Chapter 8

INVISIBLE CONNECTIONS: ON UNCERTAINTY AND THE (RE) PRODUCTION OF OPAQUE POLITICS IN THE REPUBLIC OF GEORGIA

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Every citizen of Georgia, no matter where he or she lives, has the same opportunities […] Georgia is moving forward […] Our students are accepted to the universities without bribes today… You probably remember how much it cost to apply for the law faculty, or the medical institute. How much it cost to apply for the agricultural university. We all have experienced that… Everyone knows that the government will do everything for people to come for treatment in these hospitals. If the government were only to care about its family members then a small clinic would be enough.

—President Saakashvili at the opening of a hospital in Gori, January 2012

The opening quote from 2012 illustrates how, according to then president Mikheil Saakashvili, the Georgian government had consolidated democracy and eradicated corruption over the previous decade (Saakashvili 2012). From this perspective Georgia was rapidly moving towards a bright future, increasingly distancing itself from its dark and corrupt past. Officially corruption did decline dramatically after the Rose Revolution that brought Saakashvili and his United National Movement (UNM) to power (Jones 2013, 195–98). Hence, in the years following the revolution Georgia was in many ways considered a textbook example of the rapid development of good governance and transparency in public institutions (see Kbiltsetskhlashvili 2008; Companjen 2010).

Commencing fieldwork in the provincial town of Gori in 2010, I was initially determined to get in contact with the local municipality to obtain

official statistics and figures about the town I would be studying.[1] I asked around. Most of the people I addressed seemed puzzled, such as Olga, a middle-aged woman:

KATRINE: I will need some statistics from the municipality. Just the basic facts and figures about Gori – population, unemployment and so on. Maybe you can give me advice on how to get a hold of that?

OLGA: I don't know… I think it will be very difficult to get that information… I am not sure I understand. You are an anthropologist right? Why would you need this?

KATRINE: Well, as background material. I am trying to understand what people in Gori think about the political situation in Georgia today, and why…

OLGA: And you think people will tell you the truth?[2]

Olga seemed to suggest that I would get no useful or truthful information from public servants at the municipality. So why bother? As it turned out, Olga's puzzlement at my plans was illustrative of a general perception among my Georgian friends and interlocutors. In contrast to the image put forth by Saakashvili in his speech, they would incessantly insist that services, information and political processes that should ideally be transparent and accessible were in reality kept secret and, if revealed, would become distorted and flawed. Well into my fieldwork I managed to arrange a few meetings with officials through informal contacts – that is, through my friends' acquaintances, former schoolmates, family members and neighbours. Still, however, I would continuously be warned that I should not feel certain that these contacts would not have interests and obligations invisible to me that would prevent them from answering my questions truthfully.

My conversation with Olga and the initial challenges to my fieldwork plans illustrate two features of Georgian politics that I shall suggest are intimately connected. The first is the powerful idea among the population that politics is morally dubious and opaque, and that formal political institutions and personae are largely out of reach for ordinary people. The second is the belief that if one is to access such institutions and personae, and in general secure one's everyday livelihood in a murky and uncertain sociopolitical environment, personal links and networks are essential.

Against this background, this chapter will explore how, in Georgia, phenomena ranging from national politics to local-level government and immediate social relations are infused with an atmosphere of uncertainty and a feeling that nothing is really as it seems. More specifically, I will describe

and analyse public ideas with regard to the nature of 'politics' and unfold how these ideas feed into the practical means by which ordinary people seek to manage the challenges of daily life. In short, I will discuss different aspects of public perceptions of the political as opaque and inaccessible, and the consequences such perceptions had on my interlocutors' engagement and disengagement with their sociopolitical surroundings. 'Invisible connections', then, refer to two interrelated aspects, one empirical and the other analytical. I ask: What are the kinds of accounts and rationales within which people address their immediate political surroundings at the macro- as well as micro-level? How can we analytically address the links between such everyday characterisations and the production and reproduction of a particular mode of politics? And, finally, what can be gained from conceptualising such everyday ideas and practices as grey zones of fluctuating visibility and invisibility, clarity and opacity?

