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Building and begging in Tbilisi. Contradictions in a Developing City¹

Abstract

This article aims to explore the relationship between apparent and real social development through the observation of vulnerable population segments. It argues that the landscape represents only a mystification of the true lifestyle in big cities. It examines Southern Caucasia, which has been home to conflictual scenarios and constant political, economic and social changes. Here post-Soviet urban loci present themselves as developing hubs. However, they house many beggars roaming their streets. This is a dichotomous, double reality that is magnified by magnificent new buildings and the exponential growth of urban centers. This reality is further exacerbated by an increasingly hungry population that is incapable (or incapacitated) of being part of the new socio-economic development project. Based on fieldwork, in-depth interviews and participant observation carried out in the second half of 2021, this research will examine the contradictions of the growing Georgian capital Tbilisi. These contradictions relate to an economic and demographic increase that does not represent the real welfare of the population. In Tbilisi, NGO's have recently made informal practices a main means to engage with local authorities to attempt to provide missing services, and support the weakest, left behind population. The main purpose concerns the offer of a cultural and educational proposal that is opposed to street life. Here we explore several informal and undeclared economic and social practices: activities carried out by people who help other people informally and using public spaces as private in everyday life. All these practices become fundamental in an economy that wants to grow more and more focusing on the strongest but forgetting who lives on the margins. Here, informality becomes an indispensable tool for survival and growth.

Keywords: *business, cooperation, education, informality, landscape, market, post-Soviet society.*

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1. Prologue: Informality as (inevitable) way

The myth of progress, considered the most universally shared and lasting extreme manifestation of radical optimism and promise of happiness, has moved to the other end of the axis of expectations, characterized by dystopia and fatalism. The word: "progress" now indicates the threat of an inexorable and inescapable change that instead of promising peace and relief does not herald nothing but crises and continuous anxieties, without a moment of relief. Progress has become a sort of never-ending "musical chairs", in which a moment of distraction results in irreversible defeat and irrevocable exclusion. Instead of high expectations of sweet dreams, "progress" evokes an insomnia full of nightmares of "being left behind", of missing the train or falling out of a window of a high speed vehicle (Bauman 2007, 10-11). Today more than ever, this sort of *musical chairs* is under everyone's eyes: climate change, recurring economic crises, pandemic and war are all aspects of a global globalized capitalist system, increasingly excluding and reaching a steadily evident collapse. Therefore, it is necessary to find new creative ways to get out of the game, assisting resilience and solidarity. Informality could be the way. In the past, only in specific areas could be defined as simplistically the South of the world; today, it can be defined throughout the entire earth globe. As Latouche affirmed that informal and convivial economy networks are created spontaneously to respond to concrete needs, a new model of economy "alternative" to the current one and a manifestation of rejection of economic development capitalist and the myth of unlimited growth. The protagonists of this process of building another world, are the so-called shipwrecks of progress, doomed, in the dominant logic, to disappear, they have no choice to survive than to organize themselves according to another logic. They have to invent another system, another life. In other words, we are not in an economy: we are in another society (2000).

Southern Caucasia has been and is (now, more than ever) home to conflictual scenarios and constant political, economic and social changes. In post-Soviet areas, people have a good familiarity with productive creativity and the art of managing because of the sudden economic change that, at the end of the XX century, made it essential to overturn the idea of trade, lifestyle and survival. Sýkora and Bouzarovski affirmed that cities in former communist countries can no longer be seen as socialist cities, though they are not fully developed capitalist cities either (2012, 44). So, if we were to ask a man from Georgia, Azerbaijan or Armenia about his work, most likely his answer will be that he deals in business or sells various items. The precise meaning of such self-description is not very clear. "Business" therefore, apparently, describes a whole series of activities. Businessman can, for example, become oligarchs, forming new economic elites throughout the Southern Caucasia. The most successful of them have managed to gain control of industries, but on the other hand, may also have ended up as the complete opposite. Businessmen are also merchants

who travel back and forth between state borders or traders who fight for their daily survival, organizing their business through personal networks and operating in the informal sphere (Fehlings 2018, 23), or even taxi drivers or *stoyanshiki* (a custodian watching parked cars in public spaces)².

