

Georgia and the region's European aspirations: building the future on a vibrant past

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I believe that searching for identity is a normal evolutionary process for human societies. The formation of a European identity is influenced by many factors including geographic, political, cultural, religious, anthropological, technological and many others. The identification of Europe is also largely conditional -- for example, from the point of view of physical geography, Europe and Asia are parts of a single continent, Eurasia. However, I do not intend to discuss how identity is formed or to propose my own definition of national or European identity.

For me, Europe is a family of states unified around common values and interests. Despite negative or critical comments about the efficiency of the European Union, I strongly believe in such value-based networks. Our goal should be to create transdisciplinary, pan-European networks at different levels. These alliances well adapted to today's realities could create a foundation for diffusing new and progressive European values wherever they intersect with principles throughout the world.

The long history of Georgia and the entire Caucasus region could contribute to this process. The study of history is a powerful tool, and has been used for both positive and negative ends. Perhaps a somewhat “heavy” scientific legacy in Georgia’s case was the classification of human races by Johann Fredric Blumenbach in the late 18th century. This German scientist coined the term for a Caucasian “race” based on the physical characteristics of a diplomat he knew, the first Ottoman Ambassador to England, originally from the Caucasus region. The “science of human races” was perpetuated by subsequent anatomists such as Professor William Lawrence who again referred to the Caucasian race (1823, Lectures to the Royal College of Surgeons in London): *“The name of this variety is derived from Mount Caucasus because in its neighborhood, and particularly towards the south, we meet with a very beautiful race of men, the Georgians.”* Gradually, for the English-speaking scientific world, the European and the Caucasian “races” became synonymous. Yet for Georgians and other peoples of the region, the identity of being Caucasian carried very different meanings.

This is why we believe the stories of our past must be explored and examined, so they can become tools for unification instead of for division. Our main goal is to ensure that our rich heritage doesn’t only remain in our archives, but helps move us towards new visions for a common future. Georgia’s European aspirations are not new. We have been a part of Europe, in the broadest sense, from prehistory to the present. Georgia is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious society whose history has been turbulent, but whose thoughts and culture have benefited from a diverse population and the traditions of many of its neighbors.

The country is distinguished by magnificent landscapes, varied and unique endemic fauna and flora, and five climate zones that range from the humid sub-tropical on the Black Sea to the rural wetlands, high plateau and alpine regions, and even to the semi-desert areas of the southeast. Its rich natural resources have supported uninterrupted human habitation for thousands of years.

On the territory of the Caucasus several archeological sites have been discovered that are of universal importance for the history of mankind. Archaeological research and the communication of many exceptional findings have brought our region into the spotlight of the world's scientific community. This has given local scholars the possibility to work with international institutions and to become respected members of that community. I believe that both art and science are unique instruments for spreading values and are strong tools for diplomacy.

Using archeological discoveries for nationalistic purposes, however, is nothing new and many countries claim to be “First”, “the Cradle” or “a unique culture”. This sometimes manifests itself as a form of competition, a rivalry to underline a country's importance. A good example is the story of the “earliest Europeans”. Various countries have claimed this title after finding what they say are the “earliest” discoveries of hominids, our biological ancestors. In the early 20th century a lower jaw from Mauer, Germany, near Heidelberg, was considered the earliest known human in Europe until in the 1970s a discovery from the French village of Tautevel became the earliest European at 450,000 years old. Even today, signs for tourists indicate that Tautevel is “the birthplace of the first European”. In the early 1990s discoveries from Ceprano, Italy and Atapuerca, Spain were dated back 800,000 years, which in turn made them the new “First Europeans”.

However, our task should be instead of creating competitions -- to create a win-win situation for all concerned. Even though in recent years Georgia has become known as the country of the “First Europeans” it would be very naïve to consider 1.8 million-year-old creatures as “Europeans”! The Dmanisi discovery is indeed of immense importance for science, yet our approach has been to universalize the knowledge of human migration, rather than claim a distinction for being “first”. However, the imagination of journalists was fired with new vigor for rivalry -- the Dmanisi story has been featured worldwide through international media including cover stories in *Science* magazine, *National Geographic*, *The New York Times* and many others; a quote from *Liberation* in 2000 following a congress in Tautevel read :“Avec ces deux fossils découverts en Géorgie, à Dmanisi au sud du Caucase, les premiers habitants de l'Europe vieillissent d'un million d'années. De manière certaine, ce qui n'est pas si fréquent au royaume de la paléontologie: personne ne conteste les dates. Jusqu'ici, l'Espagne et l'Italie se disputaient l'honneur d'avoir abrité les plus vieux hommes du continent, ce n'était qu'il y a 800 000 ans.”

