

“RUSSIA PUTS COMPARATIVELY LITTLE EFFORT INTO USING SOFT POWER IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS”

Interview with Dr. Timothy Blauvelt*

Conducted by Jesse Tatum, Associate Editor of CRIA



CRIA: *What do you think are some of the biggest challenges left to be tackled in higher education in Georgia? What can the government do to improve quality?*

Blauvelt: Our organization was directly involved in the program of developing the unified national university entrance exams, under contract to the World Bank as the coordinator for technical assistance, and we were working on that from 2002–2006. So I really got to see that process from the inside, and it is a reform that has been very successful. At the start, before the Rose Revolution, corruption in university admissions was one of the central problems. Education in general was one of the

institutions in society worst hit by corruption. Education then was a sort of black hole of corruption, and one of the key points of that was on the entrance end. People were paying 10 to 20,000 dollar bribes to get in to certain prestigious faculties. So the entrance exam reform was able to eradicate that entirely. What is particularly important in the approach to that reform was that the real goal was to build capacity. We didn't come in and say “We're going to make an exam for you.” The idea was to help create a function *Georgian* center that would develop the expertise to make exams itself, and that has really been so successful that Georgian specialists from the National Examination Center have become sort of regional experts. We've been involved in other projects, in Ukraine for example, where we have invited Georgians to come from the Center to provide technical assistance themselves. So the reform has been even more successful than people realize.

But by now this reform is sort of an old achievement. The question remains about what should come afterwards. From early on it had several effects: it has more or less eliminated low and mid-level corruption from the universities, which seems to have been a lasting outcome. The other effect was on secondary education, which is a rather controversial thing in the world of test development. The important thing from our point of view is that it made school matter to a degree that it didn't before. Before that there was simply no point to school, and work with tutors simply involved lots of rote

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memorization. Now I understand that they are trying to switch over to a system of mandatory school leaving exams that everybody will have to take in order to graduate. The entrance examination reform in Georgia was extremely radical: so radical that all university acceptance decisions were taken away from the universities themselves and given to the National Examination Center, based solely on the results of the examinations. Gradually the autonomy is being given back to the universities and faculties, and the test becomes just one component of the selection process.

My point in discussing this is that the reform of the entrance examinations was a crucial first step, and that if this had not been accomplished then nothing else could be successful. But again, what happens after this is the big question at the university level, and it has been the big question for the past five years. It's probably something that is going to take generations to solve. I think it's part of a more general problem in Georgian society: people don't like rules and requirements when they affect them; they don't like abstract standards. Examples of this come up very often, and it frustrates our local employees at American Councils here: people come in and say to them "Why do we have to follow all these rules? We're Georgians. Aren't you one of us? Why can't we do this the Georgian way?" And that's been a problem in both secondary and higher education. In secondary education, for such a long time, at least since the end of the Soviet system, the main goal of the teachers has been to maintain control in the classroom. The things that the Ministry is doing – the teacher certifications, the training opportunities and the requirements placed on teachers – these things will, I think, have an effect. But it's going to take a long time. And the same goes for the situation in the universities. The reform of the university faculties was a much harder thing than the exams. The reform of the tests and the university accreditation reforms were basically technical reforms, while the reform of the faculty has been a very painful one, and one that became politicized. But it seems that ultimately that has been successful. University teachers and professors can make a decent wage now, whereas before that they would get 25 USD a month.

But there is still the issue of quality and standards. The idea that someone could fail out of university is virtually unheard of, and even more so in the private universities. People think that since "we're paying for a product, so we should get that product. We should get the degree, even if we don't actually feel like working for it." So the standards, even at the best universities, are really quite low. There is tremendous plagiarism that goes on among college students, lots of "cut and paste." Professors in many departments are amazed when they see even small indications of originality and initiative, and often give inflated grades.

CRIA: Are there sufficient opportunities for Georgian university students in terms of mobility toward Europe & the U.S.? And for the kids going abroad, speaking of the plagiarism issue, for instance, do they work well when they get there?

Blauvelt: This is the rub: Georgian students, in my experience, do very well when they go to foreign universities. They adapt to that system and they come out on top of it. So it's not about being Georgian. Georgians are more than capable students. There's something more in the general culture. Perhaps we have to be optimistic: maybe it simply will take a generation until the system in Georgia becomes able to adopt international standards, or until international standards force their way into Georgia. But individually Georgians have the capability to do this. They do fantastic work when they get accepted to study-abroad opportunities. In universities all over America you will find at least one Georgian, and they prove that they are able to handle the requirements.

CRIA: *A 2007 NY Times [article](#) cited the decline of the Russian language across its historical sphere of influence. How do you see its status in Georgia today? How will it be used (or fall into disuse), in your view?*

Blauvelt: This is an issue that is of great interest to me. Obviously there is a decrease in Russian language skills in Georgia, especially among young people. I think it's largely seen in the generation of people who were schooled in the difficult period of the 1990s, when the education system as a whole suffered great difficulties. I think there are gaps in people's knowledge more generally, not just in language, but in biology, chemistry and other subjects. It was hard to learn in the days when there was no electricity or heating in the schools. Some young people of this generation were able to learn Russian well, sometimes through watching TV or having Russian-speaking relatives, friends or neighbors. But on the whole their Russian skills are weaker than those of other generations.