There are almost more definitions of the informal sector than the writings dedicated to it (Xaba et al. 2002, 10), for this reason it is not easy to give a definition of informality, or better, it is not possible to give a single and brief all-encompassing definition. Nafziger speaks of informality as part of the urban economy composed of individuals, families or small enterprises, which start with low investments or in absence of any legal registrations (2006, 118). This includes everything that is not formally and legally recognized as non-licensed commerce, such as begging, criminal activities, forms of activism and solidarity leaving ample room for an infinite plurality of interpretations, especially when applied to specific and different cultural environments. Today talking about formal and informal ways of production, as something distinct and mutually impervious is anachronistic or at least oversimplified. It would be better to outline a continuum that leads workers and enterprises to move relatively easily from formal to informal such as the many informal enterprises that provide inputs, goods and services to formal enterprises, directly or through transactions and/or subcontracts. As well as formal enterprises employing workers under informal conditions. These enterprises hire freelance workers so to not formally pay taxes directly for the employees. Or for the freelancer who works directly for himself or for a third party. Along with the many formal products that are sold, in the most disadvantaged areas, only thanks to informal actions and to the activities and assets that are legal in one country and illegal in another, and so on (Bellanca et al. 2018). It is no longer possible to refer only to the "informal sector". While this notion implied the existence of a separate sector, the concept of the informal economy includes all types of informal employment relations, whether formal or informal enterprises, in that permeable and interpenetrated realities (Nhantumbo 2006).

The theme of economic and cultural production will be addressed here from two different but contiguous angles: the clash between wealth and poverty as a representation instrument of an urban area and a society in continuous change where formal and informal activities tend to mix in a continuity. Georgia is the perfect place to analyze in this perspective (although similar scenarios are present throughout the post-Soviet area and beyond) because of its economic past-cultural which focused on informal practices that thrived within closely related networks, supported by extended patriarchal families. As Aliyev wrote, such kinship networks

² About it see Rekhviashvili in The Global Encyclopedia of Informality (2018).

were similar to clan- based and tribal societies in other parts of the world, but once had been mined and transformed by the decades of collectivization, urbanization and social reorganization (2015) associated with Sovietization; later by somewhat disoriented administration who had intent in overwriting the cultural reality by constantly fighting crime at the expense of common social practices such as the *birzha* (Curro 2015) and unlicensed street trade (Rekhviashvili 2015). Practices and informal networks of connections and acquaintances became instrumental in the transformation of social environments in the Georgian urban metropolises. Thus the widespread use of contacts and networks, the so-called *natsnoboba* (Aliyev 2018) became (and is) typical.

The following pages talk about how appearance can be deceiving, of polarization and how the gap between rich and poor people as been widening as well as the structural and apparent prosperity of the urban context.

The paper emerges from the in-depth observations of the urban environment in the Georgian capital for a relatively short period of only three months. During the fieldwork I decided to observe the places where informality usually lives its peak, the markets. What caught my attention most of all was the dualism between what the urban environment represents (or wants to represent) and the social reality that unfolds between its streets and alleys. The next step was to frame this suggestion within the dense bibliography of urban and economic studies of the post-Soviet countries to understand and better represent the phenomenon of urban growth imposed by above all its related effects on public spaces and ways of living the social environment. In the second part I will review, in broad outline, the reconstruction of the current city landscape and then I will dwell on how citizens occupy public and economic spaces. The last part will be based on a dynamic of re-appropriation of the community areas in favour of democratization, education for citizens, fighting against crime and at the same time solidarity and cultural sharing.

The following topic do not claim the right to conceive new theories or give a definition of right or wrong; rather, they must be framed in a descriptive logic to be able to generate greater awareness of the issues dealt with. Themes such as the crisis of capitalism, or rather the continuous increase of the social gap between rich and poor, and alternative economic systems are increasingly significant in every part of the world. The purpose of this article is therefore to explore, tell and open new debates and questions on the possibilities of re-appropriation of social and political spaces in the name of sharing and solidarity.

