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## University of Michigan holds Conference on Georgia

Ronald Grigor Suny

Caught between Russia and the Middle East, for centuries the passage from East to West, the small republic of Georgia has seldom in recent years had the spotlight of scholarship turned full force on its fascinating history and current troubles. The Armenian Studies Program of the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor sponsored the first international conference in mid-May to look at the “making of a national culture” in that South Caucasian country. More than thirty scholars from Europe, Asia, the United States, Canada, and Georgia itself gathered to hear and discuss papers on such far-flung topics as Iranian influences in medieval Georgia, the appeal of rap music among Georgian young people today, Russian-Georgian conflicts, and the precarious future of Armenians in Georgia. Discussions swung from enthusiasm for the multicultural nature of Georgian society and the complex harmony of life in old Tiflis (currently the capital of Georgia, Tbilisi), to tales of nationalist hostility and savage conflict.

Georgians pride themselves on tolerance of foreigners and visitors and the hospitality of their famous *supra*, the lavish feast that travelers to Georgia have praised for centuries. But Georgian culture has also been defensive and insecure about its future when threatened by the empires to the north and south. At the present time the republic has good relations with all its neighbors, except for Russia, which is supporting Abkhaz and South Ossetian separatists who want their regions to be independent of Georgia. Armenians in Georgia experience a sense of displacement and disillusionment in a city and country, which many of them consider their real homeland. Yet Georgia has managed, despite civil war and ethnic conflict, to emerge as the most promising democracy in Caucasia and an ally of the United States.

There are plans to publish many of the papers in a volume edited by the principal organizer of the conference, Ronald Grigor Suny, and his friend and colleague, historian of Georgia Oliver Reisner, currently working with the European Commission in Georgia. Suny is the author of *The Making of the Georgian Nation* (Indiana University Press, 1994), and Reisner’s major publication is *Die Schule der Georgischen Nation* [The School of the Georgian Nation] (Wiesbaden, 2004). Among other presenters at the conference were: Stephen Rapp of Georgia State University (Atlanta), Armen Kazaryan (State

Institute for Art Study, Moscow), Tamila Mgaloblishvili (Center for Exploration of Georgian Antiquities, Tbilisi), and Dean Sakel (Bogazici University, Istanbul), Hirotake Maeda (Hokaido University), Paul Manning (Trent University), David Khoshtaria and Mzia Chikhrade (art historians from Tbilisi), Medea Badashvili (Tbilisi), Paul Crego (Library of Congress), Silvia Serrano (Paris), Kevin Tuite (Montreal), Thornike Gordadze (Paris, Baku), Mariam Chkhartishvili and Alexandre Kukianidze (Tbilisi State University), Tamara Vardanyan (Erevan, Armenia), Harsha Ram (Berkeley), Clinton Buhler (Ohio State), Jeremy Smith (Birmingham University, UK), Stephen Jones (Mount Holyoke), Vicken Cheterian (Geneva), Jonathan Kulick (Tbilisi), David Soumbadze (Washington, DC), and Sergei Markedonov (Moscow).

Georgian culture was vividly represented by Nino Tsitsishvili (Monash University), Soso Jordania (University of Melbourne), and Alan Gasser (Toronto), who sang traditional folk songs at two of the dinners that tried valiantly to emulate a Georgian *supra*.

The proceedings of the conference were webcast live on the internet, making it possible for a large number of viewers around the world to follow the presentations and lively discussions.

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