This also has to do with other factors, such as a separation from Russian culture over the past two decades. There is less and less Russian heard on TV or in films, for example. And much of people's language learning efforts have been devoted to English and other Western European languages. But I think there is a shift taking place with children. Parents are now thinking about the advantages of having their children learn Russian, and are helping to renew the focus on that in the preschool and primary school levels. There seems to be a tremendous demand for Russian-speaking nannies, for example, and for Russian-language kindergartens. People have started to realize, I think, that fluency in Russian is going to be an important thing in the future, and that they should not allow the gift of possessing Russian fluency that remained as holdover from the Soviet experience to slip away.

CRIA: *So more practical thinking on the Georgians' part?*

Blauvelt: Yes, it's pragmatic, and also Georgians will often emphasize that there is a connection with Russian literature and culture, even if the political and personal situation between Georgians and Russians has been better.

CRIA: *Does Russia have any Goethe Institute or Alliance Française equivalents, for example? If so, what are the current levels of enrollment/interest they enjoy, as far as you know?*

Blauvelt: There is an international organization of teachers of Russian, [MAPRIAL](#), that is quite active, and our organization cooperates with it on the institutional level. They held a conference in Georgia several years ago, and the President of our organization, Dan Davidson, who is also a Vice-President of MAPRIAL, came to Tbilisi for that. It has always been surprising for me, though, that Russia puts comparatively little effort into using soft power in this part of the world, that they don't do the sort of things that we, the Americans, or other Western countries are doing in terms of offering scholarships and educational opportunities, and outreach for language teaching, like Peace Corps. Part of it perhaps has to do with the Russian government's Realist worldview, and they assume that we do all of these things actually for political advantage. But if they were to offer large scale programs like the Muskie Fellowships – I think there are or were such things on a smaller scale, like several slots in MGU [M. V. Lomonosov Moscow State University] per year for Georgian students – but if they had bigger programs, scholarships, high school exchanges, Georgians would respond very favorably.

CRIA: A [paper](#) in our current issue – the questionnaire for which you helped to develop – looked at foreigners venturing to learn Russian and/or Georgian in Georgia. Generally speaking, perhaps from your own experience, how do you think Georgians feel about “outsiders” choosing to learn either one or the other while in Georgia? Which language would the average Georgian recommend an engaged expat learn, and why?

Blauvelt: That's a good question, actually. No Georgian has ever said to me that learning Georgian is a waste of time, although some might question the utility. There are two mutually contradictory myths that Georgians have in their heads, I think. The first is that the Georgian language is of special interest to all foreign academics and linguists. It's an important language in the world and it should be an important thing to study, and so foreigners are supposed to come here to study the language, and they should learn the language. The second myth is that, unlike Georgians, foreigners are really not very good at learning foreign languages, and that the Georgian language is really too difficult to actually be learned by outsiders. They are even surprised when foreigners can speak Russian well, which creates yet another contradiction: while they expect all foreigners to speak Russian, and yet they're surprised when foreigners can actually speak Russian fluently. In fairness, that's probably because many foreigners with whom people most often interact, especially tourists, tend to patch together minimal scraps from both Georgian and Russian in order to communicate. Georgians also are not sure about whether Russian is actually a “foreign” language.

And it is true that Georgian is a very difficult language to learn, which adds a barrier to the level of investment in terms of time, effort and energy required to achieve fluency (or even functional proficiency), which then has to be calculated against the expected returns. Basic necessity of needing to survive in a language obviously affects that calculation, so as with learning any language, immersion in a Georgian-only environment adds to both the incentive and the results. I think that explains why Peace Corps volunteers in the villages tend to learn much more Georgian than most other foreigners, especially in terms of spoken language. But it's difficult to find oneself in such an immersion environment in Tbilisi, especially for those who speak Russian well. At American Councils we've been experimenting with organizing short-term immersion courses outside of Tbilisi. So far we did a ten-day beginning level workshop in Borjomi this summer. The results have been mixed so far, but I would like to pursue this idea further next summer.

So even for most foreigners such as me who live and work here for long periods, the meager expected returns on investment in learning the language beyond minimal levels mean that few are ultimately successful. For example, you could probably count on the fingers of one hand the number of foreigners in the world who know Georgian as well or better than I know Russian. As the CRIA article demonstrates, many foreigners who are successful in Georgian also know Russian, so knowledge of Russian is not necessarily a hindrance to learning Georgian. But for me personally, in most unofficial situations I'd rather say something well in Russian than say it poorly in Georgian, as long as whomever I'm talking to understands more or less. And again, those immersion situations where the other person cannot understand Russian at all are very rare in Tbilisi (although I actually usually enjoy it when I'm forced to speak Georgian, like in certain cafés where the waitresses can't speak Russian at all). I've studied Georgian with varying degrees of intensity over the past twelve years, and aside from café vocabulary my success has been modest. Despite everything I said above, I have always felt very limited by that, and I think it really is ultimately a disadvantage and a hindrance to make connections with people, even though I can communicate with most people just fine in Russian or in English.