2. Building in Tbilisi.

Just arriving in Tbilisi, the attention is immediately captured by the extravagance of imposing palaces with well-kept and modern features. At the same time, we cannot stop to observe how these are interspersed with much more modest housing, gloomy buildings and strange electrical connections that sprout from the walls of the buildings in a way that it is far from safe, giving us the image of a topographically heterogeneous city. Following Pardo and Prato, urban settings are widely identified as hubs of cultural and ethnic interactions and the city was conceived as a mosaic, in which each piece presented different problems (2013, 90; 2018, 9). In Tbilisi this subdivision is hardly palpable, preferably the mosaic pieces appear mixed or superimposed.

Tbilisi is located 120 km south of the Great Caucasus Mountains, on the Kura River. The city has a complex topography, surrounded by hills on three sides. These physical conditions were favorable in the past for land control, but today they represent a physical obstacle for urban growth. However, the mild climate, topography and hydrography have also ensured the city a unique cityscape, attractive panoramas and unique architecture (Salukvadze & Golubchikov 2016, 40). Important intersection of the new biaxial (north-south and east-west) silk road (Coulibaly 2012, 4), Tbilisi is like a Janus: one face towards Asia, and the other Europe (Vardosanidze 2000, 105). This ambivalence, this dualism³ emerges strongly in much of the city that acquires the characteristics of a double colonial city.

On the one hand we can admire the irregularities and the typically eastern topographical and architectural mix, the old buildings of Soviet origin (today administrative offices or places dedicated to science and culture) and traditional houses with interwoven wooden balconies and interior patios, traditionally used as places of socialization. On the other hand, we can observe newly built areas in a European style with modern architectural elements. Buildings such as the Governor's Palace and the Youth Palace, or squares connected by avenues (e.g. on modern Rustaveli Avenue), and parks (e.g. Alexander Park). A usual dualism in post-Soviet urban realities, referring for example to Budapest: a city divided by the Danube in two, the "old" separated from the new, the eastern detached from the

³ The term dualism that echoes throughout the paper is used for the purpose of simplifying the understanding in the light of interpretive macro categories. It is known that socio-cultural phenomena in post-Soviet areas are much more complex and must consider a plurality of factors that generate multiple nuances. Thus, meaning that not everything is black or white, positive or negative. Polarization can be blurred but it is still present. As for imposed urban renewal it might be useful to read Manning (2009) in a work on the Iveria Hotel, which became a refugee camp and then be transformed into the current Radisson Hotel.

western. In Tbilisi the border is not so clear-cut, due to past urban planning dynamics. As Manning states, even under Russian ruling, Eastern and European architecture developed simultaneously giving back an image of continuous opposition of Old, Oriental and New European elements (2009).

This structural heterogeneity is the result of sudden top-down imposed economic and political changes. These led to the transformation of a bourgeois city with evident medieval features to a typical Soviet metropolis, with a high degree of uniformity within types of spaces; further changed thanks to the "invisible hand" of the market (Salukvadze 2009, 183). As Sykora and Bouzarovski argue: the processes of economic/political transformation have formally ended (2012, 51) while the settlement of urban morphology, between Western and Eastern is still in progress.

During the last century, Tbilisi's territorial development has been influenced by urban planning as much as by market forces. This has meant that the growth of the city produced unique characteristics and, at the same time, presented similarities with other cities. However, the urban environment has not always developed towards the desired quality levels. Soviet planning has transformed Tbilisi. But post-soviet period, policies of urban planning have made even deeper transformations.

The first real steps forward, in the perspective of westernization, were made by the controversial Saakashvili administration (2004 - 2013). At that time, the government began acting as the main 'driver' of urban transformation. The government had started, and co-financed post-modernist projects signed by famous foreign architects, with the precise intention of restructuring, in the name of modernity, the Georgian capital landscape, and Saakashvili was consecrated on national and international publications as architect-in-chief (Collin 2010). The construction of new buildings, functional and ornamental, along with the reconstruction of historical areas have greatly changed the prospects of the city (Salukvadze & Golubchikov 2016, 53). Among the highest levels of government was the shared idea that the extravagant post-modernist structures designed by world-renowned architects were a quick solution to obtain a modernized and globalized image for the capital, implicitly placing it among one of the major European cities.