I will develop an argument which suggests that responses to perceived political opacity and uncertainty, in the end, contribute to their reproduction in perception and experience. That is, I propose that a particular idea of 'politics', and the ways in which my interlocutors appropriate and act towards this idea, in the end produce and reproduce political practice as such. Micropolitics – maintaining and relying on informal networks and connections, and speculating about the nature of the connections of others – is simultaneously a response to an uncertain macropolitical reality and the continuing production and confirmation of this reality across the sociopolitical scale. My interest, then, is not in assessing the 'real' nature of formal politics *vis-à-vis* public ideas, or in passing judgements on the extent to which post–Rose Revolution good governance policies, as described by Saakashvili above, have failed. Rather than investigating the concrete relationship between 'formal' and 'informal' politics, or the ways in which large-scale political processes are dependent on patronage and other informal practices and vice versa (see Isaacs 2011), I will depart from the public commonsensical perception that there is no such thing as 'pure' formal politics or disinterested state structures or services. I will outline the processes by which uncertainty and mistrust have become primary emic markers of 'politics', a 'sort of theory of social order' that people attempt to live by (Greenhouse 2002, 10), and, consequently, how this 'theory', or imaginary, feeds into concrete everyday interactions and experience. Before addressing these issues further, however, a few contextual notes on Gori are in order.

Notes on Gori

Gori, located approximately 70 kilometres west of the capital Tbilisi, is the administrative centre of the Shida Kartli region. Heading into town by

one of the bumpy roads leading from the main highway crossing Georgia from east to west, one is met by a patchy combination of Soviet-style five-storey apartment blocks, family houses, small kiosks and grocery shops, restaurants, and a newly built shopping centre with large glass facades. The streets appear rather quiet and empty apart from the area around the central market and bus station, which is no doubt the busiest, noisiest and most hectic place in town. In Soviet times Gori was an important industrial centre, but the economic crisis of the 1990s caused a shutdown of the majority of the former industries and factories and a general exodus among the population. In 2012 the town had an official population of 54,900 inhabitants – around 13,000 less than in the late 1980s.[3] This number, however, was disputed among the residents, most of whom insisted that the figures are too high and do not reflect the large number of people who have actually left in search of work in Tbilisi or abroad. Walking around, it was indeed hard to imagine more than 50,000 people living in the town.

According to official statistics from 2011, the Shida Kartli region has an unemployment rate of 8.9 per cent, with urban areas such as Gori having a higher rate than the rural areas. In contrast, Jones (2013, 194) points out that the design of unemployment statistics in Georgia masks radically different numbers, and he thus estimates the real unemployment rate across the country in 2010 to be as high as 60 per cent – a number intuitively much more fitting judging by my experience and the characterisations given by my interlocutors, many of whom were either unemployed or underemployed.[4] In short, whereas Tbilisi and the Black Sea city of Batumi have, at least on the surface, developed into vibrant economic and cultural centres over the last decade, Gori is an example of a provincial town that still struggles with economic development and prioritisation in national politics (Jones 2013, 144, 213).

Ideas, Detachments and Performance

Behind my argument lie a number of presumptions concerning the nature of politics. The first one is an empirical observation and builds on emic characterisations of politics, leading, as it were, to some more overall suppositions concerning useful ethnographic and analytical approaches to the political as a field of inquiry. I will briefly outline these below.

The Georgian state is 'semipresidential', with the president being head of state, and the prime minister, appointed by the president, head of government. Legislative authority is vested in the parliament. Between the 2003 Rose Revolution and the 2012 parliamentary elections, Saakashvili's UNM held a majority in the parliament and hence, in reality, both executive and legislative power. Quite possibly reflecting this macropolitical reality,