(“With these two fossils discovered in Georgia, in Dmanisi, south of the Caucasus the first inhabitants of Europe became a million years older. This has been confirmed, which is not frequent in the kingdom of paleontology — no one contests the dates. Until now Spain and Italy vied for the honor of having sheltered the oldest humans of the continent, which dates back only 800,000 years.”)

Dmanisi is a village about 85 kilometers southwest of Georgia's capital, Tbilisi, and lies on the ancient Silk Road linking Europe and Asia. The site is rich in medieval and

Bronze Age artifacts, but it is the wealth of prehistoric finds that has put it on the scientific map. Before the Dmanisi discoveries, the prevailing view was that when humans left Africa a million years ago, they had larger brains and sophisticated stone tools. But Dmanisi has changed these ideas. The discovery of Dmanisi's 1.8 million year-old human fossils has brought the Caucasus region into sharp focus as an entirely new region for studying the evolution of early *Homo*. Few paleoanthropological research projects have had such a powerful impact on our thinking about human evolution. These discoveries document the first expansions of humans out of Africa, and demonstrate that their migration was due neither to increased brain size, nor to improved technology.

In Georgia, the Dmanisi project is playing a crucial role in the development of paleoanthropology and of science in general through establishing close links with international scientific centers and introducing new methods and technologies to Georgian sciences. Project structures bridge scientific interests across international borders and have formed a large, active multinational team. We have founded a field school in Dmanisi where, every year, dozens of students from the United States and Europe are enrolled in training and receive university credits. Hosting students from around the world can significantly break down cultural-linguistic barriers, increase scientific exchange and provide many opportunities to generate new cohorts of colleagues and friends. Progressively this creates extensive networks of future scientists. Today the Dmanisi field museum is a rare example of how scientists can simultaneously facilitate active research underway at a site and at the same time make the site and its research accessible to the wider public.

Another field of competition between countries has been "Which country is the "Cradle of Wine"?" Georgia is again in line for this distinction, as it claims to have the earliest traces of viniculture. The Caucasus occupies a territory within the Near East zone, one of the seven global "Centers of Origin" of food plants, where scientists believe the origins of agriculture and the domestication of important grains occurred. The varieties and forms of cultivated plants that originated in the wider Caucasus region have shown that the area was indeed an ancient center for the domestication and diversification of food plant species.

I would suggest moving from the competition of who is "first winemaker" towards a multidisciplinary research of the history of wine and other cultivated foods. The beginning of agriculture is a key period in human history and offers another opportunity for researchers to develop high-level international interdisciplinary collaboration. This could be the occasion to create another model like that created in Dmanisi, bringing together different academic institutions and working on public outreach.

Most have heard the myth of the Greek Argonauts, but not everyone knows about the historic connection with Georgia through the myth of Jason and the Golden Fleece. According to the story told by ancient Greek authors, Jason and the Argonauts sailed to Colchis in search of the Golden Fleece that hung in a sacred grove of trees, and guarded by a dragon that never slept. Unearthed gold artifacts from Vani in western Georgia connect the history of this land to the myth of Jason and the Golden Fleece. Archaeological discoveries provide evidence of an advanced culture in what is today

western Georgia, showing that the mythical land of Colchis was indeed this region. Many of these treasures confirm that Colchis was a real country, and was rich in gold.

They also attest that Georgia's culture is an indispensable part of Western civilization, as the kingdom of Colchis is one of the main pillars of Georgia's cultural identity. Most scholars consider classical Greek culture as the basis of European culture and civilization. Greek or "Hellenic" culture has its roots in ancient Near Eastern civilizations, and it emerged after the campaign of Alexander the Great in the East. The archeological discoveries show that pre-Christian cultural traditions in western Georgia contributed to the process of civilization.

After the Greco-Roman period Georgia was subjected to Arab invasions, however with the progress of the Byzantine Empire, the country built strong links with European culture. Since Georgia became a Christian country in the 4th century, and also developed its own alphabet, the country could maintain own identity. Byzantine cultural tradition began taking shape through a merger of this symbiotic culture with Eastern Christianity, embracing countries, including Georgia. Based on Hellenistic cultural trends, new cultural centers came into being in the bosom of Eastern Christianity, with their own national scripts and cultural traditions influenced by East-West civilizations. Here lies the uniqueness of Georgian material and spiritual culture, its attractiveness both to the East and to the West.