Dozens of such geopolitical projects have been inserted into the fabric of the old city or in its vicinity. While projects such as the Peace Bridge, Public Service Hall and Rike Park Theater that can boast the signature of authors such as De Lucchi or Fuksas, are certainly a masterpiece, but many find them distorting the scale and essence of Tbilisi's history. Political action has made a displacement between the actual socio-political identification in transition and the attempt to create the desire for a new one (Theodorou 2006: 63). Once again, some projects, looking for high profit, but failed in compliance with conservation regimes, responsible for having

damaged the historical and cultural identity of many areas. All this, undoubtedly and tragically encouraged by the widespread neglect of building rules and regulations.

This has had a negative impact on public spaces, traffic, parking and the quality of urban space in general. In many neighborhoods, old structures have been demolished to give space to new skyscrapers, changing the social composition and cultural diversity of historic areas. A practice that worries and not just, the heritage professionals⁴. The buildings, in fact, are normally not repaired but demolished, the reconstruction gives life to traditional houses replicas (Salukvadze & Golubchikov 2016, 47), or trying to implant elegant and beautiful houses, more intelligible to new foreign owners destroying the original authenticity in the neighborhoods.

An excess of zeal operated by a political class committed to giving a "modern" image to the city, but at the expense of aesthetic and cultural elements of local identity and in total absence of a precise urban strategy. Considering, for example, the urban area around Vake park: apparently a completely new and modern area characterized by dozens of glass and steel buildings with bizarre shapes (high spirals or curious slopes); interspersed with many shipyard and small and old private residences.

Since the year 2012, this process has slowly met new challengers. In that period the Saakashvili party (United National Movement) had lost before the parliamentary elections, until completely losing support. This letting the new political coalition Georgian Dream take over. Under the new government ruling, the gentrification process seemed to have slowed down, but the results and impact on the capital population continued on the same wavelength as the previous administration (Gogishvili & Coppola 2018: 9). This also, confirming that the reorganization of urban structures, such as Brenner states, is perceived as a means of transforming political and economic structures (2004). Furthermore, beyond and within the large state-led urban development projects, the role of private investors also further emerged as an important driver of the urban transformation. This is visible by projects as the Hualing Special Economic Zone and Panorama Tbilisi in the capital (Gogishvili, 2017).

This dualistic urban reality can give a confused (if not another asymmetric) image even of the main streets like Ilia Chavchavadze Avenue, of the area just

⁴ Especially for locals this behavior (destroying and rebuilding) is not frowned upon. These constructions are perceived as "non characteristic" to the national culture and what is added is often considered superfluous. A separation problem between what economic policy wants to achieve and what the environment, at a cultural level, really represents, as Castells predicted in 1972. About it see also Sparsbrod, 2018.

mentioned. In addition, non-residential land use, not only in the central business-dominated districts of Tbilisi, but also in some well-located residential neighborhoods like Vake, Vera, Saburtalo, and Avlabari, have expanded very fast during the last years. Banks, insurances, offices, upscale shops, restaurants and service establishments are multiplying and transforming these districts into downtown-like areas. Today, Tbilisi is expanding through the construction of free lots, especially in the central districts, increasing the intensity of land use (Salukvadze 2009, 177).

As Salukvadze, sarcastically, states: the spatial pattern of Tbilisi resembles a children's playground where toys are thrown and then left (Ivi, 183). These words reflect the state of the art in Tbilisi city planning. The consolidating nexus among political stabilization, state-led urban regeneration projects, tourism, and real estate investments is clearly leading towards a wider commodification and formalization of the developed environment (Gogishvili & Coppola 2018: 11). Specialists permanently express their fear for irreversible deterioration of the urban environment.

This dualism, this hybridity is clearly typical of places located at the junction of the European and Asian continents; cities that become a melting pot of different cultures and different geopolitical kingdoms. The geo-political Tbilisi positioning, on the margins between two "worlds" and on the main commercial routes is reason for its fame. All this has made the city geopolitically and economically significant, if only ensuring a continuous struggle for survival (Salukvadze & Golubchikov 2016, 39).

