

GIO MEGRELISHVILI
POLITICAL ACTIVIST FROM GEORGIA

1.

COULD YOU CONTEXTUALISE THE CURRENT GEORGIAN ANTHEM FOR ME?

The current anthem came about as part of a bigger process, which was the rebranding of the country, which came about after the Rose Revolution of 2003.

And this process was led by the president who was elected after the revolution-and also led the revolution-, Mikheil Saakashvili. He really wanted to leave this post-Soviet era Georgia behind. You see, when the union collapsed, Georgia descended into a civil war, and there was no deliberate effort of unifying the nation. So national symbols were associated with a lot of suffering and did not remind people of positive things.

So he commissioned the new flag, the new anthem... all the national identity.

2.

DO YOU THINK THAT CHANGING THE SYMBOLS WAS NECESSARY FOR THINGS TO CHANGE?

It was an absolutely political strategic move. And it was really well thought out. He was working not only to rebrand the country for internal purposes, but also to create an image of a country that would be palatable and more likeable towards, well, the new direction that the country was taking, which was towards the West.

He was educated in the U.S., and he hired PR agents, design agencies, and so on. There was a foreign branding agency who created a package that included quite a thorough research that went into what kind of symbols we should adopt, what resonates with people, and what's projecting the unity and the progress that Georgia is aspiring to.

So... the music was taken from the Georgian operas Abesalom da Eteri and Daisi, by the famous late 19th-early 20th century composer Zacharia Paliashvili.

And the text...The text feels a bit archaic. It's written using language that even a person speaking modern Georgian is not going to understand immediately, even though it was written on purpose for the new anthem. Even the first two lines, that everybody knows and sings along, I cannot tell you what they mean. It's poetry, it's allegorical, but it doesn't really mean anything. It kind of alludes to you and your nation being one and kind of alike, but it doesn't really make much sense.

HOW WERE THESE NATIONAL SYMBOLS POPULARISED?

The anthem was almost like a pop phenomena at the time, so radios would play it, broadcasted on TV, there were different renditions, people would remix it... I've heard people blasting the anthem in their car sound systems. It was really surreal. It was everywhere.

But it was coming from this sentiment of liberation, that we could all have some kind of consensus, and it really represented some kind of wind of change. And a lot of people took it very, very close to heart. My generation especially, we were really encouraged to learn the anthem and perform it with a lot of pride at every occasion, really.

I went to a patriotic summer camp when I was 16. So that really must have been maybe two, three years after the revolution. It was a summer camp created by the new government for all the youth from across the country. And there we were starting the day singing the anthem, every single day for almost two weeks. And we were very enthusiastic about doing it.

And I learned wild things there besides how to properly respect and use these new national symbols. I also learned how to dismantle and build an AK war rifle. We even had a competition to see who could do it faster.

Also, at the time I was already studying at the Turkish school. Turks actually have this tradition of starting their week with the anthem, Turkish anthem, and raising the flag. We also did that for the Georgian flag and the Georgian anthem.

Keep in mind this was during my last two years of my school, so I wasn't exactly a child anymore. But if you'd now ask me about the anthem before the current one, I don't have a recollection of that anthem anymore. It has been very easily substituted with the new one. So that's how powerful the effort of really shoving these new symbols into our faces was.

For a very long time I was getting goosebumps when I sang it or heard it, because it represented hope, and it represented very much needed change.

AND HOW IS IT USED NOWADAYS?

Since the anthem kind of was an indirect result of a large protest movement that turned into a revolution, this song was associated from the get-go with some kind of rebellious mood and citizens reclaiming power. So you cannot really distinguish between the new state and its origin, which was a mass protest.

Nowadays Georgia has a lot of what we call protests: large-scale, nationwide demands for systemic change somehow, with many thousands of people on the streets. They are usually not about a localised political issue. And they unite a lot of people from all walks of life, and these people don't really have any type of symbols that unites them or identifies them. So oftentimes protesters resort to the national symbols.

And since this song kind of represented some kind of rebellion against corruption and against stagnation and it's associated with the previous government, which was openly pro-West, and pro-NATO, and pro reforms and progress and heavy capitalism and so on. It kind of hits this note that protests oftentimes go for.

These protests always happen in opposition to the sitting government. But for the Georgian government-any government of the past 12 years or so - , it has been a custom to discredit any kind of protest by using anti-Western rhetoric. By saying that because the protests are oftentimes led by pro-Western political parties, or non-governmental organisations-who are heavily subsidised by Western institutions-, that the protests are then automatically orchestrated by the West, as a way of planting some kind of seed of division and doubt.

So since this is the argument against the protests, the protesters often proudly display the anthem and the flag, to prove that they are not being manipulated by the West against the interests of the Georgian nation, that they are coming from a very patriotic place, and therefore their demands are legitimate.

Because of this, the anthem has its very distinct place in this Georgian protest culture: every hour or so, there's a blast of the Georgian anthem through loudspeakers and everybody in the protest sings along. It's quite impressive and significant!