Due to its geographic location, Georgia has long been a natural crossroads for many powerful cultures. Nevertheless, the country has preserved its cultural identity, with an unwavering interest in the Western world. Now that the country is putting itself on the world map again, it is our genuine belief that European nations will be our partners on the way to the West. Our goal is to develop common values while maintaining our unique cultural identity, to encourage diversity and tolerance while building bridges with other cultures.

Building academic institutions is crucial for these processes. We should use scientific disciplines to study the past and to bring new knowledge, but at the same time we must work on communication and institution building. One of the key issues today is to find opportunities to establish new institutions, especially cultural institutions -- not only in the Caucasus. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union many changes have occurred, but few have taken place in our cultural institutions. In Georgia's case, creating the Georgian National Museum has been a step towards establishing a strong institution based on our own national and cultural heritage.

The Georgian National Museum was established in December 2004. Its origins, however, date back to 1852 and the Museum of the Caucasian Department of the Russian Royal Geographic Society. The Georgian National Museum is the administrative umbrella organization for two research institutions and for the major museums of Georgia, including the National Gallery. The Georgian National Museum presents internationally significant collections of art and dynamic, changing exhibitions that provide visitors with inspiration and knowledge of the wonderful world of culture, arts, sciences and education. Discoveries of the oldest human existence in Eurasia are displayed along with magnificent Medieval Christian art, stunning gold and silver jewelry from the ancient land of Colchis, spectacular modern and contemporary paintings by Georgian artists and masterpieces that exemplify

Oriental, Russian and Western European decorative arts.

The Georgian National Museum now envisages the introduction of modern management policies and the establishment of a uniform administrative system. This initiative will put a coherent museum mission in place and improve conservation standards for preserved collections. It will strengthen the educational programs centered on the museum's resources and contribute to coordinating academic and museum activities. The Georgian National Museum is an important regional example of how to transform post-Soviet museums into modern, innovative, creative and user-friendly institutions that are well integrated into the urban and social fabric.

If there were a public opinion survey carried out on priority issues for Georgia, the main response would be “Education”, and if you ask Georgians what the country’s main factors of national identity are, the answer will be Christian Orthodoxy and religiosity. Indeed I am sure that museums have a high potential for participating in educational and cultural processes and developing a balance between faith and knowledge. To develop wider European values in our young people, including those of diversity and tolerance, new exhibits and public education activities are the best tools. Two concrete examples include:

- The Ivane Javakhishvili History Museum, located in Samtskhe-Javakheti, a region of multicultural challenges for ethnic Armenians and Georgians. The new museum tells the story of the region, using the exhibition and educational programs to develop common values and, in particular, strong feelings of tolerance in the younger generations.

- The recently opened branch of the National Museum in the Upper Caucasus region of Svaneti, in the capital city of Mestia. The museum houses very precious collections of medieval icons and manuscripts. Svaneti is an island with remains of Byzantine culture, with local peculiarities. The new museum is linking the local community through its collection of treasures, while building trust and dialog. Renovated exhibits and storage show respect for religious objects and are both research and educational tools. Creating a balance between science and religious beliefs is an important role for this Museum.

The Georgian National Museum is a horizontal network of different bodies unified under joint values. We are working with different international institutions, and are pleased with our cooperation with the Berlin Museum system within the frame work of the first EU twinning program in the cultural field. We continue to work bilaterally, and our cooperation has been developed at the regional level with help of Goethe Institute. We have created a network of museums in former Soviet countries, including Ukraine, Russia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belorussia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kirgizstan and Tajikistan. This will create even more horizontal cooperation. I believe that the tendency of museums in the world will change from brand promotion (like the Guggenheim and the Louvre) towards new alliances such as those created by the NY Metropolitan Museum that bring together institutions from Europe, Latin America, Asia and Africa. The Georgian National Museum should be part of this global trend.

Personally, I am participating in the work of the European Cultural Parliament's pan-European network for artists, a forum for regular debate on crucial issues for independent artists, writers, musicians, historians, philosophers, designers, architects and other cultural personalities from all European countries. I believe that the synergy of Art+Science is also a strong tool for developing democratic societies. Academic and artist freedom are key ingredients of this process.

The Caucasus must take its place in a world where there is no room for conflict. It can become a place of unification, and where different generations build common values. Today archeology has changed its position from the colonial science it had been over the last centuries, to one that advocates for countries to claim and study their own heritage -- where peoples can discuss and independently create the vision of their nation's legacies and identity and find ways to link these with the rest of the world.

Why do we need the European Union, or indeed any other alliance? Without question, this contributes to a better world! These alliances promote a respect for human rights and for the environment, along with the preservation of cultural heritage... This can only take place, however, if we develop these values early in life — thus I believe that my country, my profession and my institution must participate in this process.