estimate did not include the price of the land, as the property had been allocated by the city authorities. To my surprise however, Misha told me that the kindergarten was not financed by the state, but had been paid for by the director of the harbor and

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10 The synagogue stems from the end of the nineteenth century, when Batumi had a Jewish community of approximately 1,000 members. Because of out-migration to Israel and other countries, the Jewish community at present has only some 180 members.
intended for the children of harbor employees. The kindergarten, which everyone talked about as being a state-project, was not financed by the state. In short, it seemed to be a privately owned school.

Despite my own surprise at this discrepancy, those who told me that Abashidze had paid for the school did not act surprised when they learned I had heard evidence to the contrary. It did not seem to matter all that much. A subsequent discussion with a befriended political opponent of Abashidze made their reactions somewhat clearer to me.

Maybe the harbor did indeed pay for it but that tells you very little. What do you think? That the children of the dockmen and simple workers will go there? Of course not. Sure, some of the children of the most important people working at the harbor – the director and his staff – will go there, but for the rest they will simply be people of his clan. … You should understand how this kind of financing works. In the harbor all kinds of rules are violated and the bosses earn lots of money. Aslan knows that and can therefore easily force them to contribute to this or that project.11

This answer is valuable not only because it gives more insight in how ‘state’ projects are operated, but also and especially because they call attention to how unclear the boundaries between the state and the people controlling the political arena are. Moreover, the official Ajarian state budget is only a fraction compared to the money circulating through non-official channels of finance. As a befriended philosopher told me: “On the one hand, we say that there is no money in the budget to finance simple renovations in schools, while, on the other hand, huge amounts are being spent. You know, in a transition period such practices may sometimes be legitimate. [Because] taxes are not being paid the lost money somehow has to be retrieved. So factually it is money that Aslan Abashidze managed to accumulate outside the budget.”

But less than a transitional practice of temporary use, the personal relationships seem to have become the backbone of the ‘state’. Nearly all key-positions in the state structures are filled by use of these relationships. This system of allocation is only simplified by the fact that the key political and economic institutions – the harbor, the customs on the border with Turkey, and the state security forces – are controlled by a small group of families. These families moreover are closely related to each other – the director of the harbor, for example, is the brother-in-law of Aslan Abashidze. In such an environment it is very difficult indeed to determine what belongs to the political and what to the economic domain, something which suggests that the generally problematic differentiation between economics and politics is even less tenable in Ajaria.

So whose emptiness is it? Who controls the empty kindergarten? Is it the state, the harbor, or batoni Aslan Abashidze himself? In a way each of the three

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11 An acquainted ‘oil-checker’ in the Batumi harbour gave an indication of the scale of profit making. According to him, it is general practice that whenever an oil tanker is loaded, the measuring allows for 0.5 percent differentiation. “In Europe this margin is needed. … But here, money has a different value, so we measure very precisely, making sure that we always give 0.5 percent less. That is 25,000 dollars per ship [and after making a rough calculation] some 30 million dollars per year.”
answers is partially true. Although officially it was the harbor that paid for the kindergarten, the building is widely recognized to be a state-project – in which the state is imagined along personal lines. One could say that at the moment the buildings are controlled by Aslan Abashidze, but any change in the political environment may also renew claims by political structures or by the harbor. The discussion partly reveals how the empty buildings need to be understood. Their status or ownership is as unclear as the political-economic context is, or as the direction of the transition. The emptiness may be partially understood as a result of unclear divisions of responsibilities, or more explicitly, as a manifestation of the struggle over political and economic assets. The next section will discuss the issue of why the buildings remain empty in more detail.

WHY EMPTY?

The first answers I received to this question were quite predictable. The already introduced tour-guide told me that they were just about to open the kindergarten, thus successfully precluding any further questioning. Misha, the architect, claimed that there had been difficulties in finding missing equipment, that a few shortcomings in the design needed to be fixed, and besides that, he argued, “This is Georgia, here it isn’t so easy to find the right material to finish things off.” Misha’s answers might seem plausible, but the issue was a bit more complex than he presented it. First, the exact same answers had been given a year earlier, when I first became interested in the kindergarten, but since then it had remained empty. Second, if more than two million dollars had been spent on the construction of the kindergarten – which had been completed within a year – why then would it take more than two years to find an additional 50,000 dollars to complete the last details and a few minor repairs?\(^ \text{12} \) Even if there were reasons for its delayed use, then it was still obvious that the physical construction itself was tremendously more important than its stated future use as a kindergarten.

