

## **Voices of the Poor: Can Anyone Hear Us?**

**By Lela Rekhviashvili**

### **Stigma and Isolation**

I met Gogola (name changed) at the entrance of a shopping mall in Tbilisi. Gogola is about 80 years old. She is holding few packs of paper towels to sell. She cries often. So I met her when she was about to cry, asking me to buy some of her paper towels. Now I ask myself if I would have talked with Gogola if I was not conducting my fieldwork concerning the illegal street vendors...

Retrospectively, I want to believe that the personal curiosity of knowing her was bigger than the academic one. Gogola is from Abkhazia. She left Abkhazia during the war, in the beginning of 1990s. However most of what she talks is about Abkhazia and her life there. Her husband used to be a locally appreciated writer and a journalist. Was killed during the war and his head was sent to Gogola in the box. Her daughter had a Ukrainian husband, who also got killed in the same period. Since then, meaning for last 20 years, she has horrible headaches.

Gogola loves to tell the stories of her husband and daughter, stories of the sailors and tourists (Abkhazia is a seaside region, used to be the famous summer resort in Soviet Union) relatives, friends and parties. She hardly talks of present, or anything that happened in her and her family's life after the war.

One of the few post-war realities she shared, as probably I asked, is that her relatives and friends from Abkhazia avoid talking to her. I asked, as I realized she used to belong to well-educated and probably well-off circles, and I suspected that good social networks should have been helpful for persons facing harsh social problems. Gogola says, when her relatives see her selling paper towels, they avoid greeting her. She says people think it's a shame to vend on the streets, especially because she used to be a wife of an appreciated writer, member of a respected family, and now she turned into a disgrace.

### **Where did the collectivist values disappear?**

I do ask myself, how is it that, the shame and reputation related calculations, overcome the will to help. I do ask myself, how come in my country, a small post-soviet republic Georgia, poverty became associated so strongly with personal failure instead of being

seen as a systemic social problem that we share responsibility for. Seemingly alien concept of individual responsibility was easily embraced in Georgia over last decades. This enthusiastic adoption of libertarian discourse on poverty has always been surprising and unexplainable for me, until very recently, when I found an amazing study of poverty in Former Soviet Union, called “Voices of the poor”.

According to my own judgment, there are at least two reasons why Georgian society should have acknowledged collective responsibility over poverty instead of judging the poor.

Firstly, the Soviet experiences should have encouraged the society to be intolerant towards inequality and merciful towards the poor. Compared to western societies which have much longer experience of capitalism, (even if “tamed”, “humanized” or “embedded” capitalism) and individualism, the Eastern societies should have more collectivist values.

Secondly, from my perspective, Georgia is quite a traditionalist society, where kinship, friendship and social ties have immense power. These networks explicitly require solidarity on behalf of the members and promote collectivist values.

I myself was raised in the cloths of my cousins, was carrying the textbooks given by my mother’s friends, and my family would always be dependent on the glossary sent by family friends and relatives from the rural areas. These suppositions about Soviet experiences, as well as my personal experiences made it hard for me to understand the ambiguous approach toward the poverty in my country.

It is hard to explain the complex issue like individualization of poverty through any single argument, but I think the answer that I found in “Voices of the Poor” is certainly worth considering and sharing.

### **Were the collectivist values ever “there”?**

In contrast to my assumptions, the book argues that Soviet Ideology actually portrayed poverty as a result of personal failures. This somewhat paradoxical situation was created because the legitimacy of Soviet Union was based on the ability of the system to provide the welfare for all. However, the system was certainly deficient and often mishandled its responsibility. In order to cover up the pitfalls in the system, the poor were blamed for mishandling their fates and were often portrayed as “deviant” members of the society. This is how poverty became associated with stigma and shame, not only in Georgia but in many of other Soviet republics, like Armenia, Azerbaijan, Latvia or Moldova.

“The association of impoverishment with personal or familial shortcomings remains firmly embedded in the collective psyche. In this system, maintaining at least the appearance of prosperity is vital to maintaining the social connections that enable one to secure goods and services... Thus people will often try to hide their poverty from their friends and neighbors... Much of the humiliation comes from suddenly being unable to behave in ways consistent with strongly held social norms.

One woman from Georgia reports that she deals with the inability to afford gifts by disconnecting her phone when she is expecting an invitation. In this way she is able to offer the excuse that her phone is out of order so she learns of the invitation too late (Georgia 1997). A Latvian person told interviewers, “During the past two years we have not celebrated any holidays with others. We cannot afford to invite anyone to our house and we feel uncomfortable visiting others without bringing a present. The lack of contact leaves one depressed, creates a constant feeling of unhappiness, and a sense of low self-esteem” (Latvia 1998).”

**(Voices of the Poor: Can Anyone Hear Us? 2000, Deepa Narayan)**

The social networks, that should have been an asset in the times of crises, turned into a burden for the impoverished persons and families. Instead of relying on these networks, people often withdrew into solitude and isolation.

This kind of approach might well have contributed to the establishment of socially irresponsible states, which provide little security to their citizens and expect high tolerance towards growing inequalities. Only very recently, long muted cries for social welfare are becoming vocal in Georgia, but it is too early to simulate if Georgian society will be successful in forcing the state to extend the benefits of recent economic growth to the wider population. The least we can see now is that the attitudes towards the poor and underprivileged are slowly changing and society wants to acknowledge collective responsibility over its weaker and disadvantaged members.

### **How do we respond to the crisis?**

I do not know how far communist experiences in Central Europe and former Yugoslavia also encouraged individualizing the responsibility on poverty. From my perspective, relative to Georgia, social equality and state provided welfare seem to be in much better shape here. At least, from what I observe, majority of the citizens have health insurances, many are entitled to unemployment benefits, poor and homeless have better chances to receive support. But the situation is tricky in EU member or soon to be EU member Central and Southern European states too. Particularly in Hungary, where homelessness is being criminalized (the homeless, over 30 000 persons only in Budapest, were literally sent to prisons), civil and political rights are restricted, constitution is rewritten and ethnic and racial hatreds are played out, the

prospects seem gloomy. In Croatia, to my best understanding things are not that bad and certain degree of social cohesion is retained, but problems of poverty, inequality and unemployment, particularly in times of crisis, are becoming more and more visible here too.

Even if socialist experiences in these countries shaped the social attitudes towards supporting and demanding equality and social welfare, currently the challenges to these values are too high. More than 20 years of marketization process probably slowly washes out the memories and demand for socially oriented state. This is more so, as new and soon to become EU member states willingly or not, realize they are (semi) periphery of Europe, thus they will not afford 'Humanizing' capitalism to the extent that North-Western Europe still does. Throughout the crisis, some of the Southern EU member states were already forced to compromise social security. It is a question if these processes will lead the societies to get used to their fate and accept inequalities, or they will denote creation of strong counter movements in defense of social rights.

While social problems are deepening, I propose that one of the main determinants that will shape societal responses to crisis will be our definition of poverty. If we buy the narrative of the "lazy poor", if we agree to see the poverty primarily as a personal failure, as it was done in my country, we will only make ourselves more vulnerable versus social-economic pressures.