there was frequently a popular conflation of the state and government. People working within state institutions were seen as adhering to, and performing, government politics – or, at least, they were perceived as people who could not afford to oppose the UNM political line in public. It was a relatively accepted fact among my friends and interlocutors that people relying on employment in public institutions necessarily have to, or at least must *pretend* to, adhere to government policies when outside of private settings. Adding to this, politicians and people involved in political structures were characterised as selfish and thus acting to preserve their own positions and privileges rather than in the interests of the people they were supposedly representing. These factors contributed to a particular understanding of politics as essentially dirty, insincere and opaque – a field rife with invisible connections and secret agendas. In short, politics was considered an immoral and flawed business that one was reluctant to admit practising or showing any interest in. People would repeatedly fiercely deny having anything to do with it. According to their statements, it was nowhere to be found in their daily lives – except as something imposing itself on them from the outside: *out there* or *up there* (see Gotfredsen 2013). However, as we shall see, practices that are not necessarily explicitly aimed at being political may be interpreted as such by others and, in the end, produce political outcomes and effects. Hence, it becomes relevant to ask the question: How can we analytically grasp the fact that ordinary people take part in producing the political even when they themselves claim not to?

First of all, answering this question requires that we adopt a rather wide perspective of what constitutes 'the political' as a field of inquiry – a perspective that is not, as such, foreign to anthropology (see Vincent 2002). I propose an analysis including both the practices undertaken by ordinary people in the 'pursuit of their daily lives' (Wedeen 2008, 3) and the social and cultural meanings and expressions giving form to these practices (Verdery 1999, 25–26). When referring to the everyday production of 'the political' then, I refer to this level of analysis: to the acts and utterings of ordinary people in their pursuits of security and certainty in their everyday lives, and to the social rationales and perceptions within which these occur. In doing so, I follow Carol Greenhouse in her call to ethnographically investigate the state, and political structure in general, as it comes forth in everyday social practice, 'treating it only and wholly in relation to its social reality – or irreality – "on the ground"' (Greenhouse 2002, 7; see also Navaro-Yashin 2002, 135).

Part of this social reality 'on the ground' are the derived effects of an emic perception of politics as being essentially dirty and opaque. Hence, just as we can see the state as both a set of tangible governing practices and institutions *and* a powerful idea or imaginary (Navaro-Yashin 2012), I suggest that we may see the political – in the Georgian setting at least – as both a set of concrete

daily practices and an idea, or imaginary, that feeds into these concrete practices and their effects. In other words, similar to studies emphasising the state as an 'idea' (Abrams 1988), 'fetish' (Taussig 1992) or 'fantasy' (Navaro-Yashin 2002, 2012), I propose that *ideas* of politics among my interlocutors and the ways in which they appropriate and act towards these ideas produce the political in a particular fashion.

In her study of Yemeni politics, Lisa Wedeen argues for a performative perspective on political practice that accounts for the ways in which democratic or national persons are constituted through speech-acts and deeds associated with nationalism and democracy, without necessarily committing to their underlying ideals (2008, 16–17). Analogously, I propose that political statements may be produced through performative practices that are not necessarily aimed at being political in any such explicit sense (see Yurchak 2008, 732). By introducing what he terms a 'heteronymous shift' into discussions of late Soviet ideological discourse, Alexei Yurchak proposes an understanding of the relationship between performance and underlying meaning which is slightly different to Wedeen's. He argues that the replication of ideological form (reproducing the written form of ideological texts, raising your hand in favour at a party meeting, etc.) was increasingly decoupled from the level of meaning (values, ideals, ethics, etc.) in late Soviet discourse, ultimately leaving the literal meaning for which the form supposedly stood unpredictable and open to interpretation (Yurchak 2006, 51–54). I suggest that a similar dual potential for the interpretation of practice and performance is a defining characteristic of the production of Georgian politics. Thus, whereas I concur with Wedeen that we should focus our study of the political on what people *do*, I want to stress that this *doing* is still, in social practice, left to be interpreted and perceived in terms of its underlying meanings and values. These meanings and values, I argue, may be perceived as dual and unpredictable, and this duality, ultimately, produces the political as a grey zone that has, paradoxically perhaps, become relatively ordinary and predictable in its very opacity and unpredictability.

The Micropolitics of Everyday (In)security

$10,000

It is a Monday morning in June, and Mari and I are sitting in the kitchen having breakfast. As often before, Mari is telling me about what she sees as her hopeless job situation. She graduated from university with high marks in financial management five years ago but has not yet managed to get a job.

