

The role of scholars in the Abkhazians' loss of trust in the Georgians and how to
remedy the situation

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Being privileged to hold the only full-time academic post in the UK for Caucasian languages, I openly confess my simple and firm conviction that anyone with a professional concern for the languages of the Caucasus should be actively engaged in helping to preserve them. This may (regrettably) mean that on occasions, rather than take the easy option of looking the other way and remaining silent, one has to speak out when the survival of one Caucasian group is threatened by the actions of others (even when those others are fellow-Caucasians). It was adherence to this belief which led to my involvement in the developing Georgian-Abkhazian crisis of 1989 and which has conditioned my statements and/or writings on the topic ever since; in no way was I motivated by anti-Georgian sentiment, even if this to some was a convenient accusation. If my wishes for the well-being of the region's languages and speakers means that I have to criticise Georgian behaviour towards Abkhazia (or, to take a different example, Georgian attitudes on the ethnic identity of Mingrelians, Svans and Laz, namely that they are 'Georgians'), then I shall voice those criticisms, convinced that encouragement (even through silence) of Georgian views in these matters is ultimately not in the best interests of even Georgians themselves.

I do not propose to repeat the whole history of Georgian-Abkhazian relations, culminating in the war of 1992-93, for I assume this is common knowledge -- for details see my 1993 paper. If (i) the occupation of Abkhazia by Menshevik forces in 1918, (ii) its forced subordination to Tbilisi in 1931 by Stalin, (iii) the gross attempt to 'georgianise' Abkhazia by Stalin's local henchmen (Mingrelian L. Beria, Svan K'. Chark'viani, and Georgian A. Mgeladze) between 1936 and 1953 by slaughtering the local intelligentsia and political leadership, massive importations of non-Abkhazians (mainly Mingrelians), and closure of Abkhazian schools and possibilities of publishing in Abkhaz, (iv) the whipping up of ethnic hatred towards all Georgia's minorities in 1988-89 by such unofficial leaders as M. K'ost'ava, Z. Gamsakhurdia and G. Ch'ant'uria, and (v) even the war started by Shevardnadze on 14 Aug 1992 were purely and simply acts of the seriously defective political leaders that Georgia has long produced, the resulting wounds, though deep, could heal more rapidly. But Georgian-Abkhazian relations have been characterised by something more sinister than mere political folly. I have no time for scheming politicians; but I have even less for scholars who put their disciplines at the service of such politicians' schemes¹. It is this aspect of the conflict that I shall now address.

¹One is tempted to add to the list of those deserving condemnation that all too common type of journalist who either only takes information from the side better organised to disseminate its

We need to begin by noting some historical quotations, keeping in mind that the Abkhazians call themselves *Apswa* and that the branch known as *Abaza/Abazinians* first crossed from Abkhazia (or *Apsny*) into their current N. Caucasian home around the 14th century (as accepted by even the Georgian Encyclopædia). At the start of the Christian era Pliny Secundus (1st century) notes in the relevant region a *gens Absilae* 'Absil race', whereas a century later Arrian places the *Abasgoi* to the north of those he calls *Apsilai*, whilst even further north he locates the *San(n)igai*, whose territory includes *Sebastopolis*, today's Aq^w'a/Sukhum. In the 6th century Agathias introduces another tribe of *Misimianoï*. Agathias' original Greek text is quite unambiguous in linking the Apsilians and Missimians both culturally and linguistically. At IV.15 he refers to the Apsilians as 'being related to and neighbouring [the Missimians]². Similarly, at III.15 we read: 'Soterike went down into the country of the so-called Missimians, who, like the Apsilians, are subjects of the king of the Colchians, but they speak in a different language and also pursue different laws.' It is the Missimians and the Colchians (presumably the Zan ancestors of today's Mingrelians and Laz) that the Greek is contrasting in terms of language and laws, and so the evidence of the classical authors is that Apsilians and Missimians are linguistically related -- there is no reason not to assume that the *Abasgoi* also belong in this group. In the Georgian chronicles known as Kartlis Tskhovreba two mss add this gloss after Georgia's great queen Tamar (1184-1213) is stated to have nicknamed her son Giorgi IV *Lasha*: 'which is translated in the language of the Apsars as "enlightener of the world"' -- since the Abkhaz word for 'light' is *a-la* ჟა, it would be perverse indeed to see in the name *Apsar* anything other than an attempt to render the Abkhazian native ethnonym, Tamar acting here in recognition of the role played by the Abkhazian Kingdom (8th-10th centuries) in creating the united Kingdom of the Abkhazians and Georgians, over which she reigned. In 1404 a European traveller Johannes de Galonifontibus passed through the Caucasus; his diary (see Tardy 1978) describes exactly what we should expect for the ethno-linguistic division of the Black's Sea's eastern littoral: 'Beyond these [Circassians] is Abkhazia, a small hilly country...They have their own language...To the east of them, in the direction of Georgia, lies the country called Mingrelia...They have their own language...Georgia is to the east of this country. Georgia is not an integral whole...They have their own language' (Tardy 1978) -- NB that this perceptive early 15th century traveller had no difficulty distinguishing between Mingrelian and Georgian, though many Georgians even today erroneously assert Mingrelian to be a Georgian dialect. Finally in the 1640s the half-Turkish, half-Abkhazian Evliya Çelebi