The ‘non-use’ of new public buildings is rarely publicly criticized, but informally people discuss and condemn the practices of the regime.\(^ \text{13} \) The local intelligentsia and members of the (now muted) political opposition are most explicit in their criticisms and it is worthwhile to explore how they explain the fact that public buildings remain empty. The first is Mindia, a history teacher and a fervent though careful critic of the regime.

Actually they wanted to open it last year already. But the problem is that this kindergarten will be private. Parents will have to pay five hundred dollars [a year] for their child to attend. Can you imagine? As a teacher I only make 300 dollars a year. So the thing is that if they open it, it would make people realize that this was not built for them, but only for his [Aba-
shidze’s] own clan.14 They [the political elite] are afraid for the unrest that this would cause. That is why they keep it closed. Similar criticisms were common among the former intelligentsia, who now had to live from insufficient wages. It is this group who experienced perhaps the sharpest decline in their economic as well as their social status. They were the people who used to be able to send their children to the best schools. In their criticisms this bitterness – and at the same time a fascination – about the new buildings can be detected. Consider for example the answer of Gia, lecturer at Batumi University, to the question of why the kindergarten remained closed. “Very simple, they are waiting for his [Aslan’s] grandson Ricardo to reach the age for entering kindergarten. He is now three, so next year they will bring him and open the kindergarten at the same time. The kindergarten has all the modern facilities, so the rich people will all seek to put their children there. It is only they who can pay the money anyway.”

The emptiness points to wealth, and the distribution of power in post-socialist Ajaria. What the comment suggests is that these unequal distributions of power and wealth are seen as inhibiting people from gaining access to the ‘modern,’ and desired, facilities represented by the kindergarten. Irakli, a former spokesman of one of the (now marginal) opposition parties connected the example more tightly to the issue of morality. “It is empty because it is not built for the people, it is simply there to show off, but that is between the two of us, don’t write about it.”15 Maybe I am not right, but if we take for example the kindergarten, they won’t allow us to send our children there because … they built it only for themselves. … They are provoking us. And because they are afraid that this provocation will turn into rebellion, they keep it empty.” Other critical voices offered less of an explanation for the emptiness, using it as just another opportunity to laugh at or mock the regime. For those who were hit hardest by the recent political and economic changes the empty buildings symbolized the immorality of the political elite.

There is one point that deserves special attention. All these criticisms were directed at those who would benefit from the new projects, rather than at the choices that were made to construct them in the first place. None suggested that the money should instead have been divided among the existing kindergartens, to raise wages of employees or any other alternative. In the end, even the most severe critics agreed with the images to which these new projects pointed. The same Irakli who criticized the government for nepotism, at other times would say: “Well, at least they are constructing. How and why they build is perhaps less important than the fact that something is being done.” Or as Gia told me about the empty hospital and nursing

14 Mindia’s use of the Russian word klán (clan) did not indicate the existence of a unilineal descent group. Rather he used it to point to the kinship and marriage ties between members of the political and economic elite in Ajaria. From an analytical perspective the term ‘clique’ might have been more apt.
15 Later in our conversation I asked Irakli why the discussion should be kept secret. It struck me as strange because the tape-recorder was recording everything with his permission. “It is not for me,” he answered, “but for you! You should be thinking about your own perspectives as a future specialist on Georgia. Why care about one small article when he can make your future work impossible.”
home in Khulo, “It is really smart that they constructed a nursing home there, because the birth-rate is very high in the mountains, I think that at least is a real improvement.” So although the manifestation of emptiness raises criticism the emptiness seems not to bereave the advanced images of their effectiveness. The lack of reliable information channels may be part of the reason why, but more important is that the language and images, the future imaginings to which the buildings point, are the same as those that are used by the critics of the regime.