She dreams about working in a bank. When she graduated, she applied for vacancies and went to Tbilisi to take test exams and participate in training courses, but without success. 'If you don't have contacts you will never find a job,' she concludes. 'You know, if you want a job in a bank, you need to pay the director of that bank…maybe $10,000. But then after six months a new director will come, and you have to start all over again. The people working there don't know what they are doing – they have no education. But their family or others know someone. Sopo [her sister] knows the school director where she works. That is why she has a job.'

Analyses describing everyday life in the context of state socialism have noted how an economy of shortage made social networks and connections an essential resource in terms of exchanges of goods and favours. This created a vibrant 'second economy', running parallel to the official state economy and involving a moral economy of its own (Sampson 1987; Humphrey and Hugh-Jones 1992; Verdery 1996). In many of the former socialist countries the importance of social networks and an everyday reliance on well-connected patrons still exist (Ledeneva 2006; Morris and Polese 2014). Even if the introduction of market economies has made consumer goods available for purchase (for those who can afford them) and the introduction of liberal democracies should ideally have limited informality and corruption within formal political structures, on neither count have the expectations of the political analysts of the early 1990s been met (Sztompka 1993; Nodia 1996; Wilson 2005; Isaacs 2011). This is also true in the Georgian case. Just as social networks, friends and kin were considered essential and often drew more loyalty and attention than society as a whole in Soviet times (Mars and Altman 1983; Dragadze 1988), several analysts indicate that this is no less true today (Dudwick 2003, 256; Jones 2013, 11). My conversation with Mari above illustrates that this perspective is not confined to academic analysis. Her characterisation of her personal situation drew heavily on a commonsensical notion that networks and connections are essential to social and economic security.

In arguing for an analytical distinction between the closely related terms 'uncertainty', 'insecurity' and 'contingency', Susan Whyte proposes that we understand uncertainty as a state of mind, whereas insecurity is to be understood as a social condition reflecting a 'lack of protection from danger, weakness in the social arrangements which provide some kind of safety net when adversity strikes […] a state of limited resources for action' (2009, 213). When dealing with uncertainty, she argues, we are trying to make things more secure. It is this process of 'making secure' that I suggest simultaneously feeds on and reproduces the opaque and invisible (or uncertain) nature of Georgian politics.

Among my interlocutors it was a generally accepted fact that the best insurance against the unforeseen outcomes of political opacity, and the socioeconomic hardships that come with unemployment, is a tight personal network that can be activated and depended on for resources (material or personal) when needed. This was illustrated in Mari's account of her job situation *vis-à-vis* that of her sister. She herself had no connections within the financial sector she wished to work in, whereas Sopo knew the director in the village school where she got a job as an English teacher after finishing university. The point here is not so much whether Mari's story about jobs 'costing' $10,000 is true, but rather her statement that having no connections means having no opportunities – and vice versa: connections yield opportunity. Shortly after I had had the above conversation with Mari, another friend of mine, Davit (who has no education in finance), was offered a job in one of the local bank offices, because, as he admitted with a shy smile, his cousin was the local branch director.

The widespread reliance on personal connections entails a social stratification among 'ordinary' people in terms of who has such connections and who has not. Davit told me about his cousin's influence on the job offer, but Mari and others like her are most often left to speculate about the real nature of the – to them invisible – connections that provide others with their relative successes. In the end, this causes not only large-scale politics but also the micropolitics of everyday security and opportunity to be covered in suspicion for the perceived outsider. Or said otherwise, the pursuit of micropolitical goals comes to mirror perceptions of macropolitics – and vice versa. This link will become more explicit below.