propaganda or thinks that reporting of a conflict necessarily requires strict balance between the two parties, even when anyone fully familiar with the facts can see that the fault manifestly lies more on one side than the other.

²The Greek says *óntas homodiaítous kai agk^hitérmonas*.

passed along this coastal region. Leaving Mingrelia he passes into the 'Abaza country', starting his description thus: 'The start of the Abaza land which lies entirely along the northern shore of the Black Sea is the R. Pasha [Phasis/Rioni], and the end of the frontier is at a 42-day journey to the west, the fortress-port of Anapa which lies near the Taman peninsula...' -- he clearly incorporates some Circassian territory in this definition of 'Abaza country'. His citation of words from what he calls the language of the 'Sadz Abazas' are our first attestation of Ubykh, the now extinct sister-language to Abkhaz and Circassian. The true Sadz Abkhazians left in their entirety their Caucasian land, which lay south of the Ubykhs (who lived around modern Sochi), after the Russian conquest of the Caucasus in 1864, and it is Slava Chirikba's belief that it was the Sadz dialect that Çelebi quoted when illustrating 'the extraordinary and wonderful language of the Abazas'. Surely, then, the Greek *San(n)igai*³ will have been an (admittedly imprecise) attempt to render the Abkhazian *A-sadz-k^wa* 'Sadzians', giving us an exclusively NW Caucasian residence of the Black Sea coast down to (give or take a few kilometers depending on shifting political fortunes) the R. Ingur until the mass NW Caucasian migrations to Ottoman lands of the 19th century -- *Misimianoï* will most plausibly derive from the family-name of the local Abkhazian princely-family around this region of Ts'abal, namely *Mar zan*; as for the Svans, there is nothing in Strabo (early 1st century) to suppose they lived anywhere other than they always have -- Strabo's *Soanes* are in the mountains above Ts'abal.

It is a pleasure to be able to note that for a while after the mass-migrations of Abkhazians (and others) to Ottoman territory, leading Georgians were prepared to declare their human sympathies in such statements as this from social activist Sergei Meskhi (*droeba* 'Time-being', issue 158, 6.VIII, 1878, reprinted on pp.20-21 of vol.III, 1964, of his collected works, and part-translated into Russian in Achugba 1995.38-39): 'Abkhazia and in general the whole of this Caucasian Black Sea littoral is one of the most beautiful and richest of spots on the earth. [...] We must hope that our government will not hinder but rather permit those Abkhazians who may wish to return to and settle anew their own land to do so. Apart from feelings of philanthropy, this is demanded both by justice and indeed self-interest, for undoubtedly it is better to have people like the Circassians and Abkhazians as friends than as enemies'. But different views were soon to emerge.