The struggle for survival will be precisely the theme of the next paragraph: who lives in these futuristic homes? How displaced people have found their positioning and finally, how can architectural luxury coexist with people who often live of informality?

3. Begging in Tbilisi.

Walking through Tbilisi streets, it is not difficult to come across beggars or street vendors selling flowers, souvenirs or loose cigarettes: you can see them in every corner of the city, especially near shopping centers or areas equipped with benches and/or walls where lay the goods. They are visibly untreated men and women who clink a few pennies in their cup to draw the attention of potential new donors but also small sellers who, with infinite dignity, try to earn their daily food by selling used or cheap items. I will never forget the image of a stand arranged with a sheet on the ground, full of cutlery on one side and electrical and telephone cables on the other. My first thought was: who could ever buy that, to me, it looked like garbage. Or old cardboard box stands with an exposure of toy cars and small wooden

sailboats well maintained: a collection for sale by a drowsy middle-aged man leaning on a dumpster. It all appeared very strange to me.

In the former Soviet countries, the transition to the capitalist economic system necessarily had to pass through the art of making itself, and informal work is regarded as a way in which people “get by” in the absence of sufficient formal income; their small-scale allows the practitioner to “tread water” but not get ahead (Birdsall 2000, 147). Businessmen and businesswomen began looking for new survival strategies like using a plot of land to grow food, work as taxi drivers, rent their own garages or do business trips abroad: to buy goods for resale (Johnson et al. 1997, 185-186). A trend that has represented almost the totality of subsistence, in the past, but that continues to establish itself especially in a country like Georgia where, in the 90s, informal work represented about 65-70% of GDP (Kaufmann & Kaliberda 1996, 2); overcoming, very quickly, the shame linked to Soviet idea that trade, prohibited by law, was anti-social and speculative (Humphrey 2002).

In those years the local government was more interested in disconnecting the label of backwardness and delinquency often associated with the countries of the East investing, as we have seen, on appearance instead of welfare tacitly approving a stereotyped idea. Societies that live mainly of informality are deficient in socio-cultural aggregations and they are lacking compared to Western civilizations.

According to these theories and discourses on social development policies, these socially and culturally lacking societies must be helped to achieve modernization by copying or at least drawing inspiration from the Western model (Giordano 2018, 316). To encourage this "qualitative leap" little thought has been given on how to really improve the lives of citizens first among all the IDP (internally displaced people) who have lived for years in large Soviet buildings bordering on health. These communities were then evicted by force or in exchange for a small amount of money. The government is reclaiming large spaces destined to become a pomp symbol and to not let them remain a blind spot of the Georgian administration (Manning 2009).

Today, also the state indirectly participates in the livelihood of citizens, providing them aid with a reduction to the minimum terms, of interference in free enterprise performance and, in general, of working activity. Trade has been and is the most immediate livelihood in post-Soviet economic and cultural contexts. Tbilisi topography and ambiance prove it constantly, where going down or up from a staircase or crossing one of the bridges over the Kura River you can come across a market in where you can find yourself immersed without even noticing so. Doing a quick search, we can identify dozens of officially recognized markets, which are associated to the dozens of improvised stands mentioned above. To see this, simply go to the central market, below the trains station in Tbilisi, or Eliava market (a

complex of warehouses for domestic supplies) where you will find a remarkable mass of people, performing almost essentially a "non-work" related job, or a job that gives them very little income, but that forces a significant number of women (but also men) being away from home and receiving mutual assistance. Uneasy work, not overloaded by the state with taxes and over-regulation, is, in short, the most equitable and beneficial form of social assistance that a state could ever implement.