But the majority of my informants were not critical at all. They would point out that at least Abashidze tried, that he had given new hope to the population, and that he could not be blamed for the fact that Ajaria was still in a crisis. Besides people would tell me, “The wages may be low, but at least we receive them at the end of the month, whereas in Tbilisi [Georgia’s capital] people wait for years and don’t receive anything.” Several informants told me that they felt proud when they walked along the boulevard or through the center. As one of them put it: “Here new roads are being built, things are moving forward, and that can not be said for the rest of Georgia.” It almost seemed as if he was thinking that it was just a matter of time until he would benefit from the new economic dynamic as well. His answer resembled a claim that can be heard in almost any discussion on the subject – that “Ajaria is now in a perekhodnyj period,” a transition period or literally “a period that will pass.” Discussions would follow on the riches of their region, the availability of mineral water, the production of citrus fruits and tea – which all suggested that better times could not be far.  

The new buildings were early signs of that turn for the better, of a future of fulfilled dreams. That the buildings were empty was perhaps even a precondition of the maintenance of that dream, because as long as they were empty they belonged to the future and therefore remained potentially accessible to everyone. Empty buildings do not yet uncover the unevenness of ‘progress’, they do not yet show that the kindergarten is only for a select group of people, that one has to pay higher fees for medical service than before or that it is really much more profitable to trade in your own run-down kiosk than to rent brand new shops owned by the state or by someone allegedly representing it.

The ineffectiveness of criticisms was reinforced by another peculiarity. Discussing various stories and multiple meanings that fill ‘emptiness’ by implication means that the buildings are not completely empty – instead they are almost empty. This consideration is true also in a more concrete sense. Although the kindergarten was devoid of children for whom it purportedly was intended, it was filled with furnishing. The tables and chairs were ready to be taken in use, whereas the beds were neatly arranged and covered with colorful sheets that were aired once a while by

16 To understand the emphasis on agricultural crops – usually not what first comes to mind when talking about economic riches – it deserves mentioning that crops like tea and citrus fruits had brought wealth during Soviet times, when inhabitants could capitalise on the deficits of these luxurious goods.

17 I am indebted to Bonno Thoden van Velzen for suggesting to me this line of thought.
future employees. This seemed to suggest that they were expecting the arrival of children any day. Aside from the guards who were always present, the other employees were in the kindergarten only at specific times, to take care of some chores or to guard their own future position in the kindergarten. And of course they were present when it really mattered, when visitors like me would come to admire the building. The kindergarten thus was almost empty, and this enforced the image of progress, it gave weight to the idea that every day its gates could be opened, and it effectively silenced any criticism on the new construction projects. Keeping the kindergarten almost empty thus not only managed to keep the future bright and accessible for everyone, but also, it tied this future closely to the present. In other words, the imagined transition was going to be completed tomorrow.

**Imagining the future through the past**

The new buildings also have an imaginary aspect. They are important in the creation and continuance of dreams about a future of abundance and leisure. This future often takes the form of an imagined return to Europe, whereby Europe is a symbol of both technological progress and old traditions. The newspapers talked about European standards that were being met, and the most important square and street of Batumi were renamed ERA–street and ERA–square, referring to the “European Regional Assembly,” of which Ajaria had become a member as “the first region in the Caucasus, thus setting an example for the rest of the country.”18 The issues also came up in even the most fleeting conversations. People would for example ask me when I thought the transition would be completed, whether it would take ten or twenty years. Or they would make apologies for whatever minor inconvenience I might have endured. “Here we don’t have civilization yet like in your country,” people would tell me. The word tsivilizatsia (civilization) was here used as synonym for technological progress. This usage of the word was common among villagers, but radically different from the way the local intelligentsia used the term for whom ‘civilization’ referred to a glorious and long past of the Georgian nation. However, both uses of the word ‘civilization’ seemed to refer to an imagined ‘return to Europe.’

Was it just me who had imagined these dreams? Was it because of me that people talked so much about Europe? During conversations with architects about their new constructions I expressed my doubts and asked them why so many new buildings seemed to be influenced by (or copies of) European architectural traditions. For them it was not at all an issue. In one interview with two architects I was told the following.

> This has nothing to do with deliberately copying European styles you know. Simply, when you grow up here you come to appreciate the beauty of certain styles. We use new materials and techniques but at the same time we

18 From a brochure of the “Center of Democracy and Regionalism” in Batumi, printed in 1999.
want to continue the tradition of the city, and Batumi is a European city. ... If you look at what is being built at the moment you will see much neo-baroque, neo-classical and also ultramodern forms of buildings. Those are tastes with which we have grown up.