Everyday Suspicion

Neighbours and agents

One Sunday afternoon we are sitting in Manana's kitchen facing the common courtyard. The yard is laid out between staircases and landings leading to the surrounding flats – some of these, such as Manana's, being shared by several families. One of the neighbouring women, Nino, is visiting. She and Manana are in heated discussion. Another neighbour has claimed ownership of the common areas of the courtyard. She has obtained a document from the municipality, apparently proving that she has sole ownership of several of the – previously common – areas of the yard, including the landing leading to Manana's kitchen. The legal decision seems absurd, we agree. In reality, Manana now does not have passage from the courtyard to her flat, and Nino, in principle, cannot access her toilet, which is situated in the yard. I ask how this is possible, and Manana explains: 'I think she is a secret agent for the government. Every day she goes to the municipality – it is very interesting…like Soviet times,' she adds. She chuckles, as if pointing to the irony of nothing having changed. 'And what do you

think she is supposed to find out?' I ask. 'Yes, it is very hard to understand what would be interesting about our lives, isn't it?' Manana replies, with a dry smile. I shrug, thinking that it is indeed hard to imagine. Still, the women agree, the only plausible explanation for the municipality's decision is that the neighbour has exchanged information about the residents of the house for her new privileges.

Manana's irony reflected the seeming silliness of a neighbour informing on her to the local municipality. In the end, as she implied, there was hardly anything about her life that was worthy of such attention. Her reasoning, then, was not so much connected to fear of what the neighbour might find out and tell. What is of interest here, and what I shall further elaborate on below, is the swift conclusion that the neighbour must have a secret deal, a hidden connection, with someone at the municipality in order to have obtained the paperwork. It draws on the same general atmosphere surrounding the topic of national politics that I discussed above: that nothing is as it seems.

The cases of Mari and Manana illustrate the relationship between macro- and micropolitics. That is, how ideas regarding the nature of large-scale politics both feed on, and feed into, everyday perceptions and experiences encountered when pursuing daily life. Power, and the real sources of influence, it seems, always try to keep themselves masked and rarely come forward with true intentions or truthful information. The very diverse situations and events these examples address could call into question the extent to which they reveal anything general or at all comparable. What I wish to argue, however, is precisely that the general idea of politics is informed by an atmosphere of fragments such as these – of bits and pieces of information received from politicians, media, friends, family and people gossiping in the neighbouring yard (see Navaro-Yashin 2002). The multiple fragments of knowledge and accounts that people are confronted with may or may not be true. Actually it seems that the very foundation for assessing such information is an acknowledgement that one cannot really trust what was being said – as Manana's account illustrates there might well be ulterior motives at play. In other words, everyday interactions often build on the premise that what people *really* think and contemplate is not necessarily reflected in what they say or do. This awareness will become more evident below.

Dualities of Cynicism

Hospital openings

My former landlady, Tamuna, and I are watching the evening news in her flat in Tbilisi. The president appears on screen speaking to a crowd of people gathered in front of a newly constructed building. 'Ah, you see? Every day our Misha is opening a new hospital somewhere,' says Tamuna. 'It is something very

interesting…' she adds – giggling as she often does when commenting on politics. A giggling that I have come to know as a sign of her pointing to a profound irony of events, or, as is often the case, life in general. 'Look he is in your town, in Gori!'

In his speech, Saakashvili talks about the continuous and seemingly unstoppable development of modern infrastructure initiated by the government – exemplified by this hospital. Georgia is on a track moving forward, and there is no going back. Corruption, bribes, and politicians caring only for themselves and their families are history. Now all Georgians have the same opportunities, he optimistically states.[5]

A few days later I am watching the news with Lali, my landlady in Gori. Another hospital is being opened. 'I saw on the news a couple of days ago that Misha had opened a new hospital in Gori,' I say. Lali nods and smiles. 'I was surprised that so many people were there…' I add. 'I was there too,' Lali laughs. 'Really?' I say sceptically – knowing that Lali is anything but a fan of the president. 'They had lists with our names at the school, and we were told to go… And, so we went.'

What informed the irony and laughter at play when I talked to Tamuna and Lali about the hospital openings? To Tamuna, events like this, and similar ones daily reaching the evening news, were ironic because of their unrecognisable relationship to the reality she saw herself as being a part of. When her mother suffered a stroke the previous summer, Tamuna's only perceived access to a proper doctor was through a childhood friend and not the public hospitals. She would not have been able to pay the 'fees' needed for a stranger to give her mother the proper treatment and care, she told me. The point here is not to discuss whether hospital staff generally demand extra 'fees' to care for patients or not. The point is rather that to Tamuna's best knowledge, this was definitely the case. This awareness rendered public channels of hospitalisation and care out of her reach, and left her to use her personal network for healthcare.