The first to suggest that the Abkhazians were relative newcomers in Abkhazia seems to have been the Georgian historian Davit Bakradze. In 1889 (pp.271-273), he argued that the Abkhazians came over the mountains, driving out the Mingrelians and

³To be carefully distinguished from the classical *Sannoi/Tzannoi*, located east of Trebizond and to be identified with the Laz, called in Georgian *ch'an-(eb)-i*, whilst in Svan *mi-zän* (pl. *zan-är*) means 'Mingrelian'. Naturally, attempts have been made in Georgia to link the *Sannoi/Tzannoi* (and thus the Laz) with the *San(n)igai*.

eventually forcing them over the R. Ingur; without giving a precise date to, and on the basis of no real evidence for, this hypothesised southern push, he seems to suggest that it must have occurred after the 11th and before the 17th century. In the 1870s Georgian educationalist Iak'ob Gogebashvili had published articles about Abkhazia and Mingrelia, describing the inhabitants of Abkhazia's southernmost province (now called Gal but then known as Samurzaq'ano) as 'a branch of the Abkhazian race'. Yet, when he later included reference to these people in his famous children's book 'Nature's Door', he switched their ethnicity, saying: 'The Mingrelians and the Samurzaq'anoans are one people' (p.512 of the 1912 edition). Thus begins Georgian territorial claims to Abkhazia, largely denuded by Tsarist Russia of its native population and essentially up for grabs!

For some decades thereafter the view, based on unsophisticated philological arguments, that all Caucasian peoples were related came to hold sway, and so, even allowing for a NW Caucasian presence as far south as Guria and beyond (cf. hydronyms *Supsa*, *Akampsis*, the old name for the Ch'orokh(i), with the Circassian *ps*-element for 'water, river') was acceptable if their speakers were to be deemed Georgian kin. But when this family-link was shewn to be unacceptable, Georgian historical claims to Abkhazia could only be maintained if NW Caucasian Abkhazians could be demonstrated not to be the indigenous population.

The most notorious and sustained attempt to refute Abkhazian autochthonicity in Abkhazia was that produced originally in the late 1940s by the self-taught literary-expert, P'avle Ingoroq'va, and reprinted as part of his 1954 (1,013-page) *Giorgi Merchule*. One illustration of his method will have to suffice: the Georgian term for the pine-clad resort universally known from the Græco-Roman designation as Pitsunda is *bich'vinta*. Ingoroq'va takes this latter as the original form, detecting toponymical suffixes *-n-ta* added to a variant in *b-* of Georgian *pich'v-i* 'pine', which he states to have been 'translated' into Greek as *pitys*. In fact, the root in the Greek for 'pine' has an impeccable Indo-European etymology; there is no known Kartvelian variant for 'pine' with initial *b-*, and, since the Greek for the resort was *Pituous* (with accusative *Pitounta*), it is pretty clear that it is the Greek which is original, with this accusative being the source of both Pitsunda AND *bich'vinta* (see Hewitt 1993a for details). Coupling such unsustainable etymologies with a mistranslation (generously ascribed by the Abkhazian historian Z. Anchabadze 1959 to the Russian translator, Brun) of Çelebi to the effect that Abkhazians of his day spoke Mingrelian (the actual text reads 'also speak Mingrelian'), Ingoroq'va proposed that the NW Caucasian Abkhazians arrived in Abkhazia only in the 17th century, displacing an entirely mythical Kartvelian tribe of Abkhazians, needed there to account for centuries of reference to the area in Georgian

sources as *apxazeti*. Reviews of *Giorgi Merchule* by historian N. Berdzenishvili⁴, who also published material of his own on these lines, philologist G. Akhvlediani⁵, iranologist D. K'obidze⁶, and classicist S. Q'aukhchishvili⁷ were all supportive of this new idea of 'Western Georgian' history -- Tbilisi's specialist of Abkhaz, Ketevan Lomtadze⁸, was the honourable exception in her own published reaction to this falsification of history⁹. In volume II of his 1959 edition of *Kartlis Tskhovreba* Q'aukhchishvili glossed the term *Apsar* in the passage quoted above as a Georgian [sc. Kartvelian] tribe -- already in 1936 he had classified the Missimians as 'Svans', and in 1965 he went so far as to assert that the tribe *Heniokhoi*, located around Abkhazia by pre-Christian authors, and plainly etymologisable to anyone knowing Greek as 'rein-holders, charioteers'¹⁰, was a Georgian word!