The implicit linking of nineteenth century Batumi with the present suggests both the eclipsing of time – the neutralization of the Soviet period by reaching back to this European Batumi – as well as a selective reading of the past. In this reading historical Batumi had come to be only that part of town that was constructed by European oil-companies in the 1880s to early 1900s, while architectural influences of the significant Persian minority and the indigenous Islamic population had been omitted. The new constructions were not simply about economic development, but also about retaining valued Georgian traditions. Europe was an important model for both aspirations – both to imagine a future of plenty, and to neutralize or negate Ajaria’s Muslim past. These imaginations were represented in the exterior of the buildings. The architecture showed a reconstruction of a new Europe in Batumi that made it possible to be part of a ‘modern’ and globalizing world without having to deal with the inherent plethora of cultural influences that threatened to undermine the moral community. As such they illustrated a progressive use of ‘invented tradition’ “as a possibility to reconcile ways in which the past is used as part of political agenda’s with the way in which people mobilize the past in developing their sense of place and belonging” (Sezneva 2001: 1).

The combination of the elements of imagined abundance and selective readings of the past is well visible in yet another new complex, the most prestigious up to now. Rivièra, as it is called is located not far from the kindergarten in the prestigious part of town, at the point where the beach takes a sharp turn and connects to the harbor. The project is financed by the Turkish company Aksoy, but has been designed by a number of architects from Batumi.

Construction started in 1998 but due to rising costs and sinking soil (caused by the weight of the complex) the construction activities have temporarily been halted. Nevertheless, the huge size of the complex triggers the imagination even in its unfinished stage. No one seems to be very sure what Rivièra’s function will be. Some people say that it will be a stock exchange; others believe that it will be a commercial center for show business. According to Zviadi, one of the architects, its primary function will be a large shopping mall for luxury stores, whereas the inner part will

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19 During this period Batumi served as the main conduit for oil exports from the oilfields of Baku, and as such attracted much investment from European companies.

20 This selective reading has been made possible by equally selective destruction of early Soviet rule, which spared the buildings of the European bourgeoisie but tore down those buildings that betrayed Turkish and Persian influences.

21 Plans for this project started in 1996 when a contest was held to design a complex that could be representative of the new era. The never realized prize-winning plans contained futuristic designs combined with exuberant monuments in praise of Abashidze. The final design was developed in 1998 by a group of Batumian architects.
contain apartment buildings for the president (as he used to call Abashidze), his daughter and those who can afford to buy apartments.

Although it is highly uncertain when and if this ‘dreamland’ will be realized, this does not undermine the reality of the images connected to it. Indeed, just like the ‘state’ projects that have been realized, Riviéra has already been completed on postcards, illustrations in books about Batumi and of course in the party brochures of the Revival Party. The complex combines elements of leisure and affluence with architectural forms derived from neoclassicism. The ground level consists of a kilometer long archway shaped as a pentagon, which will provide space for shops, restaurants and cafés. At the side where the complex almost touches the sea the construction of a marina has been planned. Inside the pentagon, above ground level luxurious apartment buildings are envisioned. The apartments consist of eight or more rooms, numbers that must seem fantastic to most ordinary Batumians. But most interesting perhaps is the portrayal of abundance in the sketches. Every apartment building has its own fitness-center and swimming pool, whereas the open space between the buildings is occupied by a subtropical heaven, an area where you can sunbathe, play tennis and badminton, or drink your cocktails. The people in the drawings of these future dreamlands are especially interesting. The women are sun tanned and clad in sexy bikinis; some of them are portrayed with cocktails in their hands or relaxing along the swimming pool. The men wear dark sunglasses and talk on their cell phones, while the cars that they or their chauffeurs drive are jeeps or Mercedeses of the latest model.

It is difficult not to see these images as the embodiment of the myth of transition, of the dreams about a ‘modern’ life. After having joined me on several tours a befriended British anthropologist contrasted his impressions of Batumi with his experience of living in Tbilisi. He told me that every time he visited Batumi he was astonished at the dynamism that he encountered. “Here you get the feeling of what Georgian modernity will look like, but if that is what it is then I just don’t like it.” Perhaps the ugliness stems not so much from the forms and styles being used, as from the feeling that this new ‘modernity’ serves goals of a tiny elite. Right now, because of the fact that it is not completed, Riviéra and the dreams it represents are still accessible to everyone, an imagined future life of leisure, luxury and abundance. The tragedy is that this dream will vanish as soon as the images become reality, except for the few who will really drink their cocktails at the swimming pool between their neoclassical castles.

