

STREET LIFE IN TBILISI AS A FACTOR OF MALE SOCIALIZATION. *Summary*

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In addition to socializing institutions such as the family, school, and army, contemporary Georgian urban society also recognizes the socializing function of the “street”—a public environment that enables boys, teenagers, and young men to escape adult control. Georgians often speak of the “school of the street” or the “street academy,” similarly to the way in which the army was considered a “school for real men” in Soviet society. In Georgian urban culture, the “street” is considered a special environment that is associated with showdowns, a “thieves’ mentality,” the “code of the street,” and city-block life.

In recent years, there has been some emotional debate on whether young men should go through, or avoid, the “street academy.” These debates are often triggered by political events or pronouncements associated in the public mind with the “code of the street” and with groups backed by the “street,” which is in turn seen as controlled by high-level criminals.

In particular, the pervasive reach of the “code of the street” in society as a whole and specifically among teenagers in schools and on the streets is often cited as one of the reasons for the rise in urban street crime. Thus Georgians often perceive the “street” as a link between the criminal world and teenagers—in other words, as an agent of socialization that introduces young men to organized crime.

“Street” life is mostly concentrated in residential city blocks. This study focuses on the socialization of male teenagers and young men in neighborhood communities and the role that the code of the street plays in this process. A key institution in the life of the Georgian “street” and neighborhood community is the so-called “exchange” or *birzha*—small groups of male teenagers or young adults who regularly assemble in public gardens or in front of residential buildings or garages in their neighborhoods. The *birzha* is a community of peer males who form part of the wider neighborhood community and who interact primarily in public space. The “street” is a peculiar social system characteristic of Tbilisi and, presumably, other Georgian cities. It links different territorially-defined communities. It is built around interaction between three main elements—the *birzha*, the police, and gangsters—and is regulated by a code of customary norms.

Starting at an early age, street culture teaches boys to start distinguishing between their own group and outsiders, and defines the norms and practices of a type

of interaction that is most often conflictual. Street culture also defines members of the community by seniority: junior members subject themselves to the authority of older ones and accept their arbitration in conflict situations.

The period when boys fight for an advantageous position in their community is known as *bichoba*. *Bichoba* ends after secondary school if a boy continues into higher education or takes up employment, or it may continue for a few years if he remains unemployed. *Bichoba* is associated with constant “showdowns” and “scuffles” which structure the street community by defining social positions and determining leaders.

Street culture offers ready-made channels of socialization by providing role models that are covered by a fixed set of designations. This system of roles is based on three main positions—*dzveli bichi* (old guy), *patiosani bichi* (decent, honest guy), and *dedikos bichi* (mama’s boy). This system establishes a hierarchy of masculinities, with the role of *dzveli bichi* as a hard-to-attain ideal of dominant and aggressively heterosexual masculinity, and, at the other end, *dedikos bichi*, a role associated above all with homosexuality. The need to withstand violence in the teenage community is one of the factors that construct aggressive masculine behavior in the course of street socialization.

Neighborhood communities commonly include another group—older men, usually between the ages of 35 and 45, who no longer actively participate in street life but maintain their high status in the active *birzha* on the basis of their successful and active participation in the past. These “veterans” engage in relationships of patronage with *birzha* boys, raising each side’s reputation. Both older men and peer boys act as important agents of socialization for teenagers in street-based groups in Tbilisi.

All young men are included in peer neighborhood communities by birth, no matter how integrated they actually are into their community. They therefore need to display at least a minimal literacy in the code of the street. The code used in Tbilisi’s street-based teenage communities is known locally as “thieves’ rules” or “the law of the street”—a set of precepts and norms that define the rules of the game in this space. The clear norms dictated by this code are used as an additional resource in the street-based status struggle, making it possible to determine who is “right” and making the conquest or loss of a reputation both indisputable and evident. At the same time, however, these norms are a resource for manipulation.

There appears to be a biographical template accepted as normal by society, in which the “street” is seen as the principal school of masculinity and a required stage of transition from teen age to real manhood.

However, a teenager’s level of involvement with the *birzha* during his *bichoba* can vary, and its influence on a young man is normally considered to end with the beginning of higher education or another “adult” activity.

Informants’ explanations for the existence of the *birzha* and the spread and popularity of the *dzveli bichi* style include protest against the state, unemployment, and the attractiveness of aggressive masculine behavior for women. In recent years, social change has prompted a high level of reflection among present and former

participants in Georgian street culture. My informants note that young people's priorities have changed and the "street rules" are no longer consistently observed. Georgian society is undergoing considerable changes, including a heightened geographic and social mobility among young men. The former functions of the *birzha* are therefore being displaced, and the *birzha* may well be gradually disappearing.