Sellers are often people who seek to round up by renovating and folding their homes, other times men and women who base their entire livelihood on daily earnings in the absence of the opportunity to find a more lucrative job. The history of this second category is the symbol of a reality different from that which passes through the official channels: the events of a globalization that starts from the bottom, forged by tens of thousands of independent individual entrepreneurs (Appadurai 2000; Castells & Portes 1989; Portes 1997). This shows, as Williams and Schneider have stated (2016, 11), how shadow economies produce forms of employment and work, even if considered as underemployment (Ketchen et al. 2014). This proving how the shadow economy can be considered the micro-enterprises primordial soup and that the small sums earned act as a stimulus for the formal goods and services demand, influencing, in positive, the official economy (Schneider and Williams 2013). As Polese states, citizens can contribute to the governance of a state through petty and uncoordinated acts that he defines as subordination (or rebellion), or just unorthodox ways to make ends meet, that, repeated millions of times change the way a given political measure is implemented in each context (2021). Informality, therefore, operates in different ways and in the most disparate sectors: from the market to the topographical to housing expansion.

Just think, again, about the situation of IDP (people mostly from Abkhazia and South Ossetia) and how it has affected the city topography and landscape. A city that, in the past, represented the emblem of well-being and culture, thanks to such upheavals, in a short time, has become its exact opposite (Salukvadze & Golubchikov 2016, 44). The adaptation strategies of the IDP also influenced the aesthetic, architectural and topographical change of the capital. In particular, the so-called Collective Centers as state buildings converted into other functions such as hotels, schools and kindergartens (Salukvadze et al., 2014). This is just one of the many micro dynamics that influence the phenomena of globalization, such as resistance and resilience from below.

The privatization of public space for private purposes embodies are echoed in countless garages, kiosks and small stores built into public spaces such as underpasses. They are part of a continuum of architectural bricolage both a product of privatization but also illicit, that ends up in bazaars, which are like horizontal versions of the same kind of mosaic or collage. The roughness and the lack of

planning can lead these structures to be celebrated as exemplars of urban picturesque by foreigners, but detested as signs of ghettoization, of dilapidation, chaos and disorder by residents (Manning 2009). Once again, social phenomena can be read in a dualistic key. On the one hand the freedom of taking up business which is legally tolerated. While on the other hand, the disorder left by the picturesque, who which is not always loved by who lives there, perhaps viewing from the top of their privileged positions or more simply because it no longer resembles that harmony and stability of a home, warmed by the members of a community to which it once felt to belong to (Sparsbrod 2018).

Moreover, informality is able to act where it finds fertile ground, or better, where there is no State management and/or control, responding to real, concrete, immediate and not futuristic needs. This is what non-governmental organizations are also doing, or better, they are trying to do, occupying more than a free space where state assistance is weak.

4. Informal networks.

During careful observations of the surrounding cultural reality, I accidentally came across a group of Italian compatriots (thanks to social networks) who were working in the area of my interest, carrying out activities of solidarity and cultural formation through NGOs. I was intrigued by this type of business. This meeting was followed by a series of interviews aimed at understanding the nature of their activities and how this particular form of cultural grouping organized in a formal way, could be fully placed in an interpretative framework of informality in that continuum as mentioned in the first part.

In short, the informal economy is the income generated by economic operators operating informally. Includes all those activities that circumvent traditional costs and exclude the benefits and rights provided by the laws and administrative rules on property relations, commercial licenses, employment contracts, credit and social security systems (Feige 1990, 992). But informality isn't only the income, it isn't only money. Informality is also receiving help, saving money and/or time thanks to mutual aid practices supported by neo-clanic solidarity networks (Latouche 2007) that respond, in a capillary and self-organized way, to their needs by seeking creative and collective experimentation to stem the social costs of the economic crisis, starting from familiar and/or community relationships.

Alongside solidarity founded on family and friends' networks, in a post-soviet country lots of NGOs operate to improve civil society and the democracy idea; here, democratization has been a lightning process, so, it was necessary to work from bottom to strengthen its foundations, through activism and volunteering. The first step, in promoting these values, is the promotion of informal education and the

exchange of good practices, especially among new generations. There were several studies about this topic, first of all by La Belle (1981, 1982), Mezirow (1990) and McGivney (1999). Informal learning can be identified within any activity that involves the pursuit of understanding, knowledge or skills: when this is acquired outside the curricula of educational institutions or courses or workshops offered by educational or social agencies (Livingstone 1999); in other words, the informal learning category includes all learning that occurs outside the curriculum of formal and non-formal educational institutions and programs. As Illeris points out informal learning is rediscovered in everyday life, in every moment of the private and social life (2004), so close to schools, University and training courses (formal and non-formal learning), it's important to consider voluntary activities and active citizenship training in places of aggregation.