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22 Most Batumi residents live in one- or two-room apartments. Three-room apartments are already considered a luxury.
Almost empty buildings and the ‘transition’

The new architecture in Ajaria embodies the many facades of ‘modernity’ and ‘Western-ness’ that have spread throughout the post-Soviet Republics. But what do these images mean? In post-Soviet Ajaria the transition discourse with its strong resemblances of the myth of modernity seems as yet to be relatively unchallenged. This is true for both the political elite that attempts using the discourse for its own purposes and the critics who witness only corruption, nepotism and inequality. What the critics challenge is the discrepancy between the political reality and the discourse, not the dream of modernity.

The outward transition to ‘modernity’ is strongly linked to the opacity of social reality. What we see in Ajaria is a combination of ‘hollow’ rhetoric and opaqueness of political and economic change, which makes it possible to present dictatorships as democracy and civil society, and personal monopolies as the forces of the market. What is called transition is actually a process in which the space between images and realities is reconfigured. This uncomfortable space, and the many links that connect the two, need to be explored to grasp the processes of change taking place in post-Soviet countries.

Timothy Mitchell points exactly to such contradictions in his recent discussion on neoliberalism as a triumph of the political imagination. “[Neoliberalism’s] achievement is double: while narrowing the window of political debate, it promises from this window a prospect without limits. On the one hand it frames public discussion in the ecliptic language of neoclassical economics. […] On the other, neglecting the actual concern of any concrete local or collective community, neoliberalism encourages the most exuberant dreams of private accumulation – and a chaotic reallocation of collective resources” (1999: 28). Whereas Mitchell’s comments typically deal with the dark sides of neoliberal policies, in Ajaria it seems that even the appearance, the seeming adjustment to neoliberal standards may trigger the same results. Chaotic reallocation of collective resources and exuberant private accumulation take place without unravelling the mask of appearance, without destroying the dreams of the transition.

In this chapter I looked at the hollowness of new state projects and presented them as the embodiment of this uncomfortable space between reality and discourse. But although in a way remaining empty, this emptiness served important goals and was filled by multiple meanings. Visual forms are of course, as Handelman has argued, powerful techniques to legitimate authoritarian forms of government (1990) and they go well together with constructing images of modernity. The facades are important for the regime to present itself as a ‘modern region’ moving in the direction of Europe, reviving from its ashes and ready to join the world of ‘international standards.’ But although these representations were often accepted, the ‘emptiness’ also served as a critique of the state, and through them people could give body to their conspiracy theories and ideas about the corrupt state.
However, we have also seen that many people have adjusted to these realities and continue to see the buildings as signs of a promising future. Villagers who came to town would see the grandeur of new buildings; town-dwellers knew about the hospitals and culture houses built in the mountains. At least something was being done, at least there was progress. In the future things would be better — many people seemed to be thinking. Moreover, many, although raising their eyebrows about the uses of the new buildings, approved the direction of change, which — very few would contest — was in the direction of an imagined Europe. Herzfeld discusses a similar issue in his book *Anthropology* (2001), where he points at both the need and the danger of studying visual forms: “It remains useful — indeed, vital — to remind ourselves that spectacular performances may indeed provide authoritarian regimes with the means to enact an especially pernicious form of visualism — as long as we also remember to look behind the scenes and to catch the knowing winks and cynical frowns of spectators” (2001: 16).

As I have illustrated in this chapter, critics of the regime employed the emptiness as a useful tool for pointing at the social and economic inequalities in present-day Ajaria and at the corruptness of the regime. It is highly questionable though how effective these winks and frowns are in challenging political practices in Ajaria when they are framed within the same ideological language as the facades and hollowness to which they refer. Clearly, the discussions on almost empty buildings will not explain where Ajaria is heading. As we have seen, the emptiness is open to multiple — but not unlimited — interpretations. Although the buildings may continue to represent an imagined future of abundance, the emptiness can also become the symbol of the theft of that same dream. It is unclear yet, which interpretation eventually will become accepted. The emptiness can be filled and refilled in various ways. Until then they will remain satiated with contradictory messages and imaginations.