Perhaps one could excuse the original publication in *mnatobi* 'Luminary' in the late 40s by saying that it may well have been done to (Beria's) order, but Lomtadze's negative review of the subsequent volume leaves reprinting of the offensive material along with the remaining positive reviewers no justification at all. However, the same cannot be said of events in 1989. The weekly organ of the Georgian Writers' Union *lit'erat'uruli sakartvelo* 'Literary Georgia', amongst many other objectionable pieces, ran articles by critic Rost'om Chkheidze setting out Ingoroq'va's fabrications and calling for his academic rehabilitation¹¹ -- the street on which stands the Georgian Linguistics Institute is now named after him! The academic and nightmare-politician, the late Z. Gamsakhurdia, made his own dismal contribution to sour Abkhazian relations in a pamphlet *Letopis' 4* 'Chronicle 4' of 1989, instructing his fellow Mingrelians how to conduct anti-Abkhazian agitation, urging them to read Ingoroq'va to learn how THEY were the true inheritors of the territory of Abkhazia. Subsequently in the paper *kartuli pilmi* 'Georgian Film' (6 Sept 1989) he lectured none other than the late A. Sakharov on how the Abkhazians had come to Abkhazia 'only 2-3 centuries

⁴*p'. ingoroq'vas c'ignis* -- "*giorgi merchules*" *gamo* 'On P'. Ingoroq'va's book "*Giorgi Merchule*" (*mnatobi*, 12, Dec. 1956, 125-131).

⁵*apxazetis ist'oriuli t'op'onimik'is zogierti sak'itxisatvis* 'On some questions concerning the historical toponymy of Abkhazia' (*k'rit'ik'a da p'ublicist'ik'a*, *mnatobi*, 2, 1957, 107-114).

⁶*t'ermini "abxazis" mnishvneloba sp'arsuli c'q'aroebis mixedvit* 'The meaning of the term "Abkhaz" according to Persian sources' (*ibid.* 126-128).

⁷*"giorgi merchules" garshemo* 'Concerning "*Giorgi Merchule*"' (*ibid.* 115-125).

⁸*apxazta vinaobisa da ganlagebis zogierti sak'itxis shesaxeb* 'Concerning some questions on the identity and location of the Abkhazians' (*mnatobi*, 12, Dec. 1956, 132-139).

⁹She was, of course, savaged herself by colleagues for this defiance in the face of the (politically correct) collective viewpoint.

¹⁰*h enia* 'reins' + *ekho*: 'I have/hold'.

¹¹He had lived to an advanced age in relative obscurity because of the post-Stalin furore over his *Giorgi Merchule* (see Abkhazian responses in 'Works' of the Abkhazian Research Institute, XXVII, 1956) and had never received the sort of recognition he might otherwise have expected on the basis of his more specialised work on Georgian literary history.

ago'¹². Alongside a whole range of articles from literary or fringe-academic figures like A. Gelovani, T'. Ch'ant'uria, G. Pandzhik'idze, R. Miminoshvili¹³, I. Antelava, T. Todua, etc..., the contributions from linguists A. Oniani, T. Gamq'relidze, T. Gvantseladze and historian M. Lordkipanidze, as figures of some standing, deserve to be singled out.

In a 2-part article ('Abkhazia and NW Georgia according to the linguistic evidence') in *saxalxo gantleba = Narodnoe Obrazovanie* 'Popular Education' over 1989-90 the Svan Oniani returned (in part) to the question of the toponymy of Abkhazia and proposed that the Abkhazians arrived in Abkhazia only 400-500 years ago -- one feels that he would have followed Ingoroq'va but, knowing that a correct translation of Çelebi does not permit this, arbitrarily projects their arrival back a further couple of centuries. For my detailed answer to Oniani see my 1992 paper.

Academician Gamq'relidze addressed the etymology of the roots *apxaz-/abazg-* & *abaza/apswa* in a Georgian article ('On the history of the tribal names of ancient Colchis') in *macne* 'Reporter' (1991.2.7-14), which subsequently appeared in Russian translation in *Voprosy Jazykoznanija*, of which the author was editor. Using typically spurious arguments he claimed *apxaz-* to be a native Kartvelian ethnonym for some indeterminate Kartvelian[!] tribe that once, he alleged, not only resided in today's Abkhazia but actually gave this province its name -- the Georgian ethnonym is stated to be the source of the Greek *Abasgoi*. What happened to the putative Kartvelian Abkhazians is left unanswered (necessarily so, for they never existed!). The parallel with Ingoroq'va is clear. For my rebuttal of this tendentious article see my 1993b publication, which is preceded by my English translation of the Georgian original, presented so that the weakness of the argumentation can be appreciated in the light of the adjoined comments. My conclusion reiterates the conventional view that the Greek derives from the local ethnonym (specifically from the plural *abaza-k^{wa}*) and that there was never any Kartvelian Abkhazian tribe in Abkhazia prior to or alongside the NW Caucasian Abkhazians.