Despite the commitment of state organizations, the implementation of youth policy, youth work and youth development are carried out, in majority, by local and foreign, organized in groups and or associations such as Youth Droni Association, the European Solidarity Corps or the Italian Cultural Institute which also promotes formal learning. These associations activities fit perfectly into the lifelong learning philosophy⁵ for active citizenship development, promotion of the individual and wider employability achievement.

How can they do that? By organizing a series of activities and events aimed at implementing knowledge, good practices and new approaches to civil education, in a transversal, intercultural and dynamic way. For example, with kids' courses aimed at acquiring new skills and abilities that will be used in the future: managing their finance/budget and spending money on food, for their projects and activities, being able to organize their activities, being proactive to show tolerance. With activities aimed at exploring and promoting outdoor education as an effective tool in youth animation, increasing knowledge of the theoretical and pedagogical background of outdoor adventure education methods; and at the same time, improving basic transversal skills, such as teamwork, communication, adaptability and crisis response involving all participants in the planning and management of outdoor shipments.

Various non-governmental organizations provide opportunities for recreation and learning through European funds, creating a collaboration and friendship network that do not have national or state borders. As, for example, promoting sporting events in which the youth of different nationalities play together

⁵ See: OCSE, *Learning a Living First Results of the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALL)*, OECD, Paris, 2005; OCSE, *Recognising Non-Formal and Informal Learning: Outcomes, Policies and Practices*, OECD, Paris 2010.

to celebrate inclusion against racism; or even territory redevelopment activities creating equipped areas for local children. Participating in activities like these means training and awareness in an active process that, as Wenger states (1998), produces mutual recognition by contributing to the acquisition of experience and involving the whole subject (body, mind, emotions, etc.).

Unfortunately, not all these kinds of initiatives can boast excellent results with a positive impact on the territory. As Livia, volunteer at an NGO in 2020, tells us:

“My experience of volunteering can be seen as six months spent doing secretarial activities and organizing language courses for children but never really doing one...”

In this case we are faced with formal forms of assistance that oppress citizens, in an illegitimate way transforming people in rough conditions in acclaimed destitute people, locking them up in a state from which they cannot escape. At the same time, they also lose, de facto, fundamental rights, which would then be paradoxically protected by NGOs, in a vicious circle based on incorrect assumptions and that therefore cannot go well, except in a few lucky cases, and for the NGOs themselves benefit.

The goal of these organizations is to promote knowledge in constant interweaving and interchange from top to bottom and vice versa: know, know-how and how to be (Colombo 2014). In this direction, other interesting experiences are represented by the most varied workshops for children and adults on cooking and dancing in a way to represent their country from a different point of view, but always in an intercultural perspective; or specific courses to promote the soft skills acquisition useful in everyday life, such as preparing for job interviews. The adult being as a citizen and as a trainer (professional or not) who must educate citizens in a cultural context in which such citizens cease to be an abstract concept associated with an equally abstract and universal common good condensed into a set of good practices, to become an exercise in safeguarding one's own interests as an individual, family or small group (Tramma 2019). After all, learning is nothing more than the result of the interaction of the individual with the community in which he or she operates, and also with the physical environment, with other subjects, with himself or herself (Merril 2002). This interchange (cultural, generational, of competences) takes the shape of a gift: transversal, bidirectional and informal, including favors establishment of trust and mutual help networks (Rivkin-Fish 2005). Favors constitute a pervasive, often habitual dimension, not only of kinship but also of social relation more generally. It is important to have and maintain *natsnoboba* networks: the gathering of contacts and expansion of one's network as a sort of private safety net, which can be invoked in case of emergencies. Giving

someone a “helping hand” is a universal currency which builds political alliances and oil market transaction anywhere from the “favorable economy” of middle-class New Yorkers, to the old-boy networks of the global shadow elite (Wedel 2009).