The funny thing to Lali was that I was surprised to have seen so many people and did not realise the 'fakeness' of the event. In that sense Lali's laughter represented a cynical assertion that the number of people present at an event like that was not an expression of the number of supporters of the president. It was simply a part of what people now and then have to do, in Yurchak's (2006, 23–24) pragmatic and performative sense of the word, in order to satisfy the expectations of being a public employee: that you, at least in public, support the government that is employing you. In the end, who wants to risk losing one's job over something as silly and ordinary as this?

Lali and Tamuna's laughter, in short, played on irony and cynicism rather than joy. I was somewhat surprised when I first realised that many public political events, such as the opening of the hospital in Gori, were staged; that people were either paid to go or indirectly threatened to. Intuitively, to me, this was a reproduction of Soviet political practices and forms of oppression that I had not anticipated. Lali's laughter, on the other hand, cynically suggested that this was only what was to be expected. Everyone knows that, she seemed to imply. Knowing to what extent this is actually happening is of course difficult, as are the real consequences of not going if told to. But rumours were plenty. Several friends would tell me that they – being teachers, employed at the local hospital or at a state museum – of course had to support the government in office if they wanted to be sure of keeping their jobs.

The cynicism of Lali and Tamuna, then, mirrors the type of binary thinking that Yurchak critiques in academic analyses of Soviet authoritative discourse. That is, the immediate conclusion that people act in public 'as if' they comply with the authorities while privately believing something different. This, he argues, diverts attention from the continuing production and reinterpretation of discourse and knowledge (Yurchak 2006, 16–18). I believe, however, that we must make a distinction here between Lali's reasoning, which reflected *her* interpretation of situations such as the hospital opening, and a more abstract analytical level reflecting Yurchak's point. Showing up at a hospital opening may either, by spectators, be interpreted as a statement that one supports the government and its initiatives or, within the commonsensical understanding expressed by Lali and Tamuna, that there is not necessarily a connection between the number of people and the level of public support. In other words, there is an acute awareness that you cannot assume that there is a one-to-one relation between what people think and intend, and what they actually say or do. From a strictly performative perspective, we can argue that the very act of showing up at a hospital opening produces support. My suggestion, however, is that we see it as an ambiguous act enabling a dual interpretation and hence, in effect, as contributing to the production and reproduction of public politics as being *potentially* 'not as it seems'. We are faced, then, with what seems a paradoxical practice of critiquing the fake and opaque nature of politics and simultaneously potentially contributing to its reproduction.[6]

The Grey Zones of Georgian Politics

Johnson-Hanks observes how, in Cameroon, *la crise* and the uncertainty that it has brought about 'has become available as a trope that serves to legitimate and reinforce both the interpretation of the world as uncertain and behavior that contributes to that uncertainty' (2005, 366). In the previous sections

I have shown that the uncertainty resulting from the (perceived) opaque and suspicious nature of political institutions and social agents with successful connections in the Georgian context has a similar dual effect. The widespread perception of large-scale politics as being opaque, double-faced and dirty trickles down and serves as a trope both explaining and reproducing this opacity as an experience and reality in more micropolitical contexts.

The cases above have served to illustrate exactly this process of addressing politics as opaque and simultaneously confirming and reproducing it as such. In other words, the sense of being caught up in an uncertain political reality that is merely *out there*, impossible to engage with and grasp, is reinforced by the very practices engaged in to limit this experience of uncertainty. When 'making secure' by means of upholding and nurturing social networks through favours and their expected returns, or by faking support at certain public events, one is simultaneously confirming and enacting the perception that invisible connections and secrecy are the basis of political action. The widespread proclaimed detachment from the morally dubious and opaque realms of formal politics and institutions, the favouring of nurturing personal connections, and the insistence that if one *does* act in a explicitly political manner this is merely pretence, serve as examples of how ideas and perceptions of large-scale politics feed into micro-practices that, in the end, produce the political in an image of these ideas and perceptions.