The Greek origin of the resort-name Bich'vinta has been acknowledged even in Georgian sources (see the trilingual Georgian-Russian-English 1987 book 'Health Resorts of the Georgian SSR'). However, as we know, attempts have been made to give priority to the Georgian designation -- my 1993a paper was a direct response to one such in **Literary Georgia** (10th Nov 1989, p.10) by archaeologist T. Todua (see

¹²If Shevardnadze bears immediate responsibility for the Abkhazian war of 1992-93, the preceding war in South Ossetia was very much Gamsakhurdia's responsibility after he assumed political power, and this was hardly surprising when in 1989 he was already declaring that the Ossetians first appeared in the province when they followed the Bolsheviks into Georgia in 1921.

¹³The 1990 joint-work of the previous two individuals was published in both Georgian and Russian versions. As often happens in such cases (for example, Lordkipanidze's 1990 trilingual brochure), the texts are subtly different.

also Q'aukhchishvili 1952 & Apakidze 1975). More recently abkhazologist Teimuraz Gvantseladze did his best to tarnish the reputation of the newly established Bulletin of Kutaisi University (No.1, 1995), pp.25-32 (*bich'vintis tavidap'irveli saxelc'odebis sak'itxisatvis* 'On the question of the original designation of Bich'vinta') by arguing that the word for 'pine' in one of the Kartvelian languages (Zan-Svan) will have been the source (through calquing) of the Greek toponym *Pityous* -- if the ancient Greeks formed a calque on a Kartvelian toponym (and this is the goal of the whole enterprise), the residents must have been Kartvelians, not Abkhazians, when the Greeks arrived, which is the ulterior purpose behind the article. Gvantseladze's argument relies heavily on his opinion that the Greeks simply employed their noun for 'pine' as toponym. One need examine the argument no further, for the author wholly fails to notice that the Greek toponym *Pityous* is not in fact identical to the Greek *pitys* 'pine'¹⁴!

The latest notion offered by Mariam Lordkipanidze, who, by the way, has dubbed Ingoroq'va's view a 'scholarly' opinion, is the proposition that Abkhazia always had two aboriginals: NW Caucasian Abkhazians and Kartvelians. This means that she has to find Kartvelians in the historical sources residing in Abkhazia. On page 9 (i.e. in the Georgian text) of her brochure 'The Abkhazians and Abkhazia' (Tbilisi 1990) she quotes approvingly the views of certain Kartvelian scholars to the effect that the Missimians were of Kartvelian stock. And in reply (newspaper **Svobodnaja Gruzija** 9 Aug 1991, p.3) to criticism of this from the late Yuri Voronov (see his 1992 piece) she states: 'Although Agathias underlines the relatedness of the Apsilians and Missimians, he also stresses that their languages as well as their customs were different' (see a parallel mis-reading in Tsulaja 1995.21). I don't know whether Lordkipanidze reads Greek -- she may have based her mis-interpretation on the rather ambiguous Georgian translation of Agathias given by Q'aukhchishvili (1936a.86)¹⁵, which she either accidentally or deliberately chose to read in a way favourable to her Kartvelian hypothesis, but, as we have seen, Agathias says nothing to support any view other than that the Missimians were culturally and linguistically linked to the Apsilians.

It is my personal impression that there is an excessive and naive trust, widespread across the Caucasus area (including Turkey), in the truth of whatever appears in print. Therefore, special responsibility rests on all who have the privilege of access to such outlets. I suggest that many scholars (and writers) on the Georgian side have lamentably failed to live up to this responsibility and thus share much of the guilt for poisoning the attitude of average Georgians towards the Abkhazians and some of their

¹⁴Incidentally, the Abkhazians call the location *a-mza-ra*, which in Georgian would be *pich'v-nar-i* 'pine-plantation'.