This type of activity gives skills and friendships or better, implement the friendships network: basis of any informal practice. This provides a non-economic support offering a service that otherwise could not be used, starting from education.

These kinds of organizations inevitably become communities, collaborating with the state or overcoming political and bureaucratic obstacles for local residents’ benefit; placing itself in a legal vacuum and/or working to implement, improve and support local public services.

One of the goals could be allowing young people to take back the street. As Zakharova points out in Georgian urban culture, the street is considered a special environment that is associated with thieves’ mentality and code of the street: it is built around interaction between the *birzha*, the police and gangsters, and is regulated by a code of customary norms (2010). Resuming the street would mean applying new rules and codes to an environment that does not belong only to groups controlled by high-level criminals; it would mean rewriting the narration of those courtyards, squares, gardens as places of free sociality, democracy and leisure. An urban space re-appropriation by young people (but not only) that becomes a privileged destination of conviviality in the name of good practices. An activity that, with time, could also influence future administrative decisions about urbanization opening bi-directional dialogues. A decision-making partnership more easily shared by civil society that participated and did not suffer (Tyran and Feld 2001).

5. Epilogue: Shadow economy and future.

It is the relationship between the State and civil society that defines the quality and quantity of informality, and this relationship is constantly moving (Portes and Haller 2005, 419), making a precise and clear quantification impossible, in every part of the world. The answer to the question of whether some countries are more informal than others is no, but yes. Rethinking the ambivalence of the actual constraints that shape informal practices, residents in grey areas between no and yes, sociality and instrumentality, us and them, need and greed, carrots and sticks, can be a more promising way forward in managing complexity. In this sense, each country is an interesting case for this type of research (Barsukova and Ledeneva 2018).

This trend, in Georgia, maybe is more visible, besides the historical-economic vicissitudes, for the way of living the relationship with work and money. Mikele, Italian Cultural Institute member, confided in me:

other forms of "amicable" and extra-state assistance can be seen in the many remaining Georgians' habits, especially the less young generation, to inform themselves conventionally and in an explicit way on the economic conditions of people they meet. It is normal to ask: how much is your salary? As a social security office would inquire about the citizens conditions to whom he or she should help. The logic is precisely the same but, according to this model, it is the "social body" that takes charge of itself in a network of knowledge to which each person is connected and reports to.

Perhaps among new generations there is a little more than a behavioral trace of this attitude, but still significant compared to cultural realities when talking about money is considered unpolite.

Today the informal economy streets are tracing ever so deep into paths in globalization from below perspective and with the precise aim of bypassing the arranged structures of a collapsing global capitalist economy. These embryonic aid forms and the formation of communities increasingly united and dedicated to collaboration. It is certainly the foundation of an economic reality that seems embracing the entire globe. Just think how these support networks have become necessary during the economic health crisis of the recent years. For many Italians, for example, community support has represented survival in an incredibly difficult time.

These associations and/or relational networks respond to real and deep needs in different communities in which they operate in. It would be appropriate by local, national and international administrations, to pay attention to these activities and find creative and effective ways to respond to these needs. By virtue of a two-way street, active and conscious process at multiple levels of civil and politic society.

Such line action could turn the spotlight on single individuals and help them, on a larger scale, to face everyday life. Changing perspective in small and large policy choices could end the continued and blind support for a very small percentage of the global population, interrupting the *musical chairs game* in which someone must necessarily be excluded to make the other a winner.

Therefore, we must ask ourselves: how can solidarity, cooperation and community self-help be asserted here and now in our society? As Sennet states, in his humanism reconceptualization, we need new cooperation forms: open and informal. Open because only with absence in predetermined expectations, allowing everyone to participate. Informal because pre-established rules must come from dialogues, that do not have a specific arrival point. Finally, abandoning the dream of winning in front of a loser is the only real tool we must progress in the perspective of evolution. It all comes down to being enriched by collaboration (1998). It is up to

us to test the functionality of this collaboration; some parts of the world have been experimenting for some time, in others the way is still long.

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