As I suggested earlier in this chapter, even if we look for politics in what people *do* rather than in the intentions informing this doing, people's acts are still, in social practice, left to be interpreted (and perceived) for their underlying meanings and values. Even if we take seriously people's claims that they are not engaging in politics, acts and accounts such as those we have encountered above are still left *out there* for others to interpret and make sense of. In this continuous effort of making sense of one's personal position *vis-à-vis* others' positions as reflected in their acts and utterings, I argue that uncertainty and opacity are dominant tropes. In the cases analysed here, explanations for a seemingly absurd situation are found in other people masking the real motives for their actions and decisions. Circumstances and personal positions have been explained by reference to a commonsensical understanding that power and influence operate in the murky and invisible corners of social and political life. However, in that sense, the three stories also share an inherent paradox: on the one hand the people we have met above would stress the opaque nature of power and influence, and yet, immediately, they would also add quite precise characterisations of what was *actually* going on. From one analytical angle we could interpret this as a series of examples of how the articulation of certainty actively works to eliminate doubts and uncertainty (Vigh 2011; Pelkmans 2013). My point is, however, that while the

accounts may work at some level to clarify matters – to render them visible, as it were – they simultaneously disclose the overall idea that you cannot necessarily trust what people around you say or do, thus leaving even the clarifying stories themselves up for interpretation and speculation.

Such fluctuations of opacity and clarity, visibility and invisibility, direct our attention to a characterising aspect of political practice in contemporary Georgia. The seeming paradox of opacity and clarity that we have seen in Manana, Mari and Lali's stories may not be an anomaly but rather a defining, and on its own terms reasonable, feature of a widespread practice of engaging with uncertainty in the pursuit of everyday security and certainty; a practice in which opacity and clarity may not be mutually exclusive but, rather, run parallel (see West and Sanders 2003; Larson 2008). The effort of making sense of the inequalities of influence, then, simultaneously reproduces the widespread perception that things are – potentially – not as they seem. Besides large-scale political structures, formal political institutions, and government imaginaries and practices, the political as a field of experience and inquiry is shaped by the duality of people's engagements with the connections, influences and motives informing the everyday micropolitics of their lives. This is a duality of engagement that, as we saw most evidently illustrated in the case of Lali above, feeds into the wider political landscape and reproduces it as a predictably ambiguous formation fluctuating between clarity and opacity, visibility and invisibility – a grey zone that is continuously (re)produced by the very efforts pursued to control it and render it legible.

Notes

1 Data for this chapter stem from ethnographic fieldwork carried out between 2006 and 2012 in Georgia, notably over the course a 10-month period in 2010 and 2011 in Gori.
2 This initial conversation with Olga was conducted in English. The majority of the conversations cited in this chapter, however, have been translated from Georgian by the author.
3 Statistics from www.geostat.ge (accessed 18 November 2014).
4 Of the population listed as employed in the entire region of Shida Kartli, approximately 70 per cent are self-employed. This partly reflects the fact that it is predominantly an agricultural region. However, this simultaneously constitutes a statistical masking of the many households living mainly from subsistence farming on small plots of land and now and then selling off surplus produce at local markets. Also, these statistics do not count the unregistered unemployed and women who have stopped seeking work (Jones 2013, 194, 202).
5 The optimism displayed by Saakashvili in his speech bears remarkable resemblance to Soviet modernist optimism. In other words, even if the political project of the UNM was 'effectively neoliberal' (Manning 2007, 176), the tone and communicative form displayed a marked continuity with Soviet political discourse, and, as we shall see

below, so did popular responses. For an analysis of the similarities of the discursive practices of late liberalism and late socialism, see Boyer and Yurchak (2010).

6   In comparison, Navaro-Yashin proposes that cynicism is a feeling of political existence that reproduces the political by default. Cynicism, she argues, 'encapsulates both state fetishism and everyday public critiques of the state' (Navaro-Yashin 2002, 159). Along similar lines I suggest that the cynicism expressed by Lali was equally critiquing, essentialising and reproducing the political.

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