¹⁵Sadly it was reliance on just such an imprecise translation that led the classicist(!) David Braund (1994.310 Note) into error concerning 'Agathias, 3.15.8, noting the linguistic and cultural gulf between the Misimiani and Apsilii and, *a fortiori*, the Lazi'.

other neighbours -- one can, of course, find numerous parallels elsewhere throughout the Caucasus, and censure there too should be no less forceful. Whatever the eventual settlement in terms of residency in, and control of, territory, there will simply be no peace until some level of trust is restored between the parties, and that process has to be predicated on acknowledgement of past errors and firm commitment not to repeat them. It is no good the Georgians adamantly refusing to acknowledge their own role in the creation of the appalling state into which post-Soviet Georgia sank, continuing disingenuously to lay all the blame on that universal bug-bear (namely, the notorious '3rd force' to the north) -- airy denial of any deep-seated problems between Abkhazians and Georgians by assigning the cause of hostilities to the 'time-bombs' left in Georgia by the Kremlin's early policy of 'artificially' creating the autonomies of Abkhazia and S. Ossetia has been seen on numerous occasions (e.g. a recent article by geography professor Revaz Gachechiladze (1996) or a 1992 BBC edition of the TV documentary-series 'Assignment' by Gela Chark'viani, English-teacher, adviser/interpreter for Shevardnadze and none other than the son of the K'. Chark'viani who was responsible for anti-Abkhazian measures effected in the 1940s, as, I am sure, his son knows full well!). Who, apart from the authors themselves, penned the offensive writings of the various Georgian scholars and intellectuals over the decades that we have merely sketched above? It is precisely because this anti-Abkhazianism has become so ingrained in pseudo-scholarly outpourings that such political activists as Tamaz Nadareishvili (in his 1996 book) and Gia Gvazava (in a Radio Liberty interview in Georgian in April 1996), both from the Georgian faction of the pre-war Abkhazian parliament and now in exile, find their 'justification' in respectively repeating the Ingoroq'va fantasy¹⁶ or to mouth the equally absurd Gamsakhurdia doctrine that history's 'real' Abkhazians are the Mingrelians. Such examples (two of many) give me no optimism at all for the future. The climate will change only when those acquainted with the facts of history and philology start to record them in an attempt to re-educate their citizens that accommodation with neighbours rests on respect for, rather than conscious distortion of, historical reality.

At least two colleagues (both German) have raised the question why I spend so much time arguing in defence of at the very least 2,000 years of Abkhazian tenure of Abkhazia, asking if 2,000 years entitles them to more rights than, say, the 200 years allowed by even Ingoroq'va. The question is misconceived: what the colleagues should be asking is why the Georgians and their apologists invest so much effort in trying to argue for the shortness of this tenure. When these spurious academic points are offered against the background of such slogans as 'Georgia for the Georgians!' or such ideas

¹⁶On p.7 of his 1996 book Nadareishvili states: 'Upto the XVIIth century (1621 to be precise) the population of Abkhazia was purely Georgian -- one met not a single representative with a North Caucasian surname'.

as those of Prof. Revaz Mishveladze (*axalgazrda k'omunist'i* 'Young Communist' 29 July 1989) that Georgia can tolerate only 5% of 'guests', I think the answer is all too clear and ominous. When facts are deliberately mangled, it is surely the role of scholarship to defend them, and that is all there is to it. I have never heard Abkhazians declaiming that Abkhazia is only for Abkhazians -- on the contrary, before the war the leadership was doing all it could to keep together the various pieces of the local cosmopolitan jigsaw that history had manufactured on their territory, and indeed in 1995 it was the Abkhazians who reinstated Mingrelian as a literary vehicle for Mingrelian-speakers in the Gal province by starting the weekly news-sheet 'Gal' in Mingrelian, Russian and Abkhaz, whereas in Georgia proper Mingrelian lost any vestige of pretence to literary status when Zugdidi's half-Mingrelian, half-Georgian newspaper *K'omunari* yielded to the all-Georgian *Mebrjoli* in July 1938. When I see such dignity in the behaviour (both private and professional) of Georgian/Kartvelian academics towards their neighbours, I shall be the very first with pleasure to applaud it, for only then shall we be on the path towards securing viable peace for the benefit of all concerned.

The words of W. B. Yeats' *Second Coming* spring to mind:

Things fall apart,

The centre cannot hold,

[...]

The best lack all conviction,

Whilst the worst are full

Of passionate intensity.

We have heard enough from the worst in Georgia over the last 8 years; it is time for the best to regain their conviction and